



The Highlander

Zoe Saadia

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Born in the Highlands, Kuini thought his life was simple. You hunt and you fight, defending your towns against the raids of the Lowlanders and then raiding their lands in turn. His father was the Warriors' Leader, and he wanted to be just like him.

Yet, Texcoco, the mighty Capital of the Lowlands, seemed incredibly beautiful, sparkling, its pyramids magnificent. A friendship with the Lowlander boy, the First Son of the Texcoco Emperor, seemed harmless in the beginning. They were just boys, and their clandestine meetings were always fun, providing great entertainment.

However, on the day Kuini agrees to finally enter the magnificent city, it would all change. He expected to get into trouble, but he could not foresee the extent of the trouble and, worst of all, he did not expect to uncover hidden secrets concerning his own family.

The Highlander Details

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From Reader Review The Highlander for online ebook

Joseph says

The Highlander: Rise of the Aztecs #1 by Zoe Saadia is the first in a series of early Mesoamerican historical fiction. Saadia has published a large collection of novels about the Central America's indigenous peoples.

Most Americans have heard of the Aztecs, but know them mostly from the bloody sacrifices and "savage nature." There has been quite a bit of embellishment in the Aztec stories that most people know. My knowledge comes mostly from undergraduate history courses where the history begins with the Spanish contact. The indigenous people are given a passing mention: Aztecs are warriors, Mayans had primitive science, and the Incas had the gold. There is much more to these people than that, and historical fiction is a great way learn and enjoy.

Historical fiction in the case of the Aztecs and surrounding city-states requires a bit of work on the author's part. In American Civil War historical fiction, the characters need little development. We all have a good idea who Lincoln, Lee, Jackson, Grant, and Sherman are, and the mention of their name alone creates a ready made character in our minds. For Saadia, it is a bit more difficult as there are no readily recognizable figures from this time period and culture for the reader to instantly relate to. She has to create believable characters within the historical restrictions. The characters in *The Highlanders* are well developed and reflect the differences between the different groups that inhabit the area surrounding Lake Texcoco. The friction between different city states is reflected in the comments of the general public as well as the main characters. For a relatively small geographic region, there are very clear cut and deep feelings between neighboring peoples.

The politics of the region is a main source of information in the story. Alliances, tributes, enemies, and diplomacy all play an important role in this story. Although this may be the driving force of the plot, events are viewed mostly through the eyes of the two main characters: Kuini and Coyotl. Kuini, is a highlander living outside the main city states surrounding Lake Texcoco. He is the next in line to be the Warrior Leader. Although considered barbarians, Kuini is quite the artist. Coyotl is the son or the ruler of Texcoco. He comes from privilege and civilization. The two meet accidentally and develop a friendship even though they homelands are enemies. To tie things together Coyotl's sister is introduced as a major character along with an Aztec warrior/emissary. The characters weave the story together with their mutual experiences and keep the plot moving and tied together.

The Highlander does historical fiction right. There is a plot that is true to history. The characters are well developed, likeable, and important to the story and the history. This is the kind of historical fiction that is educational and fun to read. It is not like read a history of Vietnam; It is more like having a veteran tell you his experiences in Vietnam. *The Highlander* has that same personal feel. More than reading history, you are experiencing history. Saadia is off to a great start with this book. Highly recommended.

Zichao Deng says

Another amazing journey back in time with Zoe Saadia...

I came to this after having read the pre-Aztec series, and while some of the characters from the other books

do crop up here (I'm not saying who - read it and be surprised), it's perfectly possible to start reading here without feeling as though you're coming to things in medias res.

The Highlander takes place 20 or 30 years after the pre-Aztec series, and the action has shifted from Azcapotzalco to Texcoco. We also have two new protagonists - Coyotl, a son of the Texcoco Eperor, and Kuini, a young warrior from the highland tribes that featured as bit players in the earlier books and who dreams of being an artist. We also have a new love interest - Iztac, a princess dreading being sent away to be married. There's also a sense of looming peril, for those who know how history actually panned out :D

This installment has all the action, drama, romance and sense of place of the earlier books, plus an extra ingredient: a cliff-hanger ending. I already have Crossing Worlds, the next book in the series, and am itching to find out what happens next...

Roy Murry says

The Highlander, The Rise of the Aztecs
By Zoe Saadia

Reviewed by R. Murry

The Highlander is a well thought out historical novel that portrays real people doing what their nation-tribes have done for years. The main characters are young leaders breaking out into their own pre-determined adventures.

The elders are determined to control their situations in the world. The young people (Coyotl, Kuini, and Izrac) rebel that world in their own way to change it for others and themselves.

Ms. Saadia brings this out in detailed conversations and confrontations that propels this intriguing developed story forward, keeping the reader's attention. The reader will not be bored with historical data.

The young people are the future and the only names that are important: Coyotle, the emperor's first born son, wants to change the way things are done – social reform. Kuini, the great warlord's son, wants to change breakdown bearers between peoples. Iztac, the princess, wants to liberate herself and others from their bondage to the way men think.

Zoe Saadia makes their points clear, using well developed conversations. Although these young people are not Aztecs, they see common ground in others, where the elders don't. Especially Kuini, The Highlander, in his confrontations and communal exchanges with the only Aztec – The Aztec Warlord. To a point, the Aztec influences Kuini's decisions. Against the Aztec and his father's wishes, Kuini becomes a warrior in Coyotl's father's army – their enemy.

In this end is a new beginning for Coyotl and Kuini, which may include princess Iztac. Fate will determine that end.

Saadia's novel is an excellent lead in to the next chapter of the lives of these three young leaders. I for one will continue to read the series, because of the enjoyable read of book #1. Will you?

Elias Zapple says

Immerse yourself into the culture and the times of the Aztecs, a most incredible, enthralling and engrossing civilisation. In *The Highlander* we're transported back to this ancient period where two young men from opposing tribes form an unlikely friendship. Full of twists and turns, an elaborate and magical story full of depth that you'll come away wanting to know more about the Aztecs. A wonderful read that my slugs just adored.

Terry Tyler says

I was hugely impressed by this book! It's perfectly edited, deceptively simple, charming, and (oh joy!) without any grammar or punctuation errors. Aside from that, though, it's just really, really good.

I know absolutely nothing about this period of history, but I know that Ms Saadia is something of an authority on it, and this comes across. Although the book is fiction based on historical fact (a genre I love), it could also be read purely as a work of fiction, an adventure story; it's interesting from a historical point of view, but the main strength of it is in the story telling. The writing is smooth and easily readable, with no superfluous or overly detailed passages, and I read it in only about four sittings. Ms Saadia has created the story from the young men's point of view so cleverly; in some ways it seemed like a young adult's novel. She is obviously a natural story teller, and a gifted writer - there was absolutely nothing forced about it. At no point was I aware of any studied technique, which was lovely; one of the drawbacks with reading when you write yourself is that you tend to read like an editor, but I forgot all about that while I was reading this. I just enjoyed it. I'm a great lover of the GRR Martin 'A Song of Ice and Fire' series - this reminded me of those books, in parts.

I've read a couple of reviews that say the language is wrong, because the people of that time wouldn't have used words like 'kid' - but the dialogue is stylised, so well; after all, they wouldn't have used any of the words we use, would they? It's obvious that the author has researched the terms of speech that the people of that time and place would have used.

I have another of Ms Saadia's books to read (*At Road's End*), but I look forward to reading the others in this series, the *Rise of the Aztecs*, too. Highly recommended, even if it's not your usual genre.

E.L. Lindley says

The Highlander is the story of two boys whose friendship defies tribal feuds and wars. Initially, I wasn't sure whether the novel was aimed at a teenage or adult audience but it quickly became apparent that it doesn't really matter. *The Highlander* is a thrilling, thought provoking read for all ages.

The two boys, Kuini, a Highlander and Coyotl, who is from the lowlands are both something of free spirits and meet by chance as children. Their friendship endures through secret meetings and notes and the main action of the story takes place when they are fifteen and political tensions within the region are at a crisis point. Zoe Saadia uses her novel to communicate the valuable message, particularly for young people, that our similarities as human beings are far more important than any cultural differences.

Kuini and Coyotl couldn't have had more different upbringings. Kuini has been raised to be a warrior in the more remote, harsh conditions of the Highlands where his father is a Warlord while Coyotl has enjoyed a pampered childhood as the first son of the Emperor in the more urbane Great Capital. However, both boys possess an openness and curiosity about life beyond their own experiences. It is this natural curiosity that lends excitement to the plot and places the boys, particularly Kuini, in a perilous situation.

Saadia's passion and knowledge of history is evident on every page and this lends a great deal of credence to the novel. There are lots of names and places that are difficult to remember but, as I lost myself in the sheer pleasure of the story, the names that mattered stuck and the rest simply melted away without standing in the way of my enjoyment.

I particularly liked the way Saadia uses the character of Iztac, who is Coyotl's half-sister, to show how women were used as pawns, offered by up by their fathers as a means of appeasing other men. Watching Iztac's fate unfold and her spirit and intelligence squandered, is heartbreaking. We also see how wives are displaced at the whim of their husbands as Iztac's own mother has never recovered from the indignity of being replaced as the Emperor's chief wife.

All in all, *The Highlander* is a thoroughly engaging read about friendship but there are very serious undertones that make it a relevant choice for readers of all ages. *The Highlander* is book one in *The Rise of the Aztecs*' series and it sets a very high bar indeed.

John Caviglia says

This novel is an idea that hits the first page running ... and the pace never quits....

In central Mexico, at a time when there were Aztecs—but shortly before the Aztec empire came to be—there were a number of tribes around Lake Texcoco, and some of them had created what might as well be called city states, for they indeed had cities, with stone buildings, plazas, pyramids.... One of these cities was Tenochtitlan, built on an island, home of the Aztecs.

Coyotl, teen-age son of the ruler of another of these city-states--Texcoco--wanders into the hills, where he accidentally meets, and befriends, a hereditary enemy, the eponymous "highlander," considered a barbarian by his own people. Kuini, the highlander, also manages to meet Iso, Coyotl's adventurous sister by one of his father's other wives. And from there, their three fates become entwined ... as a war for power begins among the peoples surrounding the lake that built the Aztec civilization. But I'll leave it to Saadia's talent to take you through the twists of this tale....

One of the intriguing things about the "New World" is that native empires had recently formed (and were

expanding), when the advent of Europeans destroyed them (the Maya excepted). In Mexico, the conquering Spaniards also systematically destroyed the codices (picture writing) of the Aztecs (though not all of them) essentially erasing much of their culture and their past for the future. Which means that Saadia had far less than she might have to work with, recreating that amazing time and place. Yet what she brings to life is a wonderful exploration of this "pre Aztec" world, new to historical fiction, for to my knowledge she is the first to do so.

The Highlander is a great read, tautly plotted, the characters colorful. I'm greatly looking forward to the rest of the series....

Jerry Beller says

The HIGHLANDER is book one in Zoe Saadia's The Rise of the Aztec Series. I like it so much that I already bought the bundle that includes the next three books in the series. This is a story of ancient Mesoamerica and the various cultures within it.

The Highlander is a unique young man who travels outside his people's territory in his teens to spy on a much greater culture, one that has great buildings and much more spectacular on the surface than the much more modest tribe that the Highlander is a member. He is both intrigued and repulsed by these Lowlanders, one of whom becomes his best and most trusted friend.

It becomes a journey of two friends from enemy cultures who form an unexpected, challenging and enduring friendship. For the Highlander nothing is as it appears to be, not with his family, his people or much of anything else. In the end he must decide to fight beside his friend, fight against his friend or stay out of the brewing battle that is certain to bring much bloodshed.

The story also reminds us of women's fate in most past societies, even princesses, as they were too often shuffled off for political reasons at a very young age by their fathers to become the unwilling bride of this or that powerful man. The Highlander is determined to prevent the love of his life from facing this fate.

This is a great piece of historical fiction that is well written. It also is well worth the read for those who enjoy a good adventure with romance, secrets, politics and war as a backdrop. I very much enjoyed this book and look forward to reading more of Zoe Saadia's books. Well done!

J. Else says

Zoe Saadia's knowledge of the Pre-Columbian Americas really shines through in this historical tale. I love reading historical fiction which is based in fact where the general population is concerned while at the same time giving you a real feel for what living in those ancient times would have been like. Usually, really great fiction can shine a mirror on our present day troubles and cares! The story itself is part of a saga of several books.

I enjoyed this journey into a culture I would otherwise know little about. I will admit that some references to the different regions and people confused me. The names in this book take a while to get used to. But I find

this is true for ancient Egyptian names as well. So while some of the general conversations were a little garbled for me, the main points of the story were clear and concise. Each character was well developed and easy to identify with.

Saadia does a great job linking the story lines of Kuini, Coyotl, and Iztac. She has a fluidity to her storytelling that keeps the pace up and the plot interesting. She also brings out the beauty of the ancient society. While human sacrifices are mentioned (which is probably one of the most famous facts about this society), life within the city is lively and fun. Reasonings for things like sacrifices and warfare in ancient civilizations can be hard to understand to a modern thinker. However, Saadia is able to give understandable motivations and intentions.

This story encompasses elements of romance, family secrets, politics, friendship, and war. The ending of the book is actually a beginning for Coyotl and Kuini. I appreciated the details written into their lives as well as the historical facts Saadia is telling her story within. She makes history interesting. I look forward to reading more of this series.

Karl Wiggins says

An excellent book.

Zoe Saadia has found a gap in the market and exploited it marvellously.

If I had to find a fault, and I'm not looking for one in such an superb read, I got slightly confused between all the different tribes, but this doesn't affect the storyline or the main characters which are introduced well, built with passion and linked together in a manner that promises more from this extraordinary author.

Saadia clearly has strong sensitivities for this era and I look forward to reading more books from her because I suspect forthcoming books will prove an enlightenment lasting several generations.

Cathy Ryan says

The Rise of the Aztecs follows on from the pre Aztec series and the story picks up in 1409 with two boys from vastly differing backgrounds. Coyotl, a Lowlander, first son of the Emperor and Kuini, a Highlander and son of the War Leader from Huexotzinco. The boys meet by chance on Coyotl's favourite hill which overlooks his altepetl, Texcoco, the capital of the Acolhua people. A growing friendship develops, both expressing interest in the other's customs and culture. The story is told from each of their perspectives as they begin meeting in secret.

chichen-itza-851389_640A few years later, Kuini and Coyotl are still meeting every so often and have discussions about how they would make changes for the better. Feeling torn and guilty about his friendship with the future emperor of Texcoco, the fascination with the altepetl and it's architecture, especially the pyramids, Kuini resolves not to go to the hill again after his next visit with Coyotl. But Coyotl persuades Kuini to tour Texcoco as his guest. When Coyotl is required at the Palace Kuini has to find his own way out of the city. An encounter with a girl in the market place forces him into a dangerous confrontation, saved

only by the visiting Aztec Warlord. Kuini has no idea of the impact this Warlord will have on his life.

Kuini is not yet out of danger as, lost and confused, he is helped by the girl from the market, who is actually wayward princess, Iztac-Ayotl, Coyotl's half sister. Kuini's troubles begin in earnest as he is taken prisoner by the Palace guards for kidnapping. As he is hauled before the court the Aztec Warlord again takes a hand in Kuini's future.

Plenty of action and intrigue reflect the differences and hostility between the defined groups of people who inhabit the area around Lake Texcoco. The interwoven stories from the characters' observations build the plot and move it forward brilliantly.

Zoe Saadia has a gift which is evident in all her books. It's the ability to craft delightfully engaging, realistic characters, while bringing to life, and giving clear visual images of long ago places, times and lifestyles, along with descriptive passages of food, clothing and social interaction. The storytelling flows intricately and effortlessly, the characters and storyline well-developed. Women are still at the mercy of men and used for their own purposes, whether it's wives being deposed or daughters used to further their fathers' political advances. Learning the history of a little known period in this way is fun and entertaining, as well as educational, and brings authenticity to the story.

Eric says

"What can I do for you, oh future Emperor?"

Coyotl's eyes sparkled. "I came to relieve you of the burden of your prisoner."

"What?" The surprise of the man was genuine this time.

"I came to take your prisoner away," repeated Coyotl, suddenly more sure of himself.

The eyebrows of the Aztec climbed high. "Is this what the duties of the Emperor's heir have come to? To run around, collecting the offenders who didn't make it to the court in time? Is the royal house of Texcoco that thirsty for the blood of this boy?"

"No!" said Coyotl angrily. He shifted his weight from one foot to another. "This case is exceptional, and I will be responsible for this boy from now on, personally."

"Will you stone him personally, too? Or will you just strangle him with your own hands?"

Coyotl gasped. "He will not be executed!"

"Then what do you want with him?"

"I don't have to tell you. You are a guest in this Palace. You cannot take people of Texcoco just like that. We are not in Tenochtitlan."

"This boy is not from Texcoco, and your people wanted to kill him, anyway. It doesn't look like any of you will miss him."

“And what do *you* want with him?”

The Aztec shook his head calmly, but his eyes grew dangerously cold. “I don’t have to tell you that, either.”

Kuini’s gaze leaped from one face to the other, aghast. “Stop it,” he said quietly. “Please stop arguing.”

They turned to him at once, astounded, wide eyed, as if a statue in the far corner of the room had just opened its mouth.

He licked his lips. “Please, stop arguing about me.”

“What?” called the Aztec, clearly thrown out of his usual mocking self-assurance.

Kuini clasped his palms tight. “I know it sounds strange,” he said, licking his lips once again. “And I’m sorry about that. It’s all just a huge misunderstanding, you see? Funny as it may sound, I know both of you mean well and...” He swallowed. “I’ll go and talk to the Honorable First Son outside, if both of you don’t mind.”

He wanted to laugh at the sight of the Aztec’s face, so dumbfounded, so astounded the man looked. Claspng his lips tight, he proceeded to the doorway, praying that the warriors at the entrance would not try to stop him, hoping that Coyotl would follow promptly. Leaning against the plastered wall, he tried to contain his trembling. What now? The warriors eyed him suspiciously, but said nothing. He fought the temptation to walk away, to put as much distance between them and himself as he could, until Coyotl stumbled into the corridor, looking grim.

“Well?” he asked, stopping at some distance, sounding challenging.

“Shall we go and talk outside?”

“Is it safe for you now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, I suppose, as long as you are with me...” His friend’s tone softened.

They stepped into the early afternoon heat and headed down the wide stairs.

“So,” said Coyotl, halting at the bottom of the staircase. “You seem to be on quite good terms with the Aztec Warlord now.”

Kuini shrugged. “Well, yes. He is all right.”

The dark gaze was his answer. “I suppose you’ll be heading for Tenochtitlan now, en-route to becoming an Aztec yourself.”

“No, I’m not!” He glared at his friend, suddenly very angry. “I’m trying to find my way out of this mess, that’s all. You were the one to insist that I should come here, remember? So stop acting like I did

something wrong, like I betrayed you or something!”

Eyes narrow, lips pursed, Coyotl stared back. “The Aztecs seem as though about to betray us, so if you go with them, you will betray me.”

“I’m going home the moment I step out of this Palace, this way or another. I’m not about to get into any of your wars, whichever way they go. Acolhua people, Aztecs or Tepanecs, they are all the same to me, they all want to kill me or my people, so I’m out of here, out of this mess, out of your wars and politics. I should never have come here in the first place!”

Breathing heavily, they glared at each other, oblivious of the people’s stares. Then Coyotl’s eyes focused, lost their fierceness.

“Well, I suppose I should wish you well,” he said through his clasped lips. Kuini’s stomach turned, finding it difficult to see the hurt in the familiar face. Coyotl was a friend of many summers, maybe the only friend he had. The boys from his town and the villages of his homeland were nothing but playmates, never close enough to share more than rough jokes and messing around.

He dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it this way.” Clenching his palms together, he looked at the groomed paths and the carefully planted trees that were swaying ahead, seeing none of it. “I’m just tired of being tossed around. Tired and confused. I need to go home and think about all this. Then I can decide.” He looked at his friend searchingly. “Will you understand?”

Coyotl’s face softened. “Yes, of course. I still wish you would come to fight with me.”

4 1/2 stars

Julie Black says

Fresh and relevant, Zoe Saadia’s *Highlander* stands out in the genre of historical fiction of Ancient Mexico. For the first time, the world of the Ancient Mexicans is brought to light for young-adult readers. Written with intricately woven storytelling, *Highlander* is a fast-paced adventure, filled with political rivalries, enemy alliances, and endearing relationships. Applause for the historical integrity of *Highlander*, a must-read for anyone interested in the history of the Aztecs!

Julie Black, author *The Last Toltec King*

Cats of Ulthar says

Review of The Highlander by Zoe Saadia
Rise of the Aztecs Book 1

If you’ve read any of Author Zoe Saadia’s “Pre-Aztec Series,” you know to expect a combination of

historical education with a smoothly-written, exciting story involving empathetic characters who maintain the reader's interest throughout. The first of this new series, "The Highlander," proves to be no exception. Immediately we get involved with the story of two boys (and one half-sister), one a Highlander, one a Lowlander, as they follow the dictates of their families, disparaging each other's ethnicity, yet learn to value their growing friendship. It is no coincidence, perhaps, that these two will prove to play pivotal roles in the changes to come for their societies and the empire across the lake.

Suffused with thrills and adventure and romance as well as character development, this novel paints a vivid illustration of a society long lost to us, but yet in many ways so like our own, with characters who could be us or our friends or neighbors. The human condition does not change much despite technology and the Industrial Revolution. My recommendation: read and enjoy!

I reviewed an e-book copy received from the author in return for my fair and impartial review.

Hannah Ross says

I have always been interested in pre-Columbian America, and this book was like a treasure that fell into my lap. Incredibly detailed and well-researched, it has all the elements of a good story - engaging characters, a fast-paced plot, and forbidden romance. I finished it in about a day and a half, and am looking forward to reading the rest of The Rise of the Aztecs series.

I daresay most novels featuring the native people of the Americas focus on the cultural clash between those people and the European invaders. It is comforting to read about the period in history when the great cultures of Mesoamerica had not yet begun to crumble following the Spanish conquest. It was an age of thriving empires, art, science and politics, and it's incredibly sad that it was cut short by the arrival of Europeans, who aptly destroyed every foreign culture they touched.

Kudos to the author for recreating this fascinating ancient world.
