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# 'Ultimate' story leads to death, discovery

## San Antonio editor delves into murdered reporter's past and finds reconciliation

Reviewed by Julie Foster  
Sunday, December 11, 2005

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### Trail of Feathers

Searching for Philip True:

#### IMAGES



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### A Reporter's Murder in Mexico and His Editor's Search for Justice

By Robert Rivard

PUBLIC AFFAIRS; 424 Pages; \$27.50

Recently an American journalist was abducted while reporting on the Israeli withdrawal in the Gaza Strip. Dion Nissenbaum covered the state capital, but left Sacramento last summer after taking a job his mother called "the realization of a long-time dream."

He was lucky. After three hours, Nissenbaum was released unharmed. Every year journalists are kidnapped and killed while reporting from dangerous places. In 2004, three Mexican journalists were murdered in Mexico. Their killers are still at large.

Seven years ago, Philip True, a San Antonio Express-News correspondent based in Mexico City, was murdered while on a solo hike in the extremely rugged backcountry of western Mexico. He became the first accredited U.S. journalist murdered in Mexico in modern times.

The 50-year-old True also cultivated a dream. He wanted to write a story on the reclusive Huichol Indians, who live in the remote canyon country of the Sierra Madre Occidental. True felt it would be "the ultimate reporting foray, a solo exploration of one of the hemisphere's last surviving native cultures."

The 100-mile hike would allow True to combine two of his three greatest loves, solo hikes in the wilderness and uncovering great newspaper stories. His third love was his Mexican-born wife, Martha.

However, after pitching the story to editors in San Antonio, it was rejected. He refused to let his idea die. True had a reputation for challenging authority. He decided to take the 10-day trip on his own time without alerting editors to his intentions.

Following a celebratory meal with his wife at their cozy Chapultepec home, True made final plans for his departure the next morning. One of the two books he stuffed in his backpack was "In Cold Blood" by Truman Capote.

After kissing his pregnant wife goodbye outside their home the day after Thanksgiving in 1998, True told Martha to come looking for him if he didn't return home in 10 days. Two weeks later, his body was located at the bottom of the Chapalagana, or the Twisted Serpent Canyon, by a small search party. His murderers, two Huichol Indians, were

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found guilty after six years of legal shenanigans but remain free.

"Trail of Feathers: Searching for Philip True" by Robert Rivard, is the compelling and important account of the search for True and bringing his killers to justice. Rivard was a member of the search team that located True's body. He was also his editor at the San Antonio Express-News.

Rivard noted that "Trail of Feathers" was partly a response to his loss of faith in the Mexican legal system, which became a surreal journey. "After hiking into one of the Sierra Madre's most forbidding gorges, we descended into an even deeper labyrinth, the Mexican judicial system."

Rivard was no neophyte in navigating choppy journalistic waters south of the border. Since 1997, he has been the editor of the San Antonio Express-News, the daily paper in a city with close ties to Mexico. In 1982, he won the top award from the Society of Professional Journalists for foreign correspondents and in 2002 a Maria Moors Cabot Prize from Columbia University, both for work in Latin America.

After years of work as the case stalled, Rivard acknowledged his slippery competition. "And with each passing month, it became more obvious that our case was mired in politics that transcended True's murder." "Trail of Feathers" is also the skillfully researched and reported story of Rivard's increased understanding of both True and himself, in ways he had not imagined before True's murder. With the tracking down and interviewing of True's friends, roommates, co-workers and family members, Rivard gained a greater insight into his own early troubled years:

"True found his own release in life by seeking out the stories of people whose stories otherwise might not be told. Believing no one would ever come to my rescue as a young boy, I also came to understand newspaper reporting at some unconscious level as an avenue to help myself by helping others."

In addition to allowing him the chance to act as an advocate for True's widow, the ordeal caused him to re-evaluate his own professional responsibilities. "Editors are judged by the quality of the newspaper they edit, but also by how they stand up for their people and their work, fight for resources, and stand by people in their time of need." Finally, coming to a sort of peace within himself over the events surrounding True's murder, Rivard explained that while the verdict was satisfying, the most important aspect was the battle waged for the Mexican people.

"By fighting for our rights as victims, by fighting to convict and punish True's killers, we fought for every Mexican denied his or her own day in court, and certainly every Mexican journalist whose murder has gone unpunished."

*Julie Foster is a Sacramento writer.*

*This article appeared on page M - 2 of the San Francisco Chronicle*



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