

The Jaguar Mask

Michael J. DeLuca

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An explosive work of magical realism, Michael J. DeLuca's novel *The Jaguar Mask* is about surviving amid cycles of corruption.

In Guatemala City, Cristina, an artist stricken by visions, grieves for her mother, Eufemia, who was murdered in her restaurant over an unknown conflict. Felipe keeps his head down driving an unlicensed taxi before being enlisted in a homicide case by a disgraced officer, El Bufo, becoming an unwilling and now incriminated accomplice. Moreover, Felipe and Cristina both have secrets that they are desperate to make sense of. They are drawn together as the country's political rot builds to an unbearable cacophony and threatens to boil over.

In spite of the dark subject matter, the imagery is dazzling, intense, and surreal, in particular when it comes to Cristina's point of view: angels and demons stalk her mother's funeral, jaguars wear human masks, and the world is not as it seems. Around her, the setting is entrenched in a long, bloody history of civil unrest: people are disappeared, there are dangerous gangs with ties to the government, society is stratified, and the land and its people face rampant abuse at the hands of local and foreign powers.

Even so, there are moments of light. Cristina feels deep, painful love for her family, in all of their quirks and missteps: her teenage nephew, Lencho, is a flirtatious heckler; her mother's cousin, Rosaría, is kind and rueful. She has blunt memories of Eufemia, who was harsh and fearful out of love for her family. Felipe finds a similar love among his activist roommates Luz and Aníbal, who are fierce and stubborn and who fight for the greater good.

The Jaguar Mask is an arresting novel about constant upheavals and fights against oppression in which a few people make a difference.

NATALIE WOLLENZIEN (July / August 2024)

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