

The Cordillera

Luis Rousset

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In the historical novel The Cordillera, a complex would-be rancher faces dramatic events in international locations.

In Luis Rousset's historical novel *The Cordillera*, a young man's future is derailed when he's offered a position as an international spy.

Jacques, a sixteen-year-old French citizen, is a visitor on his Uncle Ignacio's ranch in Argentina—a space he may eventually take over. In the meantime, he and Ignacio set out to climb the challenging mountains of the Patagonian cordillera. Then Irina, the daughter of a close family friend, arrives at the ranch and seduces Jacques. Afterward, Irina returns to her work as a Russian spy and assassin; Jacques leaves for college and makes plans to become an agent for the French intelligence bureau.

Jacques narrates. When the tale begins, he is a teenager—buoyant but naïve. His development toward becoming a professional assassin is gradual. When he's attacked by a Nicaraguan militia on his first assignment as an agent of the French government, his training kicks in, and he shoots to kill as if on autopilot. Back in the New York office after the mission is completed, though, the faces of the men he's killed haunt him. The question of whether Jacques will be able to live with himself looms.

Striking descriptions of landscapes, flora, and fauna are shared as Jacques moves from remote forest villages to thriving metropolitan areas. Indeed, his observational skills are acute, and his enjoyment of being immersed in unfamiliar settings is infectious. But his interactions with others are less lively: people's voices blend together, with most people speaking in a formal manner even when the subjects of their discussions are informal. And Jacques's love interests are uniform, too—described always as beautiful, intelligent, and devoted, without additional qualities to help in distinguishing them from one another.

As elements of danger and violence are introduced to Jacques's life, the book's suspense increases. He's set on the trail of a missing French citizen who went looking for a mine in the Amazon; though he's warned away from the mine, he persists. He observes brutal conditions and meets a ferocious overseer; nonstop fighting consumes his mission. The incident raises themes of extraction and exploitation; although Jacques is not living in squalor like the miners, he, too, has masters who profit from his perilous labor. His inner vision of a simple life back in Argentina within sight of the cordillera overlays these experiences.

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MICHELE SHARPE (June 20, 2023)

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