

# Pardon My Aztec

by Ron Montana

**M**y mother doesn't like four-letter words. That, in and of itself, is not a suprising revelation. Most moms are not purveyors of profanity. But, since I am writer, this prudish attitude on the part of my maternal parent has, in the past, presented particular hazards. Witness the conversation that occurred when my first novel was published:

"Well, what did you think of your son's opus magnus, Ma?" I asked cautiously, not happy with the wrinkle on her brow—that warning sign that always signaled trouble.

"It has a nice cover."

Now, with the state of cover art being what it is today, especially for first books, I should have taken that as a compliment. But I had this creeping feeling that the gray-haired lady wearing the perennial apron was not being entirely honest with me.

"The book, Ma, how'd you like the book?"

"I didn't read it."

"Jeepers Crow, Ma—" (we said that a lot around my house for reasons that will become evident later) "--Did you break your glasses or something?"

She gave me that down-the-nose, piercing-gaze look that I had come to know so well in my youth when I had broken one of the rules of etiquette, like eating lasagna with my fingers, and said, "It had one of those words in it."

Now, the French have a saying, *toujours la dace*. I think it means 'don't let your mother get the best of you,' so I charged forward boldly like I had in the old days with the lasagna. First, you pretend you never saw a fork before, then you look surprised when it turns up beside your plate.

"Where?" I asked indignantly.

"Where? In the book. How should I know where? You think I marked it?"

Running to one of the various racks around the living room (when the book

came out, she bought out two bookstores and had my dad build racks), I grabbed a copy and shook it in her face.

"I defy you to show me what you're talking about," I said, although I was pretty sure I was about to be clobbered.

She took the book and opened it to a dog-eared page. I had selected the book at random and was somewhat surprised until I glanced at the others and saw they were all dog-eared.

"How should I know where it was?" she said. "Try page four, paragraph six, line three."

Well, she was right. It was there, bigger than life and underlined with a yellow line. I quickly searched my mental repertoire for another French phrase, something Napoleon might have used on his way to Elba. "Oh, that," I laughed without too much conviction. "That's in dialogue."

"I don't care if it's in Aztec." She cast a suspicious glance at my tiny, quiet wife of the time who was sitting at the other end of the dinner table and said, "You didn't learn words like that in my house."

I got to hand it to my wife; she just smiled and ate another canoli. She told me later she needed something in her mouth to keep her from replying. I had always wondered why she dieted for a week after visiting my mother.

"You don't understand, Ma. I didn't say that."

"So it's a typo? Maybe the editor is a pervert that runs around putting dirty words in all the books, huh? Or maybe it's a factory defect and they'll recall all your books." At that point hope gleamed in her eyes. My wife ate a piece of lemon meringue pie with two scoops of ice cream.

"No, no, no. You see, the character said that. Not me. I defy you to find any tiny bit of profanity in any descriptive blocks, the title or the dedication—which by the

way, was to you."

"That was nice. To my mother who was responsible." Ha! Now the world thinks I tutored you daily on how to swear!" My mother glared, my wife reached slackly for the cookie plate, and I squirmed.

"Look at it this way. If I was a newspaper reporter and I was interviewing a rapist, murderer..." My mother cringed and my wife smiled around an Oreo. "...and the accused described to me in gory detail how he accomplished his horrible acts and I wrote them down, would I be guilty of the same crime?" I gave her my broad Clarence Darrow grin and lifted my glass of wine to my lips. My 'your witness' pose.

"You are encouraging the youth of this country to use foul language, you with two children of your own. You ought to be ashamed."

I waved the book in her face and pointed to the dialogue block. "But that's a Harlem hooker talking, Ma. That's how they talk."

"On page 163, paragraph, six...ah," she searched her memory, "yes, line five, you have our president saying that word. He would never say that word to the country."

My wife flashed that, 'let's see you get out of this one' look and reached for candy dish.

"No, he'd rather do that word to the country!"

She looked at me calmly and said, "When they come and arrest you for pornography and treason, don't ask me to bake you a cake with a thesaurus in it. Then it'll be too late to change your ways."

Well, its several years later and times haven't changed a whole heck of a lot. No matter how hard I try, one of those gosh darn words crops up occasionally in my books. And, in case you run into a matronly lady in a book store hand-editing books with a black magic marker, it's probably mom.