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Thriller

The Condor Song
Darryl Nyznyk
Cross Dove Publishing
978-0-9656513-9-4
(March 31, 2013)

The legal expertise of John Grisham meets the environmental activism of Barbara Kingsolver in this thriller by veteran author Darryl Nyznyk.

In *The Condor Song*, his third novel, Nyznyk pits down-and-out lawyer Sean Donovan against his longtime nemesis, aggressive attorney Richard Wolf. Donovan's mission: Save a piece of the Sierra Nevada wilderness from development by Wolf's client, a single-minded businessman who dreams of building a theme park to rival Disney World. Will the depressed but idealistic Donovan rise to the occasion? Does he have a chance against powerful corporations with money to burn?

Donovan's quest makes for an engaging legal thriller, even without the environmental themes that add layers of interest. Nyznyk clearly understands the lawyers' world, and convincingly portrays both the day-to-day logistics of the job and the backstabbing politics that can go with it. The animosity between Donovan and Wolf, for instance, is palpable from their first face-to-face meeting in thirteen years: Wolf stands tall and cool behind his intimidating onyx desk while Donovan grits his teeth to avoid saying something he will regret. Nyznyk carefully doles out the clues as Donovan gathers evidence against Wolf's client, each story twist shifting the odds of success into and out of Donovan's grasp.

Of course, much more is at stake than Donovan's career. The story turns on the possibility that the endangered California condor may be nesting in the very spot designated for development. Some of the most engaging scenes take place not in the courtroom, but on the trails of the Silver Lode, where Donovan and his team seek proof that the enormous birds are living in these mountains.

Nyznyk captures the majesty and menace of the California mountains with detailed wilderness scenes that suggest a firsthand experience of the region. Readers will feel the chill

wind as the intrepid legal team passes through the Sentinels Gap on horseback, intent on finding signs of the elusive condor.

Nyznyk's story is filled with characters who are immediately recognizable, if not exceedingly complex. There's virtuous environmental altruist Buck Anderson, rich, ambitious patriarch Atticus Golden, and Donovan's charming, stew-making Irish mother, Mary. All are neatly drawn, and the story is easy to follow even when Donovan introduces a string of new players, each bearing a new revelation. Some characters border on caricature—like Anderson, who reaches iconic status among environmentalists following his mysterious death. Likewise, the characters' stories occasionally stray into overly dramatic territory. If something can go wrong along the way, it does, and in spectacular fashion, at the very last minute.

Even when the turn of events feels somewhat forced, Nyznyk knows how to keep the pages turning. By frequently switching scenes from wilderness hikes to domestic squabbles to judicial appearances—and dangling the occasional cliffhanger—he engages and maintains the reader's curiosity.

Readers may find themselves looking repeatedly at the foreboding cover of *The Condor Song*, looking for clues in the mountainous relief map shadowed by the awe-inspiring wingspan of the largest flying bird in North America.

Sheila M. Trask