



The Aztec World of Gary Jennings

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The contradictions of Aztec culture both puzzle and fascinate modern readers. The Aztecs practiced a religion based upon warfare, human sacrifice, and other violent and bloody rituals, but they also created exquisite works of art and beautiful lyric poetry that still speaks to us today. These contrasts have led to a wide variety of interpretations of Aztec culture. In the late 1970s, two anthropologists claimed that cannibalism due to dietary protein deficiency was the engine that drove the expansion of the Aztec empire. Aztec armies supposedly conquered distant peoples in order to procure increasing numbers of victims for the sacrificial altar. Once their hearts were torn out in ritual sacrifice, the bodies were distributed to the hungry masses to satisfy their need for protein. This theory received considerable play in the media before scholars disproved it by showing that the Aztec diet was perfectly adequate in protein without the need for human flesh. In the late 1990s, New Age aficionados created a very different depiction of Aztec culture. The Aztecs were peaceful sun worshipers who spent their time in intellectual and artistic pursuits, particularly rituals that used crystals and musical instruments. Human sacrifice—according to the New Age view—was a myth invented by the invading Spaniards to justify their conquest and destruction of Aztec culture.

The Aztec reality, of course, is somewhere between cannibalistic warriors and New Age crystal-gazers. The juxtaposition of violent and aesthetic elements in Aztec culture provides fertile ground for fiction. The novelist writing about the Aztecs has far greater creative latitude than novelists writing about more recent and more familiar settings. For one thing, the available documents on Aztec culture are quite limited in quantity and quality. Hernando Cortés and a few members of his army of 1519 wrote descriptions of the conquest of Mexico; Spanish friars and the descendants of Aztec nobles recorded a number of detailed accounts of particular customs and institutions; Spanish legal proceedings provide some useful observations; and the picture-writing of the Aztecs themselves illuminates certain aspects of religion and society. Archaeological fieldwork is only beginning to furnish information about Aztec life and customs. In short, we know considerably less about central Mexico on the eve of the Spanish conquest than we know about the United States at any stage of our past. Since most modern readers have little knowledge of Aztec culture or history, there is great opportunity for invention and fantasy in fiction concerning their society. A novelist can make up all sorts of nonsense, and most readers will not know the difference. Furthermore, scholars will have difficulty proving the novelist wrong.

There is certainly ample room for invention in Gary Jennings's monumental 1980 novel, *Aztec*. With over one thousand pages, this sprawling account follows an Aztec scribe named Mixtli as he travels over much of what is now Mexico and Guatemala, virtually the entire known world of the Aztecs. The novel is told in Mixtli's voice. The son of a quarryman from Xaltocan, a town in the Valley of Mexico, Mixtli shows great promise in school. He is given the opportunity for further education in the court of King Nezahualpilli of Texcoco, the intellectual and artistic center and one of the two capitals of the Aztec empire. Mixtli becomes a proficient scribe, gains the goodwill of Nezahualpilli, and undertakes military duty in the Texcoco army. He later moves across the lake to serve in the imperial court of Tenochtitlan, the political and military capital of the empire and the largest pre-Spanish city of the New World.

Mixtli next becomes a merchant, one of the renowned *pochteca*. These guild-organized professional traders regularly went out on long expeditions, and Mixtli journeys throughout the Aztec empire and beyond its

borders into the unconquered tropical jungles of the Maya peoples. His trading is astute, and he ends up a wealthy man. Later in life, Mixtli serves as a diplomat for the emperor, which brings him to the court of the enemy Tarascan empire of western Mexico. Mixtli also sets out on several voyages of solitary wandering in which he explores northern and western Mexico, even finding Aztlan, the perhaps mythical northern homeland of the Aztec peoples (scholars have searched for Aztlan without success for decades). Mixtli then participates in the major events of the Spanish conquest. His ability with languages, gained in his many travels, enables him to be the first Aztec to learn Spanish. He later dictates his life story to Bishop Zumáraga, who had been instructed by the emperor Carlos V to interview a typical Aztec about his life story. The texts of these interviews form the narrative of the novel. Zumáraga then has Mixtli burned at the stake as a heretic. His fiery death is a fitting end to a novel full of violence, blood and gore, and frequent sex.

How accurate is this portrayal of Aztec culture? I first tried to read *Aztec* in graduate school, soon after it was published. I was impressed by Jennings's knowledge of the major historical sources on Aztec society, although he refrains from mentioning or citing any sources. He builds a foundation upon known facts, and then adds plausible details of his own to flesh out what the sources don't tell us. Before I had delved halfway through the novel, I had begun to confuse the two types of information. I was lecturing to a class of undergraduates about Aztec religion and was about to state that commoners were afraid of priests, when I realized I didn't know whether that idea was from the historical sources or whether it was Jennings's invention. To avoid confusing myself further, I stopped reading the book.

Jennings's treatment of Aztec priests is a good example of his methods. We know from early Spanish descriptions that Aztec priests were always bloody, dirty, and smelly—they pierced their ears and other body parts for ritual bleeding, and they never bathed. The sources say that their hair was matted with blood, and one way to recognize a priest in Aztec pictorial books is by the red bloody marks below their ears. Jennings puts it like this: "He was surrounded by a horde of priests who, with their filthy black garments, their dirt-encrusted black faces, and their blood-matted long hair, made a somber contrast to [king] Axayacatl's sartorial flamboy-

ance” (p. 62). We also know that priests sometimes chose local commoners—both adults and infants—for sacrificial victims, but the sources do not provide much information on just how they selected the victims. It makes perfect sense that people would have feared and avoided priests, but that interpretation has little support in the sources.

Another example of this method concerns the death of the Aztec emperor Motecuhzoma. We know the following facts. Cortés was holding Motecuhzoma captive in a palace, and many Aztecs were angry with their king for cooperating with the Spaniards. A dangerous mob threatened to overrun the building, and Cortés brought the emperor out on a balcony to try and quiet the crowd. People threw stones at Motecuhzoma, and shortly after that he was found dead. Scholars do not know whether he was killed by his own people or by the Spaniards. In *Aztec*, Motecuhzoma is knocked unconscious by a rock, and Cortés instructs Mixtli (who is at the heart of the action, as usual) to take the king inside and put him at ease. The protagonist sets Motecuhzoma down and kills him with a knife. Again, Jennings has given a plausible interpretation to an event whose details will never be known for sure.

Twenty years later, after publishing four books and numerous scholarly articles on the Aztecs, I felt secure enough in my knowledge of the sources to read the whole novel, and I enjoyed it thoroughly. My more extensive and confident knowledge of the historical descriptions of Aztec society allowed me to appreciate the extent to which Jennings’s Aztec world is based upon a solid empirical foundation. As one of my students put it, he manages to incorporate almost every interesting tidbit of knowledge from the sources into the story. Jennings even includes one of my favorite pieces of Aztec trivia. “My mother shifted her grip so that one of her hands was free, and with it she flung into the fire a number of dried red chilis. When they were crackling and sending up a dense yellow smoke, my Tene [mother] took me again by the ankles and suspended me head down in those acrid fumes. I leave the next little while to your imagination, but I think I nearly perished” (p. 28). This punishment for misbehaving children appears in a painting in the Codex Mendoza¹ with the accompanying text: “They punished the eleven-year-old boy or girl who disregarded verbal correction by making them inhale chili smoke, which was a serious and even cruel torment.” Jennings, however, makes the

punishment vivid with his first-person account. Examples like this, taken from the documentary sources, are scattered throughout *Aztec*.

Gary Jennings’s depiction of Aztec society through Mixtli’s eyes is reasonably accurate. The sharp gulf between nobles and commoners in the novel reflects our knowledge from the sources. Nobles owned most of the land and controlled the government. Commoners owed the nobility labor service and tribute in goods. Membership in the nobility was strictly hereditary, and most commoners could never hope to become a noble, or even to spend time in the presence of nobles. There were two routes of social advancement, however—commerce and the military—and Mixtli was able to follow them both. Merchants, although nominally commoners, could become wealthier than many nobles, although they had to hide their wealth lest the nobles take offense and confiscate their property and possessions. All Aztec men had to perform military service, and success on the battlefield brought social advancement. Early in the Aztec empire, a category of honorary noble was created to reward the most successful and talented commoners. Mixtli reached this level, and thus his successes—as a scribe, a merchant, and a soldier—gave him access to the highest circles of the Aztec nobility. Jennings is thereby able to give the reader access to all levels of society, from slaves and prostitutes to nobles and kings, through the eyes of a single protagonist. The only difficulty here is that the honorary noble rank was abolished by Motecuhzoma, a development not mentioned in the novel.

As in any historical novel, Jennings makes a number of minor errors. For example, his Aztec priests use Spanish, Christian-style incense burners that swing from ropes instead of the long-handled “frying-pan style” actually used (p. 64; a good drawing of an Aztec priest with such a censer is shown in the Codex Mendoza); Aztec priests used chert knives, not obsidian knives, to cut open the chests of sacrificial victims (p. 64); the Tarascans did develop the technology to produce bronze, but they did not use it for weapons as suggested in the novel (p. 527); and his description of the famed *chinampa* agricultural fields is incorrect in several ways (p. 119).

Most of the errors are of minor importance. It is almost impossible to avoid such glitches when presenting complex material to a general audience, and I must admit to perpetuating some errors of this kind myself.

An article on my excavations of Aztec villages in the magazine *Scientific American*² was illustrated with attractive paintings that reconstructed scenes of a market, a household, and an agricultural field, done by an artist on the magazine's staff. The editing and production were done under a tight deadline while I was in Mexico doing fieldwork, and I was only able to give brief comments on the first version of the paintings. I thought that the resulting art was very good, with only a few small errors. Nevertheless, some of my colleagues took great glee in compiling a long list of problems with the paintings.

The most significant errors or distortions in *Aztec* are Jennings's treatment of writing and sex. The Aztec writing system was one of five different scripts known from ancient Mesoamerica. Unlike Maya writing, which was a complete script capable of recording any sentence that could be spoken in the Maya language, Aztec writing was a much more limited, special-purpose collection of glyphs. Only a few kinds of information were recorded in Aztec pictorial books, including histories of ruling dynasties, place names, tribute payments, and esoteric religious knowledge of the calendar, rituals, and gods. In Jennings's Aztec world, scribes write long messages to one another, a practice that just wasn't possible with Aztec writing. I suspect that the author knew better, yet deliberately portrayed writing in this way to help advance the plot.

A similar motivation must account for the treatment of sex in the novel, which is frequent, explicit, inventive, and almost certainly out of line with actual Aztec practices. When I asked a colleague (not an Aztec specialist) if she had read *Aztec*, she said, "I think the novel circulated among our field crew in the Peruvian Andes years ago—isn't that the book where there is a sex scene every thirty pages?" We actually know a fair amount about the Aztecs' views of sex and morality, thanks to the efforts of the Spanish friars to convert people to Christianity. Most Aztecs were far more circumspect about sex than the characters in the book, and moderation in sex and other affairs was an important and fundamental Aztec virtue.³ Much of the sexual behavior in the novel, however, is bizarre. There is a Mexica princess who kills a series of adulterous lovers, boils their bodies to free the bones, and then has artists use the skeletons as frameworks for life-size ceramic models of her lovers. In Tarascan territory, Mixtli participates in a strange practice in which a group of spe-

cially trained small children come into his bed to give him sexual pleasure. Descriptions of incest in the novel are tame in comparison.

The treatment of sex in Jennings's sequel, *Aztec Autumn*, suggests that he realized the extent to which he distorted sexual attitudes and behavior in the earlier novel. Sex scenes are far less frequent in the sequel, and at one point the protagonist of that book, Tenamixtli, even says, "But my Azteca people, and the Mexica, and most others, always had been almost as prudish as Christians in regard to sex" (p. 154). One further error—my pet peeve—should be mentioned. Jennings employs an idiosyncratic spelling scheme for names and words in Nahuatl (the Aztec language), with abundant use of accents incorrectly applied. Current conventions for spelling Nahuatl terms produce words that look sufficiently exotic in English, and I found the orthography distracting and just plain wrong.



ONE ATTRACTION OF fiction as a way to present the historical past is that authors need not limit themselves to the available sources. This does not mean that authors of historical fiction are free to make up anything they please, but rather that they can go beyond the empirical historical record both to flesh out the past and to suggest new ideas and interpretations that might not occur to the cautious, data-bound scholar. Scholars must also go beyond the empirical record of their sources to supply context and meaning for the facts of history. When historians stick too closely to their sources, they may produce incomplete, biased, or even erroneous accounts of the past.

The privileges and obligations of the Aztec nobility furnish a good example. The standard Spanish-language sources all agree that nobles did not pay tribute before the Spanish conquest, and most modern textbooks echo this, saying something to the effect that a major difference between commoners and nobles was that the former paid tribute, and the latter did not (*Aztec* agrees with the textbooks, but Jennings does not belabor this point). But this notion, based on self-serving lies by surviving Aztec nobles in the early Spanish period, is simply wrong. In setting up their own system of tribute and labor obligations, the Spaniards used Aztec practices as a model. When they asked Aztec nobles about their prior tribute

practices, the nobles replied that only commoners had paid tribute. One can just see these colonial-period Aztec nobles winking and grinning at each other as the Spaniards went along with their lie and exempted them from tribute requirements. But, in recent years, scholars studying local administrative records written in Nahuatl have found clear evidence that all nobles, except for the emperor Motecuhzoma, paid tribute to their local king, to the emperor, or to both.⁴ The Spanish administrators may or may not have been gullible—they needed the cooperation of the Aztec nobility to govern their new imperial provinces and could easily have overlooked this deception—but modern scholars were certainly gullible in accepting an interpretation that didn't make sense even though it was described in the colonial documents.

This refusal to be limited by the available sources led Gary Jennings to propose an economic practice that scholars didn't find evidence for until after publication of the novel in 1980. The Aztec economy was the most highly commercialized economy of any ancient culture in the New World. Scores of *pochteca* and other merchants traveled throughout Mexico and Guatemala, many of them making significant personal fortunes (just as Mixtli does in *Aztec*). Marketplaces thrived in every town and city, and several forms of currency were in common use. These features are described accurately and vividly in the novel. Although the documentary record is full of references to markets, merchants, and money within the Aztec empire, these features are not mentioned when the sources talk about relations between the Aztecs and the Tarascans. The Tarascan king ruled a powerful empire just to the west of the Aztecs, and the two empires fought to a standstill in the 1480s. The border was then sealed off by a series of fortresses on each side, and the historical sources focus on the continuous animosity and battles between these two polities.

From the documentary sources, one would not think that the Aztecs and Tarascans traded with one another. Yet, in *Aztec*, there is active commercial exchange between these hostile kingdoms. At one point, Mixtli is sent by the Aztec emperor on a mission to the Tarascan court. He notes that the Tarascans, although enemies of the Aztecs, "allow our travelers and merchants unhindered passage across their country. They engage freely in trade with us" (p. 527). This is a reasonable idea given the importance of commerce in both Aztec and Tarascan society, but scholars,

limiting themselves to the available sources, perhaps did not pay sufficient attention to the heavily biased and sometimes incorrect Aztec portrayal of their relations with the Tarascans.

Confirmation of Jennings's notion of Aztec-Tarascan trade came from archaeological fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s. By applying sophisticated methods of chemical analysis to artifacts, archaeologists identified two Tarascan products present in significant quantities at Aztec sites. The commoners at these communities owned tools of obsidian (volcanic glass that produces an extremely sharp edge when flaked) from many different regions, including Tarascan territory. They also had sewing needles and other objects made of bronze, whose copper can be traced to Tarascan mines.⁵ Jennings's account of Aztec-Tarascan trade in 1980 was prescient. Although the interpretations of a novelist are no substitute for empirical evidence, he deserves credit for showing that this idea was reasonable when most scholars had not even entertained it. For scholars, the lesson is that it is dangerous to limit one's consideration to a single kind of evidence, whether that be Spanish-language documents at the expense of Nahuatl-language documents, or written sources at the expense of archaeology.

We have already seen two of the contributions that historical fiction can make to advance the study of the past. Authors of novels can flesh out the details of people's behavior and daily life by building upon a foundation of historical facts, and they can suggest plausible ideas (such as Aztec-Tarascan trade) that might not occur to scholars who are too bound to their sources. But perhaps the biggest contribution of good historical fiction to the study of the past is its role in communicating the facts and processes of history to a wide audience. The Aztec world constructed by Gary Jennings is remarkably accurate and true to what we know, and his biggest distortions are easily recognizable as novelistic devices. Jennings's book has reached millions of readers; the books that my scholarly colleagues and I have written have not.

The ability of fiction to communicate historical information is not limited to historical novels and films. I have employed this device in my textbook, *The Aztecs*,⁶ in a key chapter, and I have noted a growing popularity of fictional vignettes in books by archaeologists written for students or a general audience. To me, some of the most fascinating features of

Aztec society are the cities, which ranged from the huge cosmopolitan metropolis of Tenochtitlan (now buried under Mexico City) to small regional capitals. When I started writing *The Aztecs*, I was eager to write about Aztec cities for a more general audience, since I had done fieldwork and historical research on the subject. I wrote descriptions of two cities—Tenochtitlan and a smaller city—and was disappointed to find that these passages were boring. I needed to make them more vivid, to portray the cities as they would have appeared to Aztec people. My first revision was terrible prose—highly artificial and awkward descriptions of the form “if the reader could have visited an Aztec city, he/she would have seen such-and-such.”

At that point, I took the plunge and invented fictional visitors to the two cities. My descriptions took the form of their reactions to the sights and activity around them as they entered the cities. I gave these visitors some individuality and personality (a merchant leading an expedition visits the smaller city, and a young provincial noble visits Tenochtitlan for the first time), and my descriptions improved remarkably. Nevertheless, I was worried and insecure about using fiction in a scholarly, nonfiction account. Would my colleagues think that I had sold out? Would readers find it awkward or confusing to have two small fictional vignettes in the middle of a fairly straightforward historical/archaeological account? I had a group of undergraduates read drafts of my chapters for feedback, and they took the fictional passages in stride, suggesting that my characters needed names. The transitions between scholarly narrative and fictionalized descriptions do not seem to trouble students at all. I can’t decide whether this reflects positively or negatively on today’s undergraduates.

I survived my brush with fiction with my scientific and scholarly credentials intact, gaining a greater appreciation for the power of fiction to communicate the past to a wider audience. I must admit that I got excited while working on those passages and entertained brief delusions of writing a novel about the Aztecs. But then we already have *Aztec*. I am disappointed that Jennings did not include a section on his use of sources and the origin of some of his information. As a scholar I always look for that information in historical novels, and I think it helps the general reader as well. I recently received an e-mail message from someone who had just finished reading *Aztec* and wanted to know whether it was accurate or not

(I assured him that the book is quite accurate about most things). Maybe Gary Jennings didn’t care whether readers think his Aztec world is true to life or not; maybe he was only interested in telling a good story. But I for one would like readers to know how accurate the book is, and I suspect that he would have liked them to know as well.

Notes

1. Frances F. Berdan and Patricia R. Anawalt, eds., *The Codex Mendoza*, 4 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) f. 59v.
2. Michael E. Smith, “Life in the Provinces of the Aztec Empire,” *Scientific American* 277(3): 56–63.
3. Louise Burkhart, *The Slippery Earth: Nahua-Christian Moral Dialogue in Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989).
4. James Lockhart, *The Nahua After the Conquest: A Social and Cultural History of the Indians of Central Mexico, Sixteenth Through Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 106.
5. Michael E. Smith, *The Aztecs* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 96–98.
6. See Note 5.



My Indignant Response

Gary Jennings

Gary Jennings died in 1999, before Michael Smith’s piece had been completed. What follows is Jennings’s initial letter to the editor of *Novel History*. The editor had sent Jennings a copy of *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (1995), which served as something of a model for *Novel History*. Jennings’s response is published here because it reflects his thoughts on historical writing and “accuracy” in his *Aztec*. “It may sound to you,” he wrote, “as if I’m already compiling my indignant response.” So be it. The letter appears nearly in its entirety.—Editor

[From Gary Jennings to Mark C. Carnes]

12 July 1997

Dear Mark—

Many thanks for the gift book. I had already purchased one, but now I have one to lend to other film buffs. I enjoyed it immensely. If I had any niggling criticism, it would have been of the book's oh-so-academic *earnestness*. I was many times inclined to murmur, "C'mon, guys, lighten up a little. We're dealing with *movies*."

You can certainly count on my unstinting cooperation—bar any unexpected deluge of work—in the making of your *Novel History*. And in this book I would fully *expect* (not be put off by) the most earnest and painstaking dissection of the works under consideration. However, I have a few tentative caveats to impart. Mind you, these are inspired only by my own experiences at novelization with the aid of and/or versus the professional historians.

Unless the historians whom you hope to corral are of the calibre of Herodotus, Caesar, al-Idrisi, Josephus, Gibbon, et al.—that is to say, men who've actually trodden the grounds of whatever area or era they're "experts" on—I fear you'll wind up with a coterie of graybeards looking down their noses from atop the ivory towers they've built up from a foundation of sources secondary, tertiary, etc.

Well, hell, a lot of historical novelists likewise rely on those same "received wisdoms." I know one guy who has written a novel apiece on the pre-Columbian Aztecs, the Maya and the Inca, without ever once setting foot outside the college campus he inhabits in New Hampshire (or Vermont, I forget). Other historical novelists (notably Michener) depend on battalions of legmen, not necessarily reliable, to do their on-the-scene research for them.

I speak only from my own experience, and here I will comment only on my *Aztec*. Among the reams of fan mail have occasionally cropped up letters from academicians, and they all fall into one of three categories:

- A) The wonderingly praiseful. "Where in the world did you dig up that fact X on page xxx? It confirms a theory I have long held, but until now have had not the least evidence for backup."
- B) The peevishly critical. "How *dare* you assert so-and-so on page xxx?"

Nowhere in all the literature on the subject have I encountered any mention of same!"

- C) The willing-to-be-convinced. "Why the hell didn't you append a bibliography of sources?"

Shit, I was writing a novel, not a Ph.D. thesis, and novels don't generally include bibliographies. If mine had, it would have been indeed quaint, e.g.:

- p. x, note x—Oral history. This told to me by a certain tribe's ancient Rememberer of History, and has purportedly been handed down from generation to generation.
- p. x, note xii—Watched this particular cure effected by a Chiapas jungle witch-doctor.

I'll admit that I did a helluva lot of bookwork as well as legwork. But I relied most heavily on those historians and memoirists like Bernal Diaz and Sahagun who'd actually "been there and done that"—and very little, if at all, on later historians like Bancroft, who merely cribbed from their predecessors. I also took the trouble to learn the Nahuatl ("Aztec") language, hence was able to make some assertions based on linguistic analysis. For example, ask nineteen different professional Mexicologists where the name "Mexico" came from, and you'll get nineteen different answers; but I believe the derivation I unearthed comes closest to the truth.

I'll admit, too, that I did considerable extrapolation, but only from irrefutable starting points. One academic critic chided me for giving my Aztecs the burning-glass lens, "let alone the complex monocle that your hero uses to correct his myopia" because "nothing of the sort exists in any archaeological museum or is mentioned in any known monograph." It happens that I had *seen* the so-called Sun Stone, dating from Aztec times, owned by a remote village—it contained four separate burning-glasses, each employed in turn to kindle sacred fires at certain seasons. I felt safe in assuming that if those "primitives" could grind a double-convex lens, they could as easily grind a plano-concave "monocle."

It may sound to you, Mark, as if I'm already compiling my indignant response to whatever historian may eventually do the critical review of *Aztec*. Actually, I'm only trying to particularize toward a generalization: *viz*, that

you be as selective in choosing which (non-ivory-tower) historians review the novels as you are in choosing the novels themselves.

Anyhow, yes, count on me to participate, in any way I can. And the remuneration is of no consequence. Strike it out entirely.

All best,

Gary