

Che on My Mind

Margaret Randall

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Che on My Mind is an impressionistic look at the life, death, and legacy of Che Guevara by the renowned feminist poet and activist Margaret Randall. Recalling an era and this figure, she writes, "I am old enough to remember the world in which [Che] lived. I was part of that world, and it remains a part of me." Randall participated in the Mexican student movement of 1968 and eventually was forced to leave the country. She arrived in Cuba in 1969, less than two years after Che's death, and lived there until 1980. She became friends with several of Che's family members, friends, and compatriots. In *Che on My Mind* she reflects on his relationships with his family and fellow insurgents, including Fidel Castro. She is deeply admiring of Che's integrity and charisma and frank about what she sees as his strategic errors. Randall concludes by reflecting on the inspiration and lessons that Che's struggles might offer early twenty-first-century social justice activists and freedom fighters.

Che on My Mind Details


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From Reader Review *Che on My Mind* for online ebook

Valerie says

Margaret Randall the feminist poet and author writes a totally honest and frank memoir of her thoughts on Che Guevara. The only knowledge I have of Che is the iconic image of his handsome face used worldwide and I found her recollections of friendships with his compatriots and family particularly fascinating and thought provoking. She certainly doesn't shy away from criticism of some of his actions and I found this memoir, won as a Goodreads giveaway, has piqued my interest in looking at the man behind the myth.

Joseph says

Che on My Mind by Margret Randall is her account, as a poet, of Che Guevara. She never met Che but did meet members of his family and lived through Che's time in Mexico and Cuba. A New Yorker by birth she has spend many years outside of the United States. She lived in Mexico from 1969-1980 where she co-edited *El Corno Emplumado*. She lived in Nicaragua in the early 1980s and also Spain and Cuba. She also visited Vietnam in the last days of US involvement. Randall lost her citizenship while married to a Mexican citizen. Upon returning to the US in 1984 she was ordered to be deported under the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952. The INS called her writings "against the good order and happiness of the United States." and that "her writings go beyond mere dissent." I can see where those ideas may come into play after reading *Che on My Mind*, but I disagree that that is a valid cause and so did the courts and her citizenship was restored. She says of the book is a poets reminiscence of an era. I would say Che is to her as nature is to a Romance poet.

Che never marketed a product, starred in a movie or TV show, or lead a country, but his image is almost as recognizable as the Coca-Cola logo. Conservative Americans hated him and called him a thug at best. Hipsters wear his face on their t-shirts without any real world idea of who he is. That in itself is something that would have hurt Che; to be remembered as an icon without meaning. "Go a head and shoot, coward, you are only killing a man." are the supposed last words of Che. Cultural today does something worse than kill the man, it allows Capitalists to make money off of his image selling it to the unknowing masses. Che was a man of meaning. He saw what economic colonization did to Latin America and wanted to stand up for the poor and more importantly justice. He did not lead the privilege socialist life like party favorites, in fact he despised it. Love him or hate him, he was a man of his convictions.

Margret Randall is a defender of Che. She she covers revolution and religion in a chapter, but she seems to have made Che the patron saint of positive change. Acts of brutality by Che are equaled out by acts of charity, such as lecturing prisoners of war on his goals and letting them go. Che was neither a drinker nor a womanizer. He was critical of soldiers who went to prostitutes, but at the same time not critical, but understanding, of women were selling their bodies for food. The women were victims of the corrupt society. She presents Che, accurately as a man of his convictions. Revolution first, before family, before anything.

Margret Randall presents her views on violence and change in the book also. She admits she sees violence differently today then she saw it before. There are a few success stories in nonviolence, Gandhi success in freeing India, and Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez social movements in the Untied States . There more examples where electoral change isn't possible, like Palestine or where it was ruined by US involvement, like Allende in Chile. Even in countries where dictatorships were overthrown, those that held power still hold on behind the scenes or simply relabel themselves. There is a special place for revolutionary

violence because it is done to help people and to serve justice, rather exploit them or gain imperial or territorial power. Violence was necessary for Che.

There is no mistaking the political tone of this book and the author. Which is all the more reason to read it. Che will be polarized by the right and the left and most of what is available on his life seems to be from the right. *Che on My Mind* is not from the right or even the moderate left. Although factually, I find the information about Che to be correct or at least adequately documented. Her work is well written and reads well as a memorial to someone who lost his life fighting for what he believed in. It is a fitting tribute to the man and his cause.

Sharmeen says

Margaret Randall is an amazing writer and historian and written on Cuba and Nicaragua. There are a bazillion books on Che but I appreciate this contribution because she follows his life and politics through her lens as a revolutionary. She also places his legacy to today's political struggles and where Che's internationalism fits in today. Also some good questions in feminism and the role of armed struggle.

Rob McBride says

This is a wonderful contribution to revolutionary biography, with Margaret Randall at her sharpest and most nuanced, tracing the impact of Che's life and legend and legacy on her own. She traces the continuing development of her own understanding of Che from her joining the protests in Mexico City at the time of his execution through her many years in Latin American social movements and her work in Cuba, where she became close to a number of Che's family and comrades. Her prose is luminous, the chapters short, the photos pertinent.

For a full bio, try Jon Lee Anderson's, but this is the best aid to reflecting on Che in his many aspects. Randall is never one to suppress criticism, but she combines it with a deep appreciation of Che's unwavering commitment to justice and liberation.

Kris says

Margaret Randall

In her latest book *Che on My Mind* (expected publication date October 7, 2013 by Duke University Press), Margaret Randall distills her experiences over a lifetime of work as a feminist poet, writer, photographer and social activist, considering throughout what Che Guevara has meant to her personally, artistically, and politically.

This is not a biography of Che Guevara, or a memoir, or a work of historical analysis. Throughout, Randall paints with a wide brush, relying on her own experiences and distillations of a lifetime of reading, writing, and activism to write her impressionistic essays. My first time reading the book, I was thrown a bit by her approach to certain historical questions, such as whether Castro essentially had abandoned Che Guevara to

his fate in the jungles of Bolivia. I was looking for more traditional historical documentation to support Randall's assertions in these passages. However, after re-reading the book, I was able to adjust my focus. Randall very clearly states her approach to this volume as an exploration of her own impressions of Guevara, the impact he has had on her life, and how she understands his past and future relevance for social and political activists. Her examination of what Che Guevara means to her is most assuredly biased, but rather than being an unintended flaw, this is precisely what Randall means to focus on and explore. *Che on My Mind* is a personal document from a social activist and artist who, although she did not know Che personally, was deeply engaged in the Cuban revolution. Randall who seeks to document her own history with Che Guevara as a figurehead, an inspiration, and, at times, a focus for frustration.

Randall is also very clear about her own background. She was born in New York City in 1936, and has lived in Albuquerque, New York, Seville, Mexico City, Havana, and Managua. The biography on her website provides a succinct overview of her life:

"In the turbulent 1960s she co-founded and co-edited EL CORNO EMPLUMADO / THE PLUMED HORN, a bilingual literary journal which for eight years published some of the most dynamic and meaningful writing of an era....

"Margaret was privileged to live among New York's abstract expressionists in the 1950s and early '60s, participate in the Mexican student movement of 1968, share important years of the Cuban revolution (1969-1980), the first four years of Nicaragua's Sandinista project (1980-1984), and visit North Vietnam during the heroic last months of the U.S. American war in that country (1974)....

"In 1984, Margaret came home to the United States, only to be ordered deported when the government invoked the 1952 McCarran-Walter Immigration and Nationality Act, judging opinions expressed in some of her books to be "against the good order and happiness of the United States." The Center for Constitutional Rights defended her and many writers and others joined in an almost five-year battle for reinstatement of citizenship. She won her case in 1989. In 1990 she was awarded the Lillian Hellman and Dashiell Hammett grant for writers victimized by political repression; and in 2004 was the first recipient of PEN New Mexico's Dorothy Doyle Lifetime Achievement Award for Writing and Human Rights Activism."

(<http://www.margaretrandall.org/Biography>)

Graffiti at the building in Vallegrande, Bolivia where Che Guevara's body was laid out

Some specific themes run through Randall's writing in this volume. One of the most interesting to me was how she used her feminist lens to critique and (in some cases) come to terms with some aspects of Guevara's history, particularly his relationships with women and his engaging in violence to further political aims. Randall's conclusions in some cases read as attempts to explain away less laudatory aspects of Che's life and persona -- her discussion of his possible homophobia was not especially convincing, for example. But at least she poses these questions, opening up space for her readers to ask their own questions. What to make of the fact that Che was a white man leading black men during his time in Congo? And how to come to terms with his ordering brutal executions in Cuba?

At the same time, Randall is quite compelling in her discussion of Che's influence on her as an activist. She speaks of his rising about his own severe asthma to work tirelessly for the causes he believed in, when he could have led a privileged existence as a doctor. She sees Che as having such a strong hold on her generation because of his commitment to work for social and political change at great cost to himself and his family. She also emphasizes that, to her mind, Che Guevara was motivated by great love, which fueled his work for change. His contradictions make him more human. And there may be lessons to learn from those contradictions too. For example, Randall explores how Che's idealism both fueled his commitment for

change but also doomed his work in the Congo and Bolivia to failure.

[image error]

Contrasting symbolism -- the second image is of graffiti in a Palestinian refugee camp

Randall concludes her book with a discussion of the significance that Che Guevara's image holds for 21st-century activists. Given the marketing behemoth that has spread Che's image throughout the world, and the controversies over whether he is a laudable symbol for freedom and equality or a mass murderer who should be condemned, this section emphasizes that we all construct and shape our symbols within the specific context of our cultures' beliefs, dreams, struggles, and conflicts. Will Che Guevara be a trendy symbol representing a surface-level commitment to a vague conception of freedom? Will he be an icon divorced of any clear message? Or will some take after Randall and use Che as a source of inspiration, a catalyst for questions, a symbol of change?

The marketing of Che Guevara in the 21st century

I received an ARC of this book from Netgalley in return for an honest review.

Barbara says

A few people asked me why I was reading this book. The simplest response is that Che has become an icon but few understand what he represents and who he was. Young people wear t-shirts and his image has been commercially exploited (not unlike images of Malcolm X). There are many books written about Guevara, but this slim volume does offer a condensed version of who he was. The author is 80-year-old Margaret Randall, an unapologetic leftist. She has, it seems, begun to modify some of her beliefs - wanting to thank those serving or who have served in the military, while abhorring war and strongly criticizing the Cuban and Russian revolutions for getting bogged down in bureaucracies, and leaders such as Fidel refusing to give up power held for decades. She critiques Che, though I suspect her criticisms are common. His arrogance, his devotion to the strict hierarchy of leadership when he was in command, as well as his willingness to engage in violence.

This book is probably as much about Randall as it is about Guevara. She does refer briefly to the change in enemies of the US from fascists (World War II) to communists (up to the fall of the USSR and Iron Curtain) and currently "Muslim terrorists". Current terrorism focused on urban bombings and shootings is a real threat to people in many countries. But she offers few insights except to comment on globalization and the rise of technology. However given these changes, it is hard to imagine that the US government was threatened by this Argentine/Cuban guerilla who went to the Bolivian jungle to start a revolution. Guevara didn't know the languages of the indigenous people who lived in the jungle and what they saw was a white Argentine with a ragtag band urging them to join him. This is where he died, and Randall points out, his death at age of 39 in these circumstances have contributed to views of him as a "saint" of sorts.

Ted says

[This cropped version of the original photo by Alberto Diaz (Korda) has been called the world's most famous photo. Of course the subject is both revered and hated, both sentiments often based on little more than ignorance. (hide spoiler)]
