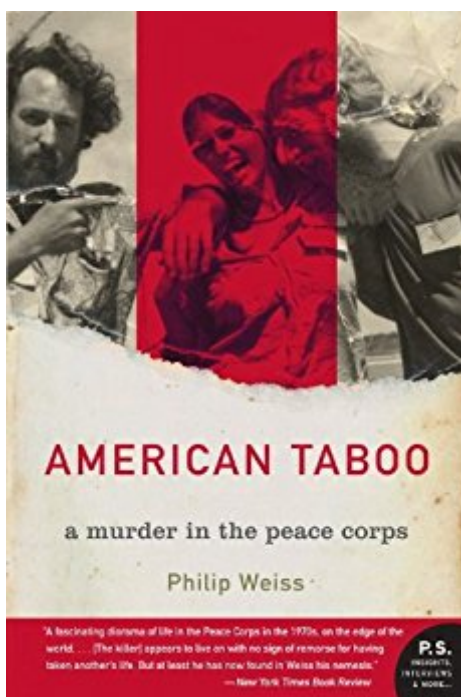


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# American Taboo: A Murder In The Peace Corps



## Synopsis

In 1975, a new group of Peace Corps volunteers landed on the island nation of Tonga. Among them was Deborah Gardner -- a beautiful twenty-three-year-old who, in the following year, would be stabbed twenty-two times and left for dead inside her hut. Another volunteer turned himself in to the Tongan police, and many of the other Americans were sure he had committed the crime. But with the aid of the State Department, he returned home a free man. Although the story was kept quiet in the United States, Deb Gardner's death and the outlandish aftermath took on legendary proportions in Tonga. Now journalist Philip Weiss "shines daylight on the facts of this ugly case with the fervor of an avenging angel" (Chicago Tribune), exposing a gripping tale of love, violence, and clashing ideals. With bravura reporting and vivid, novelistic prose, Weiss transforms a Polynesian legend into a singular artifact of American history and a profoundly moving human story.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I enjoyed this book, though it was quite painful to read about how the Peace Corps as an institution failed the Gardner family. I served in the Peace Corps in the late 1970's in the South Pacific (though

not in Tonga), and, like many former volunteers, I consider my time in the Peace Corps to be one of the seminal experiences in my life. I still have great respect for the Peace Corps and its mission, but in 1976 and 1977 the agency sadly put preservation of its image above achieving justice for Deborah Gardner. Gardner's killer—who can have any doubt that it was fellow volunteer Dennis Priven—was, to my mind, a very disturbed individual who brilliantly manipulated the Tongan legal system. The author makes almost incontrovertibly clear, however, that Priven would likely not have succeeded without the complicity (and, sometimes, active effort) of Peace Corps' officials. If you have no other reaction upon reading this book, you will be left with the feeling that a serious miscarriage of justice took place, and that our government facilitated Priven's release back into American society. The book brought back many memories of Peace Corps training and day-to-day volunteer life. (I also did "staging" at the Hotel Californian, and it was uncanny how the author captured the essence of the place and the overseas pre-departure activities.) The author does a good job of conveying those details, and he is quick to acknowledge the wealth of PCV/Tonga diaries, letters, and journals that were available to him. He also conducted numerous interviews with returned volunteers and others for what appears to be a very well-researched book. I didn't mind that the author injected himself into the story at times.

If I had to pick one word to describe *American Taboo*, it would be "compelling." Weiss shows us how far a professional reporter can go in creating scenes from a place that was long ago and far away. The book would be worth reading just to gain a sense of day-to-day Peace Corps life, when exotic gets overwhelmed by mundane. But what fascinates Weiss is the old story of justice denied. A smart but geeky volunteer murders a beautiful girl. Everyone knows he's the killer. But ironically, as Weiss points out, Deb the victim was always a private person who hadn't made close friends. Dennis, her killer, had a circle of close friends who supported him through pre-trial confinement and trial, even bringing him food and gifts. And ironically the Peace Corps wanted to save its reputation. In defiance of the Agency's own rules, bureaucrats descended from Washington and a top-flight lawyer was hired to defend Dennis. Dennis was ultimately released to the US with a promise of long-term confinement in a mental institution. However, through legal loopholes, Dennis was allowed to go free. He ended up working for another US government agency, the Social Security Administration, in computers. As in many true crime stories, there's some ambivalence about assigning blame. True, Dennis is a murderer. But he was doing everything but wearing a sign saying, "Danger! Get this man out of here!" He didn't like Tonga and didn't fit. His colleague had tried to report concerns to the Peace Corps country director, only to be turned away. And this

Director was hardly blameless. A political appointee, Mary had been an executive secretary and modeling agency director. She lacked management skills and cultural awareness.

Like other readers, I found the book in need of an editor--sadly, the same can be said of a great deal of recent US non-fiction. The story is compelling and and as a former expat, I can speak to the oddness of living abroad. OTOH, it's never really clear that Dennis, the accused, is psychotic (one theatrical psychiatrist does not make a diagnosis). Few people who seek an overseas experience are driven to really problematic behavior, let alone murder--the problems in their lives usually precede such a move. Someone should have told him that "no" means "no", but that was only beginning to be recognized as a necessity in the 70s. The book is an object lesson of how bureaucracies, public or private, civilian or otherwise cover their backsides and how the process gets more dysfunctional when the regime is changing. The country director comes off as a ludicrous figure---totally out of her depth, and culturally incompetent. Her prim Republican manner makes her seem an unlikely candidate to support the accused murderer. But support him she does, going overboard and beyond rationality or even a close reading of the country director's handbook. The asides didn't bother me as much as other reviewers. I wished we'd heard more about the dead girl's relationship with her mother and brother. The complexity of the relationship with the father, though, is interesting and would have benefited from better organization of the text. Instead, it comes at us in a helter skelter way. Oddly, the murderer is the character left the most to our imaginations. In an era when so much information is attainable, I would have expected to know more about his life after Tonga and, until the end, it's unclear whether he ever made it to Sibley Hospital.

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