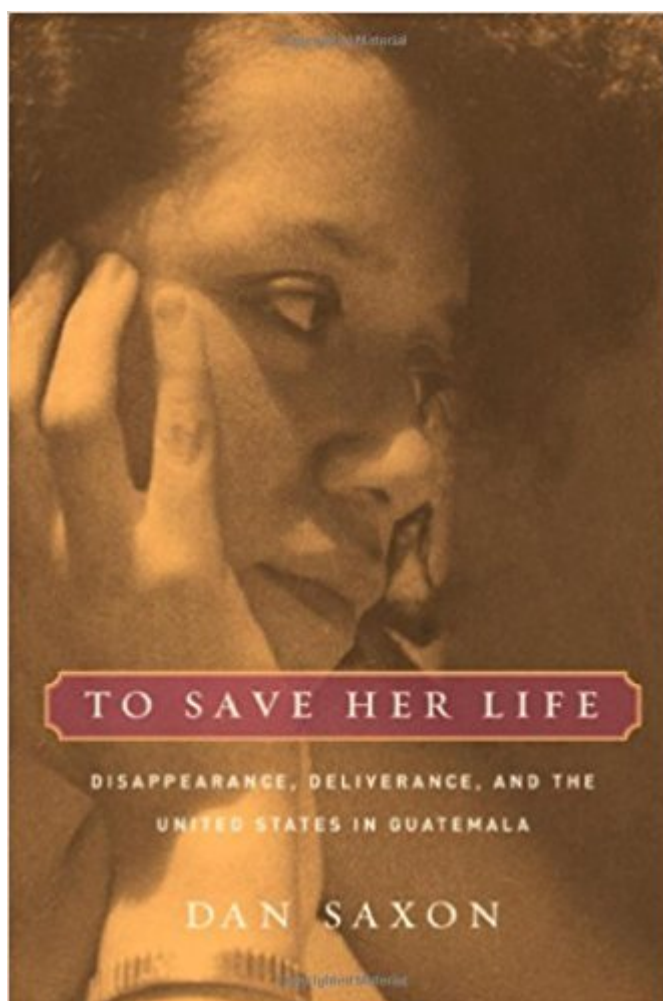


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# To Save Her Life: Disappearance, Deliverance, And The United States In Guatemala



## Synopsis

Part human rights drama, part political thriller, part love story, this riveting narrative chronicles the disappearance of one woman as it tells the larger story of the past fifty years of violence and struggle for social justice and democracy, and U.S. intervention in Guatemala. Maritza Urrutia was abducted from a middle-class neighborhood while taking her son to school in 1992. *To Save Her Life* tells the story of her ordeal which included being interrogated in secret by army intelligence officers about her activities as part of a political opposition group. Chained to a bed, blindfolded, and deprived of sleep, Maritza was ultimately spared because her family was able to contact influential intermediaries, including author Dan Saxon, who was in Guatemala working for the Catholic Church's Human Rights Office. Here Saxon brings to life the web of players who achieved her release: the Church, the U.S. State Department, the U.S. Congress, numerous NGOs, guerrilla groups, politicians, students, and the media. Reaching back to 1954, when Maritza's grandparents were activists, the book is a study of the complex and often cruel politics of human rights, and its themes reverberate from Guatemala to Guantánamo to Iraq.

## Book Information

Paperback: 328 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; 1 edition (May 21, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0520252454

ISBN-13: 978-0520252455

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #896,778 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #70 in [Books > History >](#)

[Americas > Central America > Guatemala](#) #874 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

"Dan Saxon has written a compelling and provocative book about the checkered history of United States involvement in Guatemala and the politics of human rights activism. Read this book and you will understand why the way in which we respond to human rights crimes often says more about our humanity than the abuses themselves."#151;Eric Stover, author of *The Witnesses: War Crimes*

and the Promise of Justice in The Hague"Dan Saxon's moving portrait of human courage and political interest illuminates the personal struggle of one woman against the broad sweep of Latin American history. It is rare in my experience for one book to offer both page-turning suspense and penetrating analysis of human rights policy. To Save Her Life carries it off brilliantly."#151;Jim Goldston, The Open Society Justice Initiative, The Open Society Institute"The massive intrusion of the United States in the government of Guatemala begun in 1954 is the basis for this fascinating story about a woman, Maritza. She was eventually able to emerge from captivity after torture and many humiliations. The author, intimately acquainted with life in Guatemala, tells the story of this woman and her family with humor, excitement and captivating details about the history of Guatemala. For anyone involved in the tragic history of Central America and the evolution of liberation theology, this readable book will be helpful and even indispensable."#151;Robert F. Drinan, S.J., Professor, Georgetown University Law Center"Human rights is a complicated business, and Dan Saxon's book explores many of our complexities in microcosm. Through the story of the campaign to save Maritza's life, Saxon illuminates the muddled U.S. policy in Central America at the end of the cold war; the inter-institutional rivalries and misunderstandings among organizations in the U.S. and Guatemala; and above all, the human caring that motivated so many human rights activists in the 1980s and 1990s. This is a magnificent work of history and humanity."#151;Patrick Ball, The Benetech Initiative

Dan Saxon is a prosecutor at the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Interesting book. In 1992, after dropping her son off at school, Maritza Urrutia was abducted off the streets of Guatemala City by government agents concerned about her work with groups working to overthrow the Guatemalan government. Her particular case is used as a jumping off point to discuss the history of Guatemala in the latter half of the 20th century, the "disappearances" that happened regularly, and the role of the United States in Guatemala.

This was a real eye opener-to show us what really happened in South America and to believe they came thru it all. Well written

Dan Saxon, a prosecutor for the United Nations Tribunal for crimes in ex-Yugoslavia, provides a humane and chilling investigation of civil war in Guatemala starting with October 20, 1944. On this

date, Guatemala City erupted in artillery and small weapons fire as insurgents advanced toward a government stronghold called San Jose. Among the insurgents were two children, Julia and Edmundo Urrutia, brother and sister whose curiosity and familial sympathy with Captain Laguardia leading the rebel assault in Guatemala City that day had ignited the passions of youth to march behind rebels toward the San Jose. Gunfire from snipers along streets and within the walls of the San Jose took the lives of many marchers. Along comes Dan Saxon in the early 1990's to pick up the story of the rebellion and its three-generation struggle for justice in an Urrutia descendant. Saxon reports that Maritza--a grandchild of the Urrutia matriarch, Ester--had been abducted by "an army intelligence unit," because she was a member of an "insurgent organization." Maritza's disappearance then forms the narrative kernel of the author's thesis. Saxon's thesis is best told in his own words: "...I believed that Maritza's story was about the collision of humanitarianism and politics. By the time I finished writing--nearly twelve years later--I understood that humanitarianism is [italics] politics" (Preface, xix). Writing from the Hague in September 2006, Saxon prefaces the book not only with his thesis, but also with his take on humanity as phenomenon under investigation. In short, humanity for Saxon is paradoxical and often ambiguous. But humanitarian action demands courageous response to counteract abuses. He discovered or shaped his take on humanity by accepting that "...little room exists for moral ambiguity or shades of gray. But the efforts we make to resolve and heal human rights violations may say more about our disparate, flawed humanity than the abuse itself" (Preface, xxi). If Saxon has shaped or constructed his view of humanity, as I perceive multiple examples of having shaped a personal perspective for him throughout this book of investigative review, then the pervasive cause for his opinion came not from discovering insight into his own sense of humanitarianism. Instead, Saxon reviewed archival data that spanned half a century of Guatemalan and international history to achieve what amounts to his thesis. In capable hands as his, judicious investigation attracts mystery-genre readers, political activists, international politicians and their critics, ecclesiastical and other voices of organized religion, non-governmental organizations providing humanitarian relief, and the young in age and/or heart. Saxon spares little in detail, but leaves out enough gruesome aspects of torture, neglect, and political charades to attract a reader's imagination. He never strays into ideology and political cant, which is a feat of editing stamina on the author's part, especially when his tale is of egregious abuse by many characters in this historical plot. The saga of Maritza's disappearance lasts 15 days, each day captured in a chapter of the book. The abduction occurred July 23, 1992, and the concluding chapter is dated August 6, 1992. However, the fact that her assailants, who were on the dole and under orders of the nation admitted wrongful action, Saxon explores what it means that they escaped further criminal

charges through an amnesty deal cut by the Attorney General. Saxon returns to his thesis to draw expert conclusions about humanitarian action is politics in Maritza's case. Read this book for its suspense, economy of lacing sources from many accounts of events into a narrative of "humanity," and applications to present and future humanitarian initiatives in your backyard and across the globe.

Rarely does an academic book read so well as this one; equally rare is a first-rate suspense novel that gets the facts right. The book is anchored by its focus on a single event, the ordeal of a young mother who was "disappeared" for seven days in 1992 in Guatemala. Details of the ordeal, which evolve chronologically, are interspersed with the history of the young mother's family as well as the history of Guatemala. The human rights situation of this one woman is illuminated by an examination of international, national, and local concerns with human rights in the 1990s in Guatemala as well as in the U.S. The book demonstrates how one person's disappearance--and reappearance--could trigger actions and reactions from governments, militaries, and revolutionaries, as well as from the media, the Catholic Church, and even U.S. task forces on drug smuggling. "To Save Her Life" succeeds at making connections of the personal with the political, the local with the international, and the past with the present. This book is accessible by and recommended for all readers.

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