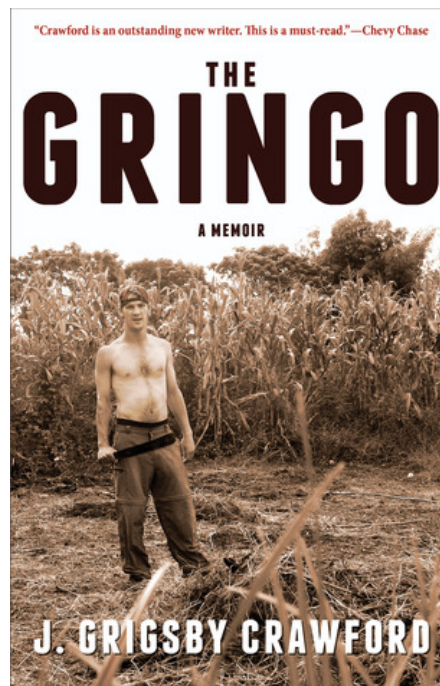




The Gringo

J. Grigsby Crawford

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Within weeks of arriving as a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote corner of South America, Crawford gets a lot more than he bargained for: a narrow escape from a kidnapping plot hatched by the people he was sent there to help.

Then things only get stranger.

In his quest to find adventure, Crawford undertakes a savage journey of danger, drugs, sex, and alarming illness. When anyone else would have packed up and quit, he endures—despite the unbearable pain and isolation. What resulted is *The Gringo*: one part literary tale of two lonely years in the Amazon jungle and one part gonzo-journalism account of a government agency wandering aimlessly through the twenty-first century.

Crawford doesn't glamorize the darkness or poverty he encounters. Instead, with fragility and toughness, he delivers a memoir of life abroad that is unlike any other. Filled with sharp humor and eye-opening observations about the human condition, this is an unforgettable story that grabs the reader and doesn't let go.

The Gringo Details

Date : Published December 11th 2012 by Wild Elephant Press (first published December 10th 2012)

ISBN : 97809888482272

Author : J. Grigsby Crawford

Format : Paperback 240 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Autobiography, Memoir, Travel, Biography, History

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From Reader Review The Gringo for online ebook

Jared G says

Fresh out of college, Grigsby Crawford decides to send his life in the direction of the Peace Corps. The novel, "The Gringo: a memoir" by J. Grigsby Crawford brings the reader along for the ride through his two year service in Ecuador. We are started off after his graduation (and application to the Peace Corps) in 2008. After a full year, Grigsby learns he is being shipped out to Ecuador. There he undergoes training and his assigned town of La Segua. However, due to violence and hostile relations, Grigsby is taken out and relocated to the town of Zumbi where he spends the rest of his service. In his waning days of service and daily stresses, Grigsby begins to question his significance and the rather defunct role of the Peace Corps in the country. To him it all boils down to "young Americans moving to poorer countries to show the people there how it's done" (p.132) Ironically in the end, Grigsby is excited to leave the country as much as he was to enter it.

Along the course of the story, I feel like I bonded closely to Grigsby as he took me along through his journey. He opened up cleared up previous misconceptions of the Peace Corps I had and revealed it wasn't anywhere close to what I thought it was. It also gave me the view from the point of an actual volunteer opposed to the comedic version seen through media such as the tv show Family Guy. I believe the author intended to have the reader bond with the text by showing the real side to daily life along with his personality thus writing in a comedic and relaxed way.

If you are ever looking for a funny, relaxed read or intend on joining the Peace Corps, this book is for you. When the author describes himself at the point of his application, it is most likely the same mindset we'll be in if you ever consider joining the Corps at his age. The propaganda and the history of it are enticing, but that only goes so far after reading this novel. In total, this novel was an enjoyable read that will have you giggle when you hit parts that you were expecting to be bland.

Raven says

A little slow at times but mostly a really great look into the life of a Peace Corp volunteer.

Marc Baldwin says

Take a look at the reviews and you will see a lot of anger about an entitled white boy in South America. There is some truth to the criticism, but I'm not ready to shoot Mr. Crawford yet.

I thought the book was well-written and painfully honest. The Gringo doesn't have much good, if any, to say about the Peace Corps in Ecuador, but I don't think that it makes the author a racist. It's a memoir, so I didn't mind giving him the latitude to call things as he saw them. He had a horrible experience, and I can't fault him for his frustration with opportunistic natives and ignorant souls (regardless of their nationality), and for his bouts of boredom and depression in a part of the world where he was disadvantageously placed and underutilized.

It's not a popular view, but Americans ARE allowed to have opinions about other countries that aren't necessarily favorable. Americans, by virtue of their nationality and the affluence of their home country, aren't required to smile and laughingly accept abuse, insults, and ignorance.

I don't think that Mr. Crawford was entirely unfair, although at times he did come across as somewhat flippant about some serious things (such as child abuse or sexual relations). But in the end, it's a memoir, and he did a good job of conveying his memories and experiences during his time in Ecuador. Not having any experience with the Peace Corps or knowing anyone that does, I found the content very interesting, and as a result, a quick read.

If you're a fan of the Peace Corps, don't bother. You'll end up writing another one-star angry review. If you're neutral, it's worth the read.

Alicea says

I am a current volunteer in the Amazonian region of Ecuador. I was loaned this book by my counterpart who was a PCV in the same omnibus as the writer. I don't feel like much could have changed in 3 years, but everything here is so different in my reality. Maybe it's because I am a girl, maybe it is because I have a different project (I am a natural resource conservation volunteer as well), but also maybe it is different because I am not quite as judgmental or given to so much exaggeration. I'm not saying that these things didn't happen, but his conversations with Ecuadorians, I really just can't even express how wrong they sounded. I'm no where near finishing my 2 years, and likely when I get done it won't be the type of book that gets published and read, but please please if you read this book do not let it be the only point of reference you hear form about a Peace Corps or about Ecuador because the fact that this story is "interesting" enough to be a book is because it is not a typical peace corps experience.

Jessica says

I won this book as a Goodreads first reads.

I had a really hard time deciding how many stars to give this book. If I could, I think I'd really give it 3.5 stars.

The Gringo was a frustrating, but good read (is that possible?). I spent the book frustrated by Mr. Crawfords negativity, but at the same time, was curious to read more. This is also a very fast read (I think it took me 4-5 days to read it).

All in all though, I'm glad I read The Gringo. Having had friends and colleagues who were in the Peace Corps, I was aware of some of the difficulties that volunteers can face. Mr. Crawford seemed to experience some of those same difficulties and perhaps Peace Corps should pay attention and work to fix those issues.

Mr. Crawford definitely had some issues (attempted kidnapping and problems with his "man plumbing") that were worthy of some complaining.

But for much of the book I thought his complaining was unwarranted. He appeared to have an attitude that he was better than the Ecuadorians. He seemed quick to judge (for example, he was often shocked at how many kids everyone had- most people are Catholic, who do not believe in using birth control. Many devote Catholics the world over have many children). I was also confused as to why he thought the Peace Corps was the best use of his time...? It appeared that sustainability was the goal for Peace Corps Ecuador and he has no background in this at all (I on the other hand do and caught myself thinking about all the potential projects that could have been done at his sites). Maybe another program would have suited him better. I also got the

feeling that the only reason he didn't Early Terminate is because he was trying to prove to himself (and others?) that he could make it, but if he didn't feel valuable and valued, I think it would have been ok to leave.

His brief moments of positive comments make me think it wasn't always as bad as he made it out to be (though again, I do agree some complaining was warranted). I would have liked to have him expand on those.

Overall, good, but frustrating read. If you are interested in the Peace Corps, wouldn't be a bad idea to read about some of the not so happy sides of it.

Joan says

Peace Corps Revealed in Today's Clime

When the Peace Corps was started, there were the usual journalistic descriptions and photos of new projects in foreign countries and they looked worthy. This department seemed like a good way to spread good will for Americans beyond our reputation for being war mongers. There was even Peace Corps work on local Indian reservations forty years ago for I knew a Senior lady who worked there and she worked hard to make it succeed. It was a shock for me when I read this book and learned of the vast waste of money, people and time for no or little results.

Grigsby, in this memoir, loudly sets forth these inefficiencies and how in his instance, they never were corrected. After graduating from college, he sent in his application and was interviewed in Arlington, VA. When he was asked for his regional preference, he said Latin America; that he had fallen in love with that part of the world after studying abroad in Argentina. He had studied Spanish in school, but during the interview, he realized that the interviewer was writing something on her computer and wasn't really involved in the interview, which would account for many of the ridiculous and unimportant questions he was asked. He had to admit he had no experience with agriculture or anything with nature. She told him she would nominate him for a program in Latin America starting in the fall and in the meantime he needed to get some experience relative to environmental education. Grigsby graduated that spring.

For the next few months all he did was fill out forms, including doctor's notes because he had voluntarily seen a therapist five years prior. They checked and rechecked his college transcript to confirm he had taken the several Spanish classes. Seven months after his interview, he was informed he wouldn't be leaving until January of the following year. He finally was invited to Bolivia but a few months later there was civil unrest and the U.S. ambassador and Peace Corps were kicked out. At this time the U.S. economy was failing, but they he was informed he would be sent to Ecuador in February. On his twenty-third birthday he was shipped out to Ecuador with no training, never having lived in the conditions which he encountered for the next two years and almost totally useless until about the last six months of his term.

This was what his memoir was about: all of his disappointments, his living conditions, the extreme cultural differences, his inability to get the local people to understand why he was there, and the very few Peace Corps administrators or directors who were of any help at all. Life became very dangerous for him because the way some poor men made a living there was through kidnapping Americans. He wrote humorously and to the point. There was one section it dragged for a few pages when he was telling of his experiment with a local drug, which could have been shortened to half a page, but otherwise it was entertaining and

educational. If his point of view was correct as far as the overall Peace Corps administration and accomplishments, then perhaps it would be better for everyone to either dissolve it or make it effective like its original intent. I recommend this book.

Ringo says

This kid's Peace Corps experience is the modern Peace Corps experience. The agency is broken and a mess. I did at times find the author to be a little too upper middle class American white bourgeois, and thus, his descriptions and analysis of his intercultural connections to be vapid. But overall, he tells it like it is--the Peace Corps is a failed mission from a Camelot era long gone. Don't read this book to learn about Ecuador or travel in South America. Read it to learn about the typical modern Peace Corps experience anywhere in the world.

Ashley says

A lot of self indulgent crap mixed in with a complete lack of respect for the country that he lived in for two years. I'm sure that his experiences were probably true, but what made me angry are the assumptions he made about an entire culture based on the bad eggs he came in contact with. I live in Quito, and I can tell you that there are definitely women in this country who have "all their teeth and less than three children." I'm embarrassed for the author that he has written a piece of literature that reflects so badly on his character.

Alison says

This book is in sore need of a good editor... by and large the narrator/author comes across as a spoiled bourgeois brat. I wish he had waited a few years to get some distance between his experience of Ecuador and his recollections--it could have been such a better book. I could not stand him and his 23 year old cynical, know-it-all attitude for most of it, but I could not put it down at the same time because it brought up so many of my own memories of Peace Corps--isn't it amazing how Americans experience different cultures in much the same way regardless of where they have lived abroad? The problem is he put to paper his childish inexperience and let it color one of the biggest experiences of his life. I would have done the same thing if I had written a book right when I got back; I am thankful that I did not, as I really value my Peace Corps experience now and would not want to view it through such a negative/immature lens. Perhaps he should write a sequel in ten years time?

Lawrence Lihosit says

J. Grigsby Crawford's book titled *The Gringo: A Memoir* is a taut, well-written Peace Corps book that not only describes his very recent experiences in Ecuador (2008-2010) but poses serious questions about the future of the agency. He includes all relevant information: application, reporting, staging, training, and the Peace Corps experience without needless sentimentality or romance. He successfully uses transitions to avoid tedious repetition and more importantly, has also written an often painfully honest account of his

service.

Pioneer volunteers beware: this book does not speak kindly about “generalists.” However, for those like me with less hair, teeth and a wider middle, reading this book will be enlightening. If the Peace Corps is to have a second half, we must take off our rose colored glasses during the half-time discussion.

Crawford approached a campus recruiter while still working on his bachelor’s degree. Apparently the recruitment process has been streamlined compared to just a few years ago. Whereas it took 15.1 months from application to reporting to staging, Crawford only took 12. He reported for “staging” in Washington D.C. during which further pruning was made before 44 Peace Corps Trainees flew to Quito, Ecuador, then shuttled several hours by bus to Olmedo, a tiny Andean village where they would learn Spanish in 10 weeks, about one third less time than past generations of volunteers enjoyed.

Trainees also participated in technical training. Crawford’s agricultural group raked leaves in the morning and assisted tree grafting class in the afternoon. The class was given by a volunteer finishing his service who admitted that he had learned this skill that very morning by using the internet.

Throughout training, the potential volunteers were threatened with “Administrative Separation” which is bureaucratic gobbly-gook for firing as in “We will fire you!” This was invented in 1963 (Just Termination) because of military conscription (the draft) and was used against male trainees with deferments who dared to question Peace Corps Training. Offending members had a note slipped into their permanent record that read “Unfit for Overseas Duty,” were fired, sent home to be processed by their Draft Board, and sent to war. This was revised in 1969 by Joseph Blanchford as part of his New Directions but it has evolved considerably. The revised version permitted a Country Director to fire trainees and volunteers who thought service as an extended college spring break. It was instituted in reaction to complaints by host nations. As the agency surpassed 10,000 volunteers, the number without real jobs had increased exponentially and with too much time on their hands, some volunteers became more tourists than workers. Most of the reasons cited by Crawford have been standard since 1969 but a few are most definitely new. In 2008, Peace Corps volunteers in Ecuador who swam at certain beaches, visited certain tourist spots, stayed past two in the morning in the capital city’s tourist zone or even those rumored to use drugs were all fired.

During training, potential volunteers were instructed in the bureaucratic art of the quarterly report to be prepared on a computer and sent electronically to the main office. This sure sounds like insulting busy work and reminded me of J. Larry Brown’s recent staff memoir (Peasants Come Last) within which he reported how the “Washington bureaucracy was voracious: non-stop reports, updates, analyses, surveys, budgets and quarterly planning.” Apparently the appetite now has increased to include volunteers in this paper morass.

Once assigned to a town or village, they were instructed to immediately begin interviewing as many residents as possible about their wants and needs (the Community Assessment Tool). This was also to be included in a report and later presented in a group setting with an electronic slide show (much like the military loves). A local Ecuadorian was supposed to accompany the volunteer to this presentation. Although used in the early Peace Corps years, given the agency’s historic susceptibility to charges of espionage (which would endanger all volunteers), this particular assignment is almost inconceivably stupid.

Following his successful completion of training and swearing-in, Crawford was sent to the Chone region located about seven to ten hours by bus west of the national capital, Quito. He was assigned to the tiny village of La Segua which included about 150 inhabitants in a low-lying marsh region prone to flooding and also known for incredible violence. This is an agricultural zone with the cultivation of cocoa, coffee, bananas, cassava, maize and recently coca for the production of cocaine.

His Ecuadorian counterpart (the one he was supposed to teach) was twenty years old “but looked no more than 15...five foot six and 120 pounds.” For the next eight weeks, Crawford lived with Juan, his counterpart,

and 19 other people in a ramshackle farm house. His room was “a ten-by-fifteen foot space enclosed by dungeon-like bricks. The only window looked out to one of the puddles of chicken shit. The door was made of scrap plywood...(which) I could have punched through.” There was no indoor plumbing.

Juan’s idea was to create a new local industry- ecotourism, much like in Costa Rica. Rich Americans were expected to fly to La Segua, Ecuador to bird watch. Crawford quickly assessed a basic problem. Unlike the well educated Costa Ricans who enjoy a fine standard of living and a national highway system as well as airports, the Chone region of Ecuador is populated by starving, illiterate, and violent farmers. Rape and murder are commonplace. Worse yet, his counterpart began their relationship with lies and extortion.

Crawford’s experience in western Ecuador ended abruptly following strange visits by a mysterious white truck. “A couple of guys in black ski masks, carrying weapons whispered as they tip-toed around the farmhouse.” His Peace Corps Program Manager did not like the idea of resettling Crawford in a new town but he was over-ruled by the Peace Corps Security Agent and the Country Director. The Security Agent is a position I had never heard of. In this case, she was assisted by a man she only identified as the “colonel,” a man who like her, had been trained in the United States and had formally been part of the national police force. They arrived in La Segua, interrogated people, then took Crawford away. Aside from the cost, the use of paramilitary forces with the Peace Corps gives the impression that the two are synonymous. This could be very dangerous.

Crawford was reassigned to a Zumbi, small village on the eastern Andean slopes near the disputed Ecuadorian/Peruvian border. When I read this, I wondered aloud what moron is in charge of assignments? They sent him from an area known for drug trafficking to an area which has had armed border disputes since 1945! Crawford proves his mettle by completing his assignment despite our ever-lurking shadows of loneliness and disease. In his case, he contracted some sort of bacteria which affected his prostate and testicles resulting in “debilitating and gut-clenching lightning bolts of pain.” He helped his community build a greenhouse with the use of a grant. The locals appreciated his efforts and before leaving, gave him a farewell party attended by “every student, teacher, faculty member, the mayor, and city council members.” He was given a huge commemorative plaque and the opportunity of giving his farewell speech in Spanish.

J. Grigsby Crawford was a success. One of 28 out of 44 in his group to complete service, he actually supplied something the community wanted. Yet, he does not see it quite like that. A generalist, he (and others in his group) thought the Peace Corps should “attract more highly skilled volunteers.” Maybe, he ruminates, we should even consider agency termination. “Like most humans turning fifty, the Peace Corps should begin thinking of retirement. Eventually, people just have to figure it out on their own.”

Lawrence F. Lihosit is the author of several books about or inspired by Peace Corps service including Peace Corps Chronology: 1961-2010.

Midge Bork says

I should be congratulated for reading this book to the end. Grigs, why should I care about how many times you went to the doctor because of the bug you caught? or your long-winded description of a bad psychedelic trip? That was a real yawnfest. Your complaints about the Peace Corp are not new. I heard them from volunteers from the 70s and 80s. You are not the center of the universe. You stated your reason for signing up was that you wanted to find yourself. You could have backpacked through Tibet, if you wanted to pay your own way.

Natoria says

So I see the cover of the book, and I thought that the guy on the cover is soooo cute. That is the only reason why I wanted to read it. However, after reading the first chapter I was sold and love every sentence. I enjoy how the book provided an in depth detail of living, trials, and tribulation of being in the Peace Corps.

Lynn says

Oh dear. Not good. I was interested in the Peace Corps and Ecuador. But Mr. Crawford is a very self-absorbed young man. He comes across as lazy and stupid. Surely in two years he must have seen or learned something of interest in Ecuador. Yes, the Peace Corps is ineffective, at least in Ecuador. Yes, the people of Ecuador have a very different culture and there are bad people there. So quit telling us about your man-plumbing and give us a good story! He told us at least twice that that wasn't the last he/we would hear about the gangsters at his first site, but oh yes it was. He never followed up with that story. Who cares about boring bus rides? Not me. Quit telling me you had nothing to do. You boob. DO SOMETHING! Ugh. Just don't become a writer.

Melissa says

Since I plan on joining the Peace Corps one day, I figured I needed to read a book that talked about negative aspects of the program just as much as I needed to read the positive ones. And this book fit that bill. Grigsby had several less than optimal experiences as a volunteer, and outlines them in this memoir.

Fresh out of college, Grigsby joins the Peace Corps and is placed in Ecuador. There he spends a few months in a coastal town that quickly proves dangerous and ineffective at the program they're trying to implement. After a kidnapping rumor, he is moved further inland to another town, where the program is dead on its feet and he does much of nothing all day. During this time he develops an illness that will persist through his entire service. And finally in the last part of his service, he works on a project that is actually effective.

Grigsby is not kind in his descriptions of the Ecuadorian people. There are only a few he seemed to like and I'm not sure if he just didn't encounter that many good people or if his personality was just not compatible with the culture of the Ecuadorians. I certainly don't want to believe that a whole people and culture are as terrible as he describes them. But at least he tries to tell things as they are without sugarcoating it. And the few people he does like are warmly described. And he doesn't really get anywhere with his projects in the Peace Corps which seems to be largely because of an ineffective coordinator and management system in Ecuador. This could have a great bearing on his views of the Ecuadorian people. If you see bad all day, it becomes the whole experience for you.

Despite everything he goes through, Grigsby does insert some humor into the book. Anyone who can complain with such cheer about pain in his testicles for extending periods of time has some moxie. And he writes in an engaging way, you have to keep reading to see if things turn out any better. I should warn that there are descriptions of genitals, cussing, and other things in this book that some readers may not enjoy. If you are a person who enjoys less graphic encounters with books, this is not one you should read. The overall message of his experience isn't positive, which is disheartening. And while I disagree with his view that

perhaps the Peace Corps should retire, I respect him for telling his story and arguing some good points. It would seem that some areas of the system do need an overhaul, especially in Ecuador. But from everything else I've read on the subject there are positives to the Peace Corps program and I take the optimist view that if it makes the difference in one person's life, it was worth it.

I do have to note that there is one section in this book that I didn't really like. Grigsby tries out one of the local hallucinogens and has a very bad trip. Now I'm not against the mention of drugs, but rather the way it was presented in this book. While everything else is largely clinical in the book, this particular chapter delves into the incoherent ramblings of a drug induced mind. And reads as such. It just didn't fit with the rest of the book and was tedious to read.

Not the most comfortable of reads, but a good one if you're interested in the Peace Corps and want to know the not-so-good side of things. Because if you're doing something that big with your life, you need to look at it from all perspectives.

The Gringo
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225 pages

Review by M. Reynard 2013

More of my reviews can be found at www.ifithaswords.blogspot.com

Michelle Seigny says

I looked forward to this travel memoir but couldn't get past the first chapter... the author's negative writing style was too, well, negative.
