

# A modern Aztec warrior slips into our slaughterhouse of a world

## Atomik Aztex

By Sesshu Foster

CITY LIGHTS; 203 PAGES; \$15.95  
PAPERBACK

Reviewed by Carolyn Juris

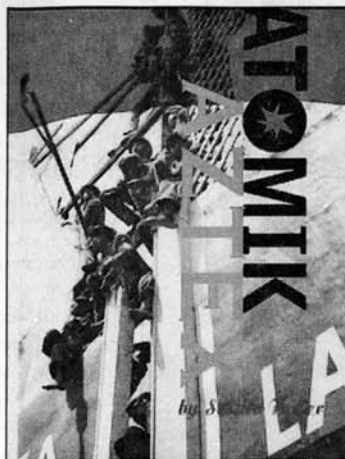
Hernan Cortes landed in Mexico in 1519; two years later, history tells us, the Aztec civilization fell to the Spanish invaders and was wiped out. "Atomik Aztex," the hallucinatory first novel by poet Sesshu Foster, proposes a different reality. Zenzontli, an Aztec warrior and the book's swaggering main character, relates his own version of the Spaniards' expedition: "The vicious leathery little rats crossed the Sargasso Sea come to find out indigenous people already had their number. We welcomed them to our land. They were not heard from again."

Instead, a modern Aztec civilization dominates the Americas, and vanquished Europeans are caged fodder for the human sacrifices that sustain society. "We cut out millions of hearts a year," Zenzontli says, as casually as if he were discussing harvesting maize. "Cuz it puts everything right in this world, in the universe as it stands."

This universe, as Zenzontli is well aware, rests on precarious ground. Most speculative fiction

portrays a single reality diverging from the historical time line: Last year's "The Plot Against America" by Philip Roth, for example, explored the repercussions of aviator Charles Lindbergh's fictional successful bid for the U.S. presidency. But in Foster's novel, the vividly imagined Aztec-ruled world coexists with a more recognizable one. Zenzontli suffers visions in which he and other displaced Aztecs, in the guise of Mexican immigrants, toil in the Farmer John meatpacking plant in what appears to be present-day Los Angeles. With a little cosmetic adjustment, these fierce warriors are ideally suited to their tasks on the kill floor: "We just took our feathers off, shoved them in the pockets of our swap-meet jeans, swabbed our garish paint off our war faces into a borrowed used snot rag. . . . Slicing meat was right up our alley."

In early quick-cut scenes, Foster deftly juxtaposes the gore of sacrifice with the viscera of the slaughterhouse. The steps leading to the top of the Pyramid of the Sun are "awash with layers of black blood, making the sharp granite steps slippery for the priests," while, a few pages later at Farmer John's, blood flows "into the grating, sticky, viscous and black under our rubber boots." He draws other parallels between the two worlds: Zenzontli hurtles



from the meatpacking plant's chill room — "I was so cold my fingers were stiff and wouldn't bend right, shivering, and my nose was running" — to frigid Russia in the winter of 1942, where he's been sent by Aztec elders to assist in the defense of Stalingrad against the Nazis.

If such contextual leaps are jarring or hard to follow, then Zenzontli conjures an apt metaphor for coping with these perspective shifts: "The Wurlitzer of the Universe is packed with 78 rpm realities side by side. Get ready to drop your dime." Steeped in the Aztec notion of cyclical time, he is discomfited but not entirely surprised by his travel between worlds or his visions of alternative

planes of existence. The reader, though, isn't quite so fortunate. Foster's introductory advice that "persons attempting to find a plot in this book should read Huck Finn" provides insufficient warning; the narrative spins grow more vertiginous rather than less so as the novel progresses. Plot points are raised and casually discarded (Zenzontli's relationship with his family, unresolved in either reality, is one example) and it isn't always clear whether the Zenzontli of Farmer John's is aware of his Aztec doppelganger.

The disclaimer also doesn't excuse tedious passages such as a pages-long exchange of mangled catchphrases and puns between Zenzontli and Nita, a labor organizer seeking to unionize the meatpacking plant. Ostensibly meant to frustrate eavesdroppers, the litany of preadolescent insults ("You sure you're following me now, booger-meister?") ring false and seems pointless, especially in comparison with the writer's normally incisive prose. But Foster, the author of two previous collections of politically charged verse, is less concerned with following narrative (or spelling) conventions than with mining his novel's fertile premise for all of the satirical humor and cultural commentary it can yield, and it's in this arena that "Aztex" is most successful.

Zenzontli is recording the novel's events in a codex he calls the True History of the Konquest of Europa. On one level, this winking reference to Bernal Diaz del Castillo's "The True History of the Conquest of New Spain" shows Foster having fun with his novel's conceit.

But the parallel titles also remind us that there's no such thing as a neutral interpretation of history — one man's heathen practice is, as Zenzontli would put it, another's "teknospirituality."

Shortly after learning of his impending mission to the Russian front, Zenzontli catches a harrowing glimpse of our world:

"Entire populations were packed into trains and trucks, taken into the woods and shot or funneled into prison camps of barbwire where they were tortured to death or exterminated en masse. . . . While this happened, entire populations of Spanish-style nations went about their daily business like sleepwalkers like zombies. . . . This was the civilization those Europeans sought to bring us."

Which society is more barbaric? That all depends, as Zenzontli surely would agree, on your perspective. ■

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