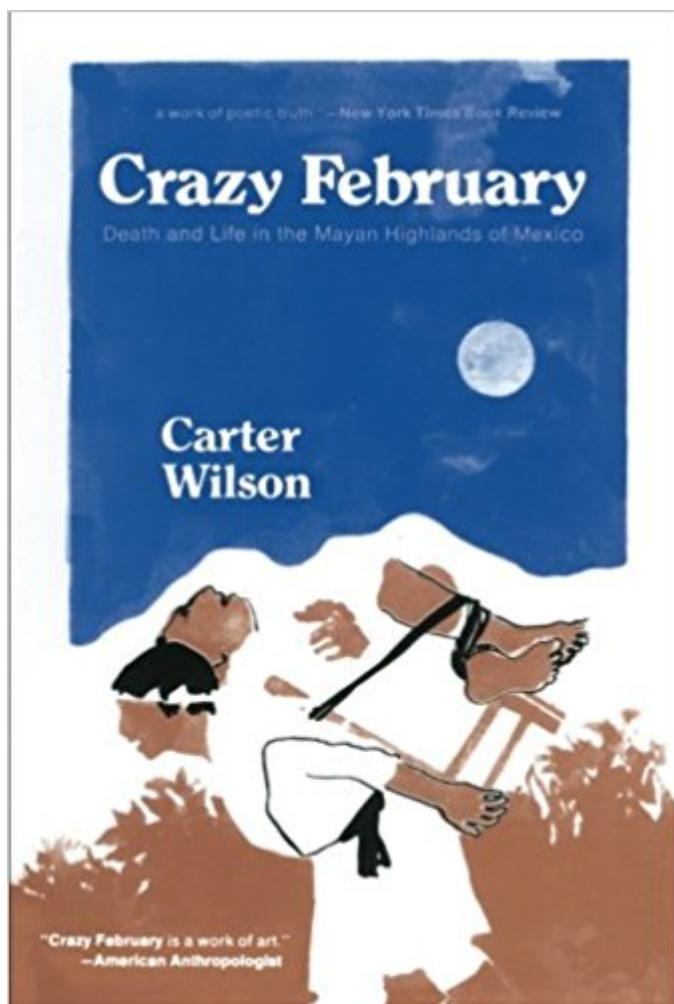


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Crazy February: Death And Life In The Mayan Highlands Of Mexico



Synopsis

Products of the "imagination," such as novels, can be especially useful tools for understanding how things work in societies far removed from our own experience. Through the telling of a story, a sound ethnographic novel conveys more than information. It involves the reader in the dynamics of life in places where the rules for action are very different from the rules the reader makes his own decisions by. Some people believe ethnographic novels are comparable to fieldnotes- the data themselves in their original, unanalyzed form. Though I can see the reason for the analogy, the author still disagree with it. Good fieldnotes record raw experience. For the time being, the anthropologist squelches his desire to interpret, and he writes down everything he can see or remember. Good ethnographic fiction also presents experience raw, without generalization. But in building the story, in selecting to tell this because it is important and not to tell that because it seems trivial, the novelist is analyzing his material. Between the raw and the cooked, both ethnographies and ethnographic novels belong in the processed pot. Anthropologists try to make explicit and public both the method they have used to gather their material and the means for analyzing it. Ordinarily, a novelist obscures his analysis-the grounds for the choices he has made-and depends on the interior logic of the story to make his tale seem "true" or "believable." But *Crazy February* works with somewhat different principles than the author would normally use in writing "fiction." The book grew directly out of field experience. Wilson felt strongly that it would stand or fall on its ethnographic correctness. And so, faced with choices between what the author would like to see in the story and what he thought would actually happen to an Indian in the mountains of Chiapas, he consistently chose "actuality." In a practical, day-to-day writing sense, reality was the author's rod and my staff. And in the end he was very happy when anthropologists with greater experience in the Mayan area found the book essentially exact and, more important, true to the spirit of the place he had written about.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Indeed, they [the Mayan Indians] are more subtly penetrated by Carter Wilson than were the famous 'Children of Sanchez,' as tape-recorded by Oscar Lewis. Without the intrusion of theory and without even a shadow of jargon, Mr. Wilson has given his book sociological validity. At the same time, it remains a work of poetic truth."--New York Times Book Review

Carter Wilson, Professor of Community Studies and Fellow of Kresge College in the University of California, Santa Cruz, has also written *I Have Fought the Good Fight* (1967), *A Green Tree and a Dry Tree* (1972), and *Treasures on Earth* (1981).

This is a remarkably good book. Anyone interested in Mexico, Chiapas, indigenous cultures, or the Zapatista rebellion of 1994 in Chiapas should regard this as essential reading. Wilson gives, in a very readable fictional format, a clear and fascinating account of traditional life, culture, and values in a highland indigenous community. Those who read this should also see Wilson's "A Green Tree and a Dry Tree" about a rebellion fomented by this same Indian community in 1969, a real event but also presented in the form of a novel.

Wilson's *Crazy February* is perhaps the best example of anthro fiction that I've read, and gives a much clearer idea of life in Chiapas than most anthro nonfiction. *Crazy February* gives the reader an acute sense of what it is really like to live there. I'd also recommend Peter Matthiessen's *Far Tortuga* as another wonderful example.

A boy comes into town bearing his murdered father on his back. He has killed him himself. Together with an elder, he goes to see the mayor who knows the kid will be going to jail even if he WAS drunk, even if he didn't really mean it. Later the mayor dies and a less-sterling character takes his place. We meet a number of people, we see what Maya life in the mountains of Chiapas, Mexico was like half a century ago, and there is a bit more drama before we're through. Carter Wilson writes simply and well. A lot of beautiful description to be found here; you definitely get a sense of

place. As in all parts of the world, Chamula (the town) was going through culture change, modernization, or whatever you want to call it. We can note that the Mexican Revolution did not ameliorate the Indians' situation as much as hoped. I think the author has shown how this goes admirably. But I have a problem with this book, which is why I have given it only three stars. Anthropologists go to a place, live with the people, maybe even work with them, and try to understand how the world looks to them and why they do what they do. They try to interpret this other culture to their readers. If they do so in the mode of "that's how it looks to me", that is the best they can do. They cannot become a member of the other culture, they cannot assume that their thoughts, actions, and expectations will become the same as those they study. So, if an anthropologist wishes to write his/her findings in the shape of a novel, that's fine. I think it is entirely acceptable as a mode of description. But---and here is my complaint---they cannot write AS a member of that culture, they can only write as an outsider looking in. In this novel (anthropological as it is), Wilson assumes the voices of several Maya individuals. While agreeing that it is literature, it cannot be accepted as the bona fide voice of Maya people. So, I felt wary and unwilling to accept that the actions of characters really represented what Maya would have done or said. With that caveat, you can definitely enjoy this book and learn a lot.

I live in rural Mexico and this book gives life to many of the things I see and the story's that I hear. I enjoyed it very much

This is an excellent book. It captures the reality of life in an Indian village in Mexico during the 1950s and 1960s. The author spent considerable time in the highlands of Chiapas doing anthropological fieldwork, and his fictional work captures many of the aspects of ladino/Indian relations which continue to plague Mexico to this day. If you want a good, emotive background to the Zapatista rebellion, this is it! Also highly recommended: Wilson's fictional account of the Tzeltal uprising of the mid 18th century "A Green Tree and a Dry Tree"

i felt this book had a false image of true indian life. it gave only negative images.

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