

## 'Orinoco': Political tale a guilty pleasure

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Sometimes you can judge a book by its cover. This was never truer than for James A. Ciullo's "Orinoco," a political thriller about a Vermont senatorial candidate haunted by the ghosts of his past. The novel's cover art, which features a swastika superimposed upon a night-lit Capitol building, warns those hoping for a "literary" yarn: Look elsewhere.

"Orinoco's" world is one of colluding bad guys often connected by little save their common villainy — drug dealers, corrupt politicians, rogue CIA agents, a sprawling roster of expendable thugs and, of course, a thriving "Nazi underground," those incorrigible rascals you love to hate. Such stories can be a great deal of fun, and, once you get past its slow start, "Orinoco" offers plenty of fun of the "Don't open that door — Oh no, he opened the door!" variety. By halfway through, I was pumping my fist like any red-blooded American confronted with a global conspiracy of Nazis.

The story centers on Joe Lacarta, a University of Vermont professor who decides to run for U.S. Senate as an independent on an apple-pie-and-motherhood platform of campaign finance reform, energy independence, drug decriminalization and "bipartisan cooperation." Hours after Joe announces his candidacy, a trio of henchmen working for a shadowy enterprise murder his Peace Corps buddy in Baja California.

Surprise: Someone evil and powerful doesn't want Joe in the Senate for reasons tracing back to a dark secret — a staple of the genre — buried in his Peace Corps past.

The bad news is that "Orinoco's" political intrigue is unconvincing. The book is more "24" than "Syriana"; Ciullo doesn't offer a compelling reason, beyond a villain's hunch, why an aging academic running on platitudes would pose a serious threat to the proverbial "status quo."

Still, the primary plot, set in motion by Joe's decades-old secret, offers enough refreshing departures from the suspense formula to keep the reader guessing and engaged.

"Orinoco" is very much two different stories: A bit under a third of the book occurs in flashback to 1970s Venezuela, where Joe, like the author, was stationed with the Peace Corps, and the rest occurs in 1998, on the campaign trail, in the halls of the Capitol and throughout the far-flung world of tropical exotica.

Structuring the story around a long flashback, rather than chronologically, risks disrupting its natural momentum. If a suspense novel loses momentum, it loses suspense.

Luckily, Ciullo is well versed in Latin American politics, with a nuanced perspective unrestrained by dogma, and he treats his subject here with relative sophistication. Descriptions of the Venezuelan culture and landscape are passionate and sharp even through the decades.

Perhaps most importantly, "Orinoco's" Venezuelan scenes slow to a pace that resembles real life. We have time to get to know the characters — to enjoy them as individuals rather than pawns in some Nazi master plan. The three Peace Corps buddies and their bone-deep camaraderie — the beer they drink, the girls they meet, the schemes they concoct, the shenanigans they pull off, the trouble they get into and out of — resonate on a human level.

And, since that chemistry carries over from the Venezuelan past into the American present, the flashback does enhance the book's momentum, taking it from a somewhat muddled political polemic into a proper page-turner in which we have some level of emotional investment.

Last I checked, that's the very definition of "guilty pleasure."