



The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography

By Miriam Pawel

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Cesar Chavez founded a labor union, launched a movement, and inspired a generation. He rose from migrant worker to icon, becoming one of the great leaders of the twentieth century. Two decades after his death, Chavez remains the most significant Latino figure in U.S. history. Yet his life story has been told only in hagiography--until now.

In the first comprehensive biography of Chavez, Miriam Pawel offers a searching yet empathetic portrayal. Chavez emerges here as a visionary whose eyes were fixed on a horizon others often could not even see. He was a brilliant strategist who sometimes stumbled, and a streetwise organizer whose pragmatism was often at odds with his soaring dreams. Drawing on thousands of documents, hundreds of hours of audiotape, and scores of interviews, this superbly written life deepens our understanding of one of Chavez's most salient qualities: his profound humanity.

Pawel traces Chavez's rise as he empowered the poor and disenfranchised and led farmworkers to historic victories over the agriculture industry. With compassion and compelling detail, she narrates the equally dramatic later years when Chavez's charismatic leadership devolved into a cult of personality, with heartbreaking consequences for his union. *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* reveals how this unlikely American hero ignited one of the great social movements of our time--and left a legacy that resonates today, from California to the White House.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Pawel, rigorous and captivating, follows her history of Cesar Chavez's crusade to protect farm workers' rights, *The Union of Their Dreams* (2009), with a zestful, dramatic, and redefining biography of the innovative, daring, and persevering activist. Raised by his strong mother to embrace sacrifice and help others, Chavez (1927–93) dropped out of school to work in the fields to support his destitute, homeless family, joining the ranks of California's exploited Mexican American migrant workers. Driven by his social conscience, pragmatic genius, and motivational ardor; inspired by Gandhi; and mentored by the highly unorthodox Father Donald McDonnell and Saul Alinsky disciple and community organizer Fred Ross, Chavez created a scrappy and revolutionary labor union for "the poorest, most powerless workers in the country." Pawel thoroughly chronicles every aspect of Chavez's battles against California's politically dominant produce growers, from audacious strikes to the now legendary national grape boycott to his penitential fasts. As she insightfully dissects Chavez's troubled relationships with his inner circle and each phase in the rise and fall of his increasingly complex and mismanaged organization, Pawel portrays a visionary civil rights leader whose fame and near-beatification engendered tragic misuses of power, but who improved countless lives and raised global consciousness. Chavez's epic story, told so astutely and passionately by Pawel, is essential to understanding today's struggles for justice and equality. --Donna Seaman

Review

"Pawel, rigorous and captivating, follows her history of Cesar Chavez's crusade to protect farm workers' rights, *The Union of Their Dreams*, with a zestful, dramatic, and redefining biography of the innovative, daring, and persevering activist . . . Pawel thoroughly chronicles every aspect of Chavez's battles against California's politically dominant produce growers, from audacious strikes to the now legendary national grape boycott to his penitential fasts. As she insightfully dissects Chavez's troubled relationships with his inner circle and each phase in the rise and fall of his increasingly complex and mismanaged organization, Pawel portrays a visionary civil rights leader whose fame and near-beatification engendered tragic misuses of power, but who improved countless lives and raised global consciousness. Chavez's epic story, told so astutely and passionately by Pawel, is essential to understanding today's struggles for justice and equality." *Booklist*, starred review

"Pawel paints a complex portrait of Chavez with all his strengths and weaknesses . . . The author's insightful, painstakingly researched, and thoughtful work makes Chavez all the more dimensional and nuanced by recognizing his failings as well as his successes. This fully rounded portrait could well be the definitive biography of this all too human figure." *Library Journal* (starred review)

"Miriam Pawel's magnificent biography of Cesar Chavez has the force and scope of a great American novel. Here is the story of a man, from the humblest beginnings, who became a labor organizer as famous as any; here is a deeply flawed man who yearned to be a saint." ?Richard Rodriguez, author of *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography* and *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*

"Miriam Pawel's new biography *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, massively researched and expertly written, is a welcome expansion and enrichment of her earlier study *The Union of Their Dreams*. Together they represent the definitive story of this charismatic farm worker and controversial visionary leader whose courage and near-genius as an organizer invigorated the stormy history of American labor." ?Peter

Matthiessen, author of *Shadow Country and Sal Si Puedes: Cesar Chavez and the New American Revolution*

"Guau! Miriam Pawel has finally given us the Cesar Chavez we deserve: neither a saint nor a bully but a complex American activist who rose to the occasion with courage, astuteness, and intuition, but was also clumsy, misinformed, and nearsighted. Written in a beautifully nuanced style and displaying enviable depth of knowledge, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* is a masterpiece. Future biographies will be measured against it." ?Ian Stavans, Amherst College, author of *The United States of Mestizo*

"Miriam Pawel has produced the definitive account--a lucid, thoughtful, evocative, deeply reported, bracingly honest account--of the life of one of our most consequential modern agents of change. And what a perfect moment for this book's appearance, as the explosion of the Latino population, the implosion of the union moment, immigration policy gridlock and growing inequality have become defining issues of our American moment." ?Kurt Andersen, author of *True Believers*

"This is a remarkable account of the life of Cesar Chavez and of his iconic struggle for justice for America's migrant farmworkers. Miriam Pawel provides a vivid narrative that is unmatched for the authenticity of its behind-the-scenes detail. That rarest of beasts, *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* is at once an important historical document, and a compelling read." ?Jon Lee Anderson, author of *The Fall of Baghdad* and *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*

"Pawel has given us an inspiring book. It introduces us to a formidable leader who drew America's most disadvantaged workers into a powerful movement. And yet every reader will identify with Cesar Chavez' human foibles; every discouraged political visionary will be moved by his story." ?Alice Kessler-Harris, author of *A Difficult Woman: The Challenging Life and Times of Lillian Hellman*

"A warts-and-all biography of an important figure." ?*Kirkus Reviews*

"A comprehensive portrait . . . Pawel's clear, accessible prose befits a subject famous for his plain rhetoric, ensuring a broad readership can appreciate this valuable exploration of Chavez's unique legacy." ?*Publishers Weekly*

"Those intent on hero worship will detest Miriam Pawel's honest, exhaustively researched biography of Cesar Chavez, the charismatic leader and founder of the United Farm Workers who famously led strikes and boycotts to improve the lot of grape pickers in the 1960s. *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez* is a biography for readers who find real human beings more compelling than icons and history more relevant than fantasy." ?*Los Angeles Times*

"The first comprehensive biography of the spectacular rise and messy decline of the United Farm Workers union and the man who struck the sparks that made the epic American social movement." ?*Sacramento Bee*

"Long after his death in 1993 at age 66, Chavez is still the most celebrated Latino leader in American history. Pawel's searching yet empathetic portrayal traces his rise as a farmworker leader--the fasts, mass marches and victories over the agriculture industry--but also the later years, when Chavez's charismatic leadership devolved into a cult of personality." ?*New York Times Book Review*

About the Author

Miriam Pawel is the author of *The Union of Their Dreams*, widely acclaimed as the most nuanced history of Cesar Chavez's movement. She is a Pulitzer Prize-winning editor who spent twenty-five years working for *Newsday* and the *Los Angeles Times*. She was recently awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship, and lives in Southern California.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Toni Williams:

Why don't make it to be your habit? Right now, try to prepare your time to do the important behave, like looking for your favorite guide and reading a book. Beside you can solve your long lasting problem; you can add your knowledge by the book entitled The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography. Try to face the book The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography as your close friend. It means that it can be your friend when you truly feel alone and beside regarding course make you smarter than previously. Yeah, it is very fortunated in your case. The book makes you much more confidence because you can know anything by the book. So , let's make new experience in addition to knowledge with this book.

Leonard Palmer:

Reading can called imagination hangout, why? Because when you find yourself reading a book specifically book entitled The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography your mind will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in every single aspect that maybe unknown for but surely will become your mind friends. Imaging every word written in a guide then become one form conclusion and explanation which maybe you never get before. The The Crusades of Cesar Chavez: A Biography giving you another experience more than blown away your brain but also giving you useful facts for your better life on this era. So now let us present to you the relaxing pattern here is your body and mind will probably be pleased when you are finished examining it, like winning a sport. Do you want to try this extraordinary wasting spare time activity?

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