

Danger at the dig

In Richard Perhacs' new thriller, an American anthropologist finds himself in deep

"Cuernavaca"

By Richard Perhacs
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When Richard Perhacs takes us to southern Mexico and the city that is also the title of his debut novel, "Cuernavaca," it feels both exotic and thoroughly convincing.

And so it should. As the Pittsburgh native explains in his author's note, he not only briefly lived in Cuernavaca but also plans to relocate part time to Mexico when he retires from his labor and employment law practice at Knox McLaughlin Gornall & Sennett in Erie.

"The combination of an exotic setting and contemporary political developments in Mexico seemed perfect for a story about personal renewal, set against the backdrop of a reawakening nation and people I admire," he writes.

Thus, the city is as much a part of Perhacs' thriller as its evocative bunch of characters. Here are a couple of its notable walk-ons in the book:

■ "Cuernavaca was a 40-mile bus ride from (the airport), up and over a mountain and down the backside of it on Route 95. ... The highway was bordered on each side by a mix of pine, cactus and scrubby trees, broken here and there by rocky outcroppings. ... Shining like a jewel, Cuernavaca nestled in the darkening valley below."



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■ "(Scott and Ana) stopped at a small restaurant called La Universal, just off the zocalo. From a sidewalk table, they could watch people in the square, bathed in the light of the street lamps and the bright vendors' stations. Although after dark now, the center of the city was just waking up."

Of course, Perhacs has more than mere travelogue in mind. If anyone could pronounce it, he no doubt would have named the book "Xochicalco" (pronounced "so-she-cal-co") because it's there, near Cuernavaca, that anthropologists Jerry Dwyer and Scott Flores fly to from Albany to explore a new archaeological excavation producing unbelievable treasures eight centuries old.

When they arrive, they present themselves as professors at the State University of New York at Albany, but only Dwyer holds that distinction anymore. Without spoiler-alerting you, let me only say that because of a personal tragedy Flores is a deeply troubled guy.

He's lost his job, he's lost his purpose in life and by redirecting him to the faraway dig, his good friend Dwyer is doing all he can to try to rerail him.

Of course, once on site at Xochicalco, things take a hard left turn — don't they always in fiction? — and Flores is soon embroiled in Mexican political corruption,

narcotics smuggling, looting at his archaeological dig, and kidnapping. Add in a maybe-too-soon romantic attraction, and you can't blame Flores if he thinks, "What tragedy?"

In "Cuernavaca," Perhacs has written a fast-paced, polished thriller. His characters are not only compelling, but fleshed out enough — and granted enough space — for us to buy into them.

At times, instead of telling us what a character is thinking, Perhacs produces her very thoughts, set off in italics:

"He can't kiss me like this and then just leave and never come back. Not this man. I know it."

I was impressed with Mallory Rock's book design and a striking but uncredited cover. This looks like something you'd find from Penguin or Vintage on the new-paperback table at Barnes & Noble.

Two complaints: For me, Perhacs overextends himself in plot and emotion. For instance, I'm not convinced his sweeping political corruption theme is as believable as the rest of the book. It's good to stir the pot, but this one seems too full.

The melodrama isn't so much the author's doing as that of the American thriller in general. Readers seem to crave it. But in his defense, Perhacs is as accomplished at it as he is with handling all the other elements.

I especially admired: "Her lips stopped his from saying more."

DOUG RIEDER is the former editor of the book page.