

Birds Sing before Sunrise

Jan Smolders

iUniverse (Feb 27, 2019)

Softcover \$20.99 (254pp)

978-1-5320-6666-5

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Jan Smolders's *Birds Sing before Sunrise* is a muscular political thriller set in the controversial milieu of the energy industry in rural South America.

Frank Anderson is an idealist. He believes in sustainable energy and believes that Earth can no longer rely on fossil fuels. That is why he is the director of the Renewable Energy Division at the PuentePetro Company of Southern California.

Frank is married to another idealist, Joanna, whose hero is John F. Kennedy. Joanna convinces her husband to take a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in southern Peru—an opportunity that could enrich PuentePetro's renewable energy division.

Problems in Peru are immediate. Joanna, along with the couple's two daughters, is kidnapped by terrorists. Frank undertakes a private investigation to rescue his family. The investigation reveals to already cynical Frank that the terrorists are part of a larger conspiracy involving corrupt politicians, profit-obsessed oilmen in the United States and Latin America, and PuentePetro itself.

This thriller is lean and gets to the point in its first two chapters. Few words are spared in describing the characters: Frank, Joanna, and PuentePetro boss Mauricio are defined more by their actions than by their appearances. Joanna and Frank's relationship is captured as supportive, based on love as much as on a shared commitment to the environment. In contrast, lots of ink is spent describing the ins and outs of the energy world. As described, the international business of oil drilling, as well as the now popular business of solar panels and wind turbines, is cutthroat and full of amoral characters who hobnob with mobsters, radicals, and hired guns.

Though the novel ends on a positive, even downright happy, note, it makes for dour reading. Along with its bleak portrayal of the energy industry, it is focused on getting across how complex the energy industry is in developing countries. Peru is pictured as a bipolar state wherein the urbane and well-to-do in Lima rule over the Quechua people of Moquegua and elsewhere with authoritarian zeal. This problem is handled with expertise.

Frank's one-man quest for revenge and justice follows a predictable path and works toward an unsurprising ending, though both are related with panache and literary flourishes, including invocations of Ernest Hemingway and hard-boiled pathos. The storytelling is variously fast and laborious.

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BENJAMIN WELTON (July 17, 2019)

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