

Cantú Francisco. *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border*. Riverhead Books, 2018.

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Francisco Cantú's remarkable collection of life experiences have equipped him specially to write this book. It is full of well-written, emotional accounts of his time as a border patrol officer and his life afterward interspersed with accounts of how the border came into being and functioned during the Mexican Revolution, dreams that haunt him as a result of his work, and horrifying news reports and poetry describing the brutality of Ciudad Juárez, a cartel-run city across the border from El Paso, Texas.

Cantú entered the border patrol after growing up near the border and studying international relations (the border in particular) in college. He wanted "to see the realities of the border day in and day out" in order to "truly understand the place" (23). The reader, in following his work, feels how little anyone could truly be prepared for a job as a border patrol agent and how easily some agents grow desensitized to violence. Cantú frequently juxtaposes the aridly beautiful landscape with the destructiveness caused by the "unnatural divide," as he calls the border in the book's dedication.

The book is divided into three sections and moves along seamlessly, as Cantú simply begins new paragraphs between new stories or topics. The first section covers his first time as a field agent for the border patrol, the second his work in an intel center and his second short stint as a field agent, and the third details his interactions with people at a coffee shop where he worked in school and his relationship with an illegal immigrant and his family. A particular part near the end made me cry. It was a man's brokenhearted plea for change, and his desire to be with his family no matter the cost.

I didn't know much about the border or about border politics before reading this book. It's something you hear in the media, especially recently, but only in vague terms. This book gave me a sense of the lives at stake in these kinds of politics. While it was emotionally difficult to read at times, I'm glad that I read it to gain perspective on life at the border. I wish politicians who make decisions relating to the border would read this book. As Cantú quotes historian Timothy Snyder, it is the responsibility of "those who grapple with death on a grand scale... to seek these numbers and put them into perspective... to turn the numbers back into people" (144-145).