

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Review Essay: American Indian Literature: Current Condition and Suggested Research

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4nb8w70x>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 3(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Rosen, Kenneth

**Publication Date**

1979-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

## Review Essay

### American Indian Literature: Current Condition and Suggested Research

Kenneth Rosen

The National Council of Teachers of English has recently approved a resolution supporting the study of Native American literature, both oral and written.<sup>1</sup> The resolution proposed "that Native American literature and culture be taught kindergarten through college, and be it further resolved that programs in teacher preparation be encouraged to include resources, materials, and methods of presenting Native American literature and culture." The quantity of contemporary American Indian literature available to today's teachers and students is limited but steadily increasing; the quality of such work is, fortunately, quite high in many instances. The poems, short stories, and novels written by American Indians in the last decade or so will be considered here, as will some of the journals and chapbooks in which this material regularly appears. But of at least equal importance, I believe, are the suggestions made in this essay concerning the needs and opportunities for scholarly and critical research in the field of American Indian literature. It is my assumption here, of course, that a sound critical apparatus can only help to legitimize (in the eyes of those who approve public school curricula and university courses) the study of an important body of material which, until only recently, has been generally ignored.

While at least nine other novels had been written by American Indians and published in this country prior to 1969,<sup>2</sup> it was in that year that the Pulitzer prize for fiction was awarded to N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) and in the decade since that award we have seen at least seven

---

Kenneth Rosen is a professor in the English Department, Dickinson College.

additional novels published which demand our serious attention. Momaday's novel opened some heretofore closed doors. It is a complex, profound, and sometimes obscure work that reveals a sophisticated intelligence and finely honed sensibility attempting to deal with difficult material: Indian time forced to function as Anglo time; dominant culture sense of place in tension with traditional Indian sense of place; the role of ritual in a world that seems to have prostituted those few rituals it still allows. Abel, the main character in this novel, is the focus of what is essentially a traditional story, told in a twentieth century version of the oral tradition. Facts, lore, and legend are so carefully interwoven in this work that the form becomes the content, the manner itself is clearly one of the most important aspects of the novel's message. Abel is a modern version of one of Dante's lost souls, an Indian who can't function in the Anglo world because that world will make few concessions to myth or tradition or ritual, and because someone who kills an albino in a bar must be treated as circumspectly as Ishmael eventually treats Ahab (another "out-of-place" character who endowed the white creature he encountered with characteristics more spiritual than mundane). Abel, in the final analysis, is unable to live in the spirit-less world of Los Angeles, yet his ritualistic running toward the ineffable horizon, his first and final attempt at reaching the elusive "house made of dawn", is as disturbing to the reader as it is exhilarating.

Much has been written about *House Made of Dawn*, but it is probably a work that will stand up under a great deal more careful scrutiny. A recent scholarly appraisal of the novel places it among the most pessimistic of contemporary American Indian efforts;<sup>3</sup> a critical look at both the novel's ending as well as its structure might be in order now that the issue of tone has been raised. The relationship of Abel to both Francisco and Tosamah is often obscure; a careful examination of such relationships may help a great many readers better to understand Momaday's use of racial memory, historical context, and the vitiation thereof. Less literary in its implications (but of nagging interest to me ever since I saw a private screening in Los Angeles many years ago) is the question of the film version of *House Made of Dawn*. Larry Littlebird (now Larry Bird) of Circle Films played Abel, and the distributors present at the screening had trouble with Momaday's "notion of time," but what happened to the movie? Research that eventually unearths it and, perhaps, makes it available to the public might be effort well spent.

*Autumn's Bounty*, *Tsali*, and *Seven Arrows* all appeared in 1972.<sup>4</sup> *Autumn's Bounty* is a novel marred by Chief George Pierre's attempt to do for his people what Hemingway had done for an old Cuban fisherman twenty years earlier. Alphonse in Pierre's book is no Santiago, but the theme of pride and professional and personal integrity is clearly the author's focus and the battle between the old chief and the mountain lion is impressively told. The issue of termination is examined in this novel, but its thinly disguised relation to the policy as it was applied to the author's own tribe (Colville) tends, at times, to detract from the novel's effectiveness, as does Pierre's tendency to try to imitate Hemingway's quasi-biblical syntax and allusions. *Autumn's Bounty* would benefit from some scholarly explication of the actual historical events out of which it grew. What are the actual conditions among the Colville Tribes of Washington that have been fictionalized here? What techniques have been employed to create the distance so necessary in a novel of this kind? Why did these techniques fail to work at crucial points in the novel?

*Tsali*, by Denton R. Bedford, is a carefully focused novel about the rebellion of one man, Tsali, during the removal of the Cherokees from their land in 1838. The central character of the book (as did his historical counterpart) kills a white man and flees to the hills with his family. He is persuaded to give himself up for the good of his people, and he is executed when he does so. His heroic nature and his complex relationship to his people (he was not a leader) is consistently interesting and well handled, but Bedford tends to overload the inherently captivating tale of the hero with historical data that slows down the novel. The rather ambivalent tie that binds Tsali to his tribe is one of the more effective motifs in the work. The role of the group and the role of the individual within (and outside of) the group is often at issue in important scenes, and Bedford treats the symbiotic relationship that results with sensitivity. Additional research on the role of relatively minor historical figures may well reveal a rich vein for future Indian novelists to mine; at the very least, a careful study of the history of such migrations or removals will, hopefully, place such figures in better historical perspective.

Hyemeyohsts Storm's *Seven Arrows* had the advantage of a major publisher (Harper and Row) and the pre-publication publicity that goes with being the first book in a new series, so it is not surprising that it overshadowed the other novels by American Indians that appeared in 1972. More important, however, was the

fact that *Seven Arrows* followed hard on the heels of T. C. McLuhan's *Touch The Earth* (1971), a picture/word book by an impressive woman who prepared the public for the format Storm was to use. *Seven Arrows* is a composite of text, photographs, traditional tales, and somewhat surrealistic novelistic techniques of the modern world. Even the author's "central figure" is composite and multiple; no single character remains in our view too long; no individual voice is dominant; the collective is all-important and the "history" of a whole people is thereby sketched out for us. The Northern Cheyenne (of which Storm is technically a member) were mixed in their reception of the novel: some liked his use of memory and seasonal as opposed to strict chronological time; some found his revelation of certain Cheyenne rituals to be both sacrilegious and erroneous; some claimed outright fraud and maintained that the author wasn't even a member of the tribe. Whatever the truth may be about Storm, his novel operates on both a narrative and a metaphorical level. "The Pipe," "The Circle," and "The Flowering Tree" are three introductory sections that provide the reader with Storm's approach to what will be the main narrative, a tale of progressive degradation that ends in powerful, though rather obvious, morals: the oral tradition of a people must be preserved if the people are to survive; the rituals and traditions must be guarded and preserved or the Anglo will change the Indian beyond recognition; the narrative history of a people must be kept accurate so that the symbolic or spiritual reality of their passing will remain powerful and sustaining. *Seven Arrows* is a novel that speaks to the need to maintain one's identity in the face of a voracious dominant culture, the need to operate in both a literal and a figurative time frame so that the identity of the group remains strong enough to support those individuals who may temporarily lose their sense of self.

Using songs, tales, drawings and pictures, Storm's novel focuses on assimilations, survival, appearance and complex reality. The book is circular rather than linear; there is no conventional story line or resolution. What is probably needed from scholars is, first, a thorough compendium of the traditional Native American forms used in *Seven Arrows* and the history of those forms. Researchers might also clarify the book for many readers by locating each tale in its correct historical context. Who is Jumping Mouse, White Clay, Pretty Weasel? Are all Storm's tales works of his own imagination or is there some resonating background the reader should be aware of? Is Greasy Grass too obvious a place for Custer's

defeat? Scholarly research into the author's relationship to his tribe may not be particularly fruitful, but a comparison of the fictive treatment of the Northern Cheyenne (only one of the several groups considered in the novel) with their actual historical treatment might reveal a great deal about Storm's talent as a writer.

James Welch published his first novel, *Winter In The Blood*, in 1974.<sup>5</sup> That same year saw the publication of *Betrayed*<sup>6</sup> by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve and *The Owl's Song*<sup>7</sup> by Janet Campbell Hale, but the latter two works by Native Americans were overlooked in favor of Welch's novel. Sneve, a Brule Sioux, had been writing children's novels for a few years and *Betrayed* was another in a long series published by Holiday House. Hale, a Coeur d' Alene, offered us a touching and often powerful story of a young boy's attempt to survive in a world that seems determined to destroy him, but Doubleday published it as a non-adult novel and its time-in-print was limited. (In contrast to this, McGill-Queen's University Press in Canada published *Harpoon of The Hunter*,<sup>8</sup> the first novel written by an Eskimo named Markoosie, in 1970 and that essentially "non-adult" novel is still in print and still used in many Native American literature classes in this country.)

*Winter In The Blood* is an important novel, as much for Welch's artistry as for any other reason. The novel has an unnamed protagonist who "thinks" the story through and the author is able to manipulate his narrator masterfully. The story centers around the narrator and his family (two of whom are dead: his father, First Raise, and his brother, Mose,) a Cree girl named Agnes, a horse, a calf/cow, and a blind old Indian named Yellow Calf. The narrator's world is a vacuous thing; endless bouts of whoring and drinking in off-reservation bars, recurrent returnings to the reservation ranch where his grandmother rocks and dreams, his mother Teresa drinks and schemes, and his step-father, Lame Bull, keeps the ranch working. He is a young man without purpose, with a coldness where there should be heat, with a death-orientation where there should be life, a memory of past events that immobilizes him instead of giving him strength and direction. As the novel progresses we see him exorcise the demons of his father's and his brother's deaths (to the best of his ability) by speaking to old Yellow Calf and finding out about his own past, by saving the old cow (at the expense of the horse, Old Bird), and by throwing an old pouch into his grandmother's grave, thereby revealing at least a partial understanding of the value of his own Indian traditions at last.

Welch has produced a novel that reverberates with sounds of the traditional world, but those sounds are muffled and what comes through most clearly are the voices of the contemporary reservation world of the Indian, the world of time wasted, of memory which is debilitating and not enhancing, of love cut off from its source rather than brought to its fruition. *Winter In The Blood* is a controlled, well modulated work of art that speaks to the power inherent in the novelist. Scholarly work here will inevitably confine itself to an examination of literary form, style, and the nuances of technique in the work of an important author and poet.

Nasnaga (Roger Russell), a Shawnee, published his first novel, *Indians' Summer*, in 1975.<sup>9</sup> It is a satirical treatment of an important issue and its attempt at sustained humor is rather strained. A fantasy about Indian power being translated into a takeover of ex-Indian lands as the U.S. government capitulates, the story suffers from imagery apparently arrested in its 1973 Wounded Knee stage of development. The theme of Pan-Indianism, however, is central to much of Native American literature today and Nasnaga's novel had the virtue of considering traditional tribal unity as the indivisible core of whatever it is that will eventually mean survival for Native American people. Scholars will have less to do with Nasnaga's work than with some of the other Indian writers considered here, but his novel is worth noting.

In 1977 a major novel was published by Viking Press. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* silenced the skeptics who thought Momaday and Welch might have been aberrations in the Native American canon, it fulfilled the promise of an already widely published poet and short story writer, and it brought together disparate threads that had been tangled in American Indian literature for a long time. *Ceremony* is a novel that reveals a master storyteller at work. It is a thick, heavy, exciting, and demanding book that will reward the researching scholar with many surprises and the casual reader with insights that are profound. It is original in its structure — it actually goes beyond Momaday's novel in multiplicity of point of view, control of authorial distance, use of mythic overtones and the juxtaposition of traditional and contemporary rituals — and it is daring in its message: Silko actually suggests that Indians (like everyone else) created their own evil. There are no simplistic answers in *Ceremony*, no Red-Man-good, White-Man-bad, and the cure for the evil in the world is not to

"break through the wall" which surrounds it but to participate in the ever-changing ceremony of living and, by so doing, purify ourselves and the world we live in. Tayo, the protagonist, returns from World War II a psychological cripple. Betonie, a modern medicine man, is the only one who can cure Tayo and his ceremonies are not the traditional ones. He believes in adapting the new to the old (without compromising the essentials); being flexible and open-minded (without losing sight of one's strengths); using the witchery to your own advantage. Tayo must recapture a mythic band of cattle and he must spend time with a mythic woman of the mountains, but his real task is the purging of self-hatred. With the help of those whose business is redemption through ever-changing ritual, Tayo becomes a survivor, a person who has lived through his hell (not just the Pacific) and who has returned to the living.

Silko's novel is full of beautiful poetry, startling images, and abrupt shifts in focus and point of view, yet the story is held together by the experimental structure itself. Critics who intend to take on this novel in any serious way should be aware of Thought-Woman, the spider, who names things, and as she names them they appear. Silko says, "I'm telling you the story she is thinking," and this narrator-within-a-narrator allows the author a latitude no other American Indian writer (that I am aware of) has ever had. To analyze Silko's method, to take apart and study the structure of *Ceremony*, would be a scholarly job worth doing, but we will all be better off if it falls to someone who is as sensitive to the sunrise as to the witchery.

D'Arcy McNickle, who had written two previous works of fiction,<sup>10</sup> died before he could finish a third. *Wind From An Enemy Sky* has just been published (1979) by Harper and Row as McNickle's posthumous novel. As of this writing, no thorough review or analysis of the book has been done, and it is certainly a work that deserves careful scholarly attention. Anyone dealing with this final book might also consider it in the context of *The Surrounded* (1936) and *Runner In The Sun* (1954).

Only one scholar has done a full-length study of the novels written by Native Americans. The University of New Mexico Press published *American Indian Fiction* by Charles R. Larson in 1978. It is, as I've suggested elsewhere,<sup>11</sup> a useful and potentially controversial book that should be read by anyone working in the area of Native American literature. Larson considers those works



written between 1899 and 1978 and his analyses of some of them are extremely helpful.

Shorter prose fiction by American Indians presents a problem for the teacher. Some very fine short stories are being produced these days, but the material is published, for the most part, in widely scattered and little known journals, magazines, and newspapers. While evaluating one's own books is as absurd as Ionesco's fire chief in *The Bald Soprano*, it should be noted that Native American literature has at least one very serious immediate need: inexpensive, representative collections of contemporary short stories by American Indians.<sup>12</sup> A recent (1977) collection edited by Jane B. Katz, *I Am The Fire of Time*, combines poetry and prose works of Native American women with some impressive photographs and helpful introductions, but there are only two short stories in the book — one by Leslie Silko and one by Juanita Platero and Siyowin Miller. The stories of people like Simon Ortiz, Joseph Little, and Leslie Silko should be accessible to those who are interested in some of the finest writing being done today by Native Americans.

Collections of poetry are, of course, more numerous than prose collections, but such anthologies are often uneven and the good often tends to get buried in the mediocre. Two exceptions were published in 1975,<sup>14</sup> and one of them should be mentioned here as an example of what sound research and a good ear can produce. *Carriers of The Dream Wheel*, edited by Duane Niatum, includes the poems of sixteen Native Americans, among them Lance Henson, Roberta Hill, Momaday, Simon Ortiz, Silko, Welch, Ray A. Young Bear and Niatum himself. The quality of the works in this anthology is generally very high, each poet is generously represented, and the art work by Wendy Rose is strikingly attractive. What is probably most important, however, is the inclusion of diverse voices in the collection. W. M. Ransom's "Critter" is a far cry from Momaday's "Rainy Mountain Cemetery," yet the two together give us a sense of what is actually transpiring among Native American poets.

Future research cannot ignore such hard-to-define works as Momaday's *The Way To Rainy Mountain* or Gerald Vizenor's recent *Wordarrows*, but the real work, I think, will have to involve a careful look at the literature published in less impressive format as well. *Akwesasne*, the newsletter of the Association for Study of American Indian Literatures (ASAIL), the special American Indian

issue of *Nimrod* (Volume 16, No. 2) published in 1972, John R. Milton's *The American Indian Speaks* (published exactly a decade ago by the University of South Dakota Press), and this journal you are now reading are all valuable resources for the serious scholar. To keep abreast of what's being written will involve looking at the regular publications of *The Blue Cloud Quarterly* (published by Blue Cloud Abbey in Marvin, South Dakota), *Meeting Ground* (published by the Center for The History of the American Indian at the Newberry Library in Chicago), *Sun Tracks* (published as the American Indian Literary Magazine at the University of Arizona), and at the various issues of *Dacotah Territory* published by Mark Vinz at Moorhead, Minnesota. In addition to these regular sources, future research in American Indian literature will depend upon the scholar searching out and studying the chapbooks produced by small presses, slim volumes like *Keeper of The Arrows* by Lance Henson (Renaissance Press, Chickaska, Oklahoma, 1972), *A Cycle For The Woman In The Field* by Duane Niatum (Laughing Man Press, Baltimore, 1973), and *Laguna Woman* by Leslie Silko (The Greenfield Review Press, Greenfield Center, New York, 1974). Whatever the effort, I suggest that the writing to be discovered is worth it.

## NOTES

1. Reported in the *New York Times*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and various local papers in March, 1978.

2. Chief Simon Pokagon (Potawatomi), *Queen of The Woods* (Hartford, MI: C. H. Engle, 1899); John Milton Oskison (Cherokee), *Wild Harvest* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1925) and *Black Jack Davy* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1926) and *Brothers Three* (New York: Macmillan, 1935); John Joseph Mathews (Osage), *Sundown* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1934); D'Arcy McNickle (Flathead), *The Surrounded* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1936) and *Runner In The Sun* (New York: Holt, 1954); John Tebbel (Ojibwa), *The Conqueror* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1951); Dallas Chief Eagle (Sioux), *Winter Count* (Boulder, CO: Johnson Publishing Co., 1967).

3. Charles R. Larson, *American Indian Fiction* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978).

4. Chief George Pierre, *Autumn's Bounty* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1972); Denton R. Bedford, *Tsali* (San Francisco: Indian Historian Press, 1972); Hyemeyohsts Storm, *Seven Arrows* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).

5. James Welch, *Winter In The Blood* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

6. Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve, *Betrayed* (New York: Holiday House, 1974).

7. Janet Campbell Hale, *The Owl's Song* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1974).
8. Markoosie, *Harpoon of The Hunter* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1970).
9. Nasnaga (Roger Russell), *Indians' Summer* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).
10. McNickle, *The Surrounded* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1936) and *Runner In The Sun* (New York: Holt, 1954).
11. See my review of Larson's book in *ASAIL*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 1979.
12. *The Man To Send Rain Clouds* remains, unfortunately, one of the only collections of Indian short stories available.
13. Jane B. Katz, *I Am The Fire of Time* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977).
14. Duane Niatum, *Carriers of The Dream Wheel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975); Kenneth Rosen, *Voices of The Rainbow* (New York: Viking Press, 1975).