

Mexican Journal

P. K. Page

Porcupine's Quill (Sep 30, 2015)

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Mexican Journal is a snapshot of a particular moment in North American life, captured from the perspective of an artist and an outsider.

Mexican Journal, the second volume in a three-volume series of the poet, artist, and diplomat's wife P.K. Page's journals, covers two years of the artist's life in Mexico, a period of great personal and political upheaval. In prose that is by turns vulnerable and brassy, she writes of life in a new locale, of chasing the muse, and of finding her spiritual center.

For Page, entering Mexico was not a case of love at first sight. She and her Canadian diplomat husband transferred there after a posting in Brazil, and her first accounts of the nation are blunt: she finds it gray, unartistic, somewhat backward, and writes that the nights are black and ceaseless. These impressions are tempered as time goes on, and as she falls into a reserved affection for some elements of Mexico's culture, particularly for its folk art.

Between diplomatic events at embassies and with government representatives, Page writes of traveling the nation, seeking out its beautiful spots and the bounty of its markets. She pursues local handicrafts with an exacting eye. And beyond the fun of this housebuilding, she has her own art to consider. Reproductions of her crayon drawings and etchings are sprinkled throughout, and evince an intricate mind at work.

Page also expresses self-doubt at regular intervals, and such vulnerable moments are disarming and sympathetic. Her husband's health presents challenge, as do health crises among family and friends at home in Canada, and she struggles with despair: "Reached a point of feeling that the whole of me—mind, flesh, bone, is made of coarse serge. All warp and woof." Late in the work, spiritual exploration is able to satisfy some of her yearning. She finds comfort in mystical Sufism, though she also writes that she feels almost provincial about it at times.

Yet as much as her personal and artistic concerns invite sympathy, other reflections are certain to be met with less appreciation, particularly where Page comments upon the traits of those she lives amongst. She is wont to discuss her Mexican neighbors with near disdain, doubting that the man she commissions a tiled table from will come through (he does, and on time), suggesting that her servants are lazy, and commenting upon the perceived brutality of local traditions. Such cultural bias lessens as the text progresses, and Page sometimes even manages affection for her neighbors, as when one houseworker is found to protect her place in open books with flower petals, a choice that Page finds charming. Still, her tendency to rate whole cultures in a fast and dismissive manner can be both surprising and grating.

The combination of Page's tremendous personal vulnerability with her often very critical observations makes for a text that is striking for its consistent sense of honesty, even when what Page has to say is not necessarily what one would expect from a diplomat's wife. Her artistic pursuits are enlivening to follow, and her commentary upon art and literature is illuminating. Brief notes on the terror of the Cuban Missile Crisis, felt even from a distance, add a period flavor.

Mexican Journal is a snapshot of a particular moment in North American life, captured from the perspective of an artist and an outsider who has much that's wise to say about her increasingly less foreign landscape.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July 25, 2016)

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