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A threat, a mystery for a Vermont candidate

By A.C. HUTCHISON

The Peace Corps: An organization, created by President Kennedy, emblematic of the most noble of American ideals and populated by selfless, inspired volunteers, right? Well, yes, of course. But sometimes don't even the best of the best go astray? Might there have been a time or two when all that selflessness and all that idealism were severely tested and perhaps found wanting?

"When I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Venezuela, a middle-aged American businessman we used to drink with told us of a cache of copper that was lightly guarded in an Orinoco River port storage yard," James A. Ciullo recalls. "He said he was told by some bankers in Caracas that it belonged to the South American Nazi underground. He said he could get the trucks necessary if we wanted to steal it." Its estimated worth: \$6 million.

Ciullo, who lives in western Massachusetts and spends much time with his family in Essex Junction, Vt., has written a fine novel – "Orinoco" – inspired largely by his long-ago, far-away encounter with that American businessman. He says that although the heist never occurred, he concedes that he and his Peace Corps colleagues were at least tempted – because "we were worried that without proper funding our projects might not survive after our tour of service." And Ciullo never forgot about the proposed copper caper.

"The idea stayed with me as a 'what-if' scenario for the next 30 years, and I went ahead and used it as the baseline event for the novel," he said in a recent interview. "Along the way, I had the opportunity in the novel to develop scenes based on our Peace Corps lives from those years 1969-71. That was therapeutic."

In the novel, it isn't copper that tempts the Peace Corps volunteers but a lightly guarded warehouse filled with priceless artworks stolen by Germans during World War II and on their way to fugitive Nazis living elsewhere in South America. And, for all their lofty ideals, the fictional volunteers find the temptation to steal the art from the art thieves irresistible. After all, it will deprive the ex-Nazis of their ill-gotten gains while helping the volunteers finance badly needed projects in Venezuela. Talk about your win-win situation.

But "Orinoco" is not just about that long-ago adventure. It's also very much about contemporary American politics, and in places it feels as fresh as today's headlines because the hero, who teaches at the University of Vermont, has decided (this is in 1998) to run for the U.S. Senate as an independent. Perhaps Bernie Sanders will want to read this novel.

Joseph LaCarta, who would prefer to forget his participation in the art heist, has strong feelings about how the American government has fought the "war on drugs" – he thinks the emphasis is in all the wrong places – and about the fierce, divisive partisanship on Capitol Hill. He believes that if Vermont's voters send him to Washington, he could help bring about changes that will better serve the American people.

"The main character's political philosophy parallels my own, mainly in the sense that I believe in the need for consensus builders in the Senate," Ciullo explained. "I do believe in creative solutions to problems, as opposed to partisan sloganeering, which tends to dominate the political scene of today. To that end, I feel there are more creative ways to address the war on drugs as well as many other problems."

"I feel that there is a need for persons like the main character who care more about solving the country's problems than simply keeping power," the author, his idealism intact, continued. "There are too many of the latter, and this is why Joe LaCarta's political enemies are portrayed as threatened by him and his willingness to bring people together."

And soon after announcing his candidacy, LaCarta discovers he truly does have ruthless enemies. Some of them fear that if he wins his race he'll put their own political fortunes (and Latin American drug cartels who enjoy their protection) at risk and others appear to be motivated more by revenge for what happened at that warehouse on the Orinoco River. One big question, however: Since all the participants in the art heist were sworn to secrecy, why has his involvement become an issue so many years later?

LaCarta soon understands that his enemies, whoever they may be, are willing, even eager, to use extreme measures against him and, even more worrisome, against those who are closest to him. As proof, one of his former Peace Corps colleagues is murdered in Mexico. His death is intended as a clear warning to LaCarta, and it succeeds. After a dinner in Montreal with his unidentified tormentor, he accedes to the demand that he withdraw from the Senate race. But he announces he's only "suspending" his candidacy, not ending it, and privately hopes to have enough time to track down his enemies and then return to the campaign.

His exploration takes LaCarta to Washington where, in the office of a powerful political enemy (he was paying what was portrayed as a courtesy visit) he spots a photograph of the very man he dined with in Montreal. The problem is he doesn't know the man's true identity and the politician claims to have no idea who he might be. But there's a Vermont senator who is secretly supportive of LaCarta's candidacy, even though she's a Republican, and with her help the evil one eventually is unmasked.

Further action-filled adventures take place in Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico. These episodes, including the threatened kidnapping of the murdered Peace Corps volunteer's beautiful daughter, only enhance the notion – first formed, perhaps, during the heist in Venezuela – that this novel has all the makings of an excellent Hollywood thriller. There's easily enough drama, and certainly an abundance of exotic settings, to fill the big screen.

The ending of "Orinoco" is not particularly surprising, but there are several genuine surprises along the way. The plot, while perhaps a stretch in terms of realism (it is fiction, after all), is exceptionally well crafted and readers will find it difficult to put down. The author wouldn't mind if some Hollywood decision-makers recognize that and begin talking to him about screen rights. But that's in the future.

Ciullo (his name is pronounced "Chew low") is not yet a full-time author, although as he nears 60 he clings to that dream. When he's not writing he helps high school dropouts find their way to a career track.

"I am afforded a fair amount of flexibility," he explained. "I love to travel, and often combine trips with research." One recent outing was his annual rafting trip in the Adirondacks with his old Peace Corps cohorts, who remain close friends.

Ciullo has written two other novels, and both reflect his Italian heritage. "A Tango In Tuscany" came out in 2002. The other has yet to be published. In the meantime, he's working on a sequel to "Orinoco" in which LaCarta plays a lesser role.

"Maracaibo" is set 10 years later, and features his murdered colleague's daughter.

"Orinoco" by James A. Ciullo; published by Thomson Gale of Waterville, Maine; \$25.95.

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