

Twins battle Aztec gods in 'Smoking Mirror'

By Bryce Milligan
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

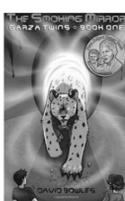
With his new novel "The Smoking Mirror," South Texas author David Bowles is helping to fill what amounts to an ethnic gap in mythology-oriented adventure literature for middle-grade readers by exploring the Aztec underworld, Mictlan.

He's created a rollercoaster narrative that fascinates, educates and (almost inevitably) terrifies.

Bowles' first novel has been celebrated this spring by being named a Pura Belpré Honor Book (and thereby making the Notable Children's Books list of the Association for Library Service to Children) and being a finalist for the Texas Institute of Letters' H-E-B prize for young adult literature.

There is a point in "The Smoking Mirror" when Johnny Garza comments to his twin sister Carol, "It seems to me that history and mythology? Same thing."

It is the kind of thing only someone who has stood at that nexus and seen into both



THE SMOKING MIRROR

By David Bowles
IFWG Publishing,
\$12.99, ages 9-12

worlds can acknowledge so matter-of-factly.

Of course, Johnny (Juan Ángel) and Carol (Carolina) have only recently learned that they are themselves shape-shifting *naguales* (able to transform into animals), and that their mother was not the victim of a narco kidnapping, but is being tortured in the dead center of Mictlan by the ultimate prince of evil and dark magic, Tezcatlipoca.

The twins are 12-year-olds from Donna, and it is up to them to save their mother. Tezcatlipoca has been around since the beginning of time. Not exactly a fair contest.

Tezcatlipoca is the brother of an Aztec god more familiar to modern readers, Quetzalcoatl. The two were charged by the oldest gods to oversee the de-

velopment of life on earth. As Johnny realizes, the twins are "stuck in the middle of the oldest family feud in the universe."

By the time the twins grasp how desperate things are, they are well on their way down the Black Road that leads through the Nine Deadly Deserts of Mictlan. It is a fast-paced, if linguistically challenging, quest for characters and readers alike.

First they meet the *tzapame*, the Aztec version of elves, who help the twins pass through the *chay abah*, the great obsidian "smoking mirror" that separates the worlds of the living and the dead, where history and mythology become one.

Aided by Xolotl, the giant hound who is the *tonal* (animal manifestation) of Quetzalcoatl, the twins pass over the great river Chignahuapan, learn to control their own *tonals*.

They dive into ever worse dangers, facing down one monster after another, eventually reaching a terrifying and truly excruciating moment on an altar of human sacrifice, surrounded by a city full of

demons, shades and monsters of all descriptions.

It turns out that twin *naguales* "may" possess an extraordinary kind of magic — which is why Tezcatlipoca has lured them to his realm by capturing their mother.

The problem is that Johnny and Carol have no idea whether they actually have this power and, if they do, how to access it.

"The Smoking Mirror" is pretty much guaranteed to give younger readers the fantods, to say the least. Also, as likely is apparent from this review, the text is filled with many terms and names in Nahuatl, along with plenty of Spanish. There is no doubt that this will prove difficult for Bowles' intended audience, but it will be well worth the effort. The author's website, <http://davidbowles.us/> provides an extensive glossary and teaching resources.

Bryce Milligan is an award-winning young adult author, poet, and the publisher of Wings Press. Bibl Haus Arts features an exhibit of his book designs through May 21.



Photo courtesy Christina Koci Hernandez

Beverly Cleary, shown at age 90, turned 100 this month.

Cleary at 100 says she's 'lucky'

By Nora Krug
WASHINGTON POST

Beverly Cleary doesn't really want to talk about recently turning 100. "Go ahead and fuss," she says. "Everyone else is."

Across the country, people are delving into Cleary nostalgia, with celebrations and new editions of her books with introductions by the likes of Amy Poehler and Judy Blume. Kids and adults are being asked to "Drop Everything and Read" to commemorate Cleary's contribution to children's literature.

But the beloved children's author has something far more low-key in mind for herself: a celebratory slice of carrot cake, she says, "because I like it."

Cleary is as feisty and direct as her famously spirited character Ramona Quimby — an observation that she hears often and doesn't care for. "I thought like Ramona," she says in a phone interview, "but I was a very well-behaved little girl."

Today, Cleary lives a quiet, well-behaved life in a retirement home in northern California. She gets up at 7:30 a.m. and spends the day reading the newspaper and books (on her night stand when we talked in mid-March: Alexandra Fuller's "Don't Let's Go to the Dogs Tonight") and doing crossword puzzles.

She watches "Doc Martin" and CNN and enjoys visits with her family. She doesn't have a computer.

Cleary is both set in her ways — "I don't think I joined this century" — and keenly aware of how times have changed.

In her youth, she points out, "Mothers did not work outside the home; they worked on the inside. And because all the mothers were home — 99 percent of them, anyway — all mothers kept their eyes on all the children." This is part of the reason, she says, that the children in her books were so often out tromping through the neighborhood without adult chaperones.

Cleary's last book was "Ramona's World," published in 1999. Her plucky heroine remains frozen at age 9; her sister, Beezus, is 14 and just entering high school. Who knows what Ramona might have been like when she hit puberty. Cleary, for one, is happy to leave her before that nightmare. "I think writers need to know when to retire," she says.

Yet Cleary's books live on. In January, HarperCollins published new editions of three of her most popular works: "Henry Huggins," "Ramona Quimby, Age 8" and "The Mouse and the Motorcycle," with introductions by Blume, Poehler and Kate DiCamillo, respectively. There are more than 40 Cleary titles in print.

Cleary has won a National Book Award, a Newbery Medal and a National Medal of Art from the National Endowment of the Arts, among other accolades. In 2000, the Library of Congress gave her a Living Legend Award.

Yet she wears her literary stardom lightly. "I'm just lucky," she says.

Even if she doesn't want to be compared to Ramona, she confesses that the spitfire is her favorite.

Ramona, she says, has to some degree been misunderstood. It's not that she's naughty, Cleary says, it's that "things just didn't work out the way she thought they should." But for her creator, things pretty much have.

Page-turning adventures keep the younger set engaged

By Susan Faust
SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE

From Greek myths to wooing worms to time travel, kids have a lot to keep their imaginations firing with this recent crop of children's books.

"I Am Pan!"
By Mordecai Gerstein
Roaring Brook, \$18.99, ages 5-9

Greek mythology is big right now. Same for graphic novels. Combine the two and, *voilà*, a raucous picture book collection of 12 stories about the goat-footed god of "noise and confusion, sheep and shepherds," music and hunting. Jumpy ink drawings and exuberant speech

bubbles fill bright comic-book cells, starting with an eventful birth. "Out I popped, laughing, howling and screeching," declares Pan. From then on, on Mount Olympus and even in New York, it is one wild adventure after another — a failed romance with the moon, flirtations with the nymphs, a showdown with Monster Typhon, the Battle of Marathon, dealings with King Midas and retirement. (The gods eventually tire of responsibility.)

"Worm Loves Worm"
By J.J. Austrian; illustrated by Mike Curato
Balzer + Bray, \$17.99, ages 4-8

Two worms are of one mind.

They want to be married. What stands in the way? Lots, according to this topical picture book, just droll enough to not be didactic. Worm and Worm need attendants and an officiant. Done! But what about

rings? "We don't have fingers," the worms protest. Solution: Make belts. And what about a dance band? "We don't have feet," they fret. Solution: Wiggle. Oh, and what about the right gear for bride and groom? Fact: Worms are hermaphrodites, so it's hard to tell which is which, and it doesn't much matter anyway. In their mix-and-match world, one worm wears a veil and bow tie, and the other a top hat and a dress.

"The First Step: How One Girl Put Segregation on Trial"

By Susan E. Goodman; illustrated by E.B. Lewis
Bloomsbury, \$17.99, ages 5-7

This sobering slice of history focuses on the case of young Sarah Roberts, banned from one of Boston's best schools in 1847. "Whites only," a police officer proclaims. Her African-American family

begins a fight for "equality before the law." Their case goes to the most powerful court in Massachusetts, and,

although initially unsuccessful, the case represents many firsts: the demand that our legal system outlaw separate schools, the participation of an African American lawyer before a high court, and a mixed-race team of lawyers in the "fight for justice."

"Otters Love to Play"
By Jonathan London; illustrated by Meilo So
Candlewick, \$16.99, ages 5-8

Furry, doe-eyed river otters fill this pleasing book with a sense of fun, but never at the expense of its serious thesis: Play has purpose. Bonus: It

also strengthens family ties. Practicing life skills, they learn to juggle stones,

chase, wrestle, swim, belly-slide, fish and groom, always under the watchful eye of a fiercely protective mother. London's sprightly narrative teams with So's naturalistic watercolors to follow pups' progress from birth in the spring through the end of their first year.

"Fresh Delicious: Poems From the Farmers' Market"
By Irene Latham; illustrated by Mique Moriuchi
Wordsong, \$16.95, ages 4-8

The celebration of National Poetry Month in April continues with a sunny collection of fruit and vegetable poems. There are 21, all short and sweet. Try "Tomato": "Round/like a baseball,/ smooth like a

balloon;/ red like/ a fire truck,/ ripe like/ a summer moon." Or check out

"Cucumbers": "a fleet/ of green/ submarines/ in a wicker/ sea." Haiku-style imagery stands vivid and alone, but still sets on fanciful acrylic paintings that feature animals at the market. Throughout, find an elephant farmer and various shoppers, including donkeys, monkeys and mice.

"California Dreaming: Mira's Diary"
By Marissa Moss
Creston, \$12.99, ages 8-13

Fourteen-year old Mira wraps up her time travels and lots of loose ends in this, the

fourth book in her diary series. After ancient Rome, 19th century Paris and World War I London, she returns home to the Bay Area

with her brother and dad. Mom is MIA, probably in San Francisco, sometime in the past, trying to change things for the better. In hot pursuit, Mira uses Touchstones to reach 1864, 1906 and 1934. Along the way, she meets Samuel Clemens and Ina Coolbrith and sees life for early Jewish and Chinese immigrants. Girded with historical detail, the plot moves quickly toward revelations about what Mom's been doing and why.

The world through eyes of an adopted child

By David Hendricks
STAFF WRITER

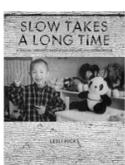
Parenting books usually do not come to mind for readers looking for a good story.

"Slow Takes a Long Time" by Helotes author Lesli Hicks presents readers with an absorbing narrative, one amplified by a big heart.

Hicks tells the story of her second adopted child, a boy originally found abandoned in a Chinese marketplace in 2001, a victim of China's one-child policy.

Hicks and her husband, Steve Lee, earlier had adopted a girl from China. She wanted a sibling. So the couple returned to China for another child.

His Chinese name is Dang Guole. He had been in perhaps six foster families, some of them likely abusive, before Hicks and Lee adopted him. His American name is not given in the book to protect his privacy.



SLOW TAKES A LONG TIME

By Lesli Hicks
Tate Publishing,
\$11.99

His story since coming to Texas?

The boy tells it directly as a first-person narrator. Kind of.

Hicks writes the narrative in her son's voice, letting readers see everything from his perspective while revealing a great deal about the parents and the challenges they face to raise their son.

Challenges? The couple learn soon after the adoption that their son shows signs of being "intellectually disabled" or "intellectually delayed."

They sometimes were subjected to the more offensive term, "mentally retarded," caus-

ing parental tears.

The boy's narrative voice conveys his parents' fears that they might not be suited to raising a special-needs child.

The boy's narrative voice reveals the joy he feels with having a "forever family" in a new country, enjoying toys and foods he never would have had otherwise.

He learns to express his love and appreciation abundantly.

Through the boy's eyes, readers see that his parents are more than capable and suitable.

Their devotion, protectiveness and patience make the boy "the happiest in the world," even as the parents struggle to seek the best educational alternatives for him.

Hicks and Lee are both former newspaper reporters. Hicks was a San Antonio Express-News business writer in the 1990s.

Hicks always had a gift for delivering revealing insights in

her writing, and she does so on every page of "Slow Takes a Long Time."

One of the best is her observation that everyone has "special needs."

Hicks makes it clear the parents have grown as people and have learned as much from their son as he has gained from them.

Parents often face uncertainty about their children. "At the same time," Hicks writes in a afterward, "there is this part we would like to remain precisely unchanged: his utter happiness in our world."

The story does not come to a typical end. The boy's future likely will take many turns.

But a book like "Slow Takes a Long Time" cannot serve a higher purpose. It ought to be read by all parents, not just ones raising children needing special education.

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