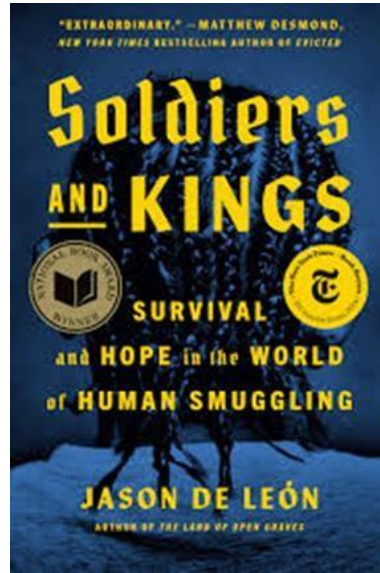


BOOK REVIEW



Publisher : Viking Books / Penguin Random House

Language: English

Hardcover: 399 pages

ISSN: 0593298586

ISBN: 9780593298589

Abstract : *Soldiers and Kings: Survival and Hope in the World of Human Smuggling* is the winner of the National Book Awards for nonfiction in 2024. It evolved from anthropological research concentrated on the Honduran guides living in Mexico. In the book, Jason De Leon narrates his entrance into the world of human smuggling, guides, and undocumented migrants. He meticulously charts their perilous journey from Honduras to Mexico and the US borders. The author dexterously humanizes the highly misunderstood lives of guides thanks to immersing himself in their rough lives and adopting cultural relativism. In his book, the guides are not tattooed villains exploiting innocent migrants but fragile humans and victims of larger forces such as neoliberal policies, colonialism, climate disasters, and human smuggling networks. By mirroring their suppressed voices and constructing a sympathetic and transparent narrative about them, the writer enables his readers to identify with these guides, vicariously experience their lives and ordeals, and acknowledge their predicaments. The writer helps his reader discard their received prejudices about them. Thus, after reading the book, the guides for the readers will be no criminals but common humans having anathema to poverty, violence, and dehumanization.

Keywords: *Migrants, Guides, Human Smuggling, Honduras, Mexico, The US*



Reviewed by:

Ahmad GHOLI

Gonbad Kavous University, Iran

 **0000-0002-2283-1134**

Introduction

In *Soldiers and Kings*, Jasen De Leon takes his readers to the world of human smugglers, guides, and wretched migrants. His anthropological analysis focuses on the guides directing undocumented migrants from the labyrinth of forests, arid deserts, and heavily surveilled borders of the US. Fleeing from poverty, violence, and climate disasters, migrants take risks, embrace their deaths, and accept dangers in their journey to their desired destiny. Though migrants cherish the American Dream, their world is nightmarish, bereft of assurance and stability. Everywhere is lurking in mortal danger, rape for the female migrants is inevitable, and money distortion is most likely. With a thousand dreams, the migrants from places like Honduras depart to Mexico hoping to cross America and initiate a decent life. They know well that if they stay in their homeland, they will die as victims of senseless violence. Exodus is their only solution and finding temporary jobs in America is their only solace. Still, the journey has its thorns unimaginable and no one can ensure their smooth passage to the US. Many a time, migrants lose their lives in their perilous journeys, but their death, in their eyes, is better than stasis and struggle with crushing poverty and unavoidable death. Their heart-wrenching journey is not dissimilar to tragic dramas enacted on roads, trains, jungles, and borders with the police embodying what Hannah Arendt calls ‘the banality of evil’ since their hearts are hardened to human sufferings. Desiring to work in the US, the undocumented migrants gamble their lives and, in most cases, they are losers: they are either deported or detained. But their losses cannot crush their hopes because they tenaciously keep on. The migrants live in a perpetual mode of anxiety. They know well that if they successfully outsmart the US police and checkpoints, they cannot escape from exploitation, humiliation, deportation, and detention in their desired terrain. Nonetheless, the hell of America for them is more bearable than that of their homeland. This is why they keep alive the vicious circle of departure, detention, and deportation.

The passage of time does not relieve the sordid situation of the migrants’ clandestine journeys, instead, it exacerbates it because security tactics and surveillance technology improve over time. Far from deterring the human smuggling industry from growing, these advancements render the human smuggling system more murderous devouring many innocent migrants. The new technologies for impeding and controlling the undocumented migrants make the smugglers greedy

demanding exorbitant money from the miserable migrants in the various stages of their hazardous travel. In these uncertain and life-threatening conditions, the migrants are doomed to be obedient: the slightest disobedience can lead to a brutal murder.

Through his anthropological narrative, Jason De Leon opens his readers' eyes to the sad and bitter realities of thousands of innocent migrants. He implicitly urges the US policymakers to treat them as humans, not undesirable pests intending to ruin their peace and rob their jobs. For the author, the migrants are innocent souls rather than monstrous villains with vampirish intentions invading their hosts' heavenly paradise. For him, they are fragile humans who have been victimized and displaced by global poverty, unfair policies of capitalism, and relentless climate change. He reminds his privileged audience that their forced movements are out of desperation stemming from sincere human desires for safety and peace and escape from crushing poverty and humiliation. The writer demonstrates that migrants are humans even though they are condemned to perpetual motions in the endless sea of troubles and humiliations. Indeed, by leaving their homes and confronting unknown challenges, migrants illustrate Hanna Arendt's idea of action: "Action unfolds without guarantees" (Leitch, 2018, p. 1168). They throw themselves into action with unknown consequences. By the 'act' of traveling, they feel they are humans with agency.

Humanizing Guides

For Leon, those unfamiliar with the human smuggling world tend to lump all guides as brutal villains. The flawed view is the bitter fruit of popular media, especially Hollywood. In his book, he redeems them from falling into this infamous category. His anthropological fieldwork involves experiencing their existential dilemmas and documenting their lives characterized by intensive life and fast death. To do so, he immerses himself in their lives. He travels with them through dangerous jungles and inhospitable deserts, lives with them in their rooms rented in violent neighborhoods in Mexico, eats fried beans with them, drinks beer with them, dances with them, weeps with them, and financially supports them when they are in dire situations. In doing so, he wins their trust, captures their 'lived experience,' and avoids simplistic narratives based on the exaggerated notions of good and bad.

His attraction to these marginalized migrants is related to a sense of kinship with them. Like them, he comes from a broken and violent family. Their proclivity toward suicidal acts is a reminder of his violent adolescent life in America. Hence, it is not difficult for him to cultivate a deep friendship with them. In this book, the writer, like John Paul Sartre, adopts the 'perspective of the least favored' (Bake, 2016) and emphasizes their victimhood. He delineates complex social, economic,

and cultural forces that compel these young guides to leave their homes and lock them in human smuggling's demonic world. In Honduras, they are initially the victims of violent conditions and then predictably their creators. Nevertheless, later they realize that they are killing their own people. So, they depart to Mexico where they are hunted and employed as young guides-cum-soldiers for ever-increasing migrants by infamous human smugglers. When they enter the closed and frightening world of smuggling, they become its prisoners, unable to escape from its tentacles. In this horrendous limbo, their choice is limited and there is no room for love and tender feelings. For instance, when Chino, one of these guides, falls in love with one of the female migrants and decides to cut off his umbilical cord with the smuggling network and start his new life as a construction worker, his life ends tragically at the hands of his colleagues resenting his romance and transformation. As a result, his reformed, decent life comes to a bitter conclusion in its early stage as if happiness has sworn to remain a stranger to them for good.

According to Leon, it is fallacious to imagine that migrants earn handsomely, and for their dirty money they deserve their sad fate. Unlike their greedy lords, their earnings are insignificant normally spent on parties or sent to their family members. In the human smuggling network, they are short-term soldiers for exploitation, tools to carry out the most difficult tasks of smuggling, and scapegoats for the police force's invasion and arrest. They participate in a war that does not belong to them; they are poor pawns stuck in the hellish world of human smuggling; ironically only death can liberate them though they cherish a desired existence. Jason De Leon attains his insights about them through firsthand experience of their risk-filled lives, fragility, fleeting happiness, and humanity. His nuanced picture shatters clichés associated with them. It will not be an exaggeration to claim in some way the author converts the supposed sinner guide like Chino into a saint at the end of his book.

This award-winning book has outstanding strong points. Its dialogic quality is one of them. Far from being a pure narrative, the book is peppered with long quotations that mirror the guides' standpoints without authorial distortion and embellishment. By doing so, he acquaints his readers with their lives' nuances and the authenticity of their existence and colloquial register. This explains why the book is filled with many swear words such as 'shit' and 'fuck.' As a result, when one reads the book, he/she feels that the guides are talking to them directly. Indeed, as a humanist and ethical anthropologist, the author emotionally connects the readers with the disenfranchised guides. However, the authorial intervention manifests itself when Leon interweaves the guides' narratives and when he critiques those forces that created the demonic world for them and migrants. Another charm of the book is its lucid and flowing prose bestowing powerful transparency upon the book. This transparency is a good vehicle to capture the pathos of guides' unstable and short lives. The next attraction of the book lies in its relevance to our world, witnessing the painful migration on a large scale. The book is particularly relevant after the

presidency of Donald Trump infamous for his strict, disastrous anti-migration policies. Indeed, reading the book will make its readers pause and ponder over the fate of the guides and migrants who are forced to risk their lives due to colonialism, global neoliberalism, climate change, and unequal distribution of power and wealth. Finally, the book's ethical contribution is its greatest strength. It is powerful enough to prick its audience's moral sensibilities to create a better world wherein migrants do not belong to the realm of 'Zoe/ bare life' to borrow Giorgio Agamben (Leitch, 2018, p.1966) even though it sounds highly idealistic.

Due to its rich insights, the book is highly recommended for modern readers, especially for those living in countries that are migrants' destinations. It is also recommended for scholars of Latin American studies, anthropology, and postcolonialism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Contact:

E-mail: ahmadgholi@gonbad.ac.ir

References and notes:

Sara Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails.*, (2016). New York: Other Press.

Vincent B. Leitch. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* (2018). New York & London: W.W. Norton.

Cite this article as: GHOLI., A. Book Review: Soldiers and Kings, by Jasen De Leon. Journal of Science and Innovative Technologies. Number 32, 2025. 84-89. <https://doi.org/10.30546/2616-4418.32.2025.2084>