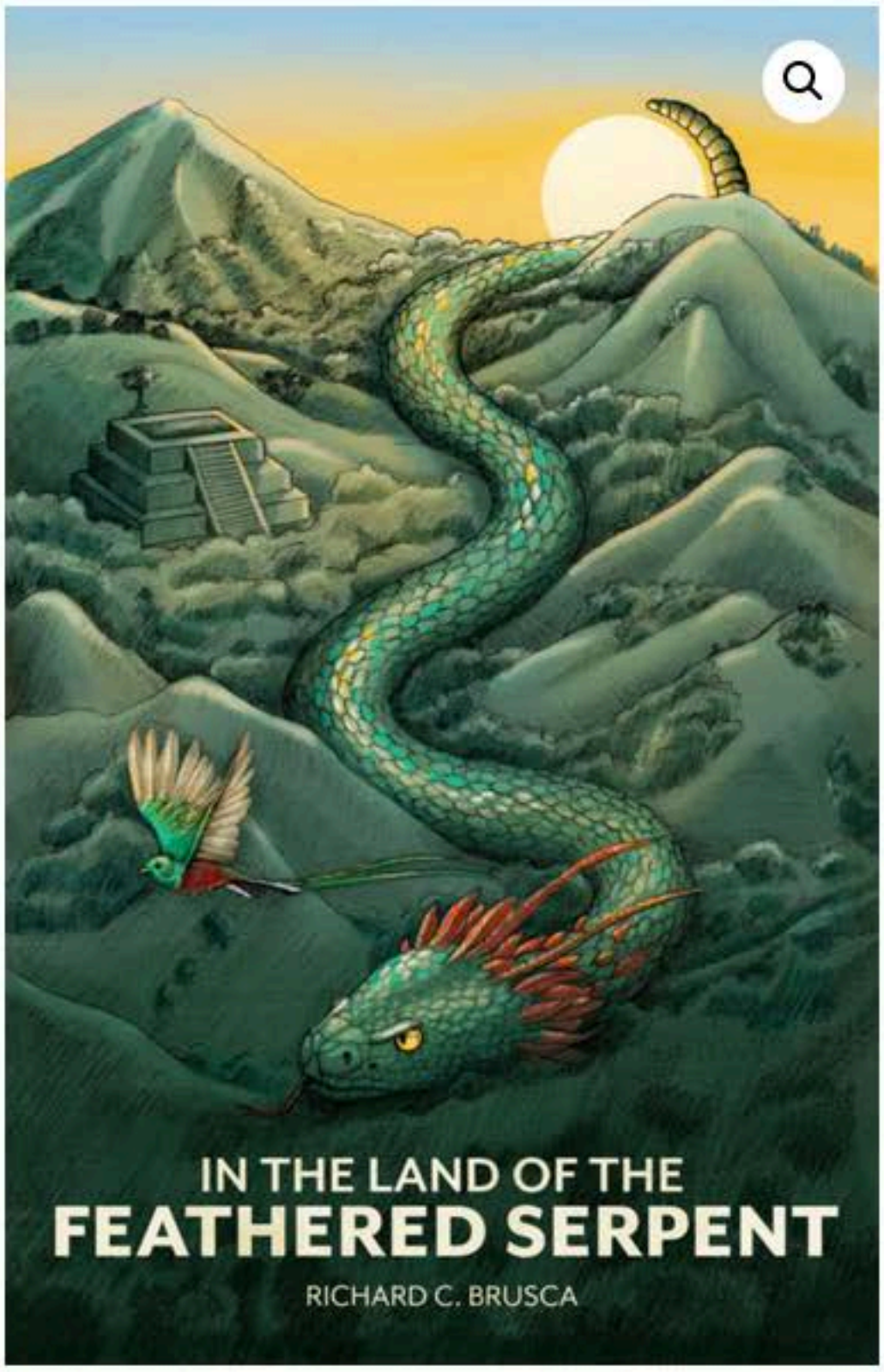

In the Land of the Feathered Serpent

We rated this book:

$14.95

Odel Bernini believed he had it all. He was madly in love with (and still wildly attracted to) his wife, Penelope, he relished his position as Chief Curator at a major museum, and his marine biology studies take him all over the world. But on a trip to Central America, everything changed. Now his job is no longer secure, he is plagued by dreams of a strange woman in the jungle, harbors doubts about his wife's fidelity and affection, and finds himself swooning over a fellow world traveler as mysterious as she is alluring. As Odel embarks on an emotional and spiritual journey, confronting long-held beliefs about who he is, he also finds himself wading deeper into the sociopolitical battleground of US/Latin American relations in the 1980s. He will make hard choices, confront his demons and his virtues, and stumble toward a greater understanding of himself and the world around him… if he survives.

In the Land of the Feathered Serpent is author and scientist Rick Brusca's ambitious reimagining of *The Odyssey* for modern times, embracing the complexity and beauty of Central America as a new Mediterranean for his own Odysseus, Odel. I won't spend too much time comparing the two, because quite honestly, while Brusca's book rests on a framework of *The Odyssey*, more often than not, it is its own narrative. But to ignore the homage completely would be irresponsible.

Brusca cherry-picks elements from the famous tale±—character names, symbolic analogs, etc.—as well as the overarching idea of a man changing over time as he struggles to find his way home. (This time, more metaphorically than literally.) And on this basis, *In the Land of the Feathered Serpent* is a success. It provides intriguing ways for Odel to encounter these famed Odyssean obstacles, steeping them in either the history of Central American or the spirituality and mythology of Mesoamerican cultures. It feels familiar, and yes, there's the occasional heavy-handed metaphor, but it is *never* boring.

As for the narrative itself, Brusca reframes what could easily be construed as a midlife crisis—particularly Odel's encounters with various women in the novel—as something grander, a spiritual awakening. Instead, it becomes an epic personal growth where Odel's romanticism is at once embraced and stripped away from him, and he begins to see those around him as true, flawed people, not just the archetypes he'd painted them as. The reader takes this journey alongside Odel, often a step or two ahead of him, but always rooting for him. Despite his pedantic nature, his self-congratulatory nature, and his unnecessary tendency to always comment on the breasts of the women around him, Odel is an Everyman worth cheering on. You wish him to find true contentment, to solve the mysteries he has stumbled into.

When Brusca focuses on the man and his journey, the book is incredibly engrossing. Experiencing Central America as a place, a complicated melange of politics, choices, beauty, chaos, and potential, strips away the reader's false images, just Odel's illusions are similarly confronted. We, like him, learn more about our world. Those moments are powerful. And, at times, those moments are more spread out than necessary, because the book is absolutely loaded with unnecessary info and exposition. The politics of Central America and the minutiae of marine biology have their place in the story, certainly, but entire pages could be cut from the manuscript without hurting the reader's experience. That may sound harsh, but, at points, the info-dumping stops adding color to the story and starts hindering it. While it does, in a small way, reflect Odel's inability to focus on what's important—losing the forest for the trees, if you will—it does detract. The first 50 pages, in particular, suffer for it. But, in the long run, that is a quibble, the price of admittance for the ride. Odel's struggles, the labyrinthine threads of his life that tangle and knot in peculiar ways, and the path he takes to the other side is an intriguing one, rich in color and character, vibrantly realized.

In the Land of the Feathered Serpent is quite unlike anything I've ever read, because it is a curious combination of many genres. It is epic, a personal story, a midlife crisis, a coming-of-age journey, a love story, a mystery, a spiritual quest, and a historical drama. All of these elements are strings in a web that rests tenuously, yet eye-catchingly, on one of the all-time classic frameworks. This is a multi-course meal to be savored, not devoured in one sitting.

Reviewed By: Glenn Dallas

Author	*Richard C. Brusca*
Star Count	*4/5*
Format	*Trade*
Page Count	*457 pages*
Publisher	*Quetzalcoatl Press/KDP Publishing*
Publish Date	*2019-03-20*
ISBN	*9781794544727*
Amazon	*Buy this Book*
Issue	*November 2020*
Category	*Historical Fiction*
Share	