

# Book Review: Che On My Mind by Margaret Randall

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*Che on My Mind* is an impressionistic look at the life, death, and legacy of Che Guevara by the renowned feminist poet and activist **Margaret Randall**. Randall writes in deep admiration of Che's integrity and charisma, and is frank about what she sees as his strategic errors. **Nick Witham** concludes that this book is an interesting discussion of an enigmatic historical figure, but also as a testament to Randall's own ability to fuse the observations of anti-imperialism and feminism into a formidable political and cultural concoction.

**Che on My Mind. Margaret Randall. Duke University Press. November 2013.**

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Che Guevara, a renowned guerrilla whose image is synonymous with hyper-masculinised revolutionary politics, may seem like the unlikely subject of a book by [Margaret Randall](#). A doyenne of international feminism, Randall's career as an activist, poet, editor and oral historian has revolved around the proposition that the contributions of ordinary women to Latin American social change have been just as significant as those of iconic male revolutionaries. Nonetheless, in *Che On My Mind*, Randall both explores and critiques the significance of Che Guevara within what she calls the "emotional iconography" of the North American generation whose politics were formed through association with the 1950s and 1960s New Left.

Intensely personal and aphoristic in tone, this short book is not a conventional work of historical or political scholarship. However, its contents are significant as both an assessment of how Guevara has been remembered, and as a window into the mind of a distinctive figure within the recent cultural history of the North American left. At the start of the book's third chapter, entitled "Multiple Prisms," Randall herself notes the irony of the topic she has chosen:

*I am a feminist, and as such I am more likely to seek inspiration in the lives of the many extraordinary women still obscured by patriarchy's refusal to give them their due than in those of men who are rendered larger than life in what remains a grossly unequal panorama.*

She goes on to explain that her goal is to "dig beneath the surface" of Guevara's all-pervasive image, to "situate it in its historical moment" at the same time as drawing attention to its "patriarchal excesses." To do this, Randall focuses on a series of key themes, three of which I will discuss here: the transnational, the masculine, and the iconographic.

Guevara's career as a revolutionary was an inherently transnational one. Born into an aristocratic family in Argentina, he travelled widely through Latin America before becoming a key figure in the Cuban revolution that culminated in 1959 with the overthrow of the U.S.-backed regime of Fulgencio Batista. After that success, Che remained restless, and partook in the nascent guerrilla struggle in the Congo before meeting his death at the hands of counterrevolutionaries in Bolivia in 1967. Restlessness is a theme that Randall is keen to highlight, and this is hardly surprising, given that she herself lived a transnational life during the Cold War, in Mexico, Cuba and Nicaragua, as well as her native United States. Randall uses a 1954 letter written to his mother to emphasise Che's self-identification as "quintessentially American, in the broad, continentally inclusive sense of the term." She then goes on to discuss the inspiration she has drawn from Guevara's ability to

“breach fabricated frontiers” with his activism, and, in the book’s concluding chapter, argues that this focus on internationalism is one of his most important legacies.

As well as praising Guevara’s career, Randall also highlights the more problematic ways in which he is remembered, not least his “macho” image. Whilst recognising that her subject lived *before* the widespread acceptance of feminist analysis on the left, she nonetheless admits a “deep disappointment” in the failure of Che’s 1965 letter “Socialism and Man in Cuba” to reach



A Che Guevara mural in Cuba reads “till the victory, always”. Credit: [Mike Donnelly](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

beyond an essentially gendered take on Cuban politics. In a series of short reflections on his emotional relationships with his parents and two wives, Randall imagines a counterfactual life for Guevara, in which the revolutionary becomes an interlocutor with feminism, the political tradition with which she most closely identifies. This treatment culminates in Randall’s lamentation of the presentation of Che as a man of “violence and war” rather than one engaged in a selfless and unflinching “pursuit of justice” and “human dignity.”

*Che On My Mind* is also centrally concerned with Guevara’s photographic iconography. The book is beautifully produced, presenting the reader with an arresting black and white snapshot at the start of every chapter. These photographs highlight how, like so many political figures cut down in their prime, Che’s significance lies as much in the continuing resonance of his image as it does in his physical and intellectual accomplishments. In comparing Guevara to Fidel Castro, Randall indicates that he stands as “a symbol of a less dogmatic style of leadership,” but that this means he is often “frozen in perfection” as an icon of idealism and revolutionary fervour, rather than as the multifaceted political and emotional figure he actually was. This, she ultimately suggests, has resulted in the superficiality of the revolutionary’s ubiquitous presence on the t-shirts and bedroom walls of many a rebellious youth, as well as the way his anti-capitalist spirit has been elided as the image of the bearded, beret-wearing guerrilla has morphed into an endlessly reproducible emblem of bland nonconformity.

However, this cynicism does not transfer into Randall’s overall assessment of Guevara’s significance. She argues that for her generation of political activists, “there is no single name that more profoundly exemplifies our identity, our dreams, the truths we hold to be self-evident, and the cause for which we struggle.” In exploring Guevara’s importance to New Left activism in such perceptive and personal terms, *Che On My Mind* stands not only as an arresting discussion of an enigmatic historical figure, but also as a testament to Randall’s own ability to fuse the observations of anti-imperialism and feminism into a formidable political and cultural concoction.

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**Nick Witham** is Senior Lecturer in American Social and Cultural History at [Canterbury Christ Church University](#). A [recent article in the \*Journal of American Studies\*](#) discusses the significance of international feminism to the U.S. left during the 1980s, and I.B. Tauris will publish his book *The Cultural Left and the Reagan Era: U.S. Protest and Central American Revolution* in 2015. [Read more reviews from Nick](#)