



Brief Encounters with Che Guevara: Stories

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The well-intentioned protagonists of *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* are caught -- to both disastrous and hilarious effect -- in the maelstrom of political and social upheaval surrounding them. In "Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera," an ornithologist being held hostage in the Colombian rain forest finds that he respects his captors for their commitment to a cause, until he realizes that the Revolution looks a lot like big business. In "The Good Ones Are Already Taken," the wife of a Special Forces officer battles a Haitian voodoo goddess with whom her husband is carrying on a not-entirely-spiritual relationship. And in "The Lion's Mouth," a disillusioned aid worker makes a Faustian bargain to become a diamond smuggler for the greater good. With masterful pacing and a robust sense of the absurd, each story in *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* is a self-contained adventure, steeped in the heady mix of tragedy and danger, excitement and hope, that characterizes countries in transition.

Brief Encounters with Che Guevara: Stories Details

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From Reader Review Brief Encounters with Che Guevara: Stories for online ebook

Will Byrnes says

Brief Encounters with Che Guevara is a 2006 collection of eight brilliant short stories by Ben Fountain, author of the wonderful novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Half-Time Walk*. *Brief Encounters* established Fountain's reputation as a writer to watch, earning him a PEN Award, a Whiting Writers Award, an O Henry, and a Barnes and Noble Discover Award. Must be good, right? Indeed it is.

Half the stories are set in Haiti. Others are in Sierra Leone, Colombia, Myanmar and there is even one in Europe. They tell of people trying to do the right thing in an amoral world. The complexity of the world is a central focus in most of these stories, where it is often not so easy to figure out what the right thing to do actually is, let alone doing it. A grad-student ornithologist is taken captive by a revolutionary group in Colombia. An American NGO worker is persuaded to help fund a revolution in Haiti. A soldier returns from an extended tour in Haiti with some very unusual baggage. A pro golfer of questionable morality is recruited by the generals in Myanmar to promote golf in their corrupt and isolated nation. A Haitian fisherman finds that it is not so easy to foil the efforts of drug smugglers. An aid worker in Sierra Leone becomes involved with a blood diamond smuggler, while attempting to support a co-op that provides work for maimed locals. Sundry people relate their intersections with Che in the title piece. And in the final selection, a prodigy pianist with an unusual gift must cope with her notoriety while attempting a supremely challenging piece.

Photo by Larry D. Moore via Wikipedia

There is considerable moral ambiguity in these pieces, a feast of Faustian bargains to be considered, and even mention of God and the Devil wagering over people's souls.

Fountain was not always a writer. He was born in North Carolina and got his law degree from Duke, then worked in real estate law in Dallas for five years before pleading *nolo contendere* and turning over a new leaf.

It was a lot of things coming together at once: having a kid; my wife, Sharie, making partner at her firm; me having practiced for five years and just absolutely having had enough; me turning thirty and thinking that if I was going to make a run at trying to be a writer I needed to get going. There was a sense of urgency, of time passing. (from *Ecotone*)

Beginning his new career in 1988, he had stories accepted here and there but it took a long time for him to hone his craft and produce top quality work. One of the stories in this collection was first published in 2000. He had his share of frustration during this time, with a couple of novels taking up space in a drawer to prove it. But he stuck with it, treating writing as a job, whether or not he was published, five days a week writing every day, every day, every day.

As for why Haiti figures so large as a subject

On a rational basis, I saw Haiti as a paradigm for a lot of things I was interested in relating to power, politics, race, and history. I went there a couple of times and at that point I probably had what I needed to get. It was some comfort to me to know, flying out of there the second or third

time, that I didn't really have to go back—and yet I did go back, many times. Once I was there I felt pretty comfortable. And the more time I spent there, the more there was that I felt I needed to understand. But I still can't give a satisfactory explanation for how it happened.

He would visit Haiti over 30 times. The notion of going to Colombia or Sierra Leone was raised, but funds and time are not limitless and his wife was aghast at the notion.

Fountain is very interested in the impact of the large forces in society on individuals.

I practiced law for five years and that gives you insight into a certain mind-set that maybe a lot of writers haven't had firsthand access to. There's an almost casual cruelty, a very low level of overall awareness, but sometimes there's also knowledge that real damage is being done—this attitude of “Oh, what the hell,” this kind of moral cognitive dissonance. These are people who have never missed a meal. It's an unknowingness, an unawareness, that Reagan personified. Reagan was so sure of everything and yet his experience of the world was so narrow. How could he be sure of anything? I saw that over and over again in the wealthier people I worked with or had contact with while practicing law. Many people were operating from a very narrow range of experience, and yet they had complete faith in it. Their way was the correct way, the only way. They had virtually no awareness of any other way of life except in terms of demonizing things like communism, socialism, or Islam. It's an extremely blindered experience of the world.

By Claudio Reyes Ule via Wikimedia

The stories turn a widened eye on this sort of myopia, but Fountain does not spare the revolutionary sorts either, who have issues of their own. I found the stories very engaging, enlightening and moving. It is definitely worth your while to encounter Ben Fountain in this volume. You may find that the time spent in his company is *too* brief.

=====THE STORIES

Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera

John Blair is a grad-student ornithologist who ignored the risks and is doing research in Colombia when he is kidnapped by members of MURC (a FARC stand-in), a revolutionary group, and is held for ransom. He winds up spending a long time with the group and establishing relationships with some members and the leader. It is a tale heavy with political irony and a very O Henry-ish ending.

Reve Haitien

Mason is an OAS observer in Haiti. He throws chess games with the young local players, as a way of boosting their self-esteem. He encounters a player better than himself, Amulatto, and is drawn in his world.

Life here had the cracked logic of a dream, its own internal rules. You looked at a picture and it wasn't like looking at a picture of a dream, it was a passage into the current of the dream. And for him the dream had its own peculiar twist, the dream of doing something real, something worthy. A *blan's* dream, perhaps all the more fragile for that.

The Good Ones are Already Taken

Melissa is a very sexual person and it is a big sacrifice for her to do without while her serviceman husband is away. But when Dirk returns from an extended tour in Haiti, he has changed, gone voodoo, religious, which

has implications for their sex life. Can Melissa adapt to the new man who came home? And what's up with all that weirdness he is into anyway?

Asian Tiger

Sonny Grous, 23, is a pro golfer, built like a bouncer and not all that successful. In Rangoon for a tournament he has the game of his life and is recruited by the generals to be the ambassador of golf for Burma, which is seeking to attract foreigners with great courses. The money is pretty good, but there is the dodgy element of working for people who are truly reprehensible.

Bouki and the Cocaine

Concerned about the massive drug-running, Syto, a small-town Haitian fisherman, and his brother decide to grab the bales that are left by the runners on the beach and bring them to the police, accepting on face value the frequent public announcements decrying the drug trade. Things do not work out as the brothers expect. There are real questions raised here about where honor lies, and how one's interpretation of that informs behavior. The tale is exceptionally clever and will make you smile, while also getting the moral dilemma involved.

The Lion's Mouth

Jill runs a co-op that provides employment for many local women in Sierra Leone but funds are cut off. She turns to her unlikely bf, Starkey, a dealer in blood diamonds, for help in finding the needed funds. More moral ambiguity here, and an image of a troubled place.

Brief Encounters with Che Guevara

Che is a touchstone here, not an actual character, for the most part. Several, very diverse, people tell of their encounters with Che. Among them is Laurent, a Haitian who knew Guevara. Laurent was my favorite character in this entire collection. It is worth reading the entire book just to get to meet him.

Fantasy for Eleven fingers

Anna Juhl is a young piano prodigy, gifted in a manner identical to Anton Visser, a luminous player of the early 19th century, and composer of a particularly wonderful and difficult piece called *Fantaisie pour onze Doigts*. She takes on the challenge. This piece seemed a bit out of place in the collection, geographically anyway.

=====EXTRA STUFF

A great interview in Ecotone Journal – by Ben George – must read stuff if you find Fountain interesting, and you should, a lot on writing and Fountain's writing history.

An interview in the on-line magazine, The Millions by Edan Lepucki. It is mostly on Billy Lynn, but there is plenty here about how Fountain thinks and writes. Definitely worthwhile.

There is a lovely bit in the Barnes and Noble writer details page on Fountain's favorite books

The on-line edition of the magazine Rain Taxi also has a lovely review with the author. He talks about his relationship with Haiti. There is a lot of detailed discussion of the stories.

There is a piece by Malcolm Gladwell in New Yorker that looks at Fountain as an example of a late-bloomer.

David Abrams says

Soon after finishing Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk, I turned to Ben Fountain's first book, the 2007 collection of short stories Brief Encounters with Che Guevara. I was not surprised to find the same kind of finely-honed language which Fountain uses to dazzling effect--especially in his evocative and detailed descriptions of characters and settings. The phrases seem to be tossed effortlessly onto the page, but they struck me as so beautiful that I whipped out my highlighter pen. That pen nearly ran out of ink before I finished the book. Here are just a few of my favorite passages, thrown at you out of context but I think they stand alone just fine as individual gems.

He talked in the slow, careful manner of a man chewing cactus.

Outside the birds began singing like hundreds of small bells, their notes scattered as indiscriminately as seed.

....sex smelled a lot like tossed salad, one with radishes, fennel, and fresh grated carrot, and maybe a tablespoon of scallions thrown in.

A man of medium height, with brisk, officious eyes and the cinematic mustache he'd worn in the army, the pencil-thin wisp like an advertisement for how well the world should think of him.

....to the sort of serious, no-frills neighborhood bar where the walls sweat tears of nicotine and the waitresses have the grizzled look of ex-child brides.

And then these sentences from the collection's final story, "Fantasy for Eleven Fingers," which opens with a biography of Anton Visser, a fictional 19th-century composer who played the piano like a human thunderbolt, crisscrossing Europe with his demonic extra finger and leaving a trail of lavender gloves as souvenirs. Toward the end, when Visser-mania was at its height, the mere display of his naked right hand could rouse an audience to hysterics; his concerts degenerated into shrieking bacchanals, with women alternately fainting and rushing the stage, flinging flowers and jewels at the great man.

Visser composes the titular Fantasy, which is called "a most strange and affecting piece, with glints of dissonance issuing from the right hand like the whip of a lash, or very keen razor cuts."

The story is perfect companion piece to Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk in the way it portrays the mass hysteria of a phenomenon (a child prodigy pianist, a war hero) which no one can understand. I believe Fountain truly cares about his objects of scorn--the lemmings of society who blindly follow a bullheaded president into a misguided war, for instance--and that he wants, more than anything, for his readers to wake up from their slumber of indifference. In both books, the bark of the whip leaves small, lasting razor cuts across our backs.

Marita says

Utopia becomes Dystopia; Hell turns into Paradise in this collection of short stories. In each story the protagonist's life or view of life is changed by an event or a series of events. There is cynicism, irony, pathos and humour in these acutely observed vignettes about greed, drugs, corruption, exploitation and other seamy aspects of human nature. Fortunately there is a glimmer of hope in these tales as there are also those who say

no to these vices.

Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera

"...John Blair, graduate assistant slave and aspiring Ph.D., whose idea of big money was a twenty-dollar bill" goes to Colombia to "...study the effects of habitat fragmentation on rare local species of parrotlets". Alas, he is grabbed by members of MURC, the Movimiento Unido de Revolucionarios de Colombia. Unfortunately for him he doesn't look like a spy and is therefore deemed to be one. Will he ever be ransomed?

Rêve Haitien

Mason works as an observer in Haiti. In his spare time he plays chess with the locals, until one day he meets a nameless mulatto man...

The Good Ones Are Already Taken

Sexy Melissa anxiously awaits her husband Dirk's return from overseas service, only to be informed that he is unable to make love to her on a Saturday. What happened to him in Haiti? Why has he changed? How will she cope?

Asian Tiger

Big, affable Texan Sonny Grous ends up with a job as golf pro in Myanmar. There he learns how the game is really played...

Bouki and the Cocaine

A poor, honest fisherman in Haiti takes the cocaine haul he finds to the authorities. What now?...

The Lion's Mouth

"She'd signed on as country project director for World Aid Ministries, a Protestant umbrella group that specialized in long-term food relief; a religious vocation wasn't necessary for the job, only a tolerance for what might be charitably called spartan living and a masochistic attitude toward work." So why has she hooked up with Starkey who is very involved in illegal diamond deals amongst other things? Where does this relationship take her?

Brief Encounters with Ché Guevara

A potpourri of very brief glimpses of Ché...

Fantasy for Eleven Fingers

The celebrated pianist Anton Visser caused mass hysteria (hilariously described) when he played the Fantasy for Eleven Fingers (yes, he had an extra finger). Now child prodigy Anna who also has an extra digit is being trained to play that legendary piece of music. However, anti-Semitism raises its ugly head...

Andrew Breslin says

While this was an entertaining and thought-provoking collection of stories, I've been scratching my head to try to figure out what in the name of holy hell the *Boston Globe* was thinking when it called it "downright funny" right there on the cover.

Fountain has done an impressive job of transporting us readers to various dark and ugly corners of the globe, usually in the context of war, genocide, greed, exploitation and textbook examples of man's inhumanity to man. And in spite of the claims made on the cover, this is not nearly as amusing as you might expect. The protagonists of these assorted stories of American expats in various incarnations of hell endure being kidnapped by Marxist rebels, or falling in with diamond smugglers and drug dealers amidst a backdrop of carnage evoked so vividly you can almost smell the rotting corpses. A woman must face losing her husband to the compelling influence of voodoo religion. A golf pro sells all his principles down the river, throwing games for corrupt ego-maniacal generals who are more concerned with making a birdie on hole # 3 than they are with the horrors of war they are foisting upon their people. A young pianist must contend with virulent anti-Semitism and public disgust over her physical aberrations, ending in a final psychological breakdown that is evoked so viscerally, I nearly puked. So really, a laugh riot.

I enjoyed this, but I didn't laugh, not even nervously. Genocide just isn't funny. War, revolution, injustice, people getting their limbs chopped off: not funny to me.

I guess I have no sense of humor.

But remind me to tell you the one about the young mother who has her infant torn from her arms and dashed to the ground in front of her before having her own arms cut off by right-wing paramilitary units. It's hilarious!

Mimi says

This book is a collection of well written short stories that leave me wondering if America is horrible because it has failed so miserably at helping other countries and at times seems to make them worse with our interference **or** if America is wonderful because even with its flaws, it's still doing better and taking care of its own much more than many, many other places. Or maybe we're supposed to be left with both feelings. Perhaps we are meant to be full of gratitude for what we have and full of determination to continue to strive for a better life for all. Hopefully the purpose was not to show us lives so horrible with no chance of ever improving. There must be a way. So many people suffering forever can't be the answer.

Some excerpts

Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera

"In the same vacant drone he told all manner of terrible stories: battles he'd fought, prisoners he'd executed, patrols where his column had come across peasants burned to death or babies nailed to planks. The stories were so patently nightmarish that Blair wondered if Hernan was talking in his sleep, channeling dreams that rose like swamp gas out of his wounded subconscious. Hernan's whole family had been killed when he was twelve, their village wiped out by *autodefensas* for electing a former insurgent as mayor."

"The U.S. had pledged Colombia \$1.6 billion in aid—advisers, weapons, helicopters, the whole bit—which made Blair wonder if his countrymen had lost their minds. There was a fire raging in Colombia, and the U.S. planned to hose it down with gasoline."

Rêve Haitian

"Mason turned as if to study the canvases, but he was thinking about the worst thing that had happened to him today. He'd been driving his truck through La Saline, the festering salt-marsh slum that stretched along the bay like a mile-wide lesion splitting the earth. At his approach, a thin woman with blank eyes had risen from her squat and held her baby toward him—begging, he thought at first, playing on his pity to shake loose some change, and then he saw the strange way the baby's head lolled back, the gray under pallor of its ropy skin. The knowledge came on like a slow electric shock: *dead*, that baby was dead, but the woman said nothing as he eased past. She simply held out her baby in silent witness, and Mason couldn't look at her, he'd had to turn away. With the embargo all the babies were dying now."

"If you were noted in your field, that could protect you, but this also meant that Duvalier perceived you as a threat. You could be famous but you could never slip, show that you were vulnerable in any way. One slip, and they'd take you.' The mulatto paused again. 'My father never slipped, but I think it made him a little crazy. He kept a gun in the house—we lived on the Champ de Mars, and at night we could hear the screams of people being tortured in the palace. One night he took his gun, my father, he held the bullets in his hand and he said to me: This bullet is for you. This one is for your brother. This one is for your mama. And this one, for me. Because if they come they are not going to take us alive.'"

"He packed sixty-three canvases in a soft duffel bag and nobody laid a hand on him. He had to face the ordeal all by himself, with not a soul to turn to for comfort or advice. There hadn't even been the consolation of seeing the mulatto before he left, the last sack of paintings delivered by a kid with a scrawled one-word message: *Go*. But Mason was white, and he had a good face; the whole thing was so absurdly easy that he could have wept."

The Good Ones Are Already Taken

Asian Tiger

"Would he ever outgrow desire, that grasping inner child? Maybe you broke free only if you actually won—it was hard to imagine that Tiger Woods fantasized about winning the Masters, thought maybe after you won you simply obsessed on it in reverse, replayed the triumph over and over in your head and inflated the moment to such orgasmic perfection that you drove yourself crazy from the other side."

"After his banking was done Sonny would spy on the monks as they went about their business, which did not, truth to tell, look like much. Some meditation, a little begging, the occasional catnap—life for them seemed to be a serene business, and Sonny watched them for clues as to how this was done. Desire, he knew, had ruined the first half of his life, and regret, its obverse, was going to ruin the second half unless he figured out their trick of serenity."

"The monsoon season had begun, bringing deluges the liked of which Sonny had seen only in Biblical-epic movies. Banded kraits and pit vipers sought out the high ground of the greens; frogs chord outside Sonny's window at night, serenading him like Mormons on a rapturous drunk."

"The opposition continued to ambush the clubhouse fax machine, their broadsides appearing at all hours of the day. SLAVE LABOR ON UNOCAL PIPELINE read the headline on one; someone had scrawled *MURDERERS* across the top.

'Is that true?' Sonny asked.

'Is what true?'

'Murderers. Slave labor.'

Tommy considered this as he shredded the fax into pencil-thin strips. 'You know, Sonny, this is what I think. I think most days the truth is just another possibility.'"

Book and the Cocaine

". . . to the police station, the former pus yellow barracks of the Haitian Army redone in searing white with snappy royal blue trim. These were the new civilian, post-invasion police, recruited and trained by the Americans to be the guardians of the dawning democratic era, and as the brothers waited in an outer office Styto reflected that, yes, there was definitely a different feel about the place. It wasn't just the paint job, the matching desks and chairs, the glossy validation of fax machines and computers. The old police used to shuffle and slouch around like a bunch of punks—until they wanted you, and then they moved pretty quick—but this crew carried themselves with the same crisp air as the people over at the tax office.

And yet here was Michelle running the place, Michelet with his oblong, strangely blunted head, like a coffee bean squeezed between your thumb and forefinger. A man of medium height, with brisk, officious eyes and the cinematic mustache he'd worn in the arm, the pencil-thin wisp like an advertisement for how well the world should think of him. As a soldier he hadn't been known as one of the high-profile rapists or torturers, though he'd slap the odd chicken thief now and then. He'd been clean enough for the Americans to recycle into the police, a professional who could brace up the situation long enough for the *blans* to pound their chests and leave."

"*Réfléchi*, that was better than direct thinking for the world of problems you could never really solve. The problem of contraband, for example, or the confusions of politics, or the trouble that came of needing to eat every day. Or the death of children, a cruelly regular thing in Trois Pins. He and his wife had lost four, the first three as infants and the last, Marie-Lucie, when she was almost seven. That one was never far from his mind, a petite, clean-limbed, willful little girl who'd insisted on starting school at age five, nagging her father until he enrolled her at Marigot's ramshackle École Supérieure. One day she'd been skipping rope and singing out her lessons, and the next she was trembling with fever on her mat, her ankle blanched and puffy as a rotten fish. By morning both legs were swollen, her eyes glassy and distant. Syto borrowed a neighbor's chestnut mare, wrapped Marie-Lucie in a towel, and cradled her across the saddle, and they didn't climb down until the shambling little horse carried them all the way to Jacmel. On the road Marie-Lucie went out of her head with fever, talking and singing with such familiar exuberance that Soto thought he would go insane with grief. At the clinic the doctor shook his head—no antibiotics, the embargo had seen to that, there wasn't so much as an aspirin to be had. They gave Marie-Lucie a bed and Syto a mat; that night the life poured out of her like water from a pail, and the next day, cradling her body again across the saddle, Syto didn't so much want to die himself as to lie down in a ditch and wait for time to end."

"Syto was already nostalgic for his previous life, when all he'd had to worry about was coaxing a living from the fished-out water off Trois Pins. 'You take even the little fish like this?' a *blan* once asked him, one of the aid guys who occasionally came around to pester the fishermen with stupid questions. Syto had shrugged and stared at his feet, somewhat cowed by the *blan*. 'Well, sure,' he'd answered. 'If I don't take it, somebody else will.' And that's what it was coming to, Syto reflected, either you took what you could or you starved to death."

"Now he pinched out a thicker wad of crystals and scraped them into a line on the wooden table. He took a slim golden reed out of his pocket, hunched over the table, and proceeded to introduce the drugs to his nose. Lulu shot Syto a horrified look—*You suck it up your nose?*"

"You were either a chump or a thief, those were your choices in this world. Syto despaired, knowing he'd never be able to explain his sense that they were all, however improbably, on the same side."

"The next several nights a U.S. Army helicopter thundered over the village, its spotlight scything through the palms and huts as a canned Creole message blared from the loudspeaker. The Americans had done this before, during the invasion, when they'd rained words of goodwill down on the people; now they were giving lectures, reminding the people of Trois Pins of their patriotic duty to surrender drugs and criminals to the law. At times it seemed to Syto that the helicopter was parked on top of his house, shattering his mind with its demonic *whacka whacka whacka* while the voice droned on like madness itself."

"And us, we're just *paysan*, okay? That's just who we are and there's no shame in it, we were born to serve God and live unimportant lives."

The Lion's Mouth

"Years ago the RUF had charged out of Liberia pushing some vague Marxist rhetoric about liberating their country, their rationale for an agenda that mainly involved robbing, raping, and murdering every peasant they could get their hands on. They kept their columns well-stocked with ganja and coke, and it was the rebel foot soldiers—most of them teenagers, some no older than ten or twelve—who'd filled the DP camps with amputees. 'Chopping,' they called it, their signature practice of hacking off one or both of their victim's arms. 'Short sleeves or long,' they were said to taunt as they raised their machetes."

"*I want the hardest place*—she'd actually said that when she signed her contract. She'd spent two years in Guatemala with the Peace Corps, then three years in Haiti with Save the Children, and after that she wouldn't be satisfied with anything but the very worst. *I want the hardest place*—on any given day that was usually Sierra Leone, 'the mountain of the lion,' a small, obscure West African country known mainly for its top-quality kimberlite diamonds and the breathtaking cruelty of its civil war."

"She was sitting on the cinderblock porch outside her office, skimming the registration binder that Dennis Hatch had brought over from USAID. Sometime in the next few weeks she would be leading a small convoy through the southeast, delivering resettlement packages in advance of the planned repatriation of refugees. That is the situation held—if the RUF honored the Lomé Accords, if the U.N. peacekeepers could hang onto their weapons, if the rainy season held off and her drivers stayed sober. If a hundred different things she couldn't control came together at a single moment in time."

"Handicap International turned us down last week—I guess they don't believe there's such a thing as one-armed seamstresses. CRS said no, Global Relief, everybody. They're sending all their money to Kosovo now."

"Her gaze inevitably lingered on the women's stumps; on some level she never really stopped thinking about it, though for a long time she'd tried to deny her obsession, this thing she had—which seemed shameful, vaguely pornographic—for visualizing her own mutilation. 'It go red when you chopped,' one of the women had told her. 'Everything go red, red, like your mind on fire.' Jill was sure she would die of horror if it happened to her; most did, ostensibly from shock or loss of blood, and how these women had survived was beyond her comprehension. Not just survived—how they seemed capable at times of quite genuine joy. Lately Jill had seen them laughing and chatting as they worked, edging back toward something like normal life."

"She rested her head against the seat and watched a flock of herons turning loops above the field, their bodies startling white against the background of green. Their elegance, the serene, fluent curves of their flight,

seemed to merge into the ongoing stream of her longing, the desire—only lately admitted—that she very much wanted to go home. She'd chosen this life because she couldn't imagine any other way, but over time, without her strictly being aware of it, the dead stares of the thousands of amputees had served to drain all the purpose out of her work. Those stares, the aura of hopelessness that always settled over the camps, implied that they knew something Jill didn't, a basic fact that had taken her years to understand. They were finished, their lives were over—if not now, then soon, and this applied to virtually every other Leonean as well. Her work was a delaying action at best, a brief comfort and hope to a very small few—she was handing them a glass of water through the window while the house burned down around their heads. She couldn't save them, she couldn't save anyone but herself, which made her presence here the worst sort of self-indulgence, her mission a long-running fantasy."

"As she cleared the corner of the nearest house the courtyard was gradually revealed to her, the crowd seething, roiling in place like a termite mount. Some were weeping, some babbling or laughing to themselves, others rocking back and forth or wringing their hands—the process of understanding was like a slow electric shock, a gathering jolt that finally brought her up short."

"Better to go ahead and shoot them, she thought. Better to have the soldiers machine-gun the lot than leave them for the rebels to carve up."

"For a split second his discipline cracked, his face collapsing as if punched from inside. 'Don't you think I would save them if I could?' he cried. 'I can't handle these people, I don't have the men. Even if we try that mob will fire before we reach the first gate.'"

"She was close enough now to see the lumps in their skin, the juju bundles they'd sewn into themselves. They wore rags and tatters of clothes but fairly bristled with weapons; they were boys, teenagers most of them, red-eyed, heads swiveling as they drifted toward the gate. Giggling, clearly messed up on something. Several pointed their guns at her and laughed."

Brief Encounters with Che Guevara

"I was desperate to speak to her, but that look stopped me cold. She scared me so badly that I remember thinking that I didn't want to fall in love with anyone, ever, not if that's what it did to you."

"Look at this village—what do you see? There's no doctor, no running water, no electricity, no decent road, they have nothing, the lives of these people are [crap]. So all that time you were trying to kill me, brother, did you ever stop to think what this war is about?"

"Now they spent most of their time together arguing about money. There was never enough, of course, and they spent too much, and the debts were piling up and so forth, and watching them fight I began to think that Marx, who was so wrong about so many things, had been right about money's relentless genius for invading every aspect of human life."

"On the other hand there was the .38 she always carried in her purse, with which she seemed as casually proficient as your average American housewife with her cell phone."

"Poverty, injustice, oppression, suffering, these remain the basic conditions of life on most of the planet—whatever else had changed since his death, this hasn't, but as life becomes more pleasurable and affluent for the rest of us, the poor seem more remote than ever, their appeal to humanity even fainter."

Fantasy for Eleven Fingers

Herr Puchel—stout, bushy-bearded, with a huge strawberry of a nose and endearingly tiny feet—had concluded after forty years of teaching that his students would never be truly happy unless coaxed and cudgelled to that peak of performance in which nervous breakdown is a constant risk. Students, by definition, could not reach Parnassus alone; they were too weak of will, too dreamy and easily distracted, they had to be cultivated into that taut, tension-filled state without which pure and lasting art is impossible."

"Romantic and expressive, yet aristocratic and restrained, it is difficult even for masters to convey the spirit of Chopin, which is, ultimately, sadness. Not the sadness of great tragedy, but the irredeemable sadness of time itself: days pass, the world changes, and that which we most treasure must inevitably be lost."

"Anna detached, quite removed from the outer chaos. What Kornblau, Leo, everyone fears most is a phase—Puchel looks to be on the verge of a stroke, so great is his anxiety—but it doesn't occur to any of them that a phase might be the most normal response to all of this."

Kevin Kelsey says

Absolutely brilliant short fiction, mostly focused on ex-pats and people visiting countries during times of turmoil and revolution. Not a bad story in the bunch. Several incredible ones.

Lou says

These stories present some high quality storytelling, with a great sense of place and people, the author manages to get you in a place, amidst struggles and different lives. The writing flows well and there is possible strains of a Mark Twain like humour in the social, travel and moral writings here.

Excellent collection of short stories for reading, interesting encounters within the world that spins in and around Che Guevara and others.

Some of the eight stories briefly reviewed.

Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera

A hostage situation of a scholar a man with no money and no one to pay up for is in a dilemma of mistaken identity, they think he is a spy but his binoculars and map are for spying on nature in his love for birds.

Nicely done short story, excellent story material used, the setting, dark humour, and great writing style makes this a great story to read occurring during a revolution in Colombia.

" "I'm not a spy," Blair answered in his wired, earnest way. "I'm an ornithologist. I study birds."

"However," Alberto continued, "if they wanted to send a spy, they wouldn't send somebody who looked like a spy. So the fact that you don't look like a spy makes me think you're a spy."

Blair considered. "And what if I did look like a spy?"

"Then I'd think you were a spy."

"During the day Blair was free to wander around the compound; for all their talk of his being a spy, the rebels didn't seem to mind him watching their drills, though at night they put him in a storage hut and handcuffed him to a bare plank bed. His beard grew in a dull sienna color, and thanks to the high-starch, amoeba-enriched diet he began to drop weight from his already aerodynamic frame, a process helped along

by the chronic giardia that felt like screws chewing through his gut. But these afflictions were mild compared to the awesome loneliness, and in the way of prisoners since the beginning of time he spent countless hours savoring the lost, now clarified sweetness of ordinary days. The people in his life seemed so precious to him— i love you all! he wanted to tell them, his parents and siblings, the biology department secretaries, his affable though self-absorbed and deeply flawed professors. He missed books, and long weekend runs with his buddies; he missed women so badly that he wanted to gnaw his arm. To keep his mind from rotting in this gulag-style sump he asked for one of his blank notebooks back.

Alberto agreed, more to see what the gringo would do than out of humane impulse; within days Blair had extensive notes on counter-singing among ,Scaled Fruiteaters and agnostic displays in Wood-Rails, along with a detailed gloss on Haffer's theory of speciation."

"Blair was twelve when it first happened, on a trip to the zoo—he came on the aviary 's teeming mosh pit of cockatoos and macaws and Purple-naped Lories, and it was as if an electric arc had shot through him. And he'd felt it every time since, this jolt, the precision stab in the heart whenever he saw psittacidae—he kept expecting it to stop but it never did, the impossibly vivid colors like some primal force that stoked the warm liquid center of his soul."

Reve Haitien

Days after Haitian coup a two chess players meet an deal is forged to use art in a bid to aid a revolution. Another great tale with a sense of place, people and grande struggles.

"He led Mason around the palace and into the hard neighbourhood known as Salomon, a dense, scumbled antheap of cinder block houses and packing-crate sheds, wobbly storefronts, markets, mewling beggars underfoot. Through the woodsmoke and dust and swirl of car exhaust the late sun took on an ocherous radiance, the red light washing over the grunged and pitted streets. Dunes of garbage filled out the open spaces, eruptions so rich in colourful filth that they achieved a kind of abstraction. With Mason half-trotting to keep up the mulatto cut along side streets and tight alleyways where Haitians tumbled at them from every side. A simmering roar came off the close packed houses, a vibration like a drumroll in his ears that blended with the slur of cars and bleating horns, the scraps of Latin music shredding the air. There was something powerful here, even exalted; Mason felt it whenever he was on the streets, a kind of spasm, a queasy, slightly strung-out thrill feeding off the sheer muscle of the place."

"On these nights the gunfire seemed diminished, a faint popping in their ears like a pressure change, though if the rounds were nearby the mulatto's eye would start twitching like a cornered mouse. He is a man, Mason thought, who's living on air and inspiration, holding himself together by the force of will. He was passionate about the art, equally passionate in his loathing for the people who'd ruined Haiti. You don't belong her, Mason wanted to tell him. You deserve a better place. But that was true of almost every Haitain he'd met."

The Good Ones Are Already Taken

This tale deals with a solider returning back home from a war in Haiti to his wife with a strange case of a voodoo marriage.

Asian tiger

A Texas man out in Burma working at a golf resort gets involved in high league dealer brokering while escorting and coaching his budding golfers of powerful positions in the world of business.

"Shwedagon: he'd never seen or even imagined anything like it, a sprawling, technicolor theme park of the soul, ten acres of temples and statues and gem-encrusted shrines surrounding the bell-shaped spire of the towering central zedL Sonny eyed the zedi's dazzling golden mass, its bowl base and tapering vertical flow,

and after a while realized that he was looking at the world's largest, albeit upside-down, golf tee. An omen? Meanwhile his guide was intoning the Buddha's main tenets, telling Sonny that life is dukkha, all pain and illusion; that the cycle of thanthaya, death and rebirth, will continue as long as desire remains; and that through bhavana, meditation, one might achieve the proper karma for enlightenment and nirvana. Yes, Sonny thought, yes yes all true—he felt something swelling in him, a weepy and exhausted soulfulness, a surrender that felt like wisdoms first glimmerings, and coming down off the plinth he acknowledged the moment by passing money to every monk he saw."

"Oh. Oh" It wasn't so much a bribe as a, ah, gesture, a little goodwill grease for the wheels. It wasn't long before Sonny realized that a giant corporate ratfuck was happening out on the course. If you wanted to do business in Burma you had to cozy up to the generals, and the best place for that was the National's elegant links.

Which put Sonny in a classic trickle-down position: over the next few days he received a case of Bordeaux from Singaporean financiers a carved elephant from Thai teakwood barons, a kangaroo-skin golf bag from Malaysian gem traders.

' So popular," said Tommy Ng in a voice like dry ice. "Two weeks in Mvannar and look at all the wonderful friends you have."

But Sonny was troubled —these people thought he could pimp for them? He was just the pro, a performing human whose job was to stun them with his mighty swing and tell colorful stories on the verandah after the round. They were all, generals included, relentless jock sniffers eager for inside information about their favourite pros. Did you ever play with Palmer? they'd ask him over drinks. Was Nicklaus really the best? Tell us about Tiger, is he as good as they say! If Sonny didn't have an actual personal anecdote he'd make one up, something dramatic or funny to make everybody feel good."

Brief Encounters with Che Guevara

Starts with a southern man has an attraction for a woman connected with thee Che, he later finds himself in Bolivia as a removal guy where he meets and has discussion with a man who says he was the killer of Che. In his thirties he finds himself in Haiti and he's now married with children. And your taken in the narrative on to his forties when Fidel is in power and the grave of Che has been located.

Interesting encounters within the world that spins in and around Che.

"School tradition required my parents to host receptions for the faculty several times a year, and it was at these gatherings —peeking with my sisters from the top of the stairs at first, then later as a fringe participant, serving punch with the help in my coat and tie —that I became aware of my attraction to Mona Broun. Mrs. Broun was a faculty wife, a trim, petite woman in her early thirties whom I confused for a time with the actress Natalie Wood. She had the same wholesome looks as the famous movie star, the same well-scrubbed, faintly exotic sex appeal, along with fawn-colored hair worn loose and soft, this at a time- the mid-sixties—when the women's hairdos, in the South at least, resembled heavily shellacked constructions of meringue. But it was her eyes that got our attention from the top of the stairs,intense brown eyes with rich, lustrous tones like shots of bourbon or maple syrup, framed by sharp, exaggeratedly arched eyebrows like the spines of enraged or terrified cats."

Trish says

"...I had no idea God and the Devil live so close together. They're neighbors, in fact, their houses are right beside each other, and sometimes when they're sitting around with nothing to

do they play cards, just as a way to pass the time. But they never wager money—what good is money to them? No, it only souls they're interested in...[Che Guevara]"

Che Guevara never actually makes an appearance in these stories—just sightings of him—but his philosophy gets a workout. Sometimes events just have a way of confounding even a well-thought-out life, where every step is taken with good intentions toward some worthy goal.

Moral dilemmas face us in each of the eight stories and Fountain does not make it easy for us. The characters may decide to do something morally questionable, but their conflict is not resolved sufficiently to finish the task without second-thinking and regret. There is always another, starker moral dilemma right around the corner as a result of their first choice.

This first collection of stories won Fountain a heap of attention in 2007 when it came out, as did his first published novel, Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk (2012). His writing is clear and free of flourish, though his locations are richly imagined. In this collection he spans the globe, though he pays special attention to Haiti, a place that allowed him to explore in microcosm "power and money and history and race and the most brutal sort of blood-politics."¹ The Haiti stories make me the most uncomfortable in this collection, yet it is the one place he'd visited and so arguably knows most about.

The stories highlight displaced persons confronting the world's troubles: a woman is forced to share her soldier husband with his dreams; a captured American doctoral student in Colombia manages to continue his ground-breaking study of birds of the Central Cordillera; a peacekeeper in Haiti finds a way to save a piece of Haiti's cultural heritage; an aid worker in Sierra Leone tries to finance her sideline sewing co-op.

A word might be said about the final story in the collection, which moves us back to the nineteenth-early twentieth centuries. The story is about a Jewish prodigy in Vienna facing racial taunts as she develops her extraordinary repertoire over a period of years. The tone of this story is so sharply different from the others in the collection that we must ask ourselves why it was included. The language is reminiscent of George DuMaurier's story of Svengali and his creation, the beautiful songstress Trilby O'Ferall. This story would not have been out of place in a Maupassant collection. It may give us an insight into the author's opinions on the dilemmas he poses in the previous stories. In all the interviews he's given, I've not seen a question about the inclusion of that story addressed, though I might rest easier if I had.

It turns out that I discovered I have read this collection before, when it came out in 2007. At the time I was not recording or writing about my reading and so did not wrestle as thoroughly with the questions it poses. It stands up very well to a second reading (and more!) so I recommend the collection for packing the punch of a novel without all the words. Besides, this man's moral compass spins in a world that challenges the best of our well-thought-out and perfectly inadequate solutions.

¹"A Conversation with Ben Fountain", reprinted in the Ecco paperback edition of Brief Encounters with Che Guevara, P.S., p.3

Lee Ann Johnson says

Passionate, funny, sad. Stories steeped in the sense and authority of having been there in some way or other. Wonderful descriptions and deep insight into people and places and how they meet and influence each other.

Aylin says

I picked this book off a shelf at our local library because of the title- and am so glad I didn't pass it up! I was getting ready to put it back on the shelf (since I am generally not a fan of short stories- with a few exceptions) but couldn't stop browsing it. I brought it to a nearby chair, read the first 2 chapters and checked it out- giddy with joy.

An eclectic mix of quirky and creative slice-of-life short stories set in such diverse geographical settings as Haiti, Columbia, Myanmar, Burma, Sierra Leone...

The book is excellent. Most of the stories (last one doesn't fit) involve Americans who become entangled in situations of political/ cultural struggle in other countries. They end up seeing things differently than they originally anticipated and their character is tested.

The writing is rich in detail yet spare. Recommending it.

Ally Shand says

I discovered this book in the same way that I have discovered most of the books that mean the most to me: browsing a second-hand bookshop in an unfamiliar place. In this case it was a charity bookshop in Covent Garden, London.

The stories are original and superbly written. They reveal different facets of the human condition against the volatile backdrop of revolution. From the diamond mines of Sierra Leone to the Bolivian jungle the chosen settings, like the stories themselves, are rich and evocative.

Pouting Always says

I usually don't enjoy short story collections because a lot of them aren't very good but this one was so well written, I really enjoyed it. There were only two I didn't like very much, the third and the last one, but even then the writing was very good, it just came down to personal preferences. All of the short stories talk about some aspect of countries with political upheaval, especially developing countries or those that were part of the communist struggle. The situations are often difficult ones with no clear solutions and the way Fountain writes really conveys this feeling of struggling to make sense of issues and ethics when in a position where there aren't many choices.

Midu Hadi says

Near-Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera: ★★★

A budding Ornithologist tries to save a rare species of birds.

"the Revolution had reached that classic mature stage where it existed only for its own sake."

Reve Haitien: ★★

An American tries to help the revolutionaries in Haiti.

The Good Ones Are Already Taken: ★

A wife has to share her husband with ~~another woman~~ goddess!

Asian Tiger: ★★★

A golf pro from Texas tries to make a living in Burma.

"Burma, he'd whisper, trying to make it real, Burma, Burma, the word so loaded and fraught that it might have been a prayer."

Bouki and the Cocaine: ★★★★★

A man & his wife with nothing to lose decide to stick it to "the man".

The Lion's Mouth: ★★★

Sierra Leone & its blood diamonds help Jill come to a decision.

Brief Encounters with Che Guevara: ★★★

"Don't ever laugh when a Haitian tells you he's going to be president, because it might happen. And if it does, ge won't forget that you laughed at him."

Fantasy for Eleven Fingers: ★★★

"Yes, because he's flaunting it. The thing that made him different. Which seems dangerous, in a way."

blakeR says

Caveat: I didn't finish it, or even make it through the first story. Since I've lived in Colombia and my wife is from there, there's something deeply arrogant and even offensive to me about this guy attempting to discuss the FARC (oh excuse me -- MURC) situation from a privileged intellectual's perspective without ever having stepped foot in the country. I stopped reading when Fountain's young, white "enlightened" proxy began scolding the Marxists for mismanaging their revolution. I've spent almost three years in Colombia and would never presume to lecture anyone on the topic except with the most modest of disclaimers.

And on top of this presumption, the dialogue is laughably stilted. . . it reminds me of stuff I used to do at age 25, before I had even attempted to write seriously, where your characters converse in ways that no normal people speak, just so they can discuss Important Things. Talk about contrived.

This is what passes for award-winning, 4-star short stories these days? Well then, please excuse me while I find my way back to the classics section.

Tex says

This is a collection of stories about various ways that we experience captivity. The settings are, for the most part, third world countries-- Colombia, Haiti, Sierra Leone, Cuba--and ending with the unexpected geography of Vienna. The emotions are sometimes excruciatingly brutal but sweet, frightening but eloquent, primarily hauntingly comforting (which was a great surprise as I discovered the theme). Though I rarely consider it, the cover is of interest as it depicts some fairly common birds which seem free and ordinary. Odd choice and I'd like to understand that bit more.

Author from Dallas, which intrigues me more.

Melissa says

I found this book in a used bookstore. I like birds. I also like Che Guevara. I thought the book would be a great whim, however, I was really put-off by the rave reviews. I was surprised that no one had anything critical to say. I was also disappointed to find that this book was sold in UO. I tend to shy away from hipster reads.

Despite my initial qualms, this collection of short stories really made me think. It certainly worked the old English major muscle

There's no denying that Ben Fountain has talent. His ability to shape entire worlds within a limited page count is remarkable. Several reviewers felt the stories would better serve as foundations for actual novels. I like the brevity of each piece. It left much to the imagination, and Fountain provides just enough detail for readers to draw conclusions on their own. I'm always one to write my own story.

I'm still puzzling over the significance of the title. Some reviewers felt that the book has nothing to do with Che Guevara and the title simply refers to a short story within the collection. I highly doubt Fountain chose the title on a whim. I suppose there's an undercurrent of revolution throughout each story; an upturn of beliefs; a lone voice that cries out against a greater injustice. All are representations of a young, idealistic Che.

Other reviews mention that certain stories do not belong because they aren't based in a third world country or don't feature a spoiled American as the protagonist. These points are irrelevant. Each story presents an outsider that inevitably assimilates to a different world. This could be a victory or a defeat depending on the story. The fate of the Austrian piano player was certainly the latter, and I wonder why Fountain chose to end his collection on such a defeated note.

I wanted to hate this book, and I ended up obsessing over it. Favorite.

Mark Wilkerson says

Part travelogue, part history textbook, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara* is a nearly-flawless collection of

historical-fiction short stories sharing a common subject; namely, the stories are centered around first-world expats and travelers (mostly Americans) experiencing life through the accounts of both the brazen and the broken citizens of the "third-world," chiefly Latin America, West Africa, and South Asia.

Read as these Americans observe and participate in the outer edges of societies on the brink of revolution, war, and outright chaos. Though the protagonists of these stories are not particularly sympathetic (Fountain does not seem to be concerned with eliciting sympathy from readers), readers are afforded opportunities to understand the lives of common folks stuck in the middle of these revolutions, just trying to survive and, daresay, even thrive in the face of tyrannical rule in Haiti and Sri Lanka, or the roving armies of young and dangerous rebels in Sierra Leone.

The Americans in these stories are often granted reprieves and outs from the danger and choose to stay, learn, and grow somehow as a result of the building uncertainty. Certainly, I felt the same sense of growth in reading this collection. Not too often can writers blend urban renegade spirit with historical fiction, but Fountain succeeds. Standouts include "Asian Tiger," "The Lion's Mouth," and the Faulkner-esque "Fantasy for Eleven Fingers."

A must-read for contemporary short-story readers and writers alike.

Alison Smith says

My true rating is 4.5 : I just can't get half a star to show.

Collection of short stories lived up to the enthusiastic reviews. Fountain is good at stories with tropical backgrounds and corrupt dictators, corrupt revolutionaries, corrupt Haitian politicians and policemen. He exposes tropical sleaze with gusto and yet manages to write gripping entertaining stories. Not to be missed.

Tony says

Fountain, Ben. BRIEF ENCOUNTERS WITH CHE GUEVRA. (2006). *****. This collection of eight short stories previously published by the author in various magazines is one of the best I've read in a long time. He manages to write not just short stories, but novels compressed into short story form. Each story features a protagonist who is too idealistic, too naive, or too talented to survive in the surroundings in which they find themselves. The only exception to this is the title story, which is one person's effort to track down people who knew Che from among all the people he met who said that they did, and to piece together his life based on their accounts. The first story, "Near Extinct Birds of the Central Cordillera" tells of an American graduate student doing ornithological research in the jungles of Columbia. While there, he is kidnapped by a gang of guerillas and alternatively held for ransom, or condemned to die as an accused spy. Being a poor grad student, he knows that nobody will pay his ransom if that's what his captors are after, and he keeps denying that he is a spy. As he is held for longer and longer periods of time, the guerillas soon begin to allow him to make accompanied trips into the jungle where he has discovered a group of parrots that were thought to be extinct. He ultimately gets his guard so enthused that they both begin to gather data on the parrots' behaviours. When a contingent from some U.N. group visits the camp, he realizes that he can't leave the camp without finishing his research. He has become totally immune to the war of politics that is ravaging this country. Another story, "Reve Haitien," tells of an AID worker in Haiti who discovers that his intent to get closer to the people leads him into abetting the theft of native art. Seven of the stories take place in third-

world countries, addressing politics, poverty, genocide, and all their other ills. The last story, "Fantasy for eleven Fingers," falls out of this mold, and is about a young woman pianist who was born with eleven fingers. This young woman, a Jew in 19th century Vienna, becomes a renowned concert pianist and will stake her claim to immortality by performing a piece of music written for eleven fingers by an earlier composer. These stories will stay with you long after you read them. Highly recommended.

HBalikov says

I would have preferred the title: Most Everything You Care to Know about People You've Rarely Thought About but were Afraid to Ask.....then again, it's probably obvious why I don't write titles for a living.

Mastering the short story is a talent few writers excel at. Ben Fountain is one of them. Brief Encounters with Che Guevara is the title of one of the short stories in this book, but there is something about Guevara that applies in each case. Fountain writes with economy and precision. He writes with compassion. And, he tells his stories with a deft humor that reminds the reader of our humanity while not beating a drum to make his points.

The subject matter is all about the developed world's encounters with the developing world....no, that's too slick. It's about HOW those who have and those who have not think about the same things in quite different ways. Fountain leads us through this theme in Africa, South America, Europe, the Caribbean Islands, and particularly Haiti.

His descriptions are both attention grabbing and though provoking. Two examples:

"Dunes of garbage filled out the open spaces, eruptions so rich in colorful filth that they achieved a kind of abstraction."

"They were all lawyers, all schooled in the authority of words, though as their words turned to dust a pall of impotence and futility settle over the mission."

Imaginative, exquisitely detailed with a big helping of black humor and irony, you will not be able to read these stories, individually or collectively, without finding some changes in what you think of the daily stream of world news. Warning: You might not be the same person after finishing it.

PS: Thanks to Trish and Will for alerting me to this gem.
