

Unraveling the mystery of a political kidnapping

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Pittsfield resident James A. Ciullo has written a sequel to his 2007 novel "Orinoco" which chronicled the quest of fictional U.S. Senate candidate Joe LaCarta.

Now, in "Maracaibo," LaCarta returns as the focal character, but this time as the victim of a mysterious kidnapping as he arrives in Venezuela for a meeting with its President Orlando Vallarta.

During the kidnap ruckus, LaCarta's trip mate and colleague, Texas Sen. Jimmy Ray Hobson, is killed.

By coincidence, Marialena Morales, a CIA agent and lifelong friend of LaCarta, stationed undercover in Venezuela for an unrelated assignment, witnesses the kidnapping.

Violating her superior's questionable wishes that she distance herself from the incident, she sets off on a self-assigned search-and-rescue mission, driven by an impulsive, powerful sense of obligation to save LaCarta.

Clearly originating in "Orinoco's" own historical backstory, we learn that Morales's father was in cahoots with LaCarta, as Peace Corps volunteers, in a righteous Venezuelan art heist more than 30 years earlier.

Numerous colorful characters move in and out of the novel quickly, while others are more tightly woven into the tale.

Unlike authors who seem to style their characters in a monotone, Ciullo has a talent for painting unique individuals with clearly separate voices -- and even more intriguing, faults.

He does not fall into a habit of creating perfect protagonists and secondary characters. His subjects have many weaknesses and insecurities, and stumbles are just as numerous as victories. The realism invoked by these traits creates a collection of sympathetic characters.

The physicality of events is painted specifically and broadly at the same time. Geographical detail is powerful and descriptive, giving a full sensory account of Venezuelan terrain and climate.

The characters are as physically varied as they are in personality, and we get a clear, crisp picture of these men and women acting out their roles.

In "Maracaibo" we see relations between the U.S. and Venezuela rapidly collapsing as the U.S. prepares, a bit too eagerly, for a full invasion in apparent response to the assassination and kidnapping.

Indeed, some of the most intriguing passages are about a succession of increasingly questionable U.S. political dealings tied in with multi-million dollar corporate kickbacks.

The unsavory actions of rogue politicians are rapidly brought to the narrative surface. That gives a dive-right-in quality to the storyline, and, make no mistake, it is enjoyable to learn early on just how unethical certain elected officials can be.

However, a slower unveiling of the shenanigans would have been worked just as well. We are told countless times, through various conversations, about one very specific incident from President Vallarta's childhood that could back up his claim that he did not orchestrate the murder of Sen. Hobson and the kidnapping of Sen. LaCarta. It is stated so many times, in fact, that it seems more suitable for light conversation than political declarations of personal credibility.

Giving more weight to the mystery of Vallarta's involvement could have eased up Ciullo's reliance on a brief tale of a decades-old encounter to move the action along.

The other questionable device is the repeated mention of how much time has passed as events unfold. Or rather, how little.

International meetings and travel, the corralling of public support, major shoot-outs, the complete start and finish of a love story, cross-border hikes, etc., happen over the course of only a few days. So is a stated chronology necessary at all?

The pacing is certainly fast and enjoyable enough to minimize any concern about actual time continuity.

The levels to which trusted political kingpins in the story will sink for personal gain are eyebrow-raising.

Fueling "Maracaibo" with conspiracy theory, Ciullo enthusiastically outlines the power structures that result from political greed and corruption.

There is also a strong left-wing slant to the story with all the evil characters pictured as conservatives. Ciullo avoids being completely partisan, however, by introducing some moderate right-wingers with honorable intentions..

The bias could just as easily have been written the other way for the story's purposes, so should be taken with a grain of salt.

It is important to note that while "Maracaibo" is a sequel, it can easily be read as a stand-alone novel. The backstory achieves two things successfully for the first-time reader. First, it actually originates the characters and their individual histories, so there is no feeling of being shut out, or of arriving late.

At the same time, it piques enough interest to make one want to read the first novel.