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Incident at Akabal
by Joanne Omang
Houghton Mifflin. 313 pp.

In a newspaper story datelined "Jacksonville, FL, Jan. 6, 1897" Stephen Crane told a harrowing tale. The cargo ship *Commodore* sank while transporting guns from Florida to Cuba. Crane described four men in a ten-foot lifeboat struggling to survive. He reported the facts faithfully. No one reads that account anymore.

They read instead Crane's magnificent short story, "The Open Boat." Newspapers grow cold within a week. Facts soon interest only historians and insurance companies. To transform a story into art, as Crane did, the teller must veer off at the intersection of the facts and the truth.

That's what Joanne Omang attempts with sporadic success in *Incident at Akabal*. Omang, the *Washington Post's* first female foreign correspondent, was already intimately familiar with Latin America by 1985 when another reporter told her of an occurrence in Guatemala two years earlier. That event forms the loose basis of Omang's novel.

Teenager Miguel Angel Kanak, nicknamed Helado (Ice Cream) by his rebel compatriots for his affable coolness, blows up an army barracks and flees to his mountain village of Akabal. Led by Lt. Prospero Gomez, troops track Miguel and issue the villagers an ultimatum: surrender the boy by dawn or face annihilation.

Omang's novel explores Akabal's period of decision and several of the characters involved. There's Mayor Don Cristóbal, the only Ladino (mixed-blood) in this Indian village, who hopes he can preserve Akabal by trusting an army that has never proved trustworthy. There's Benedicto Tijax, the village's paid army informant. There's Father Edmundo, the priest whose standard homilies pale impotently beside army slaughter and liberation theology. There's Gregorio, Miguel's best friend, who never knew Miguel was a rebel activist.

On the other side stands Lt. Gomez, whose brother was killed three years earlier by a rebel bomb. Gomez can't remember "when a dirt road was just a road and not a possible minefield." He declares the army the defenders of Akabal's homes and families "against the [communist] subversion that would make slaves of us all."

To the people of Akabal, however, the army is the ruthless tool of the rich, the landowners and Americans. Mindless killers, they are fluent only in savagery, cutting the throats of women even while raping them and forcing their fathers and husbands and sons to watch powerlessly at gunpoint. The villagers have seen political dissidents disappear

and eventually die of "natural causes," for it is only natural to die when several bullets are fired into your face. These "defenders" are such stuff as nightmares are made on.

Omang's female characters—Caterina, the town's lascivious oracle; Miguel's long-suffering mother, Flora; and Irene, Miguel's pitiable sister—seem colorless. Tellingly, none of the novel's characters ever quite develops the full blush of life, but the men are at least fired by some political viewpoint.

Both because she places her political agenda ahead of her characters and because her first-novelist brushstrokes are obtrusively visible, Omang has not yet made the transition from reporter to artist. Rather than probe the psyches of the villagers agonizing over their choice—as, say, Dürrenmatt does so poignantly in *The Visit*—Omang focuses on the exploitation of the people and the bleak futility of their world.

These, however, prove provocative themselves. If Omang has not written an expert novel, she has still produced a moving and stimulating tale.

She shows the pervasive terror felt in much of Latin America, how the daily lives of its people are like our childhood dream of falling, where objection so frequently means violent death that people cower ineffectually with little further hope than survival.

More immediately, Omang raises questions difficult to turn from. Akabal, symbolic of the Latin American masses, sees the America pulling the soldiers' strings. Omang depicts a bifocal Yankee myth structure, pioneer through one eye and Puritan through the other, creating powerful crosscurrents of foreign policy that cry, "Exploit and control for profit!" in alternating staccato with, "We stand for virtue!" Thus, her America cloaks greed with pious justifications that its guns fire in Latin America to ward off communist bondage. In a world where the Soviet nerve center of communism is no longer a credible enemy, will we soon claim we must save the descendants of the Mayans from Mitsubishi rather than Castro? Would that play strongly enough to support the rigged elections Omang shows us here or the foreign aid and disaster relief that seldom reach the people?

If the aspiring artist in Omang has shied away from the decisions facing Akabal, the reporter places in full view the tough questions Akabal raises.