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ENGL 112B

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Book Talk: *Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico*

**Part 1: Author Information**

Website: <https://davidbowles.us>

Dr. David Bowles is a Mexican-American author who grew up in South Texas near the border. Because of his proximity to Mexico he became fascinated with Mexican and Indigenous legends and folklore. He focuses on young adult fiction and employs literary devices stemming from fantasy, science fiction, and horror in his literary works. Many of his novels have received various awards including the Tomás River Mexican American Children’s Book Award, the Pura Belpré Honor Book Award, the Claudia Lewis Award for Excellence in Poetry, the Walter Dean Myers Honor Book Award, and many more. One amazing fact is that Bowles studied Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, in order to gain full access to primary sources that had not been translated. This shows his deep passion surrounding the preservation of historical works. Currently, he is a professor at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley where he teaches in the Literatures and Cultural Studies Department.

**Part 2: Book Summary**

*Feathered Serpent, Dark Heart of Sky: Myths of Mexico* by David Bowles is an epic retelling of the origin stories of Indigenous Mexico. Each legend and god presented builds upon each other to create the next myth. For example, different gods create the different myths as civilization begins through the different people they place on earth according to their purpose of being on earth. For instance, Lady Egret marries One Hunahpu, a minor god, and she bore him two sons, One Monkey and One Artisan. Once Lady Egret gave birth to her sons, she had fulfilled her destiny on Earth and returned to the Divine Mother as her sons stayed to fulfill their purpose on Earth. The myths serve another purpose as to teach citizens “model” behavior. For instance, Lady Egret’s sons died prematurely due to becoming obsessed with playing games over their earthy duties. Their obsession with games over work cut their lives short. The novel ends with the final section surrounding the arrival of the Spanish.

**Part 3: Important Quotes**

Quote 1:

“Feathered Serpent, wanting to be close to his handiwork, claimed the fourth heaven for himself. He set comets and shooting stars over his head in the fifth level to separate him from the somber sixth space of deepest green where his chaotic brother chose to whirl blackly. The seventh layer was blazingly blue, the daytime sky we see when the sun arcs from horizon to horizon. Above it, Heart of Sky set the heaven of storms, a violent region of wind and lightning and thunder like the clash of enormous obsidian blades” (Bowles 24).

This quote is significant because it reminds the reader that although not widely discussed or taught, Mexico does have great origin myths just as those presented by the Romans and the Greeks. For instance, within *The Divine Comedy* Dante describes Purgatorio, Paradiso, and the nine circles of hell beginning with their conception. In the same way, Bowels describes how the Feathered Serpent and the Heart of Sky created thirteen different layers to put both the earth and the galaxy in a unified organization. In this quote the Feathered Serpent’s mighty strength is depicted as he is able to claim the “fourth heaven” in order to be close to the work he has done in creating the Earth. It depicts how each layer was created with a specific purpose for those on Earth and the gods above the Earth. For example, the shooting stars that the Feathered Serpent will send out will be to bring happiness and awe to the people of Earth, as well as the gods. The layer containing the bright blue sky will serve its purpose of being a light colored “background” that will allow the rays of the sun to reach the inhabitants of Earth. This exemplifies the complexity behind the creation of the layers as they each serve an intended purpose with slight forms of entertainment involved to please those of both spheres.

Quote 2:

“As warriors loyal to the kind were decimated and Tepalcatzin deposed, an aging Xochitl called on the mothers and daughters of Tollan to fight by her side. Queen Xochitl led the furious battalion of women during the king’s last stand near the town of Xochitlalpan. There she hacked and slew many rebel warriors before falling t last under the obsidian blades of the enemy. Her fierce Toltec sisters carried the body… then, screaming her name, they flung themselves back into the fray” (117).

This quote exemplifies how women were highly influential in the Toltec civilization and within the entire novel itself. This creates a distinct difference as many of the ancient Roman and Greek manuscripts objectified women or labeled them as “crazy” when attempting to achieve the same respect as men. For example, when Antigone exemplifies the best qualities of Greek men she is not taken seriously as King Creon laughs in her face and rejects her stance on death, although it is the stance taken by society’s men and gods. When she performs the burial of her brother, King Creon sentences her to death, but she commits suicide before anything else can happen. This book contrasts this view of women as there are several myths and legends where women are placed on a higher pedestal than men. The Toltecs being one of the civilizations that had the most respect for women due to being guided through periods of peace by the rule and actions of various queens. Xochitl was one of the most influential queens of the Toltecs as she guided them in years of peace and died within their civil war. This is meaningful because the highest point of honor, as presented by the Greek and Romans, is for one to die in battle for their country and their people. Xochitl is an example of one of the most honorable queens as she died fighting on the battle field, even at her old age. Her leadership skills allowed her to put her people into their highest potential until her last breath. She is clearly represented as highly influential because the other female warriors began to scream her name and fight even harder in the civil war once Xochitl had died, proving that she was a great leader.

Quote 3:

“Aided by Malinalli, Cortés began to win to his side the great rivals of the Triple Alliance, especially the kingdom of Tlaxcalla, which lent thousands of warriors to the conqueror, pledging fealty to the Spanish crown and to the Christian God. The Nahuas soon learned to respect the brilliant and fierce translator at the captain’s side. They called her Malintzin, “Revered Marina.” Cortés became Malintzineh, “Master of Malintzin.” On Spanish tongues, this new epitaph slurred into Malinche. In an ironic twist of fate, Malinalli would only be remembered down the years as Malinche, the name an insult growing synonymous with treachery and treason” (250).

This quote stands out because it describes how the view of women in Mexico shifted once the Spaniards had come onto the land and demanded that their way of life be the principal way of life. Before the Spaniards arrived the Indigenous people of Mexico practiced a matrilineal way of life in which the familial structure revolved around the mother. Women were able to hold high positions in the ancient societies of Mexico, earning them high amounts of respect in society as well. Malinalli was born to elite parents which gave her the opportunity to learn Popoluca (local language) and Nahuatl (elite language). Despite her intelligence and high status, she was stolen by Potochan and later sold to Alonso Hernandez Puerto Carrero. She was finally sold to Hernan Cortes due to her intellectual capabilities of understanding various languages. However, her name is used to create the word “Malinche” which means traitor. This ignores the fact that she was sold into slavery and given the task of translating, which doesn’t give her many other options other than to translate for Cortes or die. Because she was an Aztec many people describe her as a traitor because she helped Cortes with her translation skills. This completely disregards the fact that she had no other choice because she was a slave. Furthermore, this quote depicts the shift in the perspective of women in Mexico as there are stark differences between the treatment of women within Indigenous and Spanish societies.

**Part 4: Teaching Ideas**

This book would be appropriate for young adults aged fourteen or older. This is because many of the myths presented in the novel depict death, rape, violence, and other scenes that may be too graphic for younger audiences. Teens should read this book because it gives them a deeper understanding of how Indigenous people lived a highly complex life which shifted once they were conquered by foreign people. It gives them a historical context that they can apply to other indigenous populations. Teens should also read it because it allows them to see that various other cultures have myths and legends that connect to their complex origin stories.

1. It would be interesting to teach this book in conjunction with a Greek or Roman epic in order to compare and contrast different myths. For example, I can have my students read both *Antigone* and the story of queen Xochitl. After reading about both of these females, there can be a debate held in class surrounding which female was treated with more respect in their society. Each student will be randomly assigned to either Pro-Antigone or Pro-Xochitl and then a debate will happen in class. Another idea with this topic could be creating an essay prompt in which students describe what they see as the main differences and similarities between the two females from vastly different societies.
2. Another way to teach this novel alone would be to ask students to begin a journal in which they describe what they know about their culture. Then, as a class, we can read the book together to ensure that students are following along. Each class period will begin with a journal that will have a prompt according to the information presented in the chapter that has been read. This will allow students to keep track of the different myths and characters for future use as the various gods are hard to remember. In the end the journals will exemplify how the students grew in their understanding of the Indigenous Mexican myths.
3. A third way to teach this book would be to have students read the book at home and then come to class ready to discuss. Our discussions would be based off of what the students found most interesting in the reading. Then, after discussions, there will be a main project in which students can reenact a scene that they found to be powerful. This is important because it will allow students to learn about another culture or to fully integrate their culture within the classroom. Allowing students to use visual elements will give them more opportunities to express themselves in ways that words cannot describe.

This book falls into several categories presented by Dr. Warner in *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story.* For instance, it falls into the category of “facing death and loss” because several of the characters in the novel face death, the only difference being that each character reacts to death in a different way. Several of the high and powerful figures face loss as their kingdoms come to ruins, each dealing with this loss in distinct ways. The book also falls into the category of “identity” as Mexican American students can find their culture and identity within this book. It allows students to tie back to their historical roots with Indigenous Mexico. The most important category is “myth” because the book revolves around the historical myths of Indigenous Mexico.

**Part 5: Only for Non-Teaching**

(N/A)

**Part 6: Text Complexity**

Quantitative Complexity:

Lexile Score: 1010L

Dale-Chall: 9.6 (not sure if it’s accurate because it said 34 words were not found on Dale-Chall Word List, probably because this novel has many Indigenous words and names)

Flesch-Kincaid: Average grade level of about 12, easily understood by ages 17-18.

Qualitative Complexity:

This novel best exemplifies Exeter Quality six, which is “themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns.” The issue surrounding the conquest of Mexico is a very complex and deep-rooted issue that cannot be thoroughly understood in simple terms. The issues surrounding the conquest relate back to the issues of racism in our current global society. This book would allow readers to understand how Indigenous people, as well as people of color, have suffered and still face problems in today’s society.

Another main Exeter Quality presented in this book is number eight which includes, “varied levels of sophistication that will lead to the continual development of reading skills.” The novel includes a guide to pronunciation and a glossary at the end because there are several names of people and places that are from Indigenous Mexico. This will allow for students to gain an understanding of some of the most important words of an ancient language. The way in which myths are described is somewhat difficult to keep track of due to the connection between various characters. This makes for a challenging, yet exciting read as the myths have very intriguing storylines. The sentence structures vary from simple to complex which will allow a student to further develop their reading skills.