

## REVIEW

# Review of Nicholas Griffin, *The Year of Dangerous Days: Riots, Refugees, and Cocaine in Miami 1980*. Simon & Schuster, 2020. 336 pages.

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Julio Capó, Jr. reviews Nicholas Griffin's *The Year of Dangerous Days*.

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Nicholas Griffin's *The Year of Dangerous Days: Riots, Refugees, and Cocaine in Miami 1980* is an immensely readable account of one of the most volatile years in the city's relatively short history. The prolific writer's oeuvre includes works of fiction as well as several pieces of nonfiction on topics as diverse as how Sino-U.S. diplomacy took shape alongside the game of ping-pong during the Cold War (*Ping-Pong Diplomacy*) and a recounting of the author's journey to the Caucasus region that provides historical insight on the origins of its modern-day turmoil (*Caucasus*). A common thread among his works, it seems, is his ability to craft a powerful story animated by often eccentric, if not flamboyant, characters. In many ways, his storytelling reminds us how fact can so often be stranger than fiction.

His latest historical work is no exception. It highlights the tumultuous year of 1980 in a Miami largely unrecognizable to the city of today—one sitting at the precipice of major urban transformation. The effects of that year are, indeed, still being felt. As the book's title makes clear, Griffin weaves together three major stories that ignited one of the most difficult periods in the city's history: the rebellions in Miami's Black neighborhoods following the acquittal of police officers who brutally murdered a Black man named Arthur McDuffie; the massive influx of nearly 125,000 Cubans during the Mariel Boatlift; and the rapid growth and bravado of the Colombian-dominated drug economy that often led to bloodshed. Griffin argues, "If 1980 was a diagnostic test for America, Miami was the biopsy. It revealed the coming contamination of cocaine, the complications of a sudden burst of immigration, and the potential triangulation of race" (250). In that way, Griffin suggests, but never substantively explores, that the events that transpired in Miami in 1980 were felt across the nation and beyond U.S. borders.

Griffin often anchors his riveting telling of this history through the eyes of figures he fashions as either heroes or villains. Their everyday lives and decisions dictated the fate of an entire city that had garnered major national and international attention. Heroes included *Miami Herald* reporter Edna Buchanan and six-term Mayor of Miami Maurice Ferré. Buchanan's journalistic know-how and tireless efforts helped launch the legal investigations against the police officers who murdered McDuffie and claimed his death had been caused by injuries he received in an accident, while Ferré designed a grander vision of financial prosperity and longevity for a city in chaos by looking south—rather than north—for steady financial investments. That is, the Puerto Rican-born politician saw the potential of making Miami a major financial hub for Latin America and the Caribbean. Griffin also highlights the heroic story of Héctor Sanyustiz, the Cuban who drove a bus through the Peruvian embassy in Cuba and subsequently sought political asylum, helping spark what later became the Mariel Boatlift. Some of Griffin's villains are better known, such as Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Griffin is more tenuous in describing the story of Cuban American police officer Alex Marrero, who some accused of being responsible for the most aggressive blows that killed McDuffie. His villains also include Emmy Shafer, the woman behind Citizens of Dade United, the organization that spearheaded

the successful vote that overturned Miami's progressive ordinance that mandated bilingualism in the area. Griffin dedicates a lot of attention to the story of Colombian money launderer and drug trafficker Isaac Kattan, while also assigning blame to the many banks with "unusual deposit patterns" that looked the other way to fatten their own vaults (228). His treatment of these characters is often nuanced. Buchanan, Griffin curtly suggests, had a blind spot for understanding or exploring the role that race played in her investigative reports. Similarly, Griffin notes that "within the world's most dangerous industry, Kattan was a civilized man, running an effective, honest business" (244). People, whether heroes or villains, Griffin intimates, are always complicated. He seeks to peel away at their layers page by page.

Yet despite this careful character development, at times Griffin's historical narrative simply falls short. In his telling of the Mariel Boatlift, still one of the most controversial and poorly understood waves of immigration in U.S. history, Griffin takes important steps to debunk some of the myths long associated with the Mariel episode, including the idea that the vast majority of the incoming migrants had a criminal past. However, while he reminds readers that no more than 4 percent of those who came to the United States during the boatlift had a criminal record, he seems less interested in exploring what constituted "criminality" in Cuba in the first place. For instance, the prostitutes and the community he generalizes simply as "transvestites," presumably referring to the fairly large and visible group of gay, queer, transgender, and gender-non-conforming Cubans who came on the Mariel Boatlift, may have been subject to arrest under Cuban laws (98). Similarly, for all of his work noting the many intersections of the three major episodes of Miami in 1980—the issues that became manifest in the so-called "riots, refugees, and cocaine"—Griffin seems almost oblivious to the fact that Mariel was heavily racialized, with a higher number of Afro-Cuban entrants than previous waves of Cuban migration to Miami, which helped fuel narratives of the new arrivals' so-called penchant for criminal activity. Just the same, the contemporary wave of Haitian immigrants to Miami is, at best, a footnote in Griffin's story that purports to be, in no small part, about race and immigration. Thousands of Haitians who sought political asylum had been denied entry to the United States and U.S. District Court Judge James Lawrence King ruled on July 2, 1980—that is, during the summer of Miami's seething—that anti-Black sentiments had sealed the Black migrants' fates. In noting the differential treatment between Cubans and Haitians seeking asylum, Judge King maintained: "No greater disparity can be imagined." But perhaps one of the book's weakest moments comes in the form of its treatment of the Colombians involved in the drug trade that fuels so much of Miami's financial engines during this period. At times, they are reduced to nameless "illegals" who are blissfully ignorant of U.S. law and society. And while Griffin takes significant steps to detail the origins and development of the Mariel Boatlift in Cuba, he makes little effort to explain the social or political climate in Colombia that helped the drug trade thrive in Miami.

At other points, Griffin makes assertions that suggest a lack of familiarity with the region and its history. In arguing "there was little planning, little history, to build on" to explain how Miami came to embrace Latin American culture, he ignores the region's deep-rooted connections to Latin America and the Caribbean, including competing tourist markets, waves of migration, and trade in the early twentieth century (xvi). At times, assertions are just slightly off or misleading. Griffin, for example, likens "Cuban national icon" José Martí to John F. Kennedy in the United States, when perhaps a figure like George Washington may seem more fitting (215). He also reiterates a contemporary belief that Kattan was "South Florida's Al Capone," which seems to forget that at one point Al Capone lived in Miami and therefore Al Capone *was* South Florida's Al Capone too (241). While some of these points are mere quibbles, they point to a larger problem with the author's source base. Griffin must be commended for his prodigious research, especially his interviews with those who shaped this very history, but he often relies far too heavily on media reports and seems to treat them uncritically. Some of the larger threads of this story have already received serious scholarly attention, especially through the prodigious work of historians and social scientists like María Cristina García's *Havana USA* or Alejandro Portes and Alex Stepick's *City on the Edge*. Griffin briefly notes he avidly read works on Miami, but his account of this period in Miami seems to engage with or even acknowledge established historical accounts, arguments, and debates only sparingly.

Despite this, Griffin is often very effective in dovetailing complicated and layered histories in a concise and captivating manner. He is a gifted writer and storyteller with a keen eye to detail. The author leaves his readers with the sensational effects one expects from a suspense thriller with its fair share of twists and cliffhangers. For Griffin, "Miami had simmered, exploded, and survived on its own" in the aftermath of 1980 (250). Certainly, his work should be understood as a critical call for action. Today, more than forty years later, the city must still reconcile the social and political structures that fueled the most violent and destructive elements of that year.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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