

Vidas: Deep in Mexico and Spain

Edward Stanton

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Edward Stanton's *Vidas* gathers his encounters with Mexicans and his travels through Spain in rhapsodic essays that mine his lifelong fascination with Latino cultures.

Stanton's interest in Latino cultures was initiated by a neighborhood gardener in 1955 Los Angeles, who regaled Stanton with folklore and wisdom. He learned more from his restaurant coworkers, who faced the threat of deportation, and from visits in Tijuana's red light district in the late 1950s. A mysterious raconteur took Stanton under her "tarnished wings" while he lived in a Saltillo boardinghouse. Stanton's teenage years are covered via lush, dreamlike descriptions—often addressed to the audience—that depict his coming-of-age as an evolution that was shaped by friendships.

Though this celebratory portrait of midcentury Mexico (a playground for Stanton as he sought interesting experiences) is somewhat out of sync with Stanton's unexamined privilege, the book's early sections acknowledge people's hardships in passing, noting the conditions for women in brothels and the prevalence of boot shine boys on the streets. Mexicans, who are likened to "swallows migrating," are poeticized, and sights are cataloged with omnivorous zeal—sometimes empathetic, sometimes touristic. The result is a work of hedonistic nostalgia that's steeped in its era.

The book's second part, which is set in Spain from the 1960s to the present, continues exploring sensuality through sex and gastronomy. Its perspective is more nuanced, encompassing the Franco regime with depth. When Stanton admits that as a foreigner, he was freed from memories of such histories, it's an apt commentary on the difficulty for travelers to ever become more than observers. Later sections include intriguing portraits of friends, Ernest Hemingway, and local traditions; good food and good conversations help Stanton to find multiple true homes.

Vidas is a robust travelogue set on the fringes; it captures Mexico and Spain as alluring destinations.

KAREN RIGBY (March / April 2021)

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