



Heart of a Jaguar by Marc Talbert

Subjects: Mayas—Juvenile fiction; Indians of Mexico—Fiction; Droughts—Fiction

Book List: Latin America

Props: Pictures of Mayan Temples



This book takes place in the year 1200 A.D., that's over 800 years ago, in the Yucatan Peninsula, the southern part of Mexico, where the rivers run only underground and where dense forest canopies stretch for miles in every direction interrupted only by majestic Mayan temples. (*Show pictures of Mayan Temples*)

The boy in this story, Balam, is 14-years-old—still a boy, but almost a man. He is a peasant and although little is known of the peasant culture in which he lived, we do know that it was surprisingly advanced and profoundly beautiful. We know that they worshipped many gods, and their beliefs could sometimes be rather extreme. For example, they ritually practiced human sacrifice and bloodletting. Their philosophy was that the more valuable the material, or the more painful to obtain, the more powerful it was in sacrificial rites. In other words, they would give, sacrifice, kill, what they valued most, because then the gods would be very pleased; their crops would grow, they would be healthy, there would be peace.

Although Balam is 14 through most of this story, it begins with his birth, which was a miracle surrounded by great tragedy. When his mother went into labor she was afraid. Her child was about to be born in the fourteenth month of Kankin, the Yellow Sun, on the twelfth day of the month, on the day of Ben, the Reed. It was a weak day. It was an unlucky, even dangerous day to give birth. If the child would only wait a few hours until Lord Sun had reached his zenith and a new day begin, then the child would be born on the thirteenth day—a very lucky day. But the child would not wait. The child came, but it was not Balam, it was his older twin brother.

He was born first, backwards, twisted, unmoving with no life in him. And with his still birth he brought the death of their mother. Then, almost as an afterthought, as a surprise, came Balam—twins; one alive, one dead. One born on the twelfth day—unlucky. The other on the thirteenth day, a lucky day. Or at least that's what Uk, Balam's father hoped. There had been so much confusion during the birth. But he hoped it was the 13th, he clung to the hope, the hope that good fortune would follow the boy from that day forward. For many days after his birth, whenever Uk looked at his son, he wondered: On what day, truly, was this boy born? What would the future hold for his boy? Would his future be one of luck? Or one of misfortune?

His Father's questions will be answered when Balam is fourteen-years-old. Their village is suffering a terrible drought. The villagers have, of course, tried to appease the gods through rituals and prayers. But the drought remains, drying up water, killing trees, plants, animals. Ah Khan, the village healer, who speaks with the gods, is not satisfied with the villager's sacrifices. He knows that more is needed. He tells the gods, "To you we will give the best we have. We will give gladly, knowing you will send us rain, alive with itz (eats) (meaning—blessed substance). We will send you our plea with a worthy sacrifice."

Balam wants to help his village. He will be brave, he will be cunning, but will he be lucky? Read this story of blood, of sacrifice, of love and honor. (*Hold up book*)
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