

Comment

“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice,” as the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. famously said. A three-judge Guatemalan tribunal seemed to bear him out, when Chief Justice Jazmín Barrios announced a guilty verdict on Friday, May 10, against former general and head of state Efraín Ríos Montt on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. The 86-year-old former dictator was sentenced to 80 years in prison. The arc had considerable help from Judge Barrios, her colleagues, Attorney General Claudia Paz y Paz, their respective teams, expert witnesses, and 90 courageous Ixil eyewitnesses who had experienced the indescribable wrath of these crimes.

We begin this issue of the Review with two articles about the trial. Berkeley professor Beatriz Manz was an “expert eyewitness” who sought to document the crimes of the Ríos Montt regime during the height of the genocide in the Ixil region of Guatemala. She weaves her expert testimony into the story of her decades-long personal journey among the people of Guatemala. She concludes with an exceptional set of seldom-seen photos of the Ixil area and of refugee camps in Mexico as well as excerpts from her 1985 congressional testimony on human rights in Guatemala. Anthony Fontes explores the at-times contradictory way in which some Guatemalans have come to terms with the violence of the country’s past. “The past cannot be undone,” he points out, “we can only hope to rewrite its remembrance.”

As the long-running immigration debate moves towards a conclusion in the United States Senate, Erica

Hellerstein reports on a showing of “Shenandoah,” with David Turnley, the documentary’s Pulitzer Prize-winning director. This film focuses on a hard-scrabble former coal town in eastern Pennsylvania and explores what holds the community together in the wake of the beating death of a Mexican immigrant by four star high-school football players. The documentary poses a troubling question: What causes decent people to do unspeakable things? The film is deeply moving when you see it and haunting afterwards.

Finally, we conclude with a conversation with Isabel Allende

about her new novel, *Maya’s Notebook*. Much of the book takes place in Berkeley and on Chiloé, an archipelago at the end of continental Chile. The distance between these two locations is “about the same as a trip to the moon,” Allende writes. The conversation was a bit like Allende’s writing itself: personal, witty, perceptive, lyrical, and, at times, profound. When asked about the notion of legacy, she commented, that it can be “the contribution to the collective culture, to the collective unconscious, to our collective dreams.”

Not a bad way for us to end!

– Harley Shaiken

Harley Shaiken speaking after the screening of “Shenandoah,” April 2013.



Photo by Jim Block