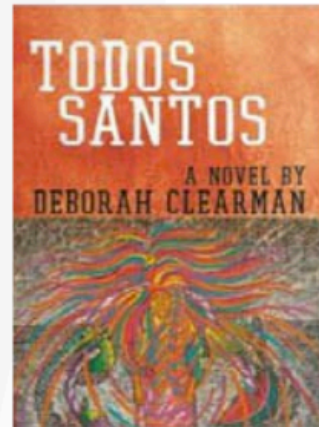


THE INSANE UNDERSTANDABLE:

Diane Simmons on
Deborah Clearman



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Catherine Barnes, wife of an academic who can't leave the college girls alone, and mother of Isaac, a fourteen-year-old "nihilist," takes a break from her life in Iowa to visit Todos Santos, a mountain town in contemporary Guatemala. There she plans to paint pictures of children for a book project. Meanwhile Isaac's outlook will broaden; it will be better for him than the summer school her bossy husband had insisted upon.

The mountains are beautiful and the people are picturesque; but much more is going on here than will fit on a postcard. The place is awash in superstition, as ancient local beliefs, especially those having to do with the terrifying, sometimes murderous "Lords of the Hills," collide with the fanaticism of more recently-arrived Christian evangelicals. These have come to Guatemala on a mission of conversion, and they continually broadcast "salvation over tinny loudspeakers in cloying chants that echoed from the mountainsides like gnats whining in the face of God."

The evangelicals are industrious; in addition to messages of salvation they also spread terrifying rumors of devil-worship, claiming that "evil ones are coming from the United States to steal babies." They will, the evangelicals claim, "arrive at the full moon, remove organs from the babies...and perform their blasphemous rituals right here in Todos Santos." The residents of the town are urged to "trust no foreign face, no Peace Corps volunteer, no tourist in our hotels."

It may not be the best moment to be an American in town, especially one looking for children to pose for portraits. Indeed, the atmosphere in Todos Santos as described by Clearman seems almost over the top; could there be a place, at least in modern times, so roiled by fanatical crazyness?

Fortunately, Clearman has found the sane voices that make the insane understand-

able. An old woman who runs the small hotel where Catherine stays, explains: For people who have lived through the thirty years of civil conflict called La Violencia, who have seen whole villages massacred, sometimes trapped between the government and the guerrillas, it may be that nothing is too horrible to be plausible.

In addition to violence, there's poverty and corruption and the sense that anything can happen to poor people including the loss of their children. Babies are big business here, many of them adopted by Americans. There is a lot of money to be made and officials are corrupt. Who knows how many babies are stolen, how many poor young women didn't really have a choice in giving up their child? And then, what are the Americans doing with these babies? "Here where babies are plentiful," the old woman explains, "poor people wonder why the foreigners pay so much for the babies. Perhaps for their organs." Catherine, initially views these fears as silly and primitive. But now there is a dawning grasp of both the extent of her own privilege as well as the limitation of her own understanding.

As if to demonstrate how fear can be whipped to a fever pitch and how rich foreigners can be utterly tone-deaf to what is going on around them, a large black bus pulls into town. The bus is full of Japanese tourists who have ignored the warning that outsiders had best keep away on this day of the full moon. The people emerging from the bus are all in fashionable black and gray, some in wide black hats with hanging white veils. The tourists are weird and scary looking, especially to townspeople who have been whipped into a frenzy of fear that Satanists will be invading; the bus is attacked with sticks and stones and set alight.

As Catherine is getting to know her "mountain paradise," her wayward son Isaac, is learning that teen-age "nihilism" is much safer practiced in Iowa than in Guatemala; the guys he falls in with are cool and take him to some awesome gatherings. Only, it seems that they have also kidnapped him. He won't be seeing his mother again unless she comes up with a sizeable ransom.

Despite all these troubles, there's time for romance, as Catherine's guide, Oswaldo, admits up that he likes "plain-spoken and aggressive" gringas, who don't hide behind their femininity. He would appear to be a welcome alternative to Catherine's philandering and know-it-all husband who, when he comes down to set things right, sees only the "broken glass, plastic wrappers and dog turds," never the riot of impatiens and calla lilies that bank the mountain path.