



## Getting to Know the General

*Graham Greene*

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## Getting to Know the General Graham Greene

Greene's account of a five year personal involvement with Omar Torrijos, ruler of Panama from 1968-81 and Sergeant Chuchu, one of the few men in the National Guard whom the General trusted completely. It is a fascinating tribute to an inspirational politician in the vital period of his country's history, and to an unusual and enduring friendship.

## Getting to Know the General Details

Date : Published September 27th 1984 by Random House (first published 27th 1984)

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Author : Graham Greene

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## Bill says

I've been reading quite a few books by Graham Greene over the past few years. Getting to Know the General: The Story of an Involvement was one of his later books and the 3rd book of non-fiction of his that I've read. It is about General Omar Torrijos Herrera, the leader of Panama in the '70s, who was killed in a plane crash in 1981. Greene was invited to Panama to meet him, in 1976 and the two became friends over the next years. As well, it is also a book about Torrijos, friend and confidante, Chucho, who is the go-between and constant companion of Greene on his visits to Panama. Greene has a wonderful way of telling stories, whether fiction or non-fiction. You can feel the genuine affection he feels for the country and Torrijos and Chucho. He travels considerably during his brief visits to Panama, often accompanying Torrijos to other countries or representing him; to Nicaragua, Cuba, even the US. I'm constantly amazed at the access that he gains in this book and the places he has visited over the course of his life. Most interesting book.

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## Tom Oman says

A bit disappointing. Greene is a great novelist, but here he is simply scrabbling together a series of trips he made to Panama in the late 70' and early 80's. For reasons that are somewhat unclear, dictator general Omar Torrijos repeatedly invited Graham Greene to Panama on a series of all expenses paid trips over the course of several years. Greene was ferried around the country with Torrijos right hand man "Chuchu" by whatever means, but usually in military planes and helicopters. Often they are drinking or socializing with other political and cultural personalities; all under the backdrop of the negotiations for the handover of the canal between Torrijos and President Carter.

I only found interest because I am a fan of Greene and I live in Panama. I don't think a casual reader would find this book really worth reading.

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## Pooja says

I think Graham Greene was 80 when this book was published. Early on, maybe in the introduction, he says that the book is more about getting to know Omar Torrijos's security guard, the improbably named Chuchu, than it was about getting to know the general himself. Though Chuchu and Torrijos are invariably charming, it's the narrator, in the gloaming of his life, who steals the show. I am certain that was unintentional. But only through the eyes of someone capable of immense charm, adventure, and, most of all, love, can a reader experience those things in his characters.

Anyway, I ended the book sad and in love with all three of them. Plenty of politics, but in a soft, background way. At one point, Greene posits that socialism is just what happens when good-hearted kids grow up and get power.

My favorite paragraph has to do with a bird that sings only when with its mate.

## Bill Smith says

Since my job takes me to Panama frequently I was anxious to read this book. This book can be a rather breezy, fun read; full of many personal anecdotes. Since this is my first Greene book, I'm ignorant of some of the context; i.e. it seems a bit of a stretch that the general-turned-president of a poor country would reach out to a European author in such an apparent trusting and generous way (plane tickets, hotels, drinks, bodyguards, drivers, etc.). Greene does have a well-developed world view and the invitation comes at a critical time as Torrijos is anxious to make progress on a Canal Treaty with the U.S. Hence Greene's insights provide some value to the general. I enjoyed many of the stories about Torrijos, other key people in Panamanian government and the author's experiences in this city/country.

The final section of the book describes events after Torrijos' death, in particular Greene representing Panamanian interests in Nicaragua's new Sandinista government. I found this section far less interesting. Presumably Torrijos' legacy is relevant here but it feels distant and not particularly compelling.

I would strongly recommend this book to anyone interested in the Canal Treaty from a Panamanian perspective.

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## Dane Cobain says

This is another great example of the type of book that just doesn't get written anymore – you just couldn't

make it up, “the story of an involvement” when Greene visited Panama and got to know General Omar Torrijos Herrera, the former dictator of the country.

And so, like several of Greene’s other works, the book is rooted in the past, and it stands out like a snapshot in time against some of the less literary works of the same era. Whether you’re a student of the history of the world or not, there aren’t many better ways to spend your time than to learn more about the events of the 20th century from the pen of Graham Greene.

Interestingly, I knew very little about either the General or his dictatorship, and so I heard all about him and his character from this book – I found myself almost admiring the man, and I’m pretty sure that that was what Greene’s goal was all along. A thankless task, in some ways.

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## **Louis Barbier says**

I found this story “Getting to Know the General” by Graham Greene quite interesting and more so because I was living and working in Panama when the events were happening. So, I have a little story of my encounter with General Omar Torrijos Herrera one bright sunny tropical day while going to pick up a visitor who was coming to inspect an automated inventory system I was installing in our operation of the Army and Air Force Exchange-Panama. but it really sets the whole tone of what happen during Mr. Henley’s visit. So, here goes...the day I had my close encounter with General Omar Torrijos Herrera.

First a little bit of history about the General:

General Omar Torrijos Herrera (1929-1981) was born in the province of Santiago. He took part in the coup that deposed Presidente Arnulfo Arias in 1968. He became commander of the National Guard and soon emerges as the strongman of the new regime. He exercised full control, ruling by decree an imprisoning or exiling all his opponents until his untimely death in an airplane crash in 1981. Here is my little story. It really happened which at the time seemed unbelievable that it was happening to me.

Now, picture if you will a sunny morning in Panama with the time almost 10 O'clock and you are running late in picking up an inspector from the States. So, you are trying to make time by racing. You are in a small blue VW heading in the direction of the Metro Theater on a narrow street one over from Balboa Avenue. You are about to pass the intersecting street up from the Cafe del Boulevard. When suddenly out of nowhere a monstrous green Mercedes with its engine racing cuts in front of you. You react quickly by slamming on your brakes and leaning on your horn. As your tires scream like a banshee on the plains of Zimbabwe, you notice that a man in uniform occupies the back seat of the Mercedes. He is smoking a large Cuban cigar. Your eyes meet his briefly and his large Mercedes accelerates. He must be late for his appointment too. The chase car has his bodyguards who at this point are just trying hard to keep up with the general's car. The whole incident takes a few seconds, but your whole life, as you know it flashes before your eyes. The bodyguards are brandishing submachine guns. As they speed by you quickly pullover to the curb and then stop the VW.

As you sit there thanking your lucky stars that you stop for some chance tickets at "La Loteria" building and a "Raspado" (Crazy Italian Ice) for the road...you say softly, "Thank you God!" After a few moments you continue to the International Hotel located on the Plaza de Cinco de Mayo. The story would end there...but no there is more.

As you all remember close parking to the International is at a premium at almost any hour of the day. As you get closer you spot a large green Mercedes in front of the entrance. The bodyguards are deployed. You go around the Plaza and notice that there is only one parking spot available but one of the general's bodyguards is standing in it. You have already gone around twice; so, you, beep your horn. He looks your way swings his machine pistol in your direction but steps out of the way as you ease into the parking space. You are wearing a white Pana-Brisa and you are sweating bullets, no pun intended. You get out of the VW, which you have nicknamed 'Herbie-2' from the movie of "The Love Bug."

Some people when they are very nervous, they talk to themselves. Well, I am carrying on a full conversation. First with Herbie-2 as I leave him in the parking space and later with myself, as I rush to meet my party staying at the International Hotel. I had tried to put him up at the Tivoli Guest House, but his stateside travel agency had made his reservations. I enter from the bright sunshine to a somewhat cooler interior of the lobby and proceed to the courtesy phone. I ring the visiting fireman's room from the main office. He picks up on the first ring and tells me that he will be right down. I walk over to the bank of elevators and notice that one is already descending. The doors open suddenly right in front of me. Guess who? No, it is not the Headquarters' Manager that I am to pick up and bus to Fort Clayton. No, it is General Omar Torrijos Herrera in the flesh. As he heads toward me, his bodyguards swarm around me like killer bees. Again, my whole life flashes before me! I do what anybody else would do in such a situation and say, " Buenos Dias mi General." He grunts a greeting as he passes me and heads for the doors. And at that very moment the elevator doors open and the person I'm to pick up steps out into the lobby. He sees the general departing and says, " Louie, that is the general, did you see him?" I answered, "Yes, I know." Well, he continues with, "Now I'll have something to tell the people back at the home office." And I think, someday I'll have to tell my little story.....

Well, his inspection tour of our operations goes well. He stays about a week. Then after some sightseeing and shopping I take him to the airport. And he is gone until his next visit. I never have another close encounter with the general. A year later I transfer to San Francisco, California. Sometime later in a stateside newspaper I read of the general's untimely death in an airplane crash. Over the years when I think about that close encounter, I say to myself that everything in life is a matter of timing. My being a little late at that intersection saved me from my final curtain call. I thank God that he was watching out for me that day. It could have been different, and I may not be here at this keyboard relating to you an incident that when I was going through it appeared like something out of the "Twilight Zone" and in very, very slow motion. Again, time marches on.....

Graham Greene's book goes into some background information and events that did not come to life until the General passed in a tragic airplane accident. Some of the accident is still cloak in mystery. The inspectors after much analysis reach the conclusion that it was not engine failure, so it must have been the terrible weather the plane was flying in to get over a ridge of mountains or pilot error. I strongly recommend that all who are interested to read the book and draw your own conclusions.

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## **Patrick says**

1) It's a small world to our south and it's pretty amazing how much Panama was right in the middle of the shit that went down in the 80's. 2) While the book is supposed to be about the General, he remains a bit of a mystery in the end. The General's sidekick really steals the show. 3) Whole bunch of classic Latin characters

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## Dan Logue says

"Fear can be easily experienced, but fun is hard to come by in old age..."

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## Natalia says

I wrote a letter to Graham Greene in my head. I'll be waiting forever to send it.

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## Patrick McCoy says

Getting To Know The General is a little known out-of-print nonfiction book by one of my favorite writers, Graham Greene. The story begins in 1976 when Greene inexplicably receives an invitation to visit Panama as the guest of then ruler General Omar Torrijos Herrar. He immediately accepts knowing only of Panama from the exploits of the pirate Henry Morgan and the mysterious death of Francis Drake in the area. In the process he becomes an intimate friend of the ruler and his fascinating friend/body guard-Chuchu, a former professor, soldier, pilot, and lothario with scores of ex-lovers and children. He will visit the country five times between 1976 and 1983. The beginning of the book is rife with tension as the General negotiates a treaty for the hand over of the Panama Canal with then President Jimmy Carter. From there the politics of South America and Central America have a routine background role in the story as it was a time of dictators and revolts in Latin America-many of them with unwanted intervention by the US through the CIA and other means. Even though politics play an important background role in Greene's travels, discussions, and meetings with the General-it is also a travelogue. Greene has been an intrepid traveler all of his life, thus every time he visits he is trying to see as much of the country as possible and as I read I would read up about each place and region he visited in my Panama Lonely Planet, because I will be limited to the area near Panama City since I don't have the time Greene had nor the use of the General's military planes. The novel also hints at personal problems Green had in France at the time as well as his struggles to write a novel about his experiences in Panama, which I believe would have made a fine novel-so instead we get this unclassifiable and intriguing short book instead. Even after the General dies Greene makes one final visit to Panama at the behest of Chuchu and the new administration. The later part of the book becomes more focused on the politics of the region and bears some resemblance to Salaman Rushdie's book about Nicaragua at a similar time, The Jaguar's Smile. Inexplicably, "that book" is still in print while sadly, this one is not. I think Greene is a more major writer than Rushdie and the cast of real life characters who populate the book are larger than life as well: Henry Kissinger, Jimmy Carter, every Latin America leader of state from the time period including Fidel Castro and the soon to be infamous Manuel Noriega, Arthur Koestler, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Thus I think it would be of greater interest to the general public than Rushdie's. Needless to say I was happy to have been able to find a copy since it added a lot of enjoyment to my first journey to Panama.

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## Yazeed AlMogren says

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### Mehrdad Ekbatani says

The most positive book ever written by Graham Greene. Thoroughly enjoyed it.

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### Josh says

A diehard fan of Greene's fiction, I confess to finding this work of non-fiction-- essentially his diary, spanning a few consecutive trips to Central America-- rather dry. Some local color and historical insights offer the occasional intrigue, but there is nothing at all like the dramatic arc of a novel. Greene fans may find it worthwhile for the light it sheds on his fascination with central America-- and, on his penchant for rum punches.

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### Lara says

Although the book could do with more of the incredible literary abilities of the author seen in his novels, the insight into what would normally be events happening behind closed doors is second to none. How fascinating that Greene was given such access to important political events and decisions. It also explains why the Panamanians are so much in love with Torrijos - why he was such a popular leader and has left such a huge mark on the country. Highly recommended if you are visiting Panama or living here - if only to see the contrast with the country as it is now (particularly tourist spots like Bocas Del Too which then were the absolute opposite). And also interesting for those with an interest in that era - as you learn a lot about the effects on various Latin American peoples of their respective dictators.

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### Maureen Milton says

Having lived through news reports of the Canal Treaty in my childhood, it was interesting to read Greene's memoir as a sort-of diplomatic attaché to Panamanian leader Omar Torrijos & his right-hand man, Chuchu. Greene's writing is so transparent as to provide an immediate sense of the characters & countries w/whom he's involved, including Torrijos, Chuchu, Ernesto Cardenal, "Gabo" Garcia Marquez, some Sandanistas, & various '70s & '80s era Latin American leaders and/or dictators. It has definitely enhanced my understanding of the Canal & its history.

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### Ali says

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## **Ekaterina says**

I admire Omar Torrijos after meeting him in different books. I bought this book and after reading I am happy to have it in my library. From page to page I was getting more into Omar Torrijos's personality, being acquainted with his friends and opponents. I had feeling that the book is alive and people were speaking to me in person. Last page... I am already missing this small, but GREAT history, described on these pages. I will definitely reread this book.

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## **David says**

I was a young kid when I read this book (okay 25) and what I thought was Greene was such a rebel. He gets an invitation to visit General Omar Torrijos of Panama in 1976 and gets to know him. This gets him kicked out of the U.S. and treads on dangerous grounds for his travels. But Greene was just that sort of character....and that is what makes this such a good read.

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## **John says**

For anyone interested in the politics of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s, which of course also requires an interest in the US intervention in the isthmus that intensified during the later stages of the Cold War, this book provides fascinating insights into some of the key personalities involved. Of course, apart from Greene himself (whose knowledge of the region grows with his friendship with the general), we mainly find ourselves getting to know Omar Torrijos, and his political amanuensis and bodyguard, Chuchu. Simply as a travelogue the book works because of the personalities - the quirky and enigmatic Torrijos, the ever-willing and slightly crazy Chuchu, and the pliable, curious Graham Greene, happy to be pushed into various political roles and (literally) to enjoy the ride as he gets dispatched to various parts of Panama or the wider region, often in the presidential plane.

In those couple of decades Torrijos was an influential figure - not only in Panama, principally in steering the agreement on the future of the canal and its return to Panamanian control, but also in his involvement in regional politics. He often operated behind the scenes, giving support to the rebel armies challenging right-wing governments in various countries, providing refuge to people who needed a place of safety away from the different struggles (not only guerilla leaders but also ordinary campesinos), and publicly or clandestinely seeking solutions to the conflicts. Greene is fascinated by Torrijos's self-adopted regional role and becomes a willing co-conspirator.

While the focus of the book is on the two main Panamanian characters, we get vignettes of many others - Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Fidel Castro, Eden Pastora, Tomas Borge and many more. We get snapshot views of the canal zone, the rain-swept Bocas de Toro, the San Blas islands where the Kuna people live, and many parts of the rest of Central America.

Greene undertakes all this with seeming reluctance - he is constantly fretting about the need to get back to Antibes to sort out some domestic problem - but in practice he is ineluctably drawn in by the combined charms of Torrijos and Chuchu. And we, of course, as readers, are similarly seduced.

Greene's last journey to Panama is in the aftermath of Omar Torrijos's death, when his plane mysteriously crashes in a remote part of the country. At first Greene believes that the crash must have been a result of pilot error, even though earlier in the book he reveals that Torrijos spoke of the possibility of his being assassinated. Then Greene is shown some intelligence reports showing the distorted view of Torrijos held by the US administration, and he becomes suspicious that the death of his friend was not accidental. Definitive proof that it was a CIA-led plot has not yet surfaced (as far as I'm aware), but it seems likely. Certainly the insider John Perkins, in 'Confessions of an Economic Hit Man' believed that this was the case. Graham Greene was to die before these further revelations emerged.

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