



Bad Times in Buenos Aires

Miranda France

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A funny and poignant account of life in Buenos Aires, by a young prize-winning writer.

Bad Times in Buenos Aires Details

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Camille Cusumano says

Well-written and researched. Didn't affect my decision to see Buenos Aires one way or the other. I was already going as a freelance journalist but one who writes about food, travel, and, as it turned out, tango. These "chapters" were stories written for newspapers, hence they have a certain clipped verve, and tight focus. They are not deeply probing, but are nonetheless illuminating and enjoyable. I enjoyed France's wry humor even when I think it was a bit caricatural. I tried my darnedest to find that morgue she visited (having been to most of the other places she mentions), but I could not. Maybe that was a phantom place.

Stephen Twist says

Unlike Henry and Michal, I loved this book. Having spent 2 of the last 10 years in Buenos Aires, I recognised so much of what Miranda France wrote, the places, the situations, the characters - recognised and enjoyed. I also agree with Caroline that, if you don't want to read about 'bad times', you look elsewhere for that book. It is now of its period, but that is part of its character and appeal. Should you be intending more than a short holiday in Buenos Aires, I heartily recommend that you read it.

Richard says

I don't often give five-star ratings here on Goodreads, but this book was exactly what I hoped it would be, which also doesn't happen all that often. Miranda France was in her late 20s in the early 90s (just like me!) and was a British journalist on a long-term assignment in Buenos Aires. (Not at all like me!) She provides the perspective of an informed and inquisitive outsider, one who, because of her job, goes to a lot of places and talks to a lot of people. She not only describes the city as she experienced it when she was there, but also the key developments that led to that point in time, such as the Dirty Wars, memories of Evita Peron, and the Falklands War. She also gives us a look at the tango and other elements of Argentine culture.

Although this is a very different book in tone as well as in heft, it reminded me in a way of James Michener's book about Spain, Iberia in that it provides a visitor's look at the history, politics, and culture of a nation. And even though books like this inevitably become more and more dated as the decades pass, they're still very much worth reading.

Maybe (*hopefully*) Buenos Aires is a happier and less melancholy place than it was 25 years ago. And maybe it never was all that melancholy; this book just provides the view of one individual. Having not (yet) been to Buenos Aires, I really can't say. But I very much enjoyed reading about Miranda France's time there.

Wendy Jackson says

In the world of travelogues, it is easy to find glowing tales about exotic cities, or to find superficial observations of those quickly passing through. It is more difficult to find deeper and more complex accounts

written by people who have lost their rose-tinted glasses and have invested in understanding the many facets of a place. Miranda France has definitely lost her rose-tinted glasses, and in doing so, has provided what feels like a nuanced and accurate picture of Buenos Aires. Much of it is rather grim - but then, so is the city's history. Her views are informed by unusual characters - such as caretakers in the cemetery - who offer a different perspective to past events and people. She also dives into random aspects of BA culture, such as the heavy reliance of porteños (people who live in BA) on psychoanalysis. Overall, a great pre-trip read. It will be interesting to see how much of it resonates when I get to Buenos Aires later this year.

Erica DuBois says

Whatever others have found to criticize in this book, I did not find it. I LOVED this book. So much "travel writing" bores me--this did not. Does the book criticize Argentina or does it paint a portrait that makes one more intrigued? I would argue the second. The violence, the passion, the melancholy, the melodrama, the history--it is all represented. I suppose this is why I loved the book, while I dislike so much other travel writing--the author is not describing some bullshit blissful vacation, but rather is expressing her curiosity and emotions when confronting a new, and longed-for place. And frankly, I just love her writing.

Caroline Winter says

For everyone criticising the author for being down on BA when she wrote the book, I would urge them to read the title - it was about bad times. The clue is in the title.

The important background is that the author went to BA after a life long interest in BA and Argentina, she didn't set out for times to be bad she simply captured the mood she encountered. I found this a great starting book on BA and am now reading other books on Eva Peron and the Dirty War that I may not have read if I had not started with Miranda France's introduction. I recommend this book highly for anyone looking for an informative and sensual introduction to BA.

Shawn says

"Bronca" is to B.A. what "angst" is to Germany, but after reading this book, you will prefer to go to Germany rather than B.A.

Jim says

This is a book I saw in my local library, so I took it out without checking it out in advance. It was entertaining, but Miranda France presented a very partial view of Buenos Aires as a city of disaffected upper middle-class obsessed with their appearance. That could be because she didn't spend much time talking to anyone else. She was a fairly depressed young woman who was attracted to other fairly depressed young women. The main exception seemed to be a gravedigger named Hugo at Recoleta Cemetery who seems like a very happy and well-balanced individual.

Along the way, there are some good points made, such as about the prevalence of psychotherapists in BA and the endless queues and stifling bureaucracy. Her discussion of the Dirty War between the armed forces and young Argentinians suspected of belonging to or supporting the Montonero guerrillas of the last 1970s under the presidency of General Videla (now in prison) is one of the better parts of the book for its even-handedness. It is capped off with an eerie interview with one of the torturers, an Argentinian General.

Bad Times in Buenos Aires suddenly runs out of steam when the author travels to Peru, Bolivia, and the Northwest of Argentina before heading back to Britain.

In the end, this is a good book, but a potentially misleading one. In the end, though, her assessment was a positive one:

I knew nowhere in the world where the bookshops and cafés were more inviting. Perhaps there was no city where the atmosphere in the streets was more intoxicating.

‘I know Buenos Aires well,’ I thought. ‘My friends are here; it could be my home. I love it and I hate it. I can’t live here, but wherever else I live, I’ll always feel the lack of it.’

Based on my own experience visiting Argentina in 2006, that’s about right.

Siân says

This book could have been subtitled: A Dreadful time in Buenos Aires. While there were some really interesting parts to this book, especially around the Disappeared, the Falklands War and Eva Peron, but mostly it appears the author was either depressed or hated BA. I didn’t particularly like it, but mandered my way through it as I am going to BA soon, and it gave me a good run down on the history.

Katherine Kreuter says

I’d recommend this book to anyone visiting Buenos Aires. I read it in advance of a trip there and got a lot of value from the writer’s recollection of living there in the 1990s as a foreign correspondent. I gleaned odd bits of social history, such as the Argentine fascination with psychoanalysis (who knew?) and what it was like to hang out in tango bars. Even if you aren’t going to BA soon, but fancy some armchair travelling, this book would do nicely. It has a dark side as well as the sunny bits, but that’s true for Argentina so the writer has done well to balance the two. I particularly admire the writer’s admission toward the end of the book that she wasn’t a very good foreign correspondent after all, and maybe needed a change of career. As someone who lived on the fringes of overseas journalism, I had similar doubts this was my future. I see she’s since written other books so good on her for acting on that impulse.

dianne says

This was a fun read - lots of good info that jived with what i know of this geographically confused, gorgeously pathetic (like a Victorian consumptive) city. i think she should have left off the last chapter on

"going home". It was sort of gratuitous and sappy. i don't know if it's true that one remembers most clearly the final note of a symphony, and carries that final note home - but i wonder in Miranda's case if (when rating 'Bad Times') that sad little last chapter made folks forget the rest of the book.

Henry says

I havent really got words to say how much i didnt like this book. It appears that the writer was seriously unhappy at the time of writing but this is never made overt it just seeps through the writing and poisons the book. As someone who has lived in Buenos Aires for more than a year her portrayal is boldly inaccurate and shallow. I generally want a travel writer who is witty engaging insightful bold and open minded. France is none of these things and worse she is pinched, complaining, reactionary and ungenerous not to mention transcendentally unfunny.

Rita says

1998

Blurb on the cover calls it a "travel book" but I would not.

It gives you a lot of political and social history of Buenos Aires, and the country in general, but in a very personalized way -- through the mouths of people she talks to or interviews [for writing articles as a foreign correspondent] -- , so it's a good read.

She puts herself right near the middle of the narrative, and conveys her feelings of oppression, frustration, amazement, wonder...

I really didn't know much of anything about the country, and found this a good introduction. I had not known ARgentines' reputation for being despondent. The most amazing tidbit is how popular it is for city dwellers to have a therapist! Fascinating! Would make a great topic for a comparative study -- I suspect in Holland the family doctor plays the same role for some people - a shoulder to cry on, somebody to ask for advice.

Also useful for a exploration of why and how people allow/desire a dictator.

Michal Leon says

I must say that I found this book terribly flawed by being dominated by what seems to have been the author's mood at the time. Perhaps Times were that Bad then, in the nineties, when she was here. Certainly, Buenos Aires, where I now reside, has many problems. But it is a vibrant, interesting, full of culture and history, place and the caricature Miranda France depicted is just that: a caricature. The story about deaths in elevators, to pick out just one example, is untrue and absurd. Yes, there are many Argentines who obsess about how they look, certainly. But hey, have you seen how the average 60-70 year old looks in DC lately? It seems like everyone tries to stretch and dye, until they all look like old stretched and dyed people (but not young!). Anyway, it is quite fun to read, in parts, if you ignore her strong negative broad brush on just about anything, and it has some interesting observations, particularly about Evita.

Seingalt says

Very witty. Many passages made me laugh out loud. In particular one about a visit to the Museum of the Morgue, where one of the exhibits, we are told, has a penis tattooed "For you."

Bad Times in Buenos Aires almost made me envious (though I, too, lived in Argentina during the Menem presidency, I could not write about my experience as well as Ms. France has.) Not perfect, but not nearly as bad as the one-star reviews left by Argentines with bruised egos would lead you to believe.
