



Aztec Midnight

M. C. Tuggle

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This fast-paced novella amps up the suspense with well-crafted dialogue and a Mexican drug cartel subplot.

An American professor's work in Mexico uncovers fake artifacts and entwines him in a kidnapping plot. While this might sound like a typical mystery-suspense story, M. C. Tuggle's meticulous creation of a suspenseful, driving thriller makes *Aztec Midnight* very engaging.

Texan Jonathan Barrett arrives in Cuernavaca, Mexico, with his wife Susanna. A professor and expert in archaeology, particularly colonial Mexican weapons of various Mayan and Aztec lineages, he's visiting the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia at the behest of the US State Department during a dangerous period of drug cartel activity. When he uncovers a fake knife in the tomb of Emperor Ahuitzotl, he is plunged into the dangerous scenario of recovering the real knife for a drug lord in exchange for his kidnapped wife.

This protagonist is racing against time, trying to use his intelligence to save his wife as drug lord Hermanito gives Barrett just five hours to deliver the knife. The mountainous, volcanic landscape of Cuernavaca meshed with the dangerous climate of the cartels, street protests, and even arachnid-infested living quarters that Barrett and Susanna inhabit up the suspense ante. There's a lingering sense of fear in all characters, both native and foreign, and Barrett's quest to save his wife while learning some historical truths keeps *Aztec Midnight* moving page-upon-page quickly to its climax.

Technically, *Aztec Midnight* is a lean piece of writing. At just over ninety pages, there are quick dialogue exchanges and no literary acrobatics. In fact, *Aztec Midnight's* greatest strength may be the dialogue's careful construction. Most of the characters' histories, as well as the histories of Barrett's artifacts, are revealed through dialogue more than through narrative passages. For example, Barrett has to explain to his doubtful, slightly condescending colleague Benitez, "My knowledge of Nahuatl is limited. My specialty is pre-Colombian weapons." Again, this keeps the narrative momentum moving effortlessly and without much pretension.

There are aspects of *Aztec Midnight* that keep it from being a richer, more unique work: the absence of slang or local dialect; the stereotype of Mexico as a cartel-riddled hell; and the characters' lack of complexity—Barrett and Susanna have a seemingly normal, if uninteresting, marriage, while Hermanito is a cold, business-minded drug lord who issues such formally constructed quips as "Your wife has not been touched, and you have my word on that." Yet *Aztec Midnight* is brisk and entertaining.

JAMES BURT (December 13, 2014)

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