



“There are worlds upon worlds before us,” a voice declares in the opening pages of Elwell’s debut novel. The transformative adventure that follows lives up to that promise, guiding readers on a journey of self-discovery, inspired by the teachings of mystic anthropologist Carlos Castaneda. Castaneda’s bestsellers, of course, shared his experiences with the shaman don Juan, using hallucinogenic plants to gain new perspectives on life. Here, Elwell follows a man named Owen’s own quest for knowledge and exploration of the essence of being human, as Owen and his group—including Nate, his assigned partner-in-spiritual-exploration—embrace Castaneda’s warrior path. Though traditionally a solitary sojourn, their shared experience deepens its intensity and meaning.

The title’s promise of “terror” and “wonder” capture the tale itself. While many novels of spiritual seeking present familiar beliefs and easy answers as fresh revelations, Elwell captures something deeper, stranger, and more rewarding—something in the spirit of the work of Castaneda himself. Here is the feeling of navigating uncharted waters and facing provocative challenges while uncovering new meanings that one must push one’s self to understand. Energy is at its core, with the human body as its stage, and Elwell’s descriptions of Owen’s encounters hit like giant waves crashing against the mind: “There is an intensity building, an element of compression and expansion,” he writes, as Owen strives to “focus for all he is worth on taking in the energy and returning it.” Owen’s journey is one of deep alignment with nature, an exploration of balance and transformation.

Elwell’s storytelling, though, tends toward an explanatory flatness rather than the incandescent mysteries of Castaneda. A principled lack of homilies and pat insights is welcome, but readers looking for practical answers about living in a “predatory universe” and facing the “obstacles of our nature” may find the material frustrating. What lingers is the group’s deep devotion to don Juan’s teachings and their relentless pursuit of a higher state of being—though the emotional depth of that pursuit feels somewhat distant.