Deep Down Dark
The Untold Stories of 33 Men Buried in a Chilean Mine, and the Miracle That Set Them Free
by Héctor Tobar

In her Musing blog, the award-winning author Ann Patchett described why Deep Down Dark was the best book she read in 2014, leading her to choose it as the first book club selection for NPR’s Morning Edition. “It is a masterpiece of compassion,” she wrote. “You know the story—33 men were buried in a spectacular mine collapse, stayed underground for two months, and then were rescued, all of them unharmed. But how do you write that book? We know what happens in the end . . . and yet . . . Tobar makes the story riveting. He puts us down there with those men. He examines all the big questions: the value of life, faith, hope, despair, and resurrection.”

Indeed, for Deep Down Dark, the Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Héctor Tobar received exclusive access to the miners and their tales, crafting a haunting masterwork from their surreal experiences and from his intensive research on the extraordinary rescue mission. When the San José Mine outside of Copiapó, Chile, collapsed, on August 5, 2010, it trapped the miners beneath thousands of feet of rock for a record-breaking sixty-nine days. The entire world watched, but until the publication of Deep Down Dark, did not have access to the full story. Even while still buried, the miners all agreed that if by some miracle any of them escaped alive, they would share their story only collectively. Héctor Tobar was the person they chose to hear that story.

Deep Down Dark is a stirring portrait of human lives stretched to their physical and spiritual limits. We hope that the following guide will enrich your exploration of this powerful meditation on determination and destiny.
QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The prologue to Deep Down Dark describes the incredibly long commutes made by employees to reach the remote San José Mine. No local jobs paid as well, so the pay was an incentive for miners such as Franklin Lobos, signing on at age fifty-two to help pay his daughter’s college tuition. Jessica Chilla refused to kiss Darío Segovia goodbye on the morning of August 5 because he chose the high pay despite the dangers, and because the job would cause them to postpone their daughter’s birthday party. What risks and personal sacrifices would you be willing to endure for a high wage?

2. Carlos Pinilla, the general manager of the San Esteban Mining Company, had a mandate from the owners to cut costs but keep the mine running, despite government threats of shutdown in 2007 in the wake of a deadly accident. Yet the mine continued to operate without key safety features, such as ladders in the vertical escape tunnels. Manuel Gonzáles, the first rescuer to reach the miners, was shocked by the primitive gear San Estaban had issued its workers. How would you have handled Pinilla’s dilemma?

3. What new information did you gain about those sixty-nine days of survival? What details did Deep Down Dark provide that were absent from the 2010 media blitz?

4. Discuss the many types of hunger described in the book, starting of course with hunger for food. Would you have been a food-box looter, or would you have complied with Mario Sepúlveda’s calculations? What did you learn about the physiology of starvation, and the dangerous process of refueling an emaciated body? What other cravings did the miners face, deprived of power, their families, and a way out? What would your coping strategies have been?

5. As their bodies became diminished, what happened to the miners’ approach to spirituality and mortality (the focus of chapter 15, “Saints, Statues, Satan”)? How did tangible objects—culminating in the arrival of a carved Virgin Mary—enhance their prayers?

6. The closing line of chapter 9, “Cavern of Dreams,” is a quote from José Henríquez, the informal pastor, after the pipe and drill bit broke through: “‘Dios existe,’ he says. God exists.” Do you attribute the rescue to human ingenuity, divine intervention, or a combination of the two? What is your definition of a miracle?

7. Discuss the women’s perspectives, especially focusing on chapter 3, “The Dinner Hour,” and the tent city of Camp Esperanza, where María Segovia (sister of Darío) became the unofficial mayor? As Ariel Ticona watches a video of his daughter’s birth, what new point of view does he gain regarding his wife?

8. Throughout the central chapters, we watch the process of “mining” for men, as the world’s leading drillers (Jeff Hart in particular) are called in to break through the earth. Deep Down Dark also describes the process of extracting gold and copper at the San José Mine. How did the book affect
your view of humankind versus nature? How did the drilling images compare to the image of Edison Peña running through the tunnels of the mine?

9. Discuss the political power struggles over who would become the face of the rescue (especially President Sebastián Piñera versus the minister of mining, Laurence Golborne). How did the psychologist Alberto Iturra handle the limitations of his power? How did the miners manage the question of leadership throughout their ordeal, eventually delegating duties (including nursing and communications)?

10. The rescue is a triumph of many elements, especially engineering and global cooperation. The book introduces us to experts from NASA, the military, the mining industry, and other sectors, hailing from Kansas, South Africa, Austria, Italy, and other corners of the globe, culminating in the safe dispatch of the Félix. The miners themselves demonstrated tremendous skill and ingenuity. What would it take to harness that level of visionary cooperation for other global crises?

11. From the millionaire Leonardo Farkas’s fund to the miners’ decision to form Propiedad Intelectual Minera, S.A. (Miner Intellectual Property, Inc.), how has the miners’ financial well-being been dealt with? Did it surprise you that not all of the miners accepted pensions?

12. In the aftermath of the rescue, some of the men return to mining, despite terrifying flashbacks. Víctor Zamora, who was difficult for the author to track down, was once homeless and, for a time, returns to a broken and destitute life. Edison Peña battles alcoholism. Others celebrate fatherhood, while still others focus on capitalizing on their experience. What determines whether survivors can find meaning in their lives, sustained by hope?

13. How did the miners retain their individuality while they were trapped? Which of their personal stories resonated with you the most?

14. How does Deep Down Dark enhance the images of humanity that Héctor Tobar has presented in his previous books (Translation Nation and the novels The Barbarian Nurseries and The Tattooed Soldier)? How did his training as a journalist and a novelist—combined with his roots in Central America—prepare him to capture the miners’ stories?

PRAISE FOR DEEP DOWN DARK

“Weaving together the drama of the miners’ harrowing ordeal belowground with the anguish of families and rescuers on the surface, Tobar delivers a masterful account of exile and human longing, of triumph in the face of all odds. Taut with suspense and moments of tenderness and replete with a cast of unforgettable characters, Deep Down Dark ranks with the best of adventure literature.”
—Scott Wallace, Los Angeles Times
“A riveting account of a remarkable disaster.” —Larry Getlen, New York Post

“[A] chiseled, brooding new book . . . As Tobar works his way through each miner’s recovery, the TV headlines recede from our memory, and a more delicate series of portraits emerges.” —Noah Gallagher Shannon, The Washington Post

“An account that brims with emotion and strength.” —Ray Locker, USA Today

“Tobar plunges the reader into this world of uncertainty with visceral, present-tense prose and careful pacing . . . Whether the story is completely new to you, or if you were one of the millions glued to the news reports and wondering, will they make it—physically, emotionally, spiritually—you’ll be greatly rewarded to learn how they did.” —Mac McClelland, The New York Times Book Review

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Héctor Tobar is a Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist and a novelist. He is the author of The Barbarian Nurseries, Translation Nation, and The Tattooed Soldier. The son of Guatemalan immigrants, he is a native of the city of Los Angeles, where he lives with his wife and three children. For more information, visit www.hectortobar.com.

Guide written by Amy Clements