



# The Isthmus: Stories from Mexico's Past, 1495-1995

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Mexican history is as tortured and crooked (in both senses of the word) as an ox cart trail--unexpected turns around every corner, replete with bumps and declivities. The casual reader of general Mexican history will find it difficult keeping up with the list of Mexico's principal characters over the centuries, now expanding, then suddenly contracting due to assassinations, exiles, military defeats, and alliances gone awry. Oaxacan writer Bruce Stores solves that problem by employing a simple technique used for millennia by the local indigenous peoples: storytelling. His take on historical fiction paints a human, everyday face on the historian's cold mask of dates, places, and wars. Structuring his book around key historical events, he asks--and answers--the questions: How did that feel? Who was affected? What happened to the community, the families?

The focus of this book, as its title implies, is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the bottom of the "scorpion's tail" of Mexican geography. At its narrowest point, it's only approximately 125 miles wide, spanning the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific, making the Isthmus an early, much-courted, often-spurned alternative to the Panama Canal. The region's remoteness, heat, and lack of picturesque colonial cities or swank beach resorts have kept tourists far away. And perhaps because of that, and sociological factors as well, the Isthmus has managed to protect its distinct, largely indigenous, culture.

Stores explains that culture to us over a 500-year period through the pre-Conquest period with its intertribal warfare to Cortes' arrival, the battles for independence from Spain, and the French Intervention. In the modern era, his characters fight political battles from Mexico City's university protests to struggles with the domination of the long-entrenched Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). A common thread for all the stories is the importance of land to the Zapotec people. It defines them.

"'Land ownership in Oaxaca,' Gomez told the Judge, 'has different roots. The system of property rights among the pre-Colombian natives was, without a doubt, antagonistic to the Spaniards' sense of private property. Yet to the indigenous peoples, their communal property holdings were as natural to them as night and day. Because their land was the provider of their food, they considered it to be divine. Yes. Their land was to them a god. And, just as the air and the wind belong to everyone, they couldn't come to terms with European notions of private property. '"

*The Isthmus* succeeds in elucidating a little-understood region of Mexico. And its telling of tales brings us closer the fierce human spirit that has withstood-and shaped-- its history.

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