

# From the halls of Montezuma — a twice-told tale

## Aztec

By Gary Jennings

Atheneum, 754 pages, \$15.95

## The Sun, He Dies

By Jamake Highwater

Lippincott & Crowell, 319 pages, \$11.95

Reviewed by Dave Walsten

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**T**he conquest of the Aztecs, under Montezuma, in 1521 is one of those anomalies that so often become landmarks in human history: With scarcely 600 men — vulnerable strangers in an exotic land — Cortez overwhelmed a native force that outnumbered his band, conservatively, by 100 to 1. This enabled the Spanish to establish a permanent foothold in Central America. More important: They had demolished one of the most advanced civilizations in the history of man.

How this was accomplished has never been satisfactorily explained; some of the reasons, however, are elementary: The Aztecs never imposed, at one time, their entire strength against the Spanish, and the terror inspired by Cortez's gunpowder was greatly disproportionate to the actual firepower of his weapons.

But Cortez's signal advantage may have been the Aztec legend that prefigured the return of their god Quetzalcoatl in much the guise of Cortez himself. Montezuma welcomed the Spaniard as though he were a god and accorded him all the appropriate benefices.

An account of the extraordinary conquest suitable for general readers was first written in 1843 by the American historian William H. Prescott in his three-volume "The History and Conquest of Mexico." Even abridged versions of Prescott are not easy reading for present-day appetites, but two new fictionalized accounts of the affair — Gary Jennings' "Aztec" and Jamake Highwater's "The Sun, He Dies" — now make the events of that fabulous encounter somewhat more accessible.

Aside from a vast difference in length (Jen-



nings' novel is six times as long as Highwater's), similarities between the two are striking: Each is a narrative by an Aztec of humble birth who becomes a confidant of Montezuma. Highwater's narrator is the emperor's personal spokesman; Jennings' is his interpreter. Both narratives begin some years before the coming of the Spaniards, and both end with the fall of Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, or shortly thereafter.

Jennings and Highwater have been equally diligent, it appears, in drawing upon primary historic sources for their material, notably Aztec manuscripts, and in sticking to the generally accepted facts of the campaign and conquest. Both have created, though in quite different ways, portrayals of the Spanish as strangers to human decency and compassion, a stance diametrically opposite that of Prescott, who wrote, incredibly, that the swords of the Spanish "were rarely stained with blood, unless it was indispensable to the success of their enterprises. . . . When any of (the Aztecs) fell into (Spanish) hands, they were kindly entertained, their wants supplied, and every means taken to infuse into them a spirit of conciliation."

The narrator in Jennings' gigantic chronicle, Mixtli, has been instructed by the Spanish bishop, under orders from Spain's Charles I, to give a complete account of his own life. A team of clerics transcribe his tale verbatim, to the bishop's constant chagrin, for Mixtli recounts with full candor the perversions visited upon the conquered by the Spanish — military and clergy alike.

Though the conflict between the Spanish and the Aztecs is much the more intriguing part of Jennings' tale, we must first negotiate a chronicle covering Mixtli's early years — 500 pages of his travels, sexual adventures, sudden wealth, instant poverty, close calls at the hands of bandits, the drowning of his wife, the sacrificial death of his daughter — all of this sumptuously

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detailed. We see the care that Jennings has given his research, but the mentality, even the humor of Jennings' Aztecs is perhaps too much like our own. "If this is their small pocks," said one (Aztec) doctor," upon seeing victims of the disease, brought by the Spaniards, "I hope they never favor us with any larger." "Aztec" falls into the same genre of historical novel as James Clavell's outrageously successful "Shogun": A cast of 20th Century characters has seemingly been lifted, contemporary values intact, and dropped into an exotic setting of centuries past.

Jennings has, without question, created some of the most unsavory creatures in recent fiction. One of these, a nymphomaniac named Jadestone Doll, dumps her ex-lovers into cauldrons, boils them down to skeletons, then uses the bones in true-to-life statues. A vignette in similar taste digresses on how the body is progressively reduced to a cinder during immolation at the stake. (How did Jennings research this?) There are also characters who variously dine on children, human excrement, and urine. Mixtli, of course, does none of these. With respect to pleasures of the flesh, he manages to resist all but the most pedestrian temptations.

After Jennings' treatment, Highwa-



Jamake Highwater

ter's is an exercise in moderation. A measured, poetic quality in Highwater's style is suggestive of an Indian legend passed from one generation to the next; the result is a narrative with little punch. But as a Native American of Blackfoot-Cherokee heritage, Highwater is writing of his own people — or at least of his kinsmen, and a certain dignity of approach seems here entirely fitting.