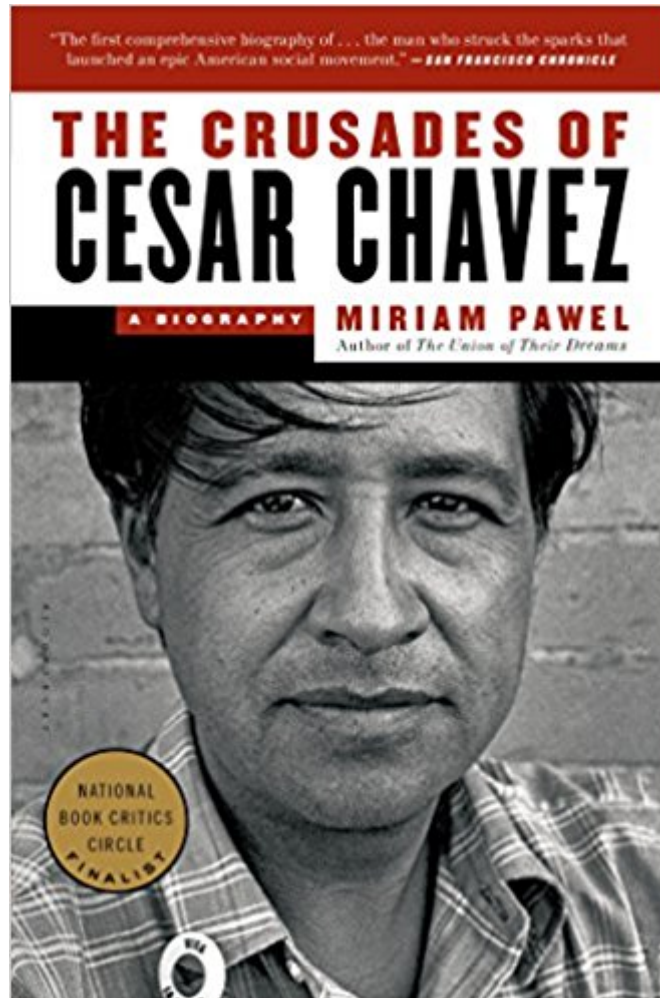




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The Crusades Of Cesar Chavez: A Biography



Synopsis

Cesar Chavez founded a labor union, launched a movement, and inspired a generation. He rose from migrant worker to icon, becoming one of the great leaders of the twentieth century. Two decades after his death, Chavez remains the most significant Latino figure in U.S. history. Yet his life story has been told only in hagiography--until now. In the first comprehensive biography of Chavez, Miriam Pawel offers a searching yet empathetic portrayal. Chavez emerges here as a visionary whose eyes were fixed on a horizon others often could not even see. He was a brilliant strategist who sometimes stumbled, and a streetwise organizer whose pragmatism was often at odds with his soaring dreams. Drawing on thousands of documents, hundreds of hours of audiotape, and scores of interviews, this superbly written life deepens our understanding of one of Chavez's most salient qualities: his profound humanity. Pawel traces Chavez's rise as he empowered the poor and disenfranchised and led farmworkers to historic victories over the agriculture industry. With compassion and compelling detail, she narrates the equally dramatic later years when Chavez's charismatic leadership devolved into a cult of personality, with heartbreaking consequences for his union. *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* reveals how this unlikely American hero ignited one of the great social movements of our time--and left a legacy that resonates today, from California to the White House.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review Pawel, rigorous and captivating, follows her history of Cesar Chavez's rise and fall, from his early years in the fields to his later years in the White House.

crusade to protect farm workers' rights, *The Union of Their Dreams* (2009), with a zestful, dramatic, and redefining biography of the innovative, daring, and persevering activist. Raised by his strong mother to embrace sacrifice and help others, Chavez (1927–1993) dropped out of school to work in the fields to support his destitute, homeless family, joining the ranks of California's exploited Mexican American migrant workers. Driven by his social conscience, pragmatic genius, and motivational ardor; inspired by Gandhi; and mentored by the highly unorthodox Father Donald McDonnell and Saul Alinsky disciple and community organizer Fred Ross, Chavez created a scrappy and revolutionary labor union for "the poorest, most powerless workers in the country." Pawel thoroughly chronicles every aspect of Chavez's battles against California's politically dominant produce growers, from audacious strikes to the now legendary national grape boycott to his penitential fasts. As she insightfully dissects Chavez's troubled relationships with his inner circle and each phase in the rise and fall of his increasingly complex and mismanaged organization, Pawel portrays a visionary civil rights leader whose fame and near-beatification engendered tragic misuses of power, but who improved countless lives and raised global consciousness. Chavez's epic story, told so astutely and passionately by Pawel, is essential to understanding today's struggles for justice and equality. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

"Pawel, rigorous and captivating, follows her history of Cesar Chavez's crusade to protect farm workers' rights, *The Union of Their Dreams*, with a zestful, dramatic, and redefining biography of the innovative, daring, and persevering activist . . . Pawel thoroughly chronicles every aspect of Chavez's battles against California's politically dominant produce growers, from audacious strikes to the now legendary national grape boycott to his penitential fasts. As she insightfully dissects Chavez's troubled relationships with his inner circle and each phase in the rise and fall of his increasingly complex and mismanaged organization, Pawel portrays a visionary civil rights leader whose fame and near-beatification engendered tragic misuses of power, but who improved countless lives and raised global consciousness. Chavez's epic story, told so astutely and passionately by Pawel, is essential to understanding today's struggles for justice and equality." *Booklist*, starred review "Pawel paints a complex portrait of Chavez with all his strengths and weaknesses . . . The author's insightful, painstakingly researched, and thoughtful work makes Chavez all the more dimensional and nuanced by recognizing his failings as well as his successes. This fully rounded portrait could well be the definitive biography of this all too human figure." *Library Journal* (starred review) "Miriam

Pawel's magnificent biography of Cesar Chavez has the force and scope of a great American novel. Here is the story of a man, from the humblest beginnings, who became a labor organizer as famous as any; here is a deeply flawed man who yearned to be a saint." *—Richard Rodriguez, author of Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography and Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*"Miriam Pawel's new biography *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, massively researched and expertly written, is a welcome expansion and enrichment of her earlier study *The Union of Their Dreams*. Together they represent the definitive story of this charismatic farm worker and controversial visionary leader whose courage and near-genius as an organizer invigorated the stormy history of American labor." *—Peter Matthiessen, author of Shadow Country and Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution*"Guau! Miriam Pawel has finally given us the Cesar Chavez we deserve: neither a saint nor a bully but a complex American activist who rose to the occasion with courage, astuteness, and intuition, but was also clumsy, misinformed, and nearsighted. Written in a beautifully nuanced style and displaying enviable depth of knowledge, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* is a masterpiece. Future biographies will be measured against it." *—Ian Stavans, Amherst College, author of The United States of Mestizo*"Miriam Pawel has produced the definitive account—a lucid, thoughtful, evocative, deeply reported, bracingly honest account—of the life of one of our most consequential modern agents of change. And what a perfect moment for this book's appearance, as the explosion of the Latino population, the implosion of the union moment, immigration policy gridlock and growing inequality have become defining issues of our American moment." *—Kurt Andersen, author of True Believers*"This is a remarkable account of the life of Cesar Chavez and of his iconic struggle for justice for America's migrant farmworkers. Miriam Pawel provides a vivid narrative that is unmatched for the authenticity of its behind-the-scenes detail. That rarest of beasts, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* is at once an important historical document, and a compelling read." *—Jon Lee Anderson, author of The Fall of Baghdad and Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*"Pawel has given us an inspiring book. It introduces us to a formidable leader who drew America's most disadvantaged workers into a powerful movement. And yet every reader will identify with Cesar Chavez' human foibles; every discouraged political visionary will be moved by his story." *—Alice Kessler-Harris, author of A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman*"A warts-and-all biography of an important figure." *—Kirkus Reviews*"A comprehensive portrait . . . Pawel's clear, accessible prose befits a subject famous for his plain rhetoric, ensuring a broad readership can appreciate this valuable exploration of Chavez's unique legacy." *—Publishers Weekly*"Those intent on hero worship will detest Miriam Pawel's honest, exhaustively researched

biography of Cesar Chavez, the charismatic leader and founder of the United Farm Workers who famously led strikes and boycotts to improve the lot of grape pickers in the 1960s. The Crusades of Cesar Chavez is a biography for readers who find real human beings more compelling than icons and history more relevant than fantasy." *Los Angeles Times* "The first comprehensive biography of the spectacular rise and messy decline of the United Farm Workers union and the man who struck the sparks that made the epic American social movement." *Sacramento Bee* "Long after his death in 1993 at age 66, Chavez is still the most celebrated Latino leader in American history. Pawel's searching yet empathetic portrayal traces his rise as a farmworker leader--the fasts, mass marches and victories over the agriculture industry--but also the later years, when Chavez's charismatic leadership devolved into a cult of personality." *New York Times Book Review*

Over the past 30 years, there has always been a 10,000 pound gorilla in the room interpreting the life and work of Cesar Chavez. That is, people have shied away from criticizing him because of his enormous sacrifices and contributions to the labor movement, to farm workers and to Latinos in general. That gave rise to the myth of Chavez vs. the complex reality of the man himself. Miriam Pawell, through her painstaking research, gives us a complete picture of the man, warts and all. It's important for future generations to understand the limitations of a charismatic figure who becomes a cult leader and a dictator, a man who preaches nonviolence, yet who countenances violence at the same time; a man who cultivates respect for others in his writings, yet is systematically abusive to those under him. Pawell presents all this, not as opinions, but as objective facts based on years of studying documents, interviewing UFW volunteers and scouring through mountains of archives and audiotapes. Hers is the work of a true journalist and a vigorous historian. I highly recommend this book, and I hope it becomes a text for discussion in Chicano and ethnic studies classes. It is both an inspiring read and a cautionary tale. It makes us reflect on the nature of true leadership.

This is Pawell's second book on Chavez and the United Farm Workers. Her first book *The Union of Their Dreams: Power, Hope and Struggle in Cesar Chavez's United Farm Worker Movement* (2010) was a collective biography of seven UFW organizers. Chavez overshadowed the portrait of each. In this longer, more detailed narrative, focused exclusively on Chavez, it is his own shadows that come forward. Hagiography this is not. Pawell is a persistent, detail-oriented journalist and *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* has raised the bar for all

future tellings of his story and the story of the rise and fall of the United Farm Workers. For those schooled on textbook versions of the life of Cesar Chavez this is a disturbing nevertheless instructive read. In the past decade we have learned that Chavez was not as respected inside the Union as he was without. The farmworker movement could not have started without him, but it often succeeded in spite of him. He could be dictatorial, deceptive, and sometimes abusive. His fear, his paranoia, and the rigor of his idealism almost killed the movement he inspired. One of the major counterpoints of Pawel's presentation is the increasing contrast between Chavez as public icon and Chavez as private neurotic. Chavez is not a sympathetic character in this book and that is perhaps both a strength and a weakness. Pawel's extensive use of UFW board meeting minutes and tape recording transcripts of those meetings creates a strong organizational lens. This contributes to accuracy but also keeps Chavez at a distance. We are constantly examining a complicated man solely through the eyes of others. We hear only a little of Chavez's private voice, his private thoughts. His Catholic faith remains in the background. His commitment to nonviolence barely examined. It is as if we can sense Chavez's own inner loneliness by the inability of his best biographer to get closer to him. The reader remains an observer of Chavez, but gets little assistance in seeing the world through his eyes. Pawel asserts that "whether nonviolence was a core belief, a tactic, or both, Chavez used the doctrine to great advantage. Nonviolence served Chavez and the UFW by assuring wealthy supporters that they were not supporting revolution; but Chavez wanted revolution. Chavez wanted a true poor people's movement - something that united 'the spirit of Zapata and the tactics of Martin Luther King.' He wanted a movement but only established a union. This was enough for those whom he fought for. They were satisfied with better wages and a step up the social ladder. Chavez wanted more. He wanted a nonviolent army living out the same level of commitment and unrelenting self-sacrifice that he tried to embody. Striving for sainthood through extreme self-discipline may have become a way to baptize his neuroses; a laudable attempt to harness the energy of an unbalanced life. But what Chavez never found and could never form was an interdependent community that could speak truth into his life, support his strengths, and confront his excesses. In Pawel's narrative we see family, co-workers, disciples, public adulation, and international acclaim. We do not see friendship. Chavez inspires us. We admire his ideals and dedication. We feel sorry for his loneliness, fear, and mistrust. Pawel's biography tells a life of Shakespearean dimensions. A tragedy in the telling. A mystery in the living.

Pawell humanizes a man that became a national icon. She documents his brilliance as a strategist and his limitations as a man who lied, initiated violence against braceros, and often acted to aggrandize himself rather than serve farm workers. Those actions led to the failure of a farm workers' union that had great potential. He did, however, bring the struggles of farm workers into the American consciousness, and inspired many people who went on to do even greater good for workers than he actually did. The last interviewee of the book said of Cesar that "the good outweighed the bad". That is what, in final analysis, should probably be his epitaph.

Went into the book with high expectations. Found it to be OK but was actually somewhat relieved when I got done with it. It seemed to plod at times and some of the situations I didn't find all that engaging. But overall it was informative and I am better off for having read it. I was surprised that I came out of it with a lesser opinion of Chavez. At times he reminded of a cult figure doing some pretty strange things.

Ms. Pawel does a great job of painting the Triumph and Tragedy of Mr. Chavez. I had thought that Chavez and the UFW was a bigger part of the national labor movement, and that it was a victim of political pressuring from Reagan and the California Government until I read this book. Ms. Pawel shows that it was Chavez himself who brought his union down with his consolidation of power and his stubbornness. However, instead of being a total smear job, it tells us a story of one of the great labor movements of the 20th Century and cautions the public of idolizing martyr's instead of finding practical solutions. Worth a read, but have time to sit and enjoy the book. Chapters range from short to long, but are all heavy on content.

I've read just about every book on the subject of Cesar Chavez and the UFW. I was an active supporter in the late 70's, and had the privilege to meet Cesar twice, visit the UFW headquarters, and get acquainted with many of his dedicated organizers. To Pawel's credit she strips away the myths surrounding Cesar's ascendancy to leadership without discrediting any of his achievements. Cesar's shortcomings and those of his inner circle are fairly treated. I looked forward to reading more after each time I would put it down. It gives the reader a revealing behind the scenes look at one of the truly human and great American leaders of our time. It rates as one of my two favorite books on Cesar Chavez. The other one is Conquering Goliath by Fred Ross.

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