



Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War

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Rising literary star Deb Olin Unferth offers a new twist on the coming-of-age memoir in this utterly unique and captivating story of the year she ran away from college with her Christian boyfriend and followed him to Nicaragua to join the Sandinistas.

Despite their earnest commitment to a myriad of revolutionary causes and to each other, the couple find themselves unwanted, unhelpful, and unprepared as they bop around Central America, looking for "revolution jobs." The year is 1987, a turning point in the Cold War. The East-West balance has begun to tip, although the world doesn't know it yet, especially not Unferth and her fiancé (he proposes on a roadside in El Salvador). The months wear on and cracks begin to form in their relationship: they get fired, they get sick, they run out of money, they grow disillusioned with the revolution and each other. But years later the trip remains fixed in her mind and she finally goes back to Nicaragua to try to make sense of it all. Unferth's heartbreaking and hilarious memoir perfectly captures the youthful search for meaning, and is an absorbing rumination on what happens to a country and its people after the revolution is over.

Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War Details

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From Reader Review Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War for online ebook

Frederic Germay says

TheRumpus.net has this neat little ditty you can sign up for called Letters in the Mail. A couple times every month, you'll get letters containing personal stories and/or anecdotes from various authors and writers. Occasionally, a return address will be listed should one elect to reply. For several months, I enjoyed these letters but never really felt compelled to reply. Finally, one letter came along that personally touched me. I can't even remember what it was about, but it was the first letter I responded to, a letter that I 'needed' to respond to. That was my introduction to Deb Olin Unferth.

I wrote to her about some blah-blah-nobody-cares stuff and she eventually responded, mailing me a copy of her book, a story that tells her coming of age tale in all of its stupid glory. She thought it might help with my situation, you know, to see familiar feelings from an outside perspective. Naturally, I was skeptical of that, but I finally got around to reading it anyway. It was a free book. No complaints here.

Having just finished it, I am astonished. This has been a quality read. It started out a little slow-paced, but most autobiographical tales often do. Once you become invested in these stories, they have a way of grabbing you by the necktie and tugging you through the pages into the author's life, and you cry with them and laugh with them, saying you would've known better, but knowing that you wouldn't have.

Unferth details her defining quest to several Central American countries to help The Sandinistas and their communist revolution, at least - that was the plan. They never really accomplish much of what they set out to do, and expectations fall apart and people reveal their true colors...the glorified start to show their flaws with wear and the voiceless meek begin to discover their own special power. It sounds corny, I'll bet. But it's good.

The centerpiece of this novel lies with her boyfriend George, a supremely confident and charismatic Christian, a young man who draws people to him with his indefinable energy and his expansive personality, big enough for two - so why bother with another. She's the one that follows him into his helltastic void, not because she's particularly political or religious, but because she needs a purpose, and so his desires and ambitions become hers. These wee damsel types always irk me in the movies, perhaps because they remind me of myself. It's that legendary line in *On the Road*, "The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to be saved..." And so forth.

Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love tracks the author's journey from tagging along in the shadows of great idea-men to breaking away and flowering into something unsure and new, something like blind hands feeling out the world, something not better or worse but finally honest. Something like self-discovery.

Jamie Bradway says

I'm wavering between 3 and 4 for Revolution. This is the second time I have to say that Unferth is a great writer - her pacing, her voice, her spare originality - but she skimps on plot and characterization. This might not be as fair a charge against a memoir, but she kind of left me dog-paddling about in a vast sea of nicely constructed sentences for the middle third of the book. It could be that this feeling was intentional, a mirroring of Deb and George's meanderings, but it's also a good way to lose a reader.

Unferth is a great observer and commenter on the movement of people and things; she tracks the slight changes and the large, macro and micro, and then reports out. She does this as well in fiction as she does in fact. But she does not provide insight to internal shifts quite as well; neither in characters she creates nor the real people she encounters. As sympathetic travelers and sometime-workers through Central American revolutions in the '80's, the reader might expect to read some angst-y reaction to, say, violent acts in the name of a peaceful ideal. How does the revolutionary deal with the tragedy of stray bullets in a schoolyard? Is there ever that long, dark tea-time of the soul when they wonder if it's all worthwhile? As all of these revolutions eventually are swept aside, as they are, how do the combatants *feel*? Unferth doesn't tell you. Even lover George, about whom she should have greater insight, is flat.

I will continue to read everything Unferth writes, I am sure. And though I've read two works of hers recently without giving her my highest marks, I'll continue to recommend her to other discriminating readers. My expectation is that she is the most likely of any of my current favorites to create something lasting and beautiful.

Maria says

When Deb Olin Unferth was 18, she fell in love with George, a fellow student, who was rather rebellious, and bit strange. Being in love, it seemed young Deb would do anything for her boyfriend. She changed her religion from Jewish to Christian, to her family's dismay, and followed George on his journey to 'foment' the revolution in Central America.

The naiveté of youth leads Deb to somewhere she is totally unprepared for, and the often treacherous journey to Nicaragua leaves an impression on her that remains to this day. From reading the memoir, it seems that some twenty years after her venture into this unknown territory, she is still deeply affected by that trip. Indeed she made a journey back to Nicaragua after ten years and then continued to visit the places she'd been to in her youth for years, as if the country had some kind of hold on her.

This book is one woman's story about how love can make people do the strangest things, and also how first love can leave its mark for a lifetime. It appears, from reading the book, that the author retains a deep curiosity about her ex-fiancé, George (he proposed whilst they were on the road and they broke off the engagement soon after. They lost touch a few years after returning home).

On their trip to join the revolution in 1987, Deb and George find jobs and get fired, sleep in spider-infested hotels, get very ill, get robbed many times, and almost drown at sea. There are very interesting stories about their adventure told in a humourous and sentimental way by the author.

The book is very well written, and kept me interested. It's quite thought-provoking and insightful in parts.

Reviewed by Maria Savva as a reviewer for Bookpleasures.com

Oriana says

I LOVE Deb Olin Unferth. I want this book RIGHT NOW.

OMIGOD THE BOOK GODS ANSWERED ME. I won the GR giveaway for this, holy shit!!!

This review was originally written for CCLaP, and the book was also on my CCLaP best-of-2011 list

"Nineteen eighty-seven is the year I did nothing. The year I fought in no war, contributed to no cause, didn't get shot, jailed, or injured. We didn't starve, didn't die, didn't save anyone either. Didn't change anyone's mind for the better, or the worse. We had absolutely no effect on anything that happened. The only thing that changed as a result of our presence was us."

A quick synopsis: Deb and her boyfriend George leave college in 1987, when she is eighteen and he is twenty, to spend a year traveling through Central America--Mexico, Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama--in search of revolutions to foment, or at least "revolution jobs" to procure. Along the way, they work in an orphanage in teaching the children reading and sports, until they are asked to leave. They build bicycles in Nicaragua for a few days before being fired for incompetence. They trade off bouts of diarrhea and fevers and scabies, get robbed over and over, have animated political and philosophical discussions with other Internacionalistas (called Sandalistas by the locals), conduct and record interviews with anyone who will speak with them (though they later lose all the tapes), keep meticulous journals, bicker and make up and fight again, and generally botch everything they set out to do meaningfully.

There is plenty of firsthand history here, as she moves from country to country, revolution to revolution. She teaches us about guerrillas who have been successful, soldiers and how they interrogate, spies and their disguises, priests who renounced religion in favor of politics, the way that the things she experienced, in retrospect, wound up playing out on the international stage. But the book is also suffused with the unreliability of memory. Unferth is constantly cancelling out her stories by questioning whether they really happened just then, or there, or in that way. She describes a family trip to El Salvador many years earlier, listing all the awful things that happened, and what a terrible memory it was. Then she says that her mother remembers it as a wonderful time. She tells us that she and George were in Managua when the radical newspaper La Prensa reopened, detailing the crowds, the paperboys, the cheering. But then she backtracks--were they really in Managua that day? Were there really such crowds? Was that the same day they saw the Russian ballet, or the day she cut the soldier's hair? Was La Prensa really even closed? This honesty and confusion is, to me, a welcome and unique stance in our current over-saturated memoir world, to admit that we are fallible, that memory is a trap and a lie. Memoirists always seem so sure of themselves, so certain of who said what to whom and where and when, and it is refreshing to see Unferth questioning and questioning. It makes the rest of her story less iron-clad, true, but also more human, more relatable.

And her language! Beautiful and strange, like everything she writes. "She had the face of captive royalty, the voice of something gentle in a cage." "I hated him with the freshness of wet cement, a new imprint, a hand coming down on my mind and marking it." "The sun was like another language. The sun was like a shout in the sky." Her prose is generally straightforward and sparse, getting out of the way of the story, but sprinkled with moments of beauty, with profound realizations, with sharp and acute characterizations. It makes for extremely engaging, propelling reading.

Starting even with its subtitle, "The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the War," Revolution is told in a particular tone, one of amused disbelief in one's former self. It's easy to picture Unferth tapping this out, shaking her head and rolling her eyes--was that really me doing all those ridiculous things? Though there are a few times when this façade is cracked, and she lets real emotions come through, the bulk of the book is extremely self-conscious. She keeps askance of the narrative, condescending to it, to her former naïve self and her bizarre genius boyfriend and all the self-important buffoons they met along the way. "Imagine. We were walking across their war, juggling. We were bringing guitars, plays adapted from Gogol, elephants wearing tasseled hats. The Nicaraguans wanted land, literacy, a decent doctor. We wanted a nice sing-a-long

and a ballet. We weren't a revolution. We were an armed circus." This tone choice is clearly a defense mechanism, forestalling criticism via self-mockery, and it is a successful technique, to a point. It grounds the narrative, saving it from corny idealism and keeping it from spinning off into maudlin recollection or inflated self-importance. But ultimately there is such a bemused, disapproving distance that the reader too is forced most of the time into their own jaded head-shaking disbelief, rather than finding a way to embrace the person she was, living the life she chose. Nonetheless, *Revolution* still manages to be a powerful book. It's ultimately an incredible journey she took, full of insane things she did, and Unferth's language and narration is more than up to the task.

Sherrie Miranda says

Sherrie Miranda gives 5.0 out of 5 stars & says "Civil Wars And Revolutions Are Not All They're Cracked Up To Be!" February 28, 2016

This review is for: *Revolution: The Year I Fell in Love and Went to Join the Sandinistas* (Paperback)

Although I agree with the criticism some have given this book, I also think that's what makes this memoir so fascinating. Unferth and her boyfriend had no idea what they were getting themselves into!

I totally relate to this book and had similar ideas of my own to go join the Revolution. My boyfriend (who later became my husband, then my ex) was Salvadoran so he knew it was no joking matter to go join a guerrilla group or any other group during the civil wars in Central and South America.

We even had some friends who were in a punk rock band that went to Nicaragua after the Revolution. The more I heard, the more I wanted to go. I finally did go to El Salvador, but my boyfriend's family made sure I didn't get into any really bad situations.

It's interesting that of all the people I met who had been to Nicaragua, not one of them told me the raw truth that Unferth tells here. I had no idea that it would have been so difficult! Yes, I knew there were very young soldiers who were indoctrinated to believe anyone who cared about the people were Communists (this was how it was in El Salvador). I knew that the Sandinistas were mostly young idealists who knew what hunger and violence was like (El Salvador too, that's how both sides were able to recruit so many teens). But I never knew about the day to day difficulties of lack of food, money and jobs, and the abundance of diseases that could KILL you!

Unferth bares her soul like few have done, especially as it relates to Central America, idealists and trying to understand another culture.

One of my favorite facts that Unferth brings up is that the locals didn't call us American and European idealists "Internationalistas," but instead referred to us (or them, since I didn't go) as "Sandalistas" because of the fact that almost all of them wore some kind of sandals! They may have arrived in Birkenstocks, but eventually had to wear whatever some local shoemaker with no resources could make for them.

I must admit that this memoir that reads like a novel made me very glad that my headstrong Salvadoran boyfriend never gave in to the silly whims of an American girl who, at that time, romanticized the entire idea of helping poor people make a better life for themselves. It truly was NO JOKE. Knowing me, I might not have made it back alive!

Sherrie Miranda is the author of "Secrets & Lies in El Salvador: Shelly's Journey"

Sherrie Miranda's historically based, coming of age, Adventure novel "Secrets & Lies in El Salvador" is about an American girl in war-torn El Salvador:

<http://tinyurl.com/klxht4y>

Her husband made a video for her novel. He wrote the song too:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P11Ch...>

Danny Fritz says

This book was hard to finish. The writing is just so bad.

At one point, there was a page without a single period on it. There was no congruence of stories. And after finishing it, it is hard to tell what happened in it at all.

I'm not positive what "the revolution" she always spoke of was. I'm not positive what they did at all in Central America in fact. She spends a great deal talking about her boyfriend George. She also goes a great deal into stalking George. All stuff that is horribly uninteresting.

Random sentences will be written in Spanish with no translation. I don't know Spanish.

I'm left with no idea of what I read. Some collection of random anecdotes from her life. That don't feel like they add up to anything, and don't feel like they mean anything.

Micah says

I wanted to like this book. Really, I did. When I first read about it, I could see myself in the author's shoes: if I was 20-something 20 years ago, I could see myself doing what she did, running off to Central America to bear witness to the conflicts that were raging there between leftist guerrillas and right-wing governments propped up by the United States without a real understanding of the gravity of the conflict. I liked the idea that Unferth was turning a critical lens on herself as a young idealistic kid who didn't really know shit about what was happening in Central America—and, in the course of the book, seems to realize that the more she learned about the conflict, the less place she really had being there. The selection I read in Harper's also made me think I would really enjoy the book's snarky, self-mocking tone. All pieces seemed to fit together to make an enjoyable reading experience.

But God, I did not enjoy reading this book.

Most annoying about the book is Unferth's tone and style, which become insufferable after the first 10 pages or so. She writes in very short, simple sentences that are supposed to reflect her naivete at the time she was in El Salvador. It's a clever idea in theory, but it became impossible to enjoy quite rapidly.

Aside from the style, there doesn't seem to be much of a tale to tell here—at least not a book-length one. Naive girl and naive/stupid boy head to civil war in impoverished country to support the revolution; don't contribute much, but, in their naivete, think they fall in love; girl eventually realizes she's not in love and boy is a moron; girl goes home, having grown considerably more than boy, who remains an idiot. That should've been told in a 30-page story, not a 200-page book. So much of the details feel like filler; the development of the plot seems slow as molasses, and it's fairly clear early on where it's going to go (which makes continuing to read a grueling exercise).

Also, maybe I think this because I'm young and naive, but one of Unferth's final conclusions seems to be that she never should've gone to El Salvador; that the entire endeavor was an exercise in foolishness. I don't think this is the case. I would have liked to read a narrative with a clear-headed analysis of some of the foible and folly of young privileged Americans heading down to Latin America in the middle of a brutal conflict, but also some of the things gained from such a trip. I got the sense that Unferth had gone from bright-eyed idealist to cynical hipster who thinks trying to change the world or supporting those who are changing the

world is an exercise in futility. I disagree.

Unferth seems to have a rich story to tell here. But the way she tells it alone makes it impossible to enjoy. Her thick cynicism makes the conclusions one could draw from her story dubious.

Stephanie Baker Opperman says

The time and place of this book is compelling (1987 during the increasing struggle between revolution and dictatorship in Central and South America), but the biographical aspect was completely uninspiring. While I hoped to read about the affect of revolutionary momentum on an idealistic American girl who hoped to be part of the change, instead I found a whiny account of an eighteen year old dealing with boyfriend troubles and diarrhea. Written in her adult life, the author still shows no sign of learning, growth, understanding, or insight into any of the events that she witnessed. Instead, she merely ponders her inability to understand the collapse of her relationship. Ugh.

Elyssa says

This book would have been better if the author had chosen to focus on the events in Central America, but instead she talks more about her boyfriend who brought her there. Towards the end she engages in more reflection about herself and her experiences, but by then it was too late for me to give this book more than two stars.

cat says

2011 Book 66/100

I would give this a 3.5 stars if that were possible, if only for the paragraph on page 107 that begins "I took my dress off and walked around in my underwear." and that asserts "My coming of age story, if I had one, would be right here. It didn't involve a loss of innocence or man's inhumanity to man. It was me taking my clothes off and marching in a circle around the room. Somehow I knew - nothing specific, I just knew - I wasn't who I would be. More of me was coming." Which so beautifully sums up this memoir of self-awareness, which is the journey within the journey in this book, as she and her then boyfriend cum fiancée travel through much of Central America in thir attempts to join the revolution in the late 80's.

Janine Darragh says

Really.... interesting? I'm not even sure what to say about it. I enjoyed the writing a great deal, and it's a memoir, so I feel like I can't be critical, but.... leaving college to run away with your boyfriend to Central America to look for a revolution to join... I just... nope. I have no words. And I'm left with two burning questions: Did she ever figure out and recover from whatever was causing her big, distended, bloated belly, and, did she ever, EVER get over George? All that said, it was a fun, quick, enjoyable, frustrating read.

Dina Reynoso says

This book was absolute torture to get through. And god, I really really wanted to like this book especially being that this was my main read while traveling to Nicaragua. The author's writing style was so incredibly difficult to follow and her sense of humor was sarcastic and not funny at all. I found the whole experience incredibly annoying and truly forced myself to get to the end. The story had so much potential, I mean, what young progressive revolutionary-minded person wouldn't fantasize about joining the struggle? I certainly have had those fantasies! I won't lie! Anyway, would never recommend this book. Don't bother.

Erin says

This was my work's March 2011 book club selection, since we had been reading a lot of "dark" stuff lately and wanted something more upbeat and comical.

It was funny (at times), but it wasn't what I expected. I thought more of the plot would focus on Unferth's experiences living in war-ridden Central America during the 80s, but that served more as a backdrop to her ruminations about her relationship with her beau at the time.

The book was definitely a quick read--I got through it in just about 4 days, reading exclusively on my commute--but I don't know that I'd necessarily recommend it.

Daveski says

Last year, I read Unferth's first novel *Vacation*, which I thought featured fantastic writing but left me feeling a little flat on the characters and story. This book, even though it's non-fiction, takes basically everything I loved about her novel and adds some emotional depth that was sorely needed. I don't know, maybe it's just easier to add emotion when you're writing about your own experiences, but I also think that the detached tone of **Vacation** was intentional, and I'm glad to see that it's not how she always writes.

This book tells the story of a trip the author took in the 1980's, to various Central American countries to seek out and join a revolution. There are very little politics discussed - Unferth focuses mainly on the personal growth that she experienced during the trip. It's sort of a combination of a travelogue and memoir, and is as good of a coming-of-age story as I've ever read.

Unferth is funny, smart, and an extremely talented writer, and she is quickly becoming one of my favorite writers. I highly recommend this one, and once again I can't wait to see what she'll do next.

Lindsey says

This book is less a memoir about being in Central America during the 1980s and more about the author remembering being a 19 year old in a bad relationship while in Central America during the 1980s. I doubt many people remember their 19 year old selves fondly and this definitely comes through. An interesting book, but the two main characters are pretty annoying, again probably because the author doesn't remember them fondly. I really enjoyed the last quarter of the book when she begins discussing how this experience

impacted her life as an adult and wish that she had included more of this analysis throughout. Overall an entertaining book and an easy read. I'll definitely look for more books by Unferth in the future.
