

The Jaguar and the Cacao Tree

Birgitte Rasine

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Czech American author and producer Birgitte Rasine has previously written literary novellas and nonfiction, but *The Jaguar and the Cacao Tree* marks her middle-grade fiction debut. Mayan prehistory intersects with nature preservation and even gastronomy in a dreamy, mystical story line. Eleven-year-old Max Hammond accompanies his parents to Guatemala, where his father, a bee researcher, will be shadowing Mayan beekeepers. Max excitedly starts learning Spanish and soon makes a new friend, twelve-year-old Itzel, the daughter of head beekeeper Don Francisco.

Together Max and Itzel explore the nearby cacao grove and delve into Mayan legends about Lord Thirteen Jaguar and the Sacred Cacao Tree. “No living thing is alone,” Max learns; everything is connected in the web of life. The possibility of magic is everywhere, too: Max meets a hummingbird that communicates with him through his thoughts. After he and Itzel enact a ritual blessing on the Sacred Cacao Tree, the pods split open and their pollen realigns to form secret maps of chocolate trade routes. Rasine thereby transforms what could have been a dry lesson about food production into a gleeful treasure hunt.

As Max’s mother explores with a chocolatier friend the possibility to obtain Guatemalan cacao, the real and legendary worlds start to blend, such that something going awry at the Sacred Cacao Tree might affect worldwide chocolate supply.

Lyrical descriptions of nature proliferate alongside the book’s winsome illustrations, and passages in Spanish or Mayan are accompanied by italicized translations. Readers can learn snippets of language and history while simultaneously being entertained by Max’s mystical rainforest adventures.

This is Book One of “Max and the Code of Harvests,” a series aimed at helping young people understand where food comes from.

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