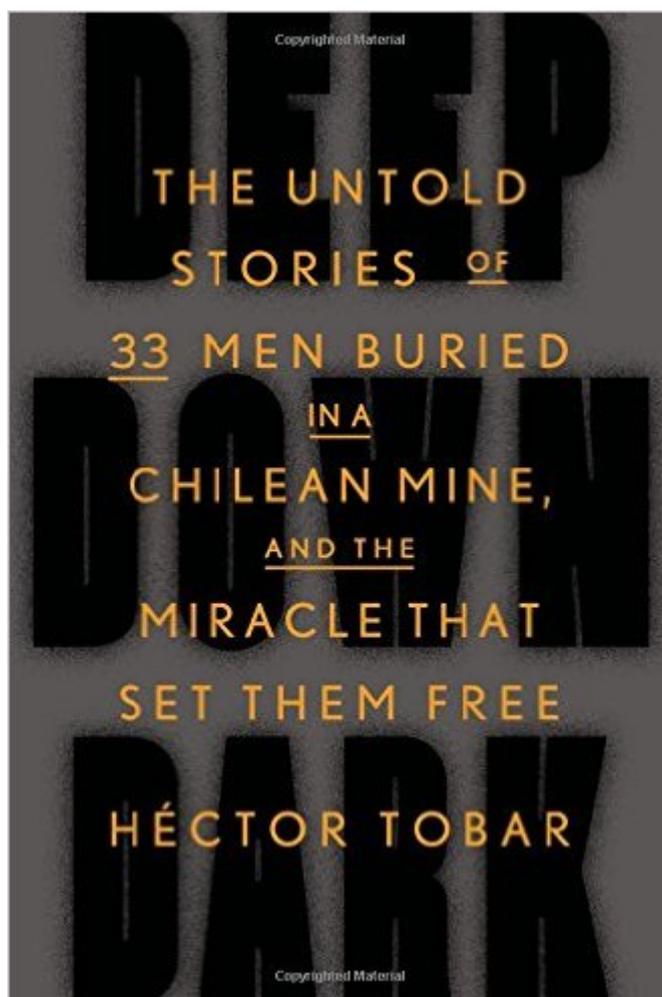


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# Deep Down Dark: The Untold Stories Of 33 Men Buried In A Chilean Mine, And The Miracle That Set Them Free



## Synopsis

When the San José mine collapsed outside of Copiapó, Chile, in August 2010, it trapped thirty-three miners beneath thousands of feet of rock for a record-breaking sixty-nine days. The entire world watched what transpired above-ground during the grueling and protracted rescue, but the saga of the miners' experiences below the Earth's surface—and the lives that led them there—has never been heard until now. For *Deep Down Dark*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Hector Tobar received exclusive access to the miners and their tales. These thirty-three men came to think of the mine, a cavern inflicting constant and thundering aural torment, as a kind of coffin, and as a church where they sought redemption through prayer. Even while still buried, they all agreed that if by some miracle any of them escaped alive, they would share their story only collectively. Hector Tobar was the person they chose to hear, and now to tell, that story. The result is a masterwork of narrative journalism—a riveting, at times shocking, emotionally textured account of a singular human event. *Deep Down Dark* brings to haunting, tactile life the experience of being imprisoned inside a mountain of stone, the horror of being slowly consumed by hunger, and the spiritual and mystical elements that surrounded working in such a dangerous place. In its stirring final chapters, it captures the profound way in which the lives of everyone involved in the disaster were forever changed.

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## Customer Reviews

Who wasn't enthralled in the story of these 33 men buried alive? Everyone was tuned in, waiting the

outcome, hoping, stressing, praying. I was really looking forward to hearing their story and what went on down there. It's such an intriguing real life story with an actual happy ending, *Deep Down Dark* goes behind the scenes and tells us their story. 33 men: 69 days unimaginable but it happened in Chile in 2010. Until now it was one of those news stories we all remember but Hector Tobar has brought these men to live as human beings; fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. You will learn about their lives before and their lives since. It's impossible to live through something like this and NOT have it change you. The truth about the conditions is as bad as one would imagine but to hear it told straight from the miners experiences is heart wrenching but also speaks to the human spirit and ones ability to survive even under the worst conditions. These men experienced a full gamete of emotions: hope, despair, loneliness, companionship, isolation, encouragement, depression. You name it; they felt it during those 69 days. The only anguish that parallels theirs is the families 1/2 mile above them waiting for news, praying, hoping, day after day after long day. I like that Tobar begins with these mens stories and takes us through their lives leading to the accident, during and after. It humanizes them. A father leaving for work. A husband denied his daily goodbye kiss because his wife is mad at them. These are ordinary, every day men going to work, until they aren't. The story that had the world watching is beautifully told by Tobar and answers all the questions you would have about these men and their ordeal. Their ordeal did not end when they were rescued and for many, never will. *The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine* is as captivating as the original news story itself and then some!

Hector Tobar's *DEEP DOWN DARK* tells the stories of the 33 Chilean miners trapped in Chile's San José mine for 69 days in 2010. The book, a chronology of the events and a collection of portraits of the men both above and below ground, is the first of its kind, honoring an agreement the miners made to one another to tell their story only as a group. Tobar begins *DEEP DOWN DARK* with a description of the San José mine: a rocky, lifeless mountain situated in the Atacama Desert of Chile. Though there is a city nearby, Copiapó, it serves more as a temporary home for miners working their seven-day shifts, leaving outside visitors to the San José few and far between. Tobar, however, eagerly invites readers into this male-dominated world, exposing the dilapidation and ever-blowing dust of the mine and preparing them for the miners' eerie descent into the depths of the earth. He explains how the workers come from all ends and social ranks of Chile, with some enduring stifling day-long bus rides even before their shifts begin. Tobar effortlessly employs the geography of Chile as a vehicle for his narrative, giving readers both a sense of Chile's layout and the personalities of the men. As the morning of August 5th

dawns, we watch the miners of the A Shift prepare for their 12-hour-long workday. In an ironic note, a few of them were not even scheduled to work that day, but were making up for previous missed days. Many of them, we are told, had concerns about the mine's safety after observing a crack in the Ramp, the central road connecting all of San José's underground passageways and the only way to leave the mine. Though there are several escape chimneys placed on levels throughout the mine, San José's standards for safety are notoriously low, and few of these chimneys are equipped with the ladders that would make escape a possibility, another complaint of the miners. Their concerns went unanswered, however, and, accustomed to their lots in life, they went about their workday normally, ignoring the ever-present --- though oppressively eerie --- rumbling of the mountain. As they prepare to enter the mine shaft, Tobar handles their characters with great care, presenting them neither as heroes nor villains, but as regular men dealing with the monotony and banality of working life. Still, their personalities begin to shine --- from Mario Sepúlveda, nicknamed Perri (short for Perrito, or small dog) for his canine-like loyalty and aggression, to Yonni Barrios, a paunchy Romeo who moves between the homes of his wife and girlfriend depending on their moods. Tobar takes readers through the day, weaving personal details and stories seamlessly with the plot, distinguishing each of the 33 miners from one another with nicknames and humorous anecdotes. Finally, a huge chunk of the mountain falls in a single piece standing about 550 feet tall and weighing 770,000 tons and blocks the Ramp. As rock falls and dust and debris fly everywhere, Tobar relays the men's reactions. Some, like Mario Sepúlveda and Alex Vega, immediately pushed the men to find another way out of the crumbling mine. Others, like the young Bolivian immigrant Carlos Mamani, were terrified and took shelter in the Refuge, a fortified room within the mine stocked with basic medical supplies and enough food for about 15 men to survive for only a few days. The men in charge, Luis Urzúa, the shift manager, and Florencio Avalos, the shift's foreman, instruct Yonni Barrios to keep the men in the refuge from touching the food, as they may be stuck for days. But mob mentality takes over, and he is quickly overpowered by several hungry miners. Here Tobar begins to alternate the chapters to show the events as they unfold both above and below ground. His talent for pen portraits continues as he exposes the miners' family members --- their dramas, fears and hopes --- accurately without feeling vulgar or voyeuristic. Media coverage of the mine collapse is spotty, at best, and several family members do not find out until much later in the evening that their husbands, boyfriends and sons may have died. Tobar is fair in his characterizations of the San José workers above ground, but does not leave out the fact that the authorities were not called until more than five hours after

the collapse. As desperation begins to sink in, the miners realize one very hopeful thing: there are 33 of them, all alive and all uninjured. Thirty-three is a special number for the mostly Catholics as it is the age of Christ's crucifixion --- surely a sign, especially since so many of them were not even scheduled to work that day. This realization steels them for a while, giving them time to think about their families above. The memories of miner Richard Villarroel are particularly touching as he remembers his pregnant girlfriend and prays that their son will not grow up without a father as he did. Meanwhile, above ground, the families are all reporting to San José, furious that they were not alerted earlier. Some, like the mining family of Alex Vega, use fake names to sneak into the mine in rescue groups, figuring that they, as miners, would be of greater help than most. Soon, however, the truth becomes apparent: no rescuer, miner or not, will be able to penetrate the mine of San José. Many families come to the conclusion that since they cannot help inside the mine, they will help by staying as close as possible. These families come to build what will be known as Camp Esperanza, a makeshift community of friends and families who want to stay nearby in case new information comes out. The owners of the San José appear to have completely given up, making the collapse a disaster of the people, uniting estranged families and unconnected citizens alike. Inside the mountain, the 33 survive by rationing their supplies and drinking water pumped into the mines during their previous shifts. One man, José Henríquez, becomes the religious leader of the group, leading the men in prayer every day at noon. Their shared fears unite them, and, shockingly, there are few to no disagreements as they spend their days playing homemade checkers and dominoes. As time wears on, they even begin to ask one another for forgiveness for old offenses, presenting themselves openly and honestly in ways they never could before the collapse. During one such apology session, Alex Vega, now the skinniest of the group, asks that they skip eating for the day so they can survive longer. His nobility and willingness to sacrifice encourage the men, and they continue to survive with a newfound respect for one another. Above ground, several search-and-rescue attempts are in effect and, finally, after many missteps, one breaks through to the men. It is at this point that they deliver their world famous message "Estamos bien en el refugio, los 33." Though it seems that all will be well from now on, Tobar carefully details the dangers still present: the miners must learn to eat normally again, several of them have entered the early stages of kidney failure, and their hope is dwindling. Their contact with the surface, though miraculous, interrupts the unity they have created, and they begin to become frustrated and even angry with one another. Meanwhile, efforts are still being made to rescue them, and supplies are being sent down in the form of food, medicine, iPods, books, and letters from their families. These messages, however, only make them feel worse as they serve as

reminders of the distance and time they have spent away from their loved ones. Exposing the days of the miners post-contact is the greatest strength of Tobar's book, as people worldwide focused only on the excitement of the men, rather than the agony of their time spent waiting for rescue even after contact was made. When the time comes for the men to leave their rocky womb, they separate to make their peace with the mountain. Like hunters or sailors, they have an immense respect for the source of their work, blaming only the mining company for their ordeal. Some, like Raúl Bustos, destroy their things, wanting to keep their time in the mine private and personal. Others spray graffiti on the walls and leave behind pictures to preserve their memory. Mario Sepúlveda takes rocks from the collapse to give to the rescue team as souvenirs. And, just as quickly as they were trapped, the miners are saved. Tobar is quick to point out that their journey is not over, with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the pains of celebrity making their transitions even more difficult, but they are alive and stronger than ever before. No longer united by the tragedy, the 33 see less of each other after the rescue and some argue endlessly. But, as Tobar writes, once they are all together, anyone can see the shared love and respect they have for one another. As the daughter of a Chilean, I can remember exactly where I was both when the mine collapsed and when the miners were rescued. Devastating though it was, the San José collapse reminded Chileans of the strength and harmony that bonds them. The miners were correct in believing that they should not tell their story to just anyone, and it is clear now that they found the perfect outlet in Hector Tobar. His retelling of their suffering is immediate, vivid and, above all, haunting. Even people who followed the story religiously will learn something new in DEEP DOWN DARK, an extraordinary work of narrative journalism. Reviewed by Rebecca Munro

Very well written, with a real skill at bringing out the dramatic elements of the story when that is called for. For example, Mr. Tobar has very good command of the voice he is writing in and, as the first contact with the miners approaches, his narrative turns dramatic. As this moment approaches, his story is emotional and suspenseful. He is also very insightful regarding the personalities involved, and how they relate to each other. For example, two of the miners were in conflict while trapped, and also after their rescue. He explores this conflict and provides some insight regarding why it was so. Also for example, one of the miners started prayer sessions but as the days dragged on, attendance at these dwindled and he narrates the ebb and flow of these sessions. Another example of this is his description of the immediate aftermath of the mine collapse, when some of the miners raided the very small emergency food supply. His description of this is immediate, as if the reader were witnessing the drama of these terrible hours first hand. He also, thankfully, spends a lot of time

on the family members and their various personalities and relationships as they camped out near the mine. Also, there were basically two groups trapped in the mine, engineers and miners, and he does a good job explaining how this affected the interaction of the miners while trapped. Photographs and drawings of the miners and the mine would have improved the book but it is a really good, insightful, dramatic narrative of an extraordinary story.

Gripping, couldn't put it down. It has many layers; the human drama, the lax owners of the mine, the political posturing. And through all this, somehow, basic human dignity seems to shine through. I would highly recommend this story for anyone who loves stories about how common people, put in extraordinary circumstances, endure.

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