

EDITORIAL REVIEW



SCHOOL LIBRARY JOURNAL



Middle Grade Xpress Reviews | May 2016 Issue

Not only is the rain forest in Guatemala full of exotic plants, animals, and insects, it has an old, mysterious magic. That magic seats itself inside an ancient cacao tree, where the stories of the past are held within the cacao pods. Up until recently, only the Mayan elders knew of the secret magic.

All of that changes when a young boy named Max travels to Guatemala with his family to study the stingless bees of the Maya. The magic of the rain forest immediately casts a spell on Max.

A young Mayan girl, Itzel, notices the magic surrounding Max and befriends him by sharing her customs and the history of the cacao trees. Itzel slowly begins to reveal the secrets of the rain forest, until one night the two wander deep into the forest and release a magical force.

This is a unique middle grade novel that expertly blends magic, science, culture, and ecological awareness. While the writing is rich and detailed, it may go over less experienced younger readers' heads. Max fluctuates between having authentic, typical 11-year-old boy reactions and experiencing thoughts and feelings like those of a much older person. The extensive vocabulary used makes this book an excellent resource for readers looking for a challenge.

VERDICT: An original concept helps propel this story forward, creating a magical world that entertains and educates.

—Annalise Ammer, Henrietta Public Library, New York

EDITORIAL REVIEW



FOREWORD REVIEWS



Spotlight Reviews | Summer 2016 Issue

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 exploration 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.

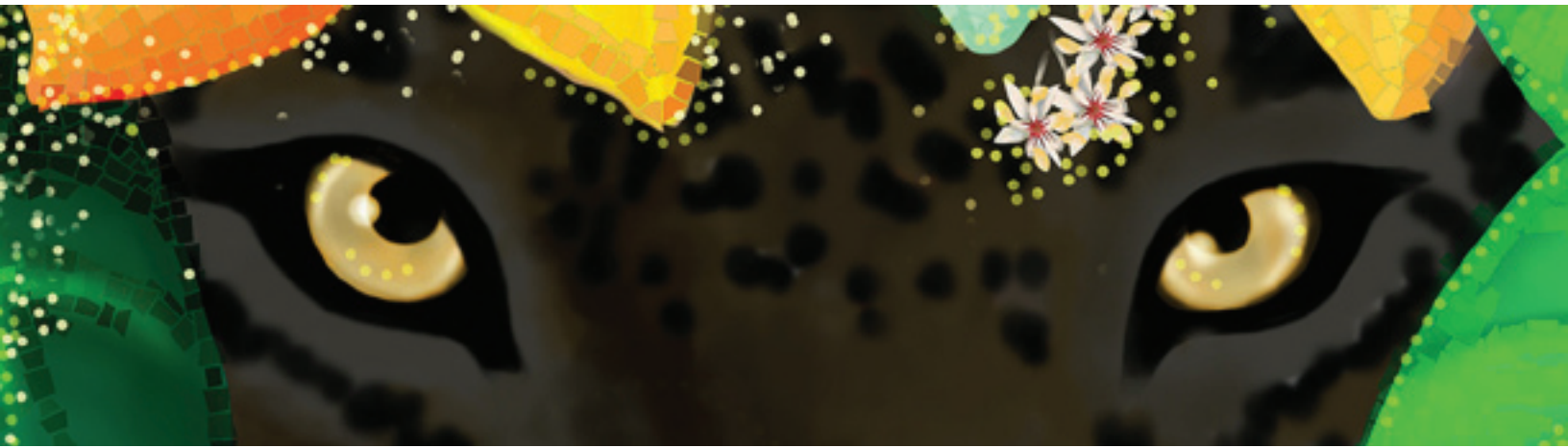
Together Max and Itzel explore the nearby cacao grove and delve into Mayan legends about Lord Thirteen Jaguar and the Sacred Cacao Tree. “No living thing is alone,” Max learns; everything is connected in the web of life. The possibility of magic is everywhere, too: Max meets a hummingbird that communicates 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.

INDUSTRY REVIEW



C-SPOT.COM



Book Reviews, Top Shelf | March 17, 2016

Faulkner noted “fiction is often the best fact.” Little wonder metaphors suit Mayan cosmology better than archeology & anthropology. Just as lines of great poetics break the sentence & suspend meaning, the Mayan world in which reified becomes deified & vice-versa makes for perfect logic, indeed feels most like reality, in the setting of a novel or the visual arts where perception enters the imaginarium to open up possibilities.

In this respect, Birgitte Rasine’s *The Jaguar & the Cacao Tree* (TJ&TCT) delivers just as much if not more essence of that culture than, say, exhaustive Mayan studies or the plethora of ‘chocolate bibles’ touted by authors as the definitive resource.

But academia, considered legit, gets taken more seriously, while freer creatives usually get dismissed or curated as ‘outsider art’ so scholars can arbitrate it. Fine. Coltrane’s “Love Supreme” wasn’t bopped in a classroom but in a basement on Long Island. Still, dissertations are written about it, PhDs awarded, & tenure tracks greased for lifetime salaries.

In TJ&TCT, yellow-eyed black cats, venomous pit vipers, full moons, iridescent hummingbirds, cocoa dust storms, & people born under *naguals* (or spirit-signs) all inhabit a post-Eden jungle in which commonsense & common notions are turned on their head. For instance, in Mayan numerology 13 turns out to be lucky, endowed with deep spiritual & temporal powers. Or an *encanto* / magick act in which there are more seeds inside a single pod hanging off the lone sacred cacao tree than there are in the entire country.

Sure, certain scenes get carried away, farfetched in fact. They ridicule the intelligence of her audience—kids & pre-teens—with, to illustrate but one episode, all the chocolate equipment in the world being stolen in a heist on the same night (just interpret it as bittersweet hacktivism). Then the ultimate scene (sorry, no spoiler here) stretches the fantastical into the far-out obtuse... Rasine clearly a fabulist.

Somewhat less preposterous, she embeds a *Titanic*-style romance between an American boy (the *extranjero* or foreigner in this saga) & a Mayan girl. Ahhhh. The latter born under the sign of 13 Jaguar (a powerful

day in the local Tzolk'in calendar) linked to the son of the historical Lord Cacao / Jasaw Chan K'awiil I, the king of Tik'al, thought to have planted the sacred cacao tree after losing his young son, devoured by a jaguar, due to the ruler's greed. That humble offering of planting a tree entwined the souls of 13 Jaguar & the child, now taken root together within the sacred cacao tree itself—The World Tree. Because a soul is immortal, the tree never stops growing versus the typical 30-year lifespan for cacao. Forever young, this one still fruits a millennium later.

At times TJ&TCT feels best suited for those who still believe in Santa, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, Oz... which includes the grownup kid in everyone, basically the most interesting people in the world.

The nib of the entire drama might be contained in a line pertaining to Western academics—so accomplished, so rational, so scientific—studying the area who, as outsiders, are not even aware let alone invited to a ritual ceremony conducted by the village elders one night under the sacred cacao tree: “If they only knew what real “research” they were missing... Followed by “little did she know how much she in fact did not.”

Of course the kids are in on the secrets. Akin to digital devices, most adults have no idea.

Irregardless of the veracity within Rasine's account (hey, science changes its conclusions periodically to engender disputes), the validity should not be discounted.

Short of time-traveling to Mesoamerica & marrying into the culture, TJ&TCT pretty much guides one to think, if not quite live, like a Mayan, perhaps in an idealized way, invoking *mostly* the kinder spirits in a similar fashion to Disney transmitting the better angels of Americana. It gives a strong verbal-map of how the early colonials—whose presumed descendants crawled across the Bearing Straits or floated alongside ice sheets—dealt with this New World wilderness. About as close as most gringos will ever approach the inner sanctum / workings of, stated respectfully, ‘The Other’, now that ‘The Other’ prides itself to call itself ‘The Other’ (or at least inculcated by universities to do so).

Added bonus lesson: the foreign language courses. Pocked with a fair amount of the Spanish of the conquistadores, as well as equally adept with the native Itzà dialect (for a flavor, try pronouncing & swallowing *Nojo'och tukaanil* / Great creator of the universe).

Plus add-in some profound lessons. For example, *Humans waste energy in talk*, muttered Fuego, one of the hummingbirds who thought-lines with the children.

So with that, let's end this quickly, by saying that after reading almost every book or blog on the subject — from cookbooks & histories to the child slave labor trade & ‘oo-la-la, OMG I-can't-believe-I-just-went-around-the-world-&ate-chocolate-in-every-country... Facebook me, Instagram it, & Snapchat, please’ — TJ&TCT is a contender for the best title in the last 5 years. One of the few books on the subject that approximates a page-turner &, though fiction / fantasy, actually pretty factual too!

To the grandmother in the acknowledgements section who laments she'll miss all the characters in the book now that the story is finished, no worries: in a sense the tale never ends... she'll remember them fondly with a lump in her throat every time she bites... into chocolate.

YOUTH REVIEW



PHOEBE'S BOOKSHELF



January 23, 2016

This was a thrilling and marvelous book in almost every way. It's full of adventure, mythology, magic and a wondrous plot. The book is about two kids, Max and Itzel, and their adventures in the jungles of Guatemala. It is also about Mayan life and mythology where the legends actually come to life!

Max is an eleven-year-old boy who gets to travel the world. His father is a bee researcher whose job takes him to exotic places and his mother is a science writer who helps Max's father. The book begins when Max's family goes to Guatemala to research a unique type of bee. There, they stay with a small Mayan village, near the jungle, where Max meets a young Mayan girl names Itzel. Itzel teaches Max about the ancient Mayan culture and traditions and together, they have numerous adventures in the jungle. For example, they encounter serpents and jaguars, and re-home honeybees.

The biggest adventure they have is when, one night, Itzel takes Max to a sacred cacao tree where, during the full moon, the Mayan elders perform a ritual with the cacao pods. But when Max and Itzel realize it's not the night of the full moon, they have to hurry back to the village before they are discovered missing and near the sacred tree, where they are not allowed. As they are leaving, they discover several of the sacred cacao pods had fallen off the tree. When they open the pods, they accidentally release the sacred pollen inside and find themselves in deep trouble with one of the Mayan mythological deities.

This book taught me a lot about the Mayan ways. For example, Itzel explains that naguals are "spirit guides." In the book, Max actually meets his nagual, a hummingbird called Luna, who becomes an important character in the story. But I especially loved learning that chocolate is a part of Mayan history, including a special hot chocolate recipe that was passed down from an ancient Mayan lord.

One of the things I really liked about this book is that the author provided many small adventures and then one big one at the end. Most other books I've read only have one main adventure. I also liked the way the little adventures built up to the key adventure. This made the book more interesting and exciting.

Also, there are parts in the book where the characters speak Spanish, and the author provides the translation underneath. I think the way Spanish is used in the book makes the characters more realistic, since that is the language that is spoken in Guatemala. I also think it's fun to learn a little Spanish.

This is a great adventure book for kids ages 9-13.

*Note: At the time of this review, Phoebe was 10 years old. She runs her own book review blog.
Source: <http://www.phoebesbookshelf.com/review-of-the-jaguar-and-the-cocoa-tree/>*