



A Candle for San Simón

Kelly Daniels

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Kelly Daniels's *A Candle for San Simón* is a gritty tale set in an unforgiving Central American world.

Max, a born-again Christian, is trying to track down his father, Norman, who lives in Guatemala and drives a bus carrying contraband. Norman hopes to work off his debt to Chucho, his “tormentor and protector.” Meanwhile, Vicki is en route to visit the “vato,” whom she suspects killed her L.A. gang leader boyfriend. Vicki is nabbed for jaywalking and is deported to Tijuana. When these characters collide, not all make it out alive.

Evocative physical descriptions enrich the book’s characterizations: Norman is a drunken gringo with a “rum-burnt face” and penchant for Hawaiian shirts, while his assistant, Seba, is remembered for the dime-sized pentagram tattoo on his left cheek. In Vicki’s case: her tilted eyes resemble “the color of a lion’s fur,” signalling her as a predator.

The Central American setting is a character in itself. Rife with poverty, violence, gangs, drugs, and human trafficking, it echoes the ancient Mayan traditions of betrayals and sacrifices at every turn. While reflecting on modern and ancient Guatemala, Max concludes that “the devil lived here, and so did God.”

Daniels’s visual writing style is reminiscent of cinematic language and provides opportunities to read deeper into the novel’s subtext. In one scene, Vicki empties a man’s wallet in a motel room. It is no coincidence that Mariachi music—long associated with machismo, love, betrayal, and death—plays next door, while an American comedy plays on television. Although Vicki has lived in L.A. for four years, the privileged and carefree lifestyle depicted on television is unattainable for a street kid from El Salvador.

Exploring themes of love, betrayal, redemption, and survival, *A Candle for San Simón* is an unflinching thriller.

BIANCA BOWERS (September / October 2020)

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