

Mexico Short Guide

Mexico by James A. Michener

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Characters

At the beginning of *Mexico* Michener offers a chronology of events in the novel that extends from the year A.D. 500 until 1961. The chronology is divided into three columns in order to call attention to three major influences on Mexican history: the Indian civilizations, Spain, and the United States. The narrator Norman Clay is the descendant of people from both Mexico and the United States, and Michener wants him to personify the way in which the histories and fates of the two countries are inextricably linked.

Norman Clay is a journalist who has been sent by a New York magazine to cover the annual bullfight fiesta in Toledo, Mexico. In other words, he must do exactly what Michener is attempting to do in Mexico, which is to explain one country's history in such a way that it is relevant to readers in another country. In writing his account for the New York magazine, Norman Clay is also trying to decide whether he is more a countryman of Mexico or of the United States.

Norman's grandfather Jubal Clay fought for the United States in its war against Mexico in the 1840s; and after fighting for the losing side in the American Civil War in the 1860s, Jubal Clay sought refuge in Mexico, the same country against which he had fought twenty years before. In the 1890s, Jubal Clay is the founder of Toledo's Tournament of Flowers, the poetry competition at which his grandson will serve as a judge in 1961. Jubal Clay marries a Mexican woman, and in 1920 his son John writes a book about the history of Toledo entitled *The Pyramid and the Cathedral*. In writing his own account of Toledo in 1961, Norman Clay is influenced by his father's book as well as the statue of his father that dominates the town square of Toledo. It is one of the ironies of history that Jubal Clay left the United States for Mexico in 1866 when the American government expropriated his Virginia plantation; then his son John Clay left Mexico for Alabama in 1938 when the Mexican government expropriated the holdings of American Petroleum, the oil company for which John Clay worked.

In nineteenth-century Toledo, Jubal Clay meets Don Alipio Palafox, the descendant of a sixteenth-century professor at the University of Salamanca in Spain who was executed for heresy by the Inquisition. The professor's son Antonio is the one who names Toledo, Mexico, in honor of Toledo, Spain, and who begins work on the cathedral in the Mexican town. In the 1890s Alipio Palafox adds the bullfights to Toledo's annual fiesta after Jubal Clay initiates the poetry contest. Eduardo Palafox, Alipio's son, provides the bulls for the fiesta in 1961.

Of the Indian characters, the first name of importance is Ixmiq, who began building Toledo's pyramid around A.D. 600. In 1961 Toledo's annual fiesta bears his name. Just before the time of the Spanish conquest, Michener develops some other Indian characters to a degree, namely Lady Gray Eyes and Xochitl. Xochitl and her daughter Stranger become the first Indians to convert to Christianity. In the twentieth century Father Juan Lopez is an Indian priest who represents the way in which the various races in Mexico maintain their distinct identities somewhat, even though they share a common religion.



Leon Ledesma is the bullfight critic in Mexico, and he serves to further Michener's claim that an understanding of the bullfight is fundamental to an understanding of Mexican history. For example, Ledesma alludes to many Spanish painters and writers as he describes bullfighters. He also leads American tourists on historical tours of Toledo's pyramid and cathedral, the symbols of Mexico's indigenous and Spanish roots, respectively, and the source of the title of John Clay's book, *The Pyramid and the Cathedral*.

Through Ledesma Michener also offers insight into the inaccuracy that frequently characterizes written history. It is a peculiar feature of the bullfight that the bullfighters pay the critic who will write about their performances for the newspaper. While this tradition resembles bribery, it has become accepted, and Michener offers Ledesma as an example of how historical accounts of the bullfight and other matters can be corrupted. Ledesma's accounts of the bullfights also serve to suggest that Norman Clay's accounts of the same bullfights are not necessarily definitive. In other words, the validity of written history is debatable.

Later in the novel Michener develops the character of General Saturnino Gurza, a leader of the peasants during the Mexican Revolution. At the end of the novel Eduardo Palafox plans to stage a pageant honoring Gurza's life at the next year's fiesta. Michener also includes some American tourists at the fiesta in order to dramatize the way in which his novel *Mexico* is designed to explain the fiesta to his English-speaking reader. Penny Grim is one of these Americans, and her interest in the bullfighters adds a hint of romance to the novel.

Social Concerns

In presenting Mexican history as a series of violent conflicts between various indigenous groups, between Spaniards and Indians, or between various social classes during the Mexican Revolution, Michener conveys the idea that the revolutionary spirit is inherent to Mexican civilization and that revolutionaries from all over the world can assimilate comfortably into Mexican society. For example, the narrator's grandfather Jubal Clay migrated to Mexico from Virginia in 1866 after participating with the losing side in the American Civil War. Eduardo Palafox, Toledo's prominent bull breeder, is the descendant of victims of persecution at the hands of the Inquisition in sixteenth-century Spain. Leon Ledesma, the bullfight critic, left Spain for Mexico in 1936 because of his political associations at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Michener portrays Mexico as the natural refuge for these political exiles from Spain and America.

Techniques

Although the primary action of the novel takes place in 1961, there are extended flashbacks to the Indian civilization that existed in Mexico fifteen hundred years before, to Spain in the sixteenth century, to Virginia during the American Civil War in the 1860s, and to Mexico during its revolution in the early twentieth century. The purpose of these flashbacks is to show how the characters present in 1961 have been influenced by history and by their various ancestors.

Besides flashback, Michener employs several other techniques to reinforce the idea that the past directly influences the present and to suggest that history is constantly in the process of being written. For example, the narrator Norman Clay is a reporter for a magazine published in New York and has been sent by his editor to Toledo, a fictional town in Mexico, in order to cover a bullfighting festival. As the reporter Clay and the editor Drummond exchange telegrams about the bullfights, the reader witnesses history being written for the magazine. Recorded history is sometimes inaccurate; in this case, the editor tends to adulterate Clay's accounts in order to please the magazine's readers. Of course, the reader of Mexico is supposed to be sympathetic to the narrator/journalist Clay because through the eyes of Clay the reader of Mexico sees the bullfight as it really occurs, not the diluted account of the bullfight that is printed in the magazine by an editor who has never been to Toledo or seen a bullfight.

Michener employs even more techniques to give the readers of Mexico the sensation that they are witnessing the process of history being written and also to make the readers question the validity of the history that has already been written. For example, as the narrator Norman Clay prepares his story about Toledo in 1961, we learn that in 1920 his father John Clay published a book about Toledo. In many ways, Mexico is a book about the writing of John Clay's book, which is entitled *The Pyramid and the Cathedral*. In other words, Michener's intention in Mexico is to make his readers feel that they are participating in the act of writing history.

During the same week as Toledo's bullfight festival, the town sponsors the Tournament of Flowers, which is a poetry competition. Norman Clay is invited to be one of the judges at the poetry contest, at which he calls poetry the "queen of the verbal arts," thus acknowledging the relationship between bullfighting, history, and literature. The relationship between bullfighting and poetry becomes most evident when the bullfighter Paquito de Monterrey is gored to death, and ballads are written about him in the tradition of Federico Garcia Lorca's poem ("Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias," 1935) about the death of the bullfighter Ignacio Sanchez Mejias.

Another feature of Toledo's annual fiesta is the pageant, a historical play about the town's past.

Themes

As in many of Michener's epic novels whose titles are the singular names of specific places, the main theme of Mexico is the history of the country from the beginning of time until the bullfight fiesta in 1961. There are references to a time at least twenty thousand years ago when people from Siberia migrated across the Bering Strait through Alaska and southward to Mexico. About A.D. 600 the descendants of these migrants began building the pyramid that still dominates Toledo in 1961. The novel chronicles the wars between various Indian tribes until the Spanish conquer Mexico in the sixteenth century and leave their architectural mark on Toledo by constructing the cathedral. Michener's chronology is comprehensive, but he does emphasize the significance of certain events, such as the Mexican Revolution of the early twentieth century.

Besides simply presenting Mexican history, Michener develops the bullfight as a complementary theme in the novel. The bullfighter Victoriano Leal has Spanish ancestry and personifies Mexico's European heritage, while Juan Gomez has Indian ancestry and represents Mexico's indigenous influences.

The competition between these two men of diverse heritage in the violent spectacle of the bullfight becomes a metaphor for the violent series of conflicts between various peoples that has resulted in Mexico's rich cultural tapestry.



Key Questions

Over the course of Michener's career, he has written monolithic novels about many places, including the Pacific, the Far East, the Middle East, Western and Eastern Europe, and the Americas. However, the author seems to have a special affection for the Hispanic world, perhaps because Spain and Mexico both represent melting pots of many different cultures. In *Iberia* (1968) Michener portrays Spain as a country that has combined the cultures of Iberians, Celts, Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, and Arabs. Likewise, Mexico is about a country with a diverse mix of indigenous Indian races, Spaniards, and other peoples from Europe and the Americas.

1. Are the long passages describing the bullfight excessive, or does Michener present them successfully as a metaphor for Mexican history and culture?
2. Does Norman Clay succeed in his intention to present Toledo from a peculiarly Mexican point of view, as opposed to a Spanish or American point of view?
3. How believable are the individual characters that Michener chooses to develop during the historical flashbacks, such as Lady Gray Eyes and Xochitl? Are they as realistic as the narrator and his contemporaries in 1961?
4. The attitudes toward usury and the lending of money expressed during the debate at the University of Salamanca in the sixteenth century may seem anachronistic to readers of Mexico. What contemporary issues today would result in the kind of heated moral debate that usury caused in the sixteenth century?
5. According to *My Lost Mexico*, Michener originally intended to include three college girls from Texas as major characters in Mexico, but he eliminated them from the novel's final version. Nevertheless, Mexico features the character Penny Grim, a girl from Oklahoma who discusses her future plans for college. Why does Michener include her in the novel?
6. Are Drummond's editorial comments on Norman Clay's dispatches irritating, or does Drummond offer the reader a useful connection between Mexico and the United States?
7. What is the role of religion in the novel, from the Indians who worship pulque, to the Spanish Inquisition, to the twentieth-century Indian priest Juan Gomez?
8. Why does Michener create the fictional town of Toledo as the focus of the novel while retaining actual places as secondary settings, such as Salamanca, Spain, and Richmond, Virginia?

How would the novel be different if Michener had chosen an actual town in Mexico as his principal setting?
9. Is Michener correct in saying that both journalists and historians prefer simplifications, even if they are not true?



10. How valid is Michener's assertion that Spanish is the language of poetry, while English is the language of commerce?

Literary Precedents

Michener's use of the bullfight as a metaphor for Mexican history is reminiscent of Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), a treatise on bullfighting that makes correlations between the taurine art and other phenomena, including writing, painting, and history. Of the two main bullfighters in Mexico, Victoriano Leal symbolizes Mexico's Spanish past while Gomez symbolizes the country's indigenous roots. Like Hemingway in *Death in the Afternoon*, Michener compares the bullfighters' techniques to the styles of various Spanish painters and writers.

For example, Victoriano Leal's bullfighting recalls the painting of El Greco and the literature of Federico Garcia Lorca; Gomez' bullfighting resembles the painting of Velazquez and the writing of Seneca, a Roman philosopher from Cordoba.

Considering that Michener began researching and writing Mexico between 1959 and 1961, one must recall that, also in 1959, Hemingway spent the bullfight season in Spain researching *The Dangerous Summer*, which Life magazine published in 1960. *The Dangerous Summer* is a nonfictional account of the "mano a mano," or bullfighters' duel, staged by two famous Spanish bullfighters in 1959. Michener adopts the format of the "mano a mano" for his portrayal of the rivalry between Victoriano Leal and Gomez in Mexico.

When Hemingway's *The Dangerous Summer* was finally published in book form in 1985, twenty-five years after its original publication in Life magazine, Michener was chosen to write the introduction. In preparing this introduction, perhaps Michener's interest in his own bullfighting story was renewed, and he would publish the manuscript he abandoned in 1961 as Mexico in 1992.

Related Titles

In *Mexico*, Michener shows how the Spaniards who colonized Mexico mixed with the indigenous races. As he introduces the colonizers before they leave Spain, Michener relies upon the knowledge of Spanish history that he acquired while researching and writing *Iberia* (1968). *Mexico* also examines the confluence of politics and history between Mexico and the United States, a phenomenon that Michener has treated previously in *Texas* (1985) and in *The Eagle and the Raven* (1990). Also in 1992, the same year that *Mexico* was released, Michener published *My Lost Mexico*, in which the author narrates the process by which he composed *Mexico* over a period of more than thirty years. *My Lost Mexico* includes photographic reproductions of some of Michener's handwritten notes and outlines that offer insight into the creative process that resulted in *Mexico*. *My Lost Mexico* also includes passages that Michener wrote for early drafts of *Mexico* but which he did not include in the final version of the novel.



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