

The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey Study Guide

The Motorcycle Diaries: Notes on a Latin American Journey by Che Guevara

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Plot Summary

The Motorcycle Diaries consist of diary entries written by Ernesto "Che" Guevara as he travelled with his friend Alberto Granado across Latin America. Che Guevara was born in 1928 on June 14th in Rosario, Argentina. He grew up middle class, the son of Ernesto Guevara Lynch and Celia de la Serna. Che grew up with asthma, which prevented him from going to school until he was nine; he grew up in Alta Gracia, a town near Cordoba. Che went to Buenos Aires for medical school in 1948 and in 1950 took a break to embark on a 4,500 kilometer journey around the north of Argentina. The next year, in October, Che and his friend Alberto Granado come up with the idea to ride La Poderosa II, Alberto's motorbike, all the way to North America. Alberto is a biochemist interested in lepers and leprology, whereas Che is a young medical student with a budding interest in the topic. They begin their journey leaving Cordoba in December 1951 and meet Che's family for farewells in Buenos Aires. The book consists of notes written on their trip from December well into 1952.

Guevara is most famous for his role in the establishment of the communist dictatorship government of Fidel Castro in Cuba in 1956-58. He helped Castro to overthrow the authoritarian ruler of Cuba at the time, Batista. They eventually win, with Che as one of the commanders of the revolutionary forces. He then becomes a leader in the government but believes in spreading communist revolution across Latin America. He becomes well-known across the world for his advocacy on behalf of the world's poor and tries to start revolution in other countries. He visits to Soviet Union, China and many other communist countries. After he is killed in 1966 trying to start a communist revolution in Bolivia, Che becomes the stuff of legend; he is quickly elevated to a symbol of working class revolution, social and economic equality, and generally as a hero fighting for justice. The Motorcycle Diaries, while only sometimes touching on political topics, helped to create the romantic mystique that surrounds Che Guevara. He is a young man at the time, twenty-three and twenty-four, travelling the countryside, often observing the poverty of working class Latin Americans and coming to believe in a proletarian revolution that would eventually establish a Pan-Latin-American communist state. Here one sees the budding communist revolutionary in Che, whose ideas only begin to coalesce as he and Alberto travel throughout Argentina, Chile, Peru, Colombia and Venezuela before Che finishes his medical degree. The book contains many small entries arranged chronologically, as a diary is typically organized. It details his and Alberto's travels, their locations, where they stayed, what they ate, their mode of travel and their health, along with the occasional description of the countryside and characters they meet and the social implications of their observations.



Chapters 1 - 3

Chapters 1 - 3 Summary and Analysis

The Motorcycle Diaries is a collection of diary entries during Ernesto "Che" Guevara's motorcycle trip around South America in late 1951 and 1952 with his friend Alberto Granado. Each "chapter" is a diary entry, so the entries follow in triplets.

"So We Understand Each Other" outlines the purpose of The Motorcycle Diaries, illustrating the events of Che and Alberto's journey and many of the ideas that Che considered during his journey. Che writes that once he returned to his native Argentina after the trip, the person who wrote these diary entries died. The diaries record the thoughts of a real person.

"Forewarnings" introduces Che in Cordoba in October, 1951. He visits Alberto, drinking mate and fiddling with his motorcycle, La Poderosa II. Both Alberto and Che had quit their jobs. They decide to travel to North America now that they are unemployed. So they chase the necessary documentation.

"Discovery of the Ocean" describes the view of the sea at night. Alberto sees the Atlantic Ocean for the first time. They have Alberto's dog Comeback with them. They are in Villa Gesell with Che's uncle, driving their first 1,200 kilometers. Che's uncle had given them some food supplies. Che notes that the bike is hard to control.



Chapters 4 - 6

Chapters 4 - 6 Summary and Analysis

"Lovesick Pause" begins with Che and Alberto leaving Comeback in Miramar, at his new home. They start in Miramar several days longer than they had intended and spend a lot of time on the beach. Chichina, Alberto's girlfriend, gives Alberto her bracelet for his journey, so that he might remember her.

"Until the Last Tie is Broken" starts as Che and Alberto ride to Necochea to stay with a friend of Alberto's. The friend asks them why they have decided to go on such a long journey and they do not know. Che recalls visiting a friend who had joined the Peronist party in Argentina, which gave him privilege, but others joined the radicals, presumably communists. Che gets sick, which slows them down a day, and the bike continues to be hard to control. They have a crash because Che tries too hard to make up for lost time; rain causes them to have another crash as well.

"For the Flu, Bed" finds Che and Alberto tired from long driving. At night, they sleep at Choele Choele. The next morning Che discovers that he has the flu and vomits. He visits the doctor and the doctor gives them a room for the night. Che recovers quickly and they left. They camp in between towns in a tent and their bike frame breaks, but they fix it. They receive a meal from some people on the way and catch fish later. Alberto and Che arrive at San Martin de los Andes.



Chapters 7 - 9

Chapters 7 - 9 Summary and Analysis

"San Martin de Los Andes" snakes between the Andes Mountains near Lake Lacar and is a tourist haven. Che and Alberto stay overnight in a tool shed in the national park and buy some beef. Che believes that his destiny involves travel. They stay the day at the park and earn some money loading wood for a local barbecue. A lot of meat is left over and they are allowed to take it; Che steals a bottle of red wine by pretending to be drunk. It rains the next day, and before they resume riding, some of Alberto's friends arrive in a jeep and drink. They ride to Junin de los Andes with them.

"Circular Exploration" records their experience in Junin de los Andes, which is a more isolated place than their last location. The next day they fix La Poderosa, and Alberto's friends give them a wonderful dinner. Alberto and Che go mountain climbing and go for a swim. They receive their pay from Don Pendon and move on.

"Dear Mama" is a letter Che wrote to his mother; he reports the experiences of his trip briefly, and tells his mother that he received a "little-known drug, penicillin" when he fell ill. He notes that he diagnosed a tumor in a friend.



Chapters 10 - 12

Chapters 10 - 12 Summary and Analysis

"On the Seven Lakes Road" follows Che and Alberto to Bariloche by the Seven Lakes Road. They find a road laborer's hut to sleep in. Their trip the next day surrounds them with local forest. However, La Poderosa gets a flat, and while they are patching it up at a shed of an Austrian caretaker, a puma comes upon them. It leaps at them and Che shoots and kills it. But it turns out to be the Austrian couples' dog, Bobby, a nasty dog. They leave for San Carlos de Bariloche and spend the night in a police station.

"And now, I feel my great roots unearth, free and ..." opens with Che and Alberto in the police station during a storm. Che is reading a letter and is fascinated by its contents; the letter causes him to dream of moving to Mexico for a better life. They take a short water voyage onto the Modesta Victoria into Chile.

"Objects of Curiosity" finds Che and Alberto in the Modesta Victoria, keeping their bike from becoming water logged. They meet some doctors and discuss leprology with them. The doctors in Chile had not encountered leprosy in Chile because it was not a problem there. Che and Alberto meet some black Brazilian women briefly and meet a small man who wants a station wagon driven to Osorno, their next destination. Alberto teaches Che to make gear changes on the station wagon and he drives behind Alberto on the motorcycle. They reach Osorno and pass through, meeting friendly Chileans. The local newspaper in Valdivia writes an article about them.



Chapters 13 - 15

Chapters 13 - 15 Summary and Analysis

In "The Experts," Che notes that Chilean hospitality made travel there a delight. Che wakes up satisfied from the meal of the previous night. They had been able to repair the bike with the help of a man named Raul, who had given them a room for the night. Che notices the article written about them in a paper and is surprised that the article lauded their visit. They had been referred to as called "Leprosy Experts". They leave Temuco and head north.

In "The Difficulties Intensify," La Poderosa gets another flat tire; the spare had a hole as well. They repair their inner tubes at a railroad worker's house. They spend the next night at a park ranger's house. Afterwards, one of the bikes' steering columns breaks, as well as the gearbox. A car picks them up; the driver says he knew that they were the "scientists" from the paper. Alberto and Che solder the bike back together and they sleep in a local barracks. They dance briefly with a local woman.

"La Poderosa II's Final Tour" is the last gasp of La Poderosa. Che decides to bike but they had to fix the gearbox again. A tight curve causes them to lose a screw on the back brake and the hand brake breaks as well. They crash into two rocks after avoiding some cows but are unhurt. Some Germans house them. Che has diarrhea and lets it loose outside of the second story window. The next morning they discover the excrement on a sheet of tin where the Germans were drying some peaches, so they decide to run. The bike will still drive but the damage was serious and La Poderosa finally dies. A truck takes them to the house of a Chilean army lieutenant.



Chapter 16 - 18

Chapter 16 - 18 Summary and Analysis

"In Firefighters, Workers and Other Matters" the reader discovers that there are only volunteer fire-fighters in Chile. Leading a brigade is a sought-after honor. The days in the fire station brought many fires; Che and Alberto had been enticed to stay there by the fire station caretaker's three daughters. They watch a fire extinguished and Los Angeles says goodbye. "Little Che" (Alberto) and "Big Che" (Che) say goodbye and get into a truck with La Poderosa that will take them to Santiago. In Santiago, they leave La Poderosa at a shop to be repaired. They work to pay for their trip, and have some trouble gaining visas to enter Peru. La Poderosa is left in Santiago as Alberto and Che leave for Valparaiso.

"La Gioconda's Smile" leaves Alberto and Che as mere hitchhikers, finding rides across the country. They explore Valparaiso, seeing the terrain, climbing hills, visiting a museum, and so on. They consider a trip to Easter Island, but no boat is available. Alberto and Che stay in La Gioconda and wait for a friend. Che tends to the asthma and heart condition of an old woman; he finds the injustice of her suffering without aid unbearable and criticizes the class system. Che could do little for her. A woman Rosita reports a murder, but she appears to be exaggerating. Alberto and Che meet a Dr. Molinas Luco at the hospital; he was president of the Friends of Easter Island society; Che and Alberto wanted to visit the island. The two then arrange to sneak on a boat and convince a sailor to let them stay.

In "Stowaways," Che and Alberto hide on a boat known as the San Antonio. They have no toilet and the only usable one stinks. The heat causes Alberto to throw up. The two are caught but are allowed to stay on the boat, so long as they work. They do not get in trouble.



Chapters 17 - 19

Chapters 17 - 19 Summary and Analysis

"This Time, Disaster" confronts the reader with the drunk captain of the ship. After partying with the sailors, Alberto and Che get off the ship and leave for Chuquicamata, a copper mine. A small truck takes them to Baquedano and they make friends with a communist Chilean couple of workers. The couple had been persecuted for their beliefs; Che was upset by this and their poverty. To these people, communism merely meant "bread for the poor." The ideology filled them with hope. Alberto and Che travel to Chuquicamata and find that a miner's strike is imminent. Che is infuriated by the injustice the "Yankees" perpetrated on these poor workers and dreams of the day when the workers will revolt.

"Chuquicamata" has beauty without grace, according to Che. The town is mostly a large copper mountain surrounded by a mine. The workers mine and manufacture copper, one of Chile's main exports (twenty percent of the world supply). Nationalists and left-wing groups fight over whether the mines should be nationalized. Some want a free-market mine because it will be more efficient. Che notes the number of people who have died while mining.

"Arid Land for Miles and Miles" begins with Che and Alberto losing their water bottle, forcing them to cross the desert by foot. They weather the day under a sign and drink some water in a pack they brought with them. A night watchman houses them. The next day they lose more water but a truck of striking workers from Magdalena, a mine, come by and pick them up. They reach Iquique in another truck.



Chapters 20 - 22

Chapters 20 - 22 Summary and Analysis

In "The End of Chile" Alberto and Che continue to cross the desert. The conquistador Valdivia had journeyed the same path. They reach Arica, a small port town; they sleep in a hospital. The next day they bathe in the Pacific and head for the Peruvian border.

Che notes in "Chile, a Vision from Afar" that he would like to review his diary entries; this entry is written sometime after the journey. Che notes the inadequacy of health care in Chile; public hospitals are rare. Chile has a lower living standard than Argentina, with poorly paid workers in the south. Dead workers' families are rarely compensated. He discusses the election in Chile and the likely winner Carlos Ibanez del Campo, whose base is the Popular Socialist Front. Popular Front candidate Salvador Allende was supported by the communists but he won't win the presidency until after Che's death. Che expected Ibanez to win, fomenting hatred against the United States to gain support, nationalize the copper mines and railroads and increase trade with Argentina. Chile promises economic prosperity for all but the proletariat. The major struggle in Chile is to resist American control, but with the amount of American money invested there, this will be difficult.

"Tarata, the New World" brings Alberto and Che to the edge of Peru. They hitch a truck ride to Tarata but have to pay a small fee. Next they leave the truck to camp and are very cold; they gain rooms and aid by letting it be known that they hail from Argentina, the home of Peron and Evita. The next day they continue to travel in another truck until they reach Estaque and run into Peruvian Indians. Che describes the landscape. The people in town, however, do not match the glory of the landscape; they are a "defeated race."



Chapters 23 - 25

Chapters 23 - 25 Summary and Analysis

"In the Dominions of Pachamama" continues Alberto and Che's stay with the Peruvian police. They find a truck heading for Ilave; the wind lashes them as they climb up the mountain and the truck later has carburetor trouble. The Indians find them strange and ask them about the riches of the "land of Peron." Alberto and Che regale them with embellished stories. They stop briefly to talk with a schoolteacher, who teaches them some Indian rituals devoted to Pachamama, or Mother Earth. The man argues for revolutionary changes in education.

"Lake of the Sun" brings Alberto and Che to Puno, without them having to stop in Ilave; they find local lodging but are kicked out. They explore a lake and then take a truck to Cuzco to meet Dr. Hermosa, an ex-leprologist.

"Toward the Navel of the World" leaves Che and Alberto in Juliaca to stay in another police station. After an odd encounter with a drunken sergeant, they find another truck to travel in. On the way, they chew on some coca leaves which make them feel better; when they reach Sicuani, they encounter a funeral procession.



Chapters 26 - 28

Chapters 26 - 28 Summary and Analysis

"The Navel" brings Alberto and Che to Cuzco. The Incas once resided here and the conquistadors did as well. Cuzco was once the center of the Incan Empire. Its terrain and many ruins are beautiful, but there is another Cuzco which is a bustling city, and another which is a picturesque town littered with small buildings and churches.

"The Land of the Incas" informs the reader that Cuzco is surrounded by mountains, which the Incas used for defense of their fortress, Sacsahuaman. Che discusses some Incan history; the ruins remain to symbolize Incan power, however. The ruins also represent the power of whites that destroyed the Incas for their gold. Che and Alberto trace the Vilcanota River and Che recounts further events and Incan structures along the way. Further, in Cuzco, social classes are separated.

"Our Lord of the Earthquakes" follows from the cathedral, Our Lord of the Earthquakes, with its bell, the Maria Angola. It had been built during a restoration of cathedrals after an earthquake. Che and Alberto note a pilgrimage the cathedral bishop makes around town. But the procession appears to be a pagan festival.



Chapters 29 - 31

Chapters 29 - 31 Summary and Analysis

"Homeland for the Victor" continues to comment on the former capital of the Inca Empire, but Cuzco no longer holds the title "Navel of the World" as it once did. The Indians have lost their identities, their language, and the capital of Peru is now Lima. The cathedral in the center of the city is beautiful. Che notes that Catholicism has been fused with the "enigmatic" soul of the true Andean peoples. He suggests that people visit the Basilica of San Blas.

"Cuzco Straight" continues the Cuzco commentary. Alberto and Che live there for two weeks and continued to live as hobos. They are able to meet with Dr. Hermosa; he knew Dr. Fernandez, who Alberto had worked with. He takes them on a tour of the Valley of the Incas and finds them train tickets to Machu Picchu. On the train, they meet some Chilean swindlers; when they reached the ruins, they play some football. They come home, but find the third-class coaches reserved for the local Indians depressing. The archaeological museum in Cuzco is pretty poor.

In "Huambo," Che and Alberto run out of rooms to stay in. They are forced to stop in Abancay before going to Huancarama. They hitch a ride and wander around a little village during Easter. They get lost on their way back to the police station, and then see a local church ceremony. Che and Alberto ask the mayor to borrow some horses to visit the leper colony. They reach the leper colony and meet the head of the clinic, Senor Montejo, who sends them to a rancher's house to sleep. Thirty-one people there were condemned to die of leprosy. A newer leper colony can house 250 lepers but has fewer facilities. They return to Cuzco and find a truck to take them North to Andahuaylas. Che goes to the hospital to recover from a sickness.



Chapters 32 - 34

Chapters 32 - 34 Summary and Analysis

Che stays in the hospital for two days and then in "Ever Northward" he and Alberto find themselves practically broke. They need food but don't want to work until they get to Lima. Alberto and Che end up staying in Andahuaylas for five days. They have to leave; Alberto had yelled at some Civil Guard soldiers for preventing an Indian woman from bringing her husband food in jail; this had upset the guards. Alberto and Che take a truck north, spending a night in Chincheros and arrive in Ayacucho the next day. They find room with a gentleman that loved to entertain, and the next day they leave for Lima.

"Through the Center of Peru" takes Alberto and Che through the middle of Peru; they continue to be hungry, as they had no food. The hospitality of the locals helps them some. They get a meal in Huancallo and get some more food, next travelling to Oxapampa. Many services and goods cost them the little money they have left.

A friend of theirs in Argentina had told them that his mother lived in Oxapampa, but he was wrong. Only his brother-in-law lives there. In "Shattered Hopes" they discover this. They have a great day and a nice meal, leaving in the wee hours of the morning for San Ramon. Che explains a technique he and Alberto use to get free food and drink. It usually works. Alberto gets sick and they go to a local hospital; a doctor they meet buys them a meal. Next they catch a truck to Lima, which resulted in a dangerous ride. They cross the mountains at over 4,000 meters and are freezing. They spend the night outside of Lima and enter the next day.



Chapters 35 - 37

Chapters 35 - 37 Summary and Analysis

They enter Lima in "The City of the Viceroy." Lima is beautiful but not as much as it is said to be. The city center has a wonderful cathedral though. Lima has remnants of its colonial past, however, and "still waits for the blood of a truly emancipating revolution." Alberto and Che meet Dr. Hugo Pesce, an expert leprologist, and they have a great conversation. He houses them as well. The next day they visit the port and a museum, along with the leprosy hospital. On Sunday, Alberto and Che see their first bullfight. They stay several days, two days longer than they intended, and so spend much of their time touring the city.

Alberto and Che leave Lima and face mechanical trouble in the truck they were riding in. The next day, May 20th, Alberto notes that they have been gone for six months; they get drunk to celebrate. The rest of the chapter describes the rest of the journey towards Iquitos.

In "Down the Ucayali" Che and Alberto board a boat to San Pablo. Alberto wins some money in a card game, and the two have few opportunities for conversation. They do make friends with a girl who seems easy, however. Alberto and Che must deal with a huge number of mosquitoes, along with Che's asthma. The boat ride lasted for four days and is very boring and difficult. Che's asthma slowly gets worse until their arrival in Iquitos; Che spends the next day in bed and follows a stricter diet. Che and Alberto board a boat the next day and arrive in San Pablo. The night passes in the room of the colony's medical director, Dr. Brescianini.

"Dear Papi" is a letter Che wrote to his father from Iquitos on June 4th, 1952. He describes the terrain and the disorders he encounters. The food there is poor and he and Alberto are looking to fly to Bogota. Che notes his increasing interest in leprology. He tells his father about their trip to the ruins.



Chapter 38 - 40

Chapter 38 - 40 Summary and Analysis

In "The San Pablo Leper Colony" Alberto and Che visit Sister Alberto, the administrator of the colony. They send their clothes to be washed on Monday and meet six hundred sick people living in the colony in jungle huts. Dr. Bresciani, the lead doctor, commands great respect. On Tuesday, Alberto and Che tour the colony with him and follow the doctor on his rounds. The colony has poor living conditions.

"Saint Guevera's Day" opens with Che's birthday, on June 14th, 1952, when he turned twenty four. He fishes and eats a meal at Dr. Bresciani's house. They drink Pisco, a Peruvian national drink. Che replies to a toast with a plea for a united Latin America. On Sunday, Che and Alberto visit a tribe of Indians known as the Yaguas. They play football that evening and Alberto awakes in the night with some stomach pain. On Tuesday, Alberto has recovered. Che swims across the Amazon. They waste Wednesday, as it rained. On Friday, they left on their raft, the Mambo-Tango.

"Debut for the Little Kontiki" finds Alberto and Che on their raft, fending off mosquitoes. They arrive at Leticia but have trouble directing the raft to the river bank; they miss their stopping point and must move forward to Manaus, perhaps ten days' journey. They are in Brazil with no papers and they cannot speak the language. Luckily, in the morning they awake to find their raft on the riverbank.



Chapters 41 - 45

Chapters 41 - 45 Summary and Analysis

"Dear Mama" is the second letter Che writes to his mother. He notes that he is close to Venezuela and poorer. He wishes her a happy birthday on July 6th, 1952 from Botoga in Colombia. He mentions their stay at the leper colony, the Pisco, his toast and the trip to Colombia on the raft. They had various troubles with the raft, but survived them and often caught great fish. Once they arrive in Leticia, they take a plane to Bogota. They spend their first day in Bogota finding food and room. They find a place in the hospital. They meet Dr. Pesce and Alberto and Che are both offered jobs. Che rejects the offer. He notes the great repression of individual freedom there, harassment from the police, and he sees a revolution coming. Che and Alberto want to leave soon for Caracas, Venezuela.

"On the road to Caracas" finds Che and Alberto having passport trouble. They leave for Caracas on July 14th and are harassed by a Venezuelan soldier and customs official. They are detained for some time but are eventually let through. Che and Alberto travel to San Cristobal, and they fight with the transport company officials. Eventually, travelling economically and in tight quarters, they arrive in Caracas. Che falls into a bed they rented and sleeps.

In "This Strange Twentieth Century" Che survives an asthma attack and is happy to have a French inhaler. He misses Alberto, who has left. Che is well looked after, has food, and is excited to continue his studies in Miami. He notes the squabbling between the two oppressed races of the blacks and the Portuguese. He observes some people in town and interacts with the locals.

"A Note in the Margin" is not really an entry so much as a description of meeting a strange man in the darkness. He is an interesting character, having escaped Europe and "dogmatism." The strange man goes on a rant. He argues that one day the workers will revolt and take power. The people need to be educated for this massive strike and the strike will be bloody when it comes. Then he departs; Che sees himself as inspired by this bloody vision of revolution and fighting to the death for justice.

The final chapter "Appendix: Speech to Medical Students" is known as "A Child of My Environment." Eight years after the book is written, Che has become a leader of the revolutionary government in Cuba. After splitting with Granado, he traveled back through Latin American and saw a CIA-backed coup in Guatemala, which radicalized him. Che describes himself as wanting to help the poor and suffering, as a medical student and as a revolutionary. He describes the coup he witnesses and realized that revolution requires an organized poor worker class.

Che points out that after the revolution, a new type of human must be created, but not one that is totally disconnected from what came before. Things are different in Cuba.



The poor, hungry children of yesterday are being taught to read in public schools and are being fed revolutionary ideology to continue what Che and Fidel Castro have accomplished. Doctors must be integrated into the revolutionary movement as well because they are required to help everyone. Humanity needs a new "social" medicine and to focus the public on public health maintenance obligations for the collective will. Despite criticism, collectivism is meant to liberate the development of the individual. But the revolution "directs" this capacity for growth.

Capitalism is dying and communist science moves forward. Latin American liberation is coming, and a new individualism will bring about the common good. This is going on in Cuba. And the doctors help to bring it about. Che recounts one day when some medical students demanded extra pay to go out to the countryside and help peasants; Che says he understood, but that the peasants would not have batted an eye and this is what it means to be honorable. Further, a revolutionary people must always act out of solidarity, not charity, which is demeaning. The doctor must identify with all; he must also be a farmer, a teacher and a politician. The Cuban people must also unite against their common enemy, the United States of America.



Characters

Ernesto

Che Guevara is the main character of the Motorcycle Diaries. These diaries are Che's diary entries during his 1951-1952 trip with his friend Alberto Granado across Latin America, from Cordoba, Buenos Aires to Caracas, where Che leaves for Miami to finish medical school. In 1953, Che will become a radicalized communist and will in 1956-58 become a leader of the communist revolution in Cuba. Between this event and 1966, when Che was killed, he became a legendary freedom-fighter on the global left. The Motorcycle Diaries helped to add to his mystique.

The "Che" of the Motorcycle Diaries is not the Che of the Cuban Revolution, as Che notes early on in the book. This was a pre-revolutionary Che, a boy of twenty-three and twenty-four, looking for adventure and beauty on the road in Latin America. In the book, Che is a risk-taker, and a bit of a hooligan graduate student. He and Alberto live the life of hobos and sometimes steal. Other times, they cause the kind of trouble that one would expect from two headstrong twenty-something college students. Che also has an early and not well-formed but developing social conscience. When he sees the suffering of Latin American workers, particularly among the Latin American indigenous populations, he often laments the injustice done to them and hopes that one day they will be free. He even occasionally appears friendly to revolt, which foreshadows his later revolutionary activities.

Alberto Granado

Alberto Granado was born on August 8th, 1922 in Cordoba, the same city as Che. He was an Argentine biochemistry student, whose younger siblings were friends with Che. They later become friends and eventually decide to take a trip around Latin America together on Alberto's motorbike, La Poderosa II. Alberto had been involved in political protests long before Che became too terribly political. In 1943, he protested Peron and spent a year in jail. He later earned his master's degree in biochemistry. Granado was concerned with the causes and cure of leprosy, and so Che and Granado spend much of their time touring leper colonies, observing their conditions and talking with local doctors about how leprosy functions, the types of leprosy, etc. In general, Alberto has a calmer demeanor than Che, and is less youthful. He teaches Che how to ride and operate La Poderosa and helps Che to develop an interest in leprology. This does not come out directly in the book, but Alberto already has a fairly well-developed social conscience, which is illustrated when Alberto yells at some local civil guardsmen who prevent a woman from bringing some food to her husband in jail. In general, one does not hear much from Che about Alberto's personality. He was grateful for his friendship with Alberto and all the help that Alberto gave him health-wise, intellectually, and on the road. But all in all, Alberto seems to be a kind, socially-conscious, relatively level-headed scientific man who had Che Guevara as his best friend.



Fidel Castro

The communist dictator of Cuba that Che eventually allied himself with after *The Motorcycle Diaries* was written. *The Motorcycle Diaries*, however, help to make sense of Che's participation with Castro in overthrowing Batista and establishing a communist government.

Hilda Gadea

The first wife of Che Guevara.

Hildita Guevara

Che and Hilda's daughter.

Salvador Allende

The democratically elected president of Chile who was replaced by Pinochet in 1970, but he ran for the presidency in 1952. He was not expected to win at the time. But his mention foreshadows the future revolution that Che would be involved in.

Lepers

Alberto had a great interest in lepers, so Che and Alberto spend a great deal of time in the book at leper colonies throughout Latin America.

Doctors

Che is a medical student during *The Motorcycle Diaries* and Alberto is studying biochemistry and has an interest in lepers, so they speak with many doctors throughout their travels.

Chileans

Che goes out of his way to praise the Chilean people for their unusual hospitality.

Peruvian Indians

The Indians in Peru are descendants of the Incas and are an underclass in Peru. Che sympathizes with their plight.



Objects/Places

Argentina

The country of Che and Alberto's birth and youth.

Cordoba

The city in Argentina where Che and Alberto grow up and meet.

Buenos Aires

The capital of Argentina where many of Che's family members live.

Chile

The second country on Alberto and Che's journey. The Chilean people are widely respected as helpful and hospitable to a fault.

Santiago

The capital of Chile, Santiago is one of the stops on Alberto and Che's journey.

Peru

The third country on Che and Alberto's journey. Peru is a hilly country, containing the Andes Mountains. Passing through is difficult.

Lima

The capital of Peru and a destination on Che and Alberto's trip.

Cuzco

The ancient seat of the Incan Empire once known as "the navel of the earth." In Che's day, the city contains beautiful ruins and is still a wonderful place, retaining shadows of its former glory.



Colombia

The fourth country on Che and Alberto's trip.

Bogota

The capital of Colombia and a stop on their journey.

Venezuela

The final country on Che and Alberto's trip together. Passage into Venezuela was difficult.

Caracas

The capital of Venezuela, where Che leaves for Miami.

Miami

The American city in the state of Florida where Che studies medicine.

La Poderosa II

Alberto's bike, which he and Che traveled on until it broke down. La Poderosa was unreliable.

Water

Water was at times in short supply on Alberto and Che's journey.

Food

Alberto and Che had varying amounts of food on their trip. At times, they are very hungry and must use tricks to get food.

Motorcycle Parts

La Poderosa often needed repairs, and motorcycle parts were required as a result.



Illness

Alberto and Che both become ill at various points throughout the book, but they quickly recover every time.

Mate

A popular South American drink that plays a role in the book.



Themes

Adventure

When Che and Alberto leave Cordoba on their trip, Che is only twenty-three years old. He turns twenty-four during the trip. Alberto is closer to thirty, but they are both still young at heart. They went out on their trip on a whim, driven to see the countryside. They take significant risks, riding a motorcycle that continually breaks down, traveling alone in the mountains, hitchhiking across the country, traveling on a raft that they built, and even crossing the Andean desert with inadequate supplies of water. Sometimes Che and Alberto steal supplies and food. Other times, they use certain subtle cons to receive free food, room and housing. They live as hobos, with few funds, and make their way through Latin America by working for the money they need to get to the next town. When *The Motorcycle Diaries* is described as a political book, something is left out. Che and Alberto did not embark on their trip originally in order to learn about the conditions of the Latin American proletariat. While Alberto had an interest in visiting some leper colonies due to his scholarly interests, their goal was more or less to simply travel to North America on *La Poderosa II*. The allure of adventure, their mode of life, their lack of preparation, all of it can be largely attributed to their desire for an open-ended adventure. In many ways, Che and Alberto's trip is like American and European college graduates backpacking across Europe; they did it for fun, for the memories and the excitement of living day to day.

Social Justice

The Motorcycle Diaries are the writings of a young man, a man that the later Che claims he no longer is. The man of *The Motorcycle Diaries*, Che later claims, existed only for those six months of time. Che later becomes a Cuban revolutionary, interested in spreading his Marxist conception of social justice across Latin America. But perhaps Che exaggerates, for there is a theme of social justice running throughout *The Motorcycle Diaries*. From time to time, Che and Alberto will encounter people in extreme poverty. In Chile, the major export is copper. Chile produced twenty percent of the world's copper at that time. The copper mines are owned by Americans and Germans, and they do not treat their workers well. When Che encounters these miners, he dreams of revolution for them, so that they might receive better treatment. And when Che encounters the Peruvian Indians, descendants of the ancient Incas, he laments the fact that they exist as an underclass, treated terribly by the social and racial classes above them. Alberto even erupts at some guards for not letting a poor Indian woman bring her husband some food in jail.

Throughout the book, Che often describes the political circumstances in the countries they travel in. The fall of 1952 will bring elections in Chile, and Che senses that Colombia is about to erupt into revolution. Towards the end of the book, Che begins to dream of a violent, bloody revolution where revolutionary communists fight to the death

for social justice and win by conquering their former masters; thus, the theme of social justice takes a distinctively revolutionary Marxist turn at the end. This is no more prominent than when Che meets a communist man and speaks with him and ideology in the last chapter before the appendix.

Travel and the Love of Latin America

One of the most obvious themes of *The Motorcycle Diaries* is travel. Many, including the author of the introduction, see the *Motorcycle Diaries* as a primarily political book. But what comes through to the reader throughout most of the diary entries are descriptions of where Che and Alberto went, when they went there, how the travel felt, and the difficulties faced when traveling. The reader will find detailed descriptions of the character of various Latin American cities, particularly those in which Che and Alberto stay for more than a few days. Che also describes the different types of people that he and Alberto meet, the type of terrain travelled, the weather, and so on. Their journey begins in Cordoba, their current home, and they next travel to Buenos Aires to see family. They then cross the south of Latin American, through Argentina to Chile and travel up the Chilean coastline, occasionally taking boats. In Buenos Aires, Che describes the beauty of the Atlantic Ocean and he describes the friendliness and hospitality of the Chilean people in detail. The journey to North Chile takes them through desert, and Peru confronts them with the Andes. Che engages in a detailed description of Cuzco, the former imperial city of the Incan empire, and he describes the ruins there in detail. He writes about the Peruvian Indians, their travel, their trip from Peru to Colombia on a raft and their entry into Venezuela. Throughout the book, Che describes scenes, weather and so on, finding many of his experience breathtaking. This breeds a love for Latin America within him and ultimately leads him to believe in Pan-Latin-Americanism, or the unity of the Latin American peoples.



Style

Perspective

The perspective of the book is that of its author, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. However, two Ches pervade the book. First, the young Che, the twenty-three and twenty-four year old Argentine medical student, who writes the diary, speaks. He is the primary voice in the book. The young Che is full of energy and has a strong appetite for adventure. He is rowdy and a risk-taker, but he is also a careful writer, observer and a lover of nature. Because of his interests in medicine, he begins to share Alberto's interest in lepers and describes the people in and conditions of the leper colonies they visit in detail. The young Che drew some of his political influences from Alberto, who was imprisoned for a year for protesting the Peronist government in the late forties. Alberto was a leftist and Che became one too. He seems to have influences of Marxism in his mind already. He sometimes speaks of the Latin American 'proletariat', meaning the working classes. He also believes in the unity of all Latin American peoples, a cosmopolitanism common among Marxists. Further, he decries poverty and believes that violent revolution is ultimately the best solution to the proletariat's problems. However, there is also the influence of the older Che, for he compiled the book, and tells us more about his influences and thoughts at the time. Further, he ordered the book in a particular fashion in order for it to illustrate - at least towards the very end - his evolution into a revolutionary. The older Che also provides commentary on the sort of person he was when *The Motorcycle Diaries* was written, claiming that he is not the same person as the main character in the book.

Tone

The tone of *The Motorcycle Diaries* is that of a smart college student with a growing social conscience but who is largely interested in having fun, getting drunk, finding adventure and young women. In many ways, the tone of the diaries is rather dry. It describes Che and Alberto's travels and the struggles they have along the way. However, often Che breaks out into beautiful prose describing the countryside, the ocean, or the details of a city, or its history. He also sometimes breaks out into a description of the injustice of the circumstances of many of the Latin American working poor. In particular, he decries the treatment of Chilean copper miners and Peruvian Indians. But contrary to public perceptions of the book, these are relatively minor sections of the book as a whole.

Most of the book is a frank description of Che and Alberto acting like typical young men on a cross-country journey - risk-taking, thrill-seeking, flying-by-the-seat-of-their-pants and living day-to-day with little thought of the future. This gives the tone of the book and upbeat, chipper, optimistic feel. Che seems to have not a care in the world, save for the occasional bout of concern for the working classes. Yet these almost come off as feigned, given how quickly Che returns to describing the great time he and Alberto were

having. The book is rarely tense, the reader is rarely anxious; instead, the reader follows Che and Alberto on a wonderful six-month trek throughout Latin America with some beautiful encounters and many good times.

Structure

The Motorcycle Diaries is simply a diary with a preface, introduction, a few letters, some notes, and an appendix interspersed. As such, it does not have chapters proper. It only has small, several page entries. The Motorcycle Diaries has nearly forty-five of these short entries. They typically describe a day of travel, or two days. They sometimes list what Alberto and Che ate, where they slept, who housed them, how they traveled, who they traveled with, the characters they met, their physical and mental condition, the recreation they engaged in and a description of the local scenery. Each entry also describes where they've come from and where they will go next. However, the diary entries are not formulaic and are drawn together in clear prose. As a result, The Motorcycle Diaries reads like a novel, with the entries in quick succession. But, unlike a novel, it does not have an overarching plot to speak of; while the main event of the book is their trip, there is no central conflict in the book. However, the characters do seem to grow somewhat during the trip, though this element is rarely emphasized. Che intersperses two letters he wrote to his mother and one he wrote to his father during this time. At the end of the diaries, we read some notes left in the margins recording a conversation Che had with a communist which inspired him to become more political. And the end of the book contains an appendix which records a speech that Che gave to some Cuban medical students. The speech gives us the mature Che, the communist revolutionary Che who argues that all aspects of society must be subsumed under the pursuit of the common good through (often violent) revolution. It is an abrupt shift in emphasis presumably placed there to show what the Che of The Motorcycle Diaries would become. The book also includes a helpful brief biography of Che, a map of Che and Alberto's journey along with a timeline.

Quotes

"But I'll leave you now, with myself, the man I used to be . . ." p. 32

"The full moon is silhouetted against the sea, smothering the waves with silver reflections." p. 34

"Hey kid, che, don't push Don Pendon too far, he'll get angry." p. 46

"We set off along a magnificent mountain road, the most beautiful civilization could offer compared to the real natural wonders ... in a truck bearing the heavy weight of us freeloaders." p. 67

"It is at times like this, when a doctor is conscious of his complete powerlessness, that he longs for change: a change to prevent the injustice of a system in which only a month ago this poor woman was still earning her living as a waitress, wheezing and panting but facing life with dignity." p. 70

"It is there, in the final moments, for people whose farthest horizon has always been tomorrow, that one comprehends the profound tragedy circumscribing the life of the proletariat the world over." p. 70

"The couple, numb with cold, huddling against each other in the desert night, were a living representation of the proletariat in any part of the world." p. 77

"He belonged to that special class of men the species produces every so often, in whom a craving for limitless power is so extreme that any suffering to achieve it seems natural, and he had become the omnipotent ruler of a warrior nation." p. 85

"Cuzco is not a city to visit for this or that painting. Rather, it's the whole of the city together which creates the impression of the peaceful, if sometimes disquieting, center of a civilization that has long since passed." p. 115

"With a shrug of his shoulders, into which he poured the whole spirit of his race, he said, 'Why, when all it'll ever see is shit.'" p. 125

"Lima is the perfect example of a Peru which has not developed beyond the feudal condition of a colony. It still waits for the blood of a truly emancipating revolution." p. 134

"Is all of this worth it?" p. 142

"And so, in an attempt to rid myself of the weight of small-minded provincialism, I proposed a toast to Peru and to a United Latin America." p. 149

"The atmosphere is tense and it seems a revolution may be brewing." p. 157



"And I see, as if a great exhaustion smothers this fresh exaltation, I see myself, immolated in the genuine revolution, the great equalizer of individual will, proclaiming the ultimate mea culpa. I feel my nostrils dilate, savoring the acrid smell of gunpowder and blood, the enemy's death; I steel my body, ready to do battle, and prepare myself to be a sacred space within which the bestial howl of the triumphant proletariat can resound with new energy and new hope." p. 165

"And let us then march toward the future of Cuba." p. 175



Topics for Discussion

Why do you think Alberto and Che decided to travel across Latin America despite Che claiming that he doesn't know the reason?

What do you think Che enjoyed most about the trip?

What is the significance of leprosy in the story?

To what extent do you think *The Motorcycle Diaries* is about social justice? Please defend your answer.

Do you think the older Che is right to claim that the Che of *The Motorcycle Diaries* is wholly different from the man he became?

Do you think Che has any political principles in *The Motorcycle Diaries*? If so, what are they? What do you think they mean? If not, explain why not.

What was the significance of Cuzco to Che?

Why did Che and Alberto bother to ride *La Poderosa II* when they knew it was unreliable?

What lesson did Che draw from his interactions with the Chilean copper miners and the Peruvian Indians?