

Historical Testimonies of Aztec Civilization and the Conquest of Mexico

Lost Temple of the Aztecs. Shelley Tanaka. Illus. Greg Ruhl. Scholastic/Madison, 1998. 48 pp. \$21.95 cloth. ISBN 0-590-12478-1. *What the Aztecs Told Me*. ISBN 0-88899-306-4 paper, 0-88899-305-6 cloth. *Broken Shields*. ISBN 0-88800-304-8 paper, 0-88899-303-X cloth. Both books: text and design by Krystyna Libura, Claudia Burr and Maria Cristina Urrutia. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1997. 32 pp. \$15.95, \$6.95 cloth, paper.

These three books effectively complement each other in vibrant depictions of the events leading up to the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519 and the Spanish conquest of the great Aztec city of Tenochtitlán. *Lost Temple of the Aztecs* provides an amazingly in-depth and engrossing account of the clash of two cultures and world-views, by weaving together the historical testimonies recorded by Bernardino de Sahagún in the Florentine Codex: *General History of the Things of New Spain* with a variety of indigenous accounts recorded in renowned histories of this period. The other two books are actual adapted excerpts of Sahagún's account made clear to young readers by the testimonial style of the opening lines: "I, Bernardino de Sahagún, Spanish friar, came to Mexico in the sixteenth century as a missionary. For many years I



Illustration from *What the Aztecs Told Me*

met with the elders of the people who knew the language, beliefs and customs of their land. I have written down what they told me, so you could know how they lived before the Spaniards came" (*What the Aztecs Told Me*). *Broken Shields* opens with the testimonial lament of the defeated Aztecs: "Let

us sing our grief, let us lament our fate so that no one will ever forget what our people have suffered, when they came, when they subjugated us, there in Tenochtitlan, they the Spaniards.”

Together these two translations of the original Mexican children's books published by Tecolote, bring alive the well-selected excerpts from the chronicles, wonderfully illustrated with good quality reproductions of paintings taken from the original codex. The two Groundwood books can be all the better appreciated after reading *Lost Temple of the Aztecs*, which contextualizes and explains such topics as human sacrifice, religious beliefs, contrasting warfare strategies, and the effects of the smallpox epidemic on the Native American population.

Children interested in art will be especially fascinated by the codex paintings representing diverse aspects of both the daily life of the Aztecs and the special ceremonial practices depicted on the first pages of *What the Aztecs Told Me*. While the subject of human sacrifice did dominate much of the Spaniards' accounts of Aztec civilization, dedicating the first six pages of the book to this controversial practice gives the unfortunate impression of a sensationalistic approach to representing the Aztecs as the incomprehensible other, despite the fact that Sahagún's mission was to record their points of view. This could have been avoided by simply reorganizing the material so that the subject of sacrifice would still retain its significance, but would be integrated within a wider cultural context introduced by the pages depicting the quotidian life of the people, their knowledge of nature, medicine, astronomy, and the flora and fauna of Central Mexico. This criticism, however, only pertains to a first reading of the book, which given its fascinating story and aesthetic impact will not be the last. Again, young readers can refer to *Lost Temple of the Aztecs* for a discussion of human sacrifice that explains the belief system behind this practice, while also offering the more ideologically-oriented interpretation that “these sacrifice ceremonies were intended to show people just how powerful the Aztecs were” (28). The uninterpreted accounts of Sahagún complement the multifaceted, mosaic structure of *Lost Temple of the Aztecs* in which continuum, albeit a problematic one, bridges the years 1519-1520 and 1978 when construction of the Mexico City subway unearthed the Great Temple.

Read together, these three books implicitly configure the dynamics of representing self and other in which an uncanny mirroring effects the identifications of the “I” (eye) with civilization, and the other with barbarism. While the Spaniards were said to be horrified at the sight of the bloodstained temples where Aztec priests tore out their victims' hearts, the Aztec account of how the Spaniards ransacked the Feast of the gods, cutting off the drummers' hands and heads, represents the Spaniards as the godless barbarians (*Broken Shields* unpag., *Lost Temple of the Aztecs* 30). The irony of not recognizing in the Spaniards the same imperialistic objectives that motivated Moctezuma closes *Lost Temple of the Aztecs*: “They didn't realize that the Spaniards were warriors like themselves who had come to the New World to

gain riches and glory for their country and their church ... But for the Aztecs the Spanish victory meant much more than defeat in war. It meant the loss of their entire civilization" (46). This last sentence overstates the loss, for just as Eduardo Matos Moctezuma, chief archaeologist of Aztec sites and consultant for this book, is the direct descendant of the emperor, many other Mexicans are the descendants of the Aztecs, whose culture — more enduring and pervasive than the concept of "civilization" — was not suddenly lost in battle. *Lost Temple of the Aztecs* is itself a rich testimony of cultural memory and metamorphosis, presented in a highly integrative format combining direct testimony, thoughtful interpretation, paintings, and artifacts that will bring alive the Aztec heritage for young readers.

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Our Best Friends/Ourselves: Together With Animals

52 Days By Camel: My Sahara Adventure. Lawrie Raskin with Debora Pearson. Annick, 1998. 86 pp. \$14.95, \$24.95, paper, cloth. ISBN 1-55037-518-0, 1-55037-519-9. *Animal Senses: How Animals See, Hear, Taste, Smell and Feel.* Pamela Hickman. Illus. Pat Stephens. Kids Can, 1998. 40 pp. \$14.95. ISBN 1-55074-423-2. *Canadian Endangered Species.* Colleayn O. Mastin. Illus. Jan Sovak. Grasshopper Books, 1995. 31 pp. \$10.95, \$18.95, paper, cloth. ISBN 1-895910-09-9, 1-895910-08-0. *Giraffes.* Bobbie Kalman and Greg Nickles. Crabtree, 1997. 32 pp. ISBN 0-86505-641-2, 0-86505-741-9, cloth, paperback. *In Like A Lion.* Julie Lawson. Illus. Yolaine Lefebvre. North Winds, 1998. 30 pp. \$17.99. ISBN 0-590-24938-X. *On Safari.* Tessa Paul. Crabtree, 1998. 32 pages. ISBN 0-86505-589-0, 0-86505-597-1, cloth, paperback. *Safari.* Robert Bateman. Illus. Robert Bateman. Penguin Canada/Madison, 1998. Unpag. ISBN 0-670-87970-3. *Wild Talk: How Animals Talk To Each Other.* Marilyn Baillie. Illus. Romi Caron. Owl Books, 1996. 32 pp. \$6.95, \$17.95, paper, cloth. ISBN 1-895688-55-8, 1-895688-54-X.

This group of eight books, each one sporting an animal-related title, can be divided into three distinct categories. The first includes five volumes dealing with a number of different species. In the second group containing two books, the author writes about a single species or one particular animal. Finally, the last category with one remaining volume barely deals with animals at all.