

# Before Cortés

## AZTEC

By Gary Jennings.  
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By GERALD JONAS

This historical novel represents a triumph of research over art. "Twelve years in the making" — as the jacket copy informs us — it reads like a succession of index cards, on which the author has jotted down all the known facts about the exotic civilization that flourished in central Mexico for two centuries until the Spanish Conquest of 1519-21. Yet the civilization is so truly exotic, the story so inherently dramatic, the facts so genuinely shocking, that one is willing to forgive, up to a point, the pedestrian writing, the lack of narrative imagination, the constricted emotional range.

Mixtli (Dark Cloud), the book's hero, is a Mexicatl who is born on the outskirts of the capital city of Tenochtitlan a half-century before the arrival of Cortés. He becomes, in turn, a student, a scribe, a soldier, a merchant, a cultural anthropologist, an adviser to noble rulers, and finally an involuntary chronicler of his people's past for the victorious Spaniards.

The book is presented as the verbatim transcript of the reminiscences of this "elderly male Indian," recorded at the command of Emperor Charles I, who is eager to learn more about his recently acquired colony of New Spain. The framing device allows the narrator to draw ironic parallels between Aztec and Spanish customs while professing respect for the moral and civil authority of his captors. Unfortunately, this tone of obsequious defiance seems to be the narrator's one strong emotion. When he is not "innocently" offending Spanish sensibilities, with matter-of-fact descriptions of sexual perversions and wholesale human sacrifice, he is flatly describing the flora and fauna of central Mexico and the day-to-day life of his people. The result is a book that resembles an X-rated travelogue.

There is no doubt that Mr. Jennings has done his homework. Mexico is his adopted home. He is not only fluent in Spanish, he taught himself *nahuatl*, the Aztec language that is still spoken by thousands of Mexicans today. He has not only read the standard histories, such as William H. Prescott's "Conquest of Mexico," but he has dug deeply into the early accounts of post-Conquest Mexico by Spanish soldiers, churchmen and administrators. I assume that it is from these sources that he has gleaned such details as the casual cannibalism of the desert people north of Tenochtitlan; "tender white meat flaking off delicate bones" is the way Mixtli describes his first taste of baby-stew. His host's account of the preparation of this "food for the hard times" might have come straight from an Aztec equivalent of Larousse Gastronomique.

Presumably, it was also research that inspired Mixtli's account of his guilt-free initiation into sex by his

Gerald Jonas frequently reviews fiction in these pages.



sister (although the Aztecs had an unequivocal incest taboo); his accidental involvement with a teen-age Aztec princess who couples with men and women and then has them flayed and boiled so that the flesh-free skeleton can serve as armature for lifelike sculptures of her ex-lovers; his guilt-free taste of battlefield homosexuality; his enjoyment of various drug-inspired sexual adventures.

One of the few roles in Aztec society that Mixtli does not assume at one time or another is that of priest. So we get a matter-of-fact outsider's view, rather than an insider's revelations, of the numerous religious festivals during which hundreds and thousands of prisoners of war, slaves and other dispensable victims were sacrificed, their chests slit open with an obsidian blade, their still-beating hearts plucked out and stuffed into the hollow stone images of the ever-hungry gods. When Mixtli's own beloved daughter is sacrificed in a particularly hideous way, his revenge is horrible beyond imagining, but the march of his sentences hardly skips a beat.

The arrival of the Spaniards only compounds the problem. The conflict between the proud, brutal, creative Aztecs and the proud, brutal, gold-hungry Conquistadors is surely one of history's most impressive dramas. How did Cortés and a few hundred men subdue an empire whose warriors, together with the troops of allies and tributary nations, numbered in the tens and perhaps hundreds of thousands? The factual details are here. The Aztecs and their allies fought on foot with bows and arrows, spears and swords — all tipped with sharp flakes of obsidian. The Spaniards brought cannon, muskets, crossbows, horses, and — most important, according to the author — smallpox and plague. Mr. Jennings recounts every diplomatic and military move so meticulously that the reader can second-guess the opponents, and root — against all hope — for the doomed defenders of their clean bright

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