



Instead of *Mexico* by James Michener

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Melinda Camber Porter

James Michener was once a writer to reckon with. Reading his latest novel, *Mexico*, it is hard to believe that he is the author of *Tales of the South Pacific*, his first novel, which received a Pulitzer Prize. *Mexico* gives us clues to unravel the mystery of Michener's almost instantaneous literary decline: first, witness his delusions of grandeur. He announces that "of Mexico as a unique land, with its own promise and problems, no one has written... no one has written of Mexico as a Mexican" and promptly sets himself up as the man for the job. (Has he ever deigned, by the way, to read Octavio Paz?)

Having promised us the definitive work on Mexico, he goes on to promise a riveting voyage into the inner life of his central character, the journalist Norman Clay, whom we meet in Mexico, clumsily reporting on bullfighting.

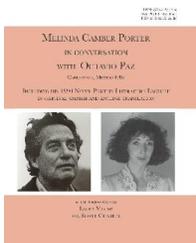
Clay even admits that he writes "as-told-to junk"; nevertheless, Michener treats us to at least a hundred pages of his bullfighting reports.

Clay's voyage of self-discovery never materialises because Michener is not interested in character and, thus, never takes the slightest interest in Clay's quest. He uses Clay's spurious search for self as a peg for endless anecdotes on Mexican history, starting from the year 600AD. In fact, Clay's inner journey is actually a tedious array of facts that one might enjoy reading in a more coherent form in any potted history of Mexico, or even a guidebook.

Michener is fetishistic about facts and details. He hoards them. He piles them up. Nothing else motivates him. Mark, for instance, this exemplary sentence: "When the widow moved the door, a faint creaking that dated back to 1575, when the structure was built, told me that I was home, for it was in this room that my mother and I had hidden in 1918, during the second sacking of Toledo, when to continue living at the Minerals was impossible."

One senses, sadly, that Michener's aims may be more lofty than exploitative, that he actually sees his novels as glorious textbooks for the masses. But he has no vision, no feel for place or character, and merely a gargantuan appetite for inconsequential detail.

Volume 1, Number 4: *Melinda Camber Porter In Conversation With Octavio Paz*



At his home in Cuernavaca, Mexico in 1983

Includes Paz's Nobel Prize Lecture in English and Spanish

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