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For the Classic Maya, who flourished in and around the Yucatan peninsula in the first millennium AD, artistic materials were endowed with an internal life. Far from being inert substances, jade, flint, obsidian, and wood held a vital essence, agency, and even personality. To work with these materials was to coax their life into full expression and to engage in witty play. Writing, too, could shift from hieroglyphic signs into vibrant glyphs that sprouted torsos, hands, and feet. Appearing to sing, grapple, and feed, they effectively blurred the distinction between text and image.

In this first full study of the nature of Maya materials and animism, renowned Mayanist scholar Stephen Houston provides startling insights into a Pre-Columbian worldview that dramatically contrasts with western perspectives. Illustrated with more than one hundred photographs, images, and drawings, this beautifully written book reveals the Maya quest for transcendence in the face of inevitable death and decay.