

Greg Grandin

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About this Person

Born: September 13, 1962 in New York, New York, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: College teacher
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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born September 13, 1962, in New York, NY; married Manu Goswami (a professor); children: Eleanor.
Education: City University of New York: Brooklyn College, B.A., 1992; Yale University, Ph.D., 1999.
Memberships: American Academy of Arts and Sciences. **Addresses:** Home: Brooklyn, NY. Office: New York University, King Juan Carlos I of Spain Center, 53 Washington Sq. S, Ste. 611, NYU Mail Code 1771, New York, NY 10012; fax: 212-995-4017. **E-mail:** grandin@nyu.edu.

CAREER:

Writer, historian, and educator. Duke University, Durham, NC, assistant professor of history; New York University, New York, NY, began as assistant professor, became professor of history and director of graduate studies in Latin American history. Member of the editorial committee of the North American Congress on Latin America. Consultant and guest on television and radio programs.

AWARDS:

Guggenheim fellowship, 2004; Bryce Wood Award for most outstanding book published in English in the humanities and social sciences on Latin America, Latin American Studies Association, for *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*; Pulitzer Prize finalist, National Book Awards finalist, National Book Critics Circle Awards finalist, and *Times Literary Supplement's* Sir Ferdinand Mount best book of the year, all 2010, all for *Fordlandia*; Bancroft Prize, 2015, for *Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*; Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction (one of two winners), 2020, for *The End of the Myth*.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

- o *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 2000.

- o *Denegado en su totalidad: documentos estadounidenses liberados*, AVANCSO (Guatemala City, Guatemala), 2001.
- o *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, University of Chicago Press (Chicago, IL), 2004, updated edition, 2011.
- o *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 2006.
- o (Editor, with Thomas Miller Klubock) *Truth Commissions: State Terror, History, and Memory*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 2007.
- o (Editor, with Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Lynn Hunt, and Marilyn Young) *Human Rights and Revolutions*, Rowman and Littlefield (New York, NY), 2007.
- o *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City*, Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 2009.
- o (Editor, with Gilbert M. Joseph and Emily S. Rosenberg) *A Century of Revolution: Insurgent and Counterinsurgent Violence during Latin America's Long Cold War*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 2010.
- o (Editor, with Deborah T. Levenson, and Elizabeth Oglesby) *The Guatemala Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 2011.
- o *Who Is Rigoberta Menchú?*, Verso (New York, NY), 2011.
- o *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2014.
- o *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*, Metropolitan Books (New York, NY), 2015.
- o *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt (New York, NY), 2019.

Contributor to books, including *Reclaiming the Political in Latin American History: Essays in Honor of Emilia-Viotti-da Costa*, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph, Duke University Press (Durham, NC), 2001; and *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, edited by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, Cambridge University Press (New York, NY), 2003. Contributor to periodicals, including the *New York Times*, *Nation*, *Harper's*, *London Review of Books*, *Mother Jones*, *Boston Review*, *American Historical Review*, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, *Anthropological Theory*, *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, and the *Nation*.

Sidelights

Author, educator, and historian Greg Grandin is a Pulitzer Prize-nominated professor of history at New York University and an expert in Central and Latin American history. Grandin explained on the New York University Department of History Web site that his work "explores the connection between the diverse manifestations of everyday life and the large-scale societal transformation that took place in Central America related to agricultural commodity production and state formation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Grandin teaches classes on subjects such as terrorism and Latin America, Latinos and Latinas in America, comparative Native American history, and Latin America and the cold war.

His first book, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, "examines the astute ways in which the K'iche' elite in the city of Quetzaltenango maneuvered to preserve their position of prestige and power over the course of more than two centuries," noted Jean Muteba Rahier in the *Latin American Research Review*. In his "fascinating and ambitious narrative of the political, economic, social and demographic dimensions of Guatemala's history from the late colonial period to the counterrevolutionary coup of 1954," Grandin "offers a highly critical and innovative reinterpretation of the histories shaping the making of the country's nation-state, nationalism and cultural identities during the last two centuries," commented Gerardo Renique in the *NACLA Report on the Americas*. Grandin

focuses on the struggles between the elite political groups and the other groups forming the area's middle class in creating a national state in Guatemala. He also explores how the K'iche' elites became a cadre of middlemen between the local, indigenous K'iche' population and the upper classes and the government, allowing the elite class to thrive and expand economically, perhaps at the expense of their commoner brethren. "Through his treatment of local politics and the changing relationship between K'iche' commoners and elites, the author also examines the intricacies of Indian identity, state formation and the emergence of contentious nationalist visions," Renique observed.

Jennie Purnell, writing in the *Journal of Latin American Studies*, called Grandin's work a "rich and beautifully-written book" and "a very complex and elegant book that combines a compelling narrative with meticulous scholarship." Steve C. Ropp, writing in *Perspectives on Political Science*, remarked: "This is an excellent book for those who wish to understand the complexities of Guatemala's historical transition from a remote Spanish colony populated largely by indigenous Mayan people to a racially and ethnically mixed sovereign nation-state."

In *The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War*, Grandin disputes the many scholars and others who contend that since the rise of Castro in Cuba, Latin America has rejected democracy in favor of Communist totalitarianism. Grandin uses Guatemala as a case study, arguing that the Cold War was not a contest between American-style liberalism and Soviet Communism but between two different perceptions of democracy. He writes that U.S. intervention in Latin America did not contain Communism but did eliminate home-grown concepts of social democracy.

William L. Stanley wrote in the *Journal of Third World Studies* that Grandin "delivers a devastating account of the role of the U.S. during the 1950s and 1960s in upgrading the repressive capacities of the state just in time to slaughter the surviving moderates within the Guatemalan Left, in the process destroying for almost thirty years any prospect that the Left could accept liberal democratic political rules. Grandin's account serves as a valuable reminder of just how moderate and democratic the Guatemalan communist movement was, until its offshoots were literally forced to take up arms."

In *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, Grandin traces the origins of U.S. imperial intentions and military interventionism in Latin America, which he sees as having long served as a testing ground for U.S. imperialistic ambitions. The trend of American imperialism did not emerge solely as a reaction to the 9/11 attacks; as long ago as the administration of Thomas Jefferson, Grandin suggests, the United States harbored imperialistic intentions toward the Latin American region. Over the years, the U.S. interventions in Latin America have consistently mirrored the American tendency to spread its ideas and influence by application of military and economic force, Grandin notes. Military actions in Iraq and elsewhere should not be considered new or surprising, according to Grandin, because such activity has been replayed in Latin America again and again.

Brad Hooper, writing in *Booklist*, called Grandin's work "contentious, certainly, but well presented." A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer called the book an "incisive study" and observed that "this timely book offers an analysis of the ideological foundations of today's foreign policy consensus" on military action and imperialistic expansion.

Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City is Grandin's Pulitzer Prize-nominated account of Henry Ford's failed Amazonian rubber plantation. In 1928, the car manufacturer bought property in a Brazilian jungle, with plans to produce rubber for the manufacture of tires and hoses in his factories. His two and a half million acres, roughly the size of the state of Connecticut, were on the banks of the Tapajos River, an Amazon tributary about 600 miles inland. Ford also imported a culture that was foreign to the Brazilians. He built movie theaters, ice cream shops, Cape Cod-style homes with indoor plumbing, and a golf course. Fire hydrants lined sidewalks in what one American associated with the project called a "work of civilization."

The indigenous people, however, rejected Ford's ideas, including his ban on alcohol and his attempt to remake their society so that it would resemble a moral, conservative Midwestern American town. Ford himself never set foot in Fordlandia.

While Ford had a vision of improved morality, high wages, and other benefits for the workers, they took their wages and used them for immediate gratification in the form of women and drink. Bordellos and bars sprang up around the area to profit from the steady income of the workers. Venereal disease increased, as did drinking and fighting. The workers rejected Ford's prescribed diet of brown rice, whole wheat bread, and canned peaches. They destroyed the cafeteria and all of the vehicles on the property. In addition to the lack of a reliable workforce, many of the Americans went insane, one throwing himself to crocodiles. Einar Oxholm, the ship's captain who managed Fordlandia, was a good man who was unprepared for the job. Four of his children died before he returned to the United States.

Ford also made an error in judgment in not relying on native naturalists who understood how to produce rubber in that region. Grandin writes of Fordlandia that "what it didn't have was a horticulturalist, agronomist, botanist, microbiologist, entomologist or any other person who might know something about jungle rubber and its enemies." Ferocious insects attacked the people and stripped the vegetation. Big cats carried off children, and man-eating piranhas and caimans inhabited the rivers and swamps.

Ford spent just over one hundred thousand dollars to buy the land, and over the course of eighteen years another twenty million dollars, the equivalent in today's money of a quarter of a billion dollars, but Fordlandia, as it was known, was a huge failure in that it supplied less than one percent of the world's latex. In 1945 he sold it all to the Brazilian government for approximately two and a half times what he originally paid for the land alone.

Ben Macintyre wrote in the *New York Times Book Review*: "The story of Fordlandia is a biography of Ford in relief, the man who championed small-town America but did more to destroy it than any other, the pioneer who aimed to lift workers from drudgery but pioneered a method of soul-destroying mass production that rendered them mere cogs."

Reviewing *Fordlandia* for the *St. Petersburg Times Online*, David L. Beck concluded: "Grandin suggests that the tale he has told is the story of capitalism run amok. It is, and that's interesting. But as I read it, his tale is also one of stupidity and blundering by powerful men who valued loyalty above competence. And that, it seems to me, is a story with peculiar relevance to America in the 21st century."

In 2014, Grandin published *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*. In this volume, Grandin uses the account of a slave revolt aboard the *Tryal*, a slave-trading ship, in 1805 as a touchstone for exploring the historical paradox of the Enlightenment movement toward freedom and democracy at the height of the slave trade. Grandin likewise examines Herman Melville's fictional account of the event in his 1855 novella "Benito Cereno." The story features the unsuspecting American captain and seal hunter Amasa Delano, who boards the ship believing he is simply providing aid to the Spanish ship in distress only to discover that, led by a slave called Babo and his son Mori, the slaves had taken over the ship. Despite the fact that he champions freedom and finds slavery abhorrent, Delano is persuaded by the Spanish captain, Benito Cereno, to launch an attack on the slaves, who are ultimately tortured and executed. Comparing Melville's fictional account to the historical record, Grandin explores the event as a microcosm of larger contradictory forces at work in this historical period.

"The indispensable spine of the book, not to mention its dark heart, is what happened on the *Tryal*. Melville got there first, and his novella, upon which Grandin meditates fulsomely and well, haunts *The Empire of Necessity*," observed Kevin Nance in the *Chicago Tribune*. "In a final layer of deception," Nance also stated, "many literary critics denied until well into the 20th century that 'Benito Cereno' had

anything to do with slavery in anything but a purely metaphysical sense. To these critics, Babo's motives were unfathomable, his evil as primal as Iago's, though without as much malice aforethought. As Yale's Stanley Williams wrote in 1947, 'Babo, after all, as perhaps his name suggests, is just an animal, a mutinous baboon.' And the circle of lies was complete." Nance concluded: "Grandin traces that circle through all its evolutions, proving once again that any lie, however outrageous, will be believed if it's told over and over. The only solution is the truth, told just as often."

Andrew Delbanco asserted in the *New York Times Book Review*: "Grandin does not say much about the literary power of 'Benito Cereno.' But by reconstructing the world through which the slaves moved toward their doom, he has done more than any previous scholar--and there have been many--to illuminate the context of the work in which Melville confronted slavery without presuming to comprehend its vast ramifications. *The Empire of Necessity* is also a significant contribution to the largely impossible yet imperative effort to retrieve some trace of the countless lives that slavery consumed."

Washington Post critic Alan Taylor felt that the book offers too much historical context: "Grandin tells a great and moving story, but bloats and dilutes it with long digressions. ... Fortunately, the narrative revives whenever Grandin loops back to the lives of the core characters: Delano, Cereno, Babo and Mori. Their plights illuminate the leviathan that Grandin pursues: 'It is not the paradox that defines America but rather the ceaseless bids to escape the paradox, to slip out of the shackles of history, even as such efforts inevitably deepen old entanglements.' Delano had trapped himself by pursuing an illusion of isolated freedom at the expense of seals and slaves."

An *Economist* reviewer found the book too dark, writing: "Unfortunately, the horrors in Mr Grandin's history are unrelenting. His is a book without heroes. The brave battlers against the gruesome slave business hardly get a look in, although it was they who eventually prevailed. ... A better balanced history would have included the good guys, too." *Christian Science Monitor* critic David Holahan, on the other hand, pointed out the heroism of Babo and his fellow slaves. "Delano--and Melville's early readers--may not have grasped it, but the Babo of *The Empire of Necessity* is smart, disciplined, and resolute in the face of privations and imminent death," he wrote. "Thanks to Grandin, his story has become both heroic and compulsively readable."

Grandin offers a new assessment of one of the most controversial diplomats in U.S. history in *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*. In this reassessment, Grandin initially argues that in order for anyone to understand America's current position in the twenty-first century with domestic political polarization and seeming never-ending wars abroad, one must first understand the work of Henry Kissinger, national security advisor under the President Richard Nixon, and secretary of state under Nixon and President Gerald Ford. Generally known for his use of Realpolitik, Kissinger was a major player in U.S. foreign policy from 1969 to 1977, and was credited with helping to arrange the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China and of the creation of détente with the Soviet Union as well as brokering the end of 1973 Arab-Israeli War. He is also noted for actions during the Vietnam War and his negotiations at the subsequent Paris Peace Accords. However, Kissinger's secret bombing campaign of Cambodia during the Vietnam War and a subsequent ground invasion of that country have earned him an infamous reputation among many, and similar actions in Pakistan, Angola, Iran, and Chile have added to such criticism. Grandin attempts to balance the two sides of Kissinger's legacy in this biography. However, he also notes that interventionism became legitimized because of Kissinger and the Kissinger gave birth to today's neo-cons. Grandin goes beyond traditional arguments about Kissinger regarding his intervention in Cambodia and elsewhere to attack the idea that his policies were guided by realistic considerations. As *New York Times Book Review Online* writer Mark Atwood Lawrence noted in this regard: "Grandin contends that Kissinger is best understood as an existentialist who believed that in a world without objective truth or inescapable historical patterns, great statesmen distinguish themselves through spontaneity and resolute action rooted in intuition rather than rational thinking."

Reviewing *Kissinger's Shadow*, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted: "Ever the marvelous thinker, Grandin will have even the most ardent Kissinger foe enthralled." Similar praise came from a *Kirkus Reviews* critic, who termed the book a "trenchant and succinct depiction of the ongoing artful dodging of the nonagenarian statesman." *Booklist* writer Mark Levine felt that "Grandin's argument is compelling" in this work, further observing that it "should receive major attention." Likewise, *Washington Post Online* reviewer Evan Thomas observed: "Grandin is a persuasive polemicist, and he has a lot of material to work with. ... He writes with literary flair and a sharp eye for the absurdities of politics."

Washington Monthly contributor Michael O'Donnell stated: "Grandin ... contends that Kissinger has left us with war as an instrument of policy, less as a last resort than as a kind of peacock's strut. ... The abiding concern driving Kissinger's foreign policy was therefore maintaining credibility: action to avoid the appearance of inability to act. Hence, Grandin persuasively argues, the bombing of Cambodia is Kissinger's signature policy, supported as it was by a self-perpetuating justification." *Star Tribune Online* reviewer Michael Magras similarly observed: "Some readers may argue that Grandin gives short shrift to Kissinger's more positive accomplishments. But *Kissinger's Shadow* is an important book and an unsparing portrait of Kissinger's legacy." *Los Angeles Times Online* writer Zach Dorfman noted that in the work, Grandin "plumbs Kissinger's writing, especially his undergraduate and graduate work at Harvard, for insights into his philosophy of history, theory of statecraft and sense of the role of morality in politics. He then analyzes Kissinger's later decisions in the political and policymaking spheres through this lens." Dorfman added: "The picture of Henry Kissinger that emerges in Greg Grandin's new book--of youthful brilliance curdled by an overweening ego and the will-to-power--is not an attractive one."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

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- o *Atlantic*, January-February, 2016, Stephen Sestanovich, "The Long History of Leading from Behind: Nixon and Kissinger's Effort to Fix an Overextended Foreign Policy Was More like Obama's than You Might Think," p. 94.
- o *Booklist*, February 15, 2006, Brad Hooper, review of *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, p. 24; December 1, 2013, Jay Freeman, review of *The Empire of Necessity: Slavery, Freedom, and Deception in the New World*, p. 6; July 1, 2015, Mark Levine, review of *Kissinger's Shadow: The Long Reach of America's Most Controversial Statesman*, p. 19.
- o *California Bookwatch*, August, 2009, review of *Fordlandia*.
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- o *Kirkus Reviews*, March 15, 2006, review of *Empire's Workshop*, p. 273; December 1, 2013, review of *The Empire of Necessity*; June 1, 2015, review of *Kissinger's Shadow*.
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