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The Suicide Museum: A Novel

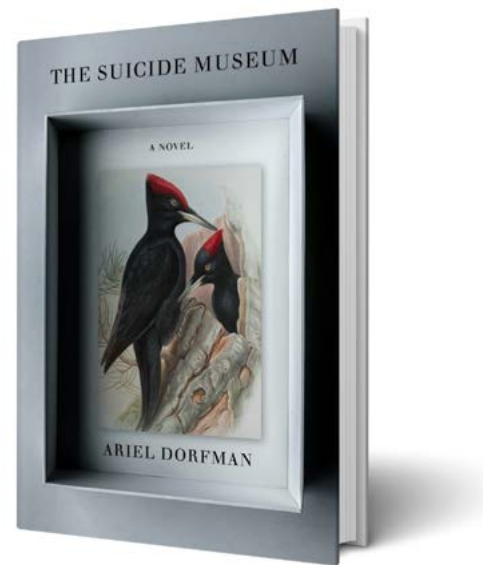
Author Ariel Dorfman

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Reviewed By *Graham Alexander*

The reviewer is a CIA operations officer, writing in penname.



Chilean-American author Ariel Dorfman's semi-autobiographical novel, *The Suicide Museum*, is a curious work—one in which the boundaries between fiction and reality are not always apparent. Dorfman presents a seemingly first-person account of his investigation into the death of Chilean President Salvador Allende in September 1973 after a military-led coup (see box, next page). The book is difficult to categorize in other ways, too. *The Suicide Museum* is part political treatise, detective thriller, and biography with elements of espionage and historical fiction baked alongside for variety. Dorfman's habit of dwelling on certain themes and indulging in long digressions will occasionally test the patience of even committed readers. Still, his ability to craft highly readable prose in a story that is nothing if not original

makes *The Suicide Museum* worthwhile for connoisseurs of the Cold War and the circumstances surrounding Allende's ouster and death.

The Suicide Museum traces Dorfman's quest, commissioned by a fictional Dutch billionaire, to learn authoritatively how Allende died at the La Moneda Palace in Santiago, Chile, after military forces led by Augusto Pinochet staged a US-approved coup against him on September 11, 1973. This quest, however, does not follow a traditional arc in which the main characters enter stage right and the suspense builds toward climax and reveal. Dorfman dwells instead on meetings with his financial sponsor Joseph Hortha, Dorfman's wife and children, and even famous rock stars.

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The reader is also treated to long passages regarding Dorfman's and Hortha's views on religion, death, the environment, and especially Salvador Allende. Dorfman frames Allende throughout *The Suicide Museum* as a kind of demigod who was destined to lead Chile into a vaguely defined state of political paradise if only malicious plotters had not foiled him. Dorfman does not mention that Allende won the presidency with roughly 36 percent of the vote in 1970, that he was hardly the paragon of morality in his private life, that he was working in cooperation with Cuban and Soviet intelligence to install a socialist system, and that Chile's economy collapsed under his administration. This is understandable, at least in an artistic and literary sense, because Allende is less a character than a symbol of the unrealized, still-beckoning left-wing political program toward which Dorfman, Hortha, and every other major character aspire. Unquestionably, however, those interested in a more evenhanded examination of Allende and Chile's history will be better served by other sources.

Dorfman's winding, nearly unpredictable plot development is made intelligible, even entertaining, by the clarity of his writing. *The Suicide Museum* stretches for nearly 700 pages but is easily digestible because of the novelist's talent for crafting sharp, memorable images with admirable economy. Only after 400 pages does the reader learn the meaning of the book's title but the description is both memorable and haunting – one that ties neatly with Dorfman's ongoing investigation into Allende's mysterious death.

Dorfman's habit of finding and then losing the plot is likely to test the patience of many but one that ultimately forces readers to read attentively through his random peregrinations. *The Suicide Museum* defies convention defiantly; near its conclusion Dorfman seems to solve the Allende mystery, only to change his verdict, and then change it again for reasons that are hard to fathom or follow. This is, as noted, not a traditional detective or espionage thriller. Alas, that may have been the point all along as both Dorfman and Hortha argue that the destination is the journey itself. Allende the saint, and not the man, serves at the conclusion of *The Suicide Mission* as the lodestar for Dorfman's political agenda: one with which readers

will have become familiar and can therefore assess on its own potential and merits. ■

**Excerpt from CIA Chief Historian
David Robarge's review of *Hostile
Intent: US Covert Operations in
Chile, 1964–1974*,
by Kristian Gustafson
(*Studies Vol. 52, No. 3, 2008*)**

Pinochet's death in December 2006 brought no closure to the long debate over CIA intervention in Chile and its legacy. The discussion essentially remains polarized between left and right, and for some time an objective narrative of the facts and a fair-minded analysis of the critical and apologetic perspectives have been sorely missed. Such is the landmark contribution of Kristian Gustafson's *Hostile Intent: U.S. Covert Operations in Chile, 1964–1974*, which must be considered the indispensable study in the large bibliography on that seemingly intractable subject. A former student of Professor Christopher Andrew's at Cambridge University and now a lecturer at Brunel University in England, Gustafson previewed some of his findings in this journal in 2003 [Vol. 47, No. 3]. In *Hostile Intent*, he demonstrates in an orderly and comprehensive way, with a good grasp of Chilean politics and full facility with the now substantial documentary record, how US administrations carried out their Chilean policy founded on the concern stated as early as 1958 by the senior State Department official responsible for Latin America that "were Allende to win we would be faced with a pro-Soviet, anti-U.S. administration in one of the most important countries in the hemisphere."