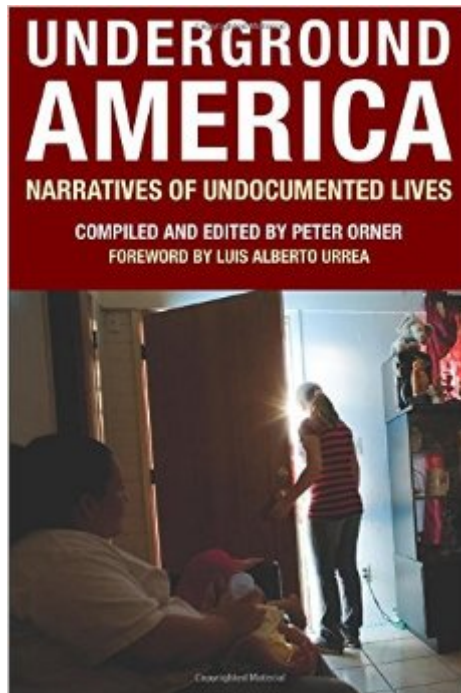


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# Underground America: Narratives Of Undocumented Lives (Voice Of Witness)



## Synopsis

Millions of immigrants risk deportation and imprisonment by living in the US without legal status. They are living underground, with little protection from exploitation at the hands of human smugglers, employers, or law enforcement. *Underground America* presents the remarkable oral histories of men and women struggling to carve a life for themselves in the US.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The book does an excellent job of showing the human side of the underground world of millions of people in the United States. A few weeks ago, I took Amtrak from San Jose, California to Los Angeles. While looking out the window at the strawberry farms in the Central Valley, I saw the migrant farm workers hunched over or kneeling in the hot sun as they picked strawberries. As a child and teenager, going strawberry picking at the pick-it-yourself farms in Watsonville, near Santa Cruz, was always a fun trip for me and I looked forward to going. For these workers, the strawberries were their sustenance, not a weekend family outing. Despite my yearly trips to the farm country, I never knew much about how these farm workers lived until I read their personal accounts in the book, *Underground America*. Reading the stories of undocumented migrants in the book, *Underground America*, gave me a glimpse into the lives of not just the migrant farm workers harvesting the Golden State's crops, but into the difficulties of many people living illegally in the United States. The book gives a human face to the statistics we see on TV about illegal immigration.

I was familiar with the harsh living conditions and migration patterns of undocumented Latin Americans in the US, but I was quite shocked at the stories of the African, South Asian, Chinese and Iranians in the book. One woman from South Africa came to the United States to work as a missionary and ended up cleaning and cooking in the dirty house of the pastor's daughter. She came to do the work of the Lord and was instead used for cheap labor. In order to pay for her family member's HIV treatments, she had to stay in the US and work as a nanny and housekeeper. The conditions described in the detention facilities for illegal immigrants seem to parallel those in maximum security prisons. Why do we treat the people who do the jobs that few legal residents would ever want to do with such disgust? There was a striking story of a Mexican woman who came to the US with her two children. Her eldest son Victor became a transgender woman named Vica. She got AIDS. Vica was caught in an immigration raid and taken to a detention facility where the doctors refused to give her her needed AIDS medicines. She died chained to a bed. These stories make take away the hidden nature of the underground in the United States. The strawberries have a story to them, and it's not sweet. The illegals are not criminals. We are profiting from their work and we have to face the reality of the way our economy works in the United States. We must be aware of the immigration struggle and the implications of our laws and government in order to create a just society.

Orner and his team of interviewers slice through all the political rhetoric and get at what really matters--the people--by letting "illegals" from all walks tell their stories. Reading these narratives, your heart will break and your blood will boil. With immigration sure to be a hot button debate this fall in the general election, any person who wants to speak intelligently to the issue owes it to themselves to read this book. In the tradition of Studs Terkel's *Division Street USA* and other great oral histories, this is a great and important book.

*Underground America* is a superb work that chronicles the true stories of a diverse collection of undocumented aliens living in all corners of the continental U.S. Most of the interviewees are immigrants from Latin America or East Asia. Some came to flee persecution at home, others to escape poverty in countries devoid of economic opportunity. Some came decades ago, others just a few years ago. Some have families and extensive support networks in the U.S., others are here alone and lament years of estrangement from spouses, parents, and above all children. Almost all of them live at the constant mercy of organized crime, predatory romantic partners, exploitative employers, and above all, the immigration authorities. Most subsist on marginal wages in semi-legal

businesses, and lack practically all access to health care, higher education, legitimate employment, and virtually all manner of government services and legal protections. To reach the U.S., most of these immigrants paid thousands of dollars to coyotes or incurred tens of thousands in debt to snakeheads. Many endured perilous journeys weeks or months in duration to enter the country without detection. Their stories are reported as sophisticated, first-hand narratives, compiled by a team of expert interviewers, precisely translated and edited. Brief and remarkable, *Underground America* illustrates the human side of the contemporary U.S. immigration policy debate. Sometimes the facts are their own best argument.

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