



NATIVE AMERICAN VOICES



A SIGNAL EVENT in the recent cultural history of Native Americans was the awarding of the 1969 Pulitzer Prize for fiction to Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday for his novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968). The Pulitzer jury declared that in making the award it was recognizing “the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans.” The importance of Momaday’s award, in fact, was far greater than that. It marked the beginning of a renaissance of Native American literature that would continue to grow and flourish throughout the remainder of the twentieth century. A great Niagara of novels, short stories, and poems began to flow from the pens (and word processors) of Indian authors across the country. Their writings offered bitter commentaries on the enduring problems that confronted Native Americans poised between two worlds and, with great insight, they analyzed the cultural and psychological implications of centuries of Indian-white interaction. Gifted Indian writers transformed the contemporary experiences of Native people into a literature of tremendous power and grace.

A central theme in this literary renaissance, like that of the Native American fine arts movement, was the search for an authentic Native American identity. Most of the major writers were people of mixed ancestry who had experienced life in both Native American and European American cultures. Their mixed-blood status heightened the sense of alienation and marginality that was common among Native

people regardless of their “degrees of blood.” Images of dislocated characters wrestling with their Indian identity fill the pages of contemporary Native American prose and poetry, just as they do the canvases of contemporary Native artists. Some succeed in discovering a satisfying sense of place and community, but others fail and remain lost in an alien and hostile world. Although the search for identity was a major theme, the complexity and diversity of contemporary Indian writing remained mind-boggling. “If you have an idea in mind what ‘Indian literature’ is, I suggest that you reconsider,” cautioned Native writer Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok):

If your idea is based on the observation of certain themes or images, consider that there is no genre of “Indian literature” because we *are* all different. There is only literature that is written by people who are Indian and who, therefore, infuse their work with their own lives the same way that you do.

Kenneth Lincoln, author of *Native American Renaissance* (1983), stressed the continuities between the earlier oral traditions of Native people and the literary flowering of the late twentieth century. Contemporary Indian novelists drew upon tribal storytelling traditions, as well as upon the pictographs of tribal histories recorded on rock walls, buffalo skins, birch-bark scrolls, and shell-beaded wampum belts. Native poets found inspiration in the songs and ceremonies of traditional spiritual leaders and healers. The oratory of ancient chiefs and council members contributed to the style and substance of modern Indian essayists. Through it all was a living connection between Native American literature and the context of tribal life, past and present. “The values and perceptions in older oral literatures underlie contemporary Indian writing,” Lincoln concluded. “Without question a renaissance or ‘rebirth’ springs from roots deep in the compost of cultural history, a recurrent past.”

Joseph Bruhac (Abenaki) questioned the use of the word “renaissance” to describe the works of contemporary Native American writers, but agreed that an essential quality of Native literature was its connection with the past. “Although what has been happening in the last few decades in North American Native writing has been described as a ‘renaissance,’ that word may be both inadequate and inaccurate in describing what has been happening,” wrote Bruhac in *Returning the Gift* (1994). “A renaissance is a sort of reawakening, but contemporary Native writing is both something old emerging in

new forms and something which has never been asleep.” Northwest poet Elizabeth Woody (Wasco/Navajo) was one of the many Native writers to acknowledge in her work a sense of connection with earlier, preliterary traditions. “The petroglyphs on rock in the Columbia River Gorge,” she commented in 1994, “are part of my literary heritage.”

NOVELS

Although the Native American traditions of storytelling and pictography were rich and full, the record of earlier published writings was scant. Prior to the appearance of Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* in 1968, only nine novels by Indian authors had been published. The earliest was *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854) by mixed-blood Cherokee author John Rollin Ridge, a seminal novel not only because it was the first ever written by an Indian author, but also because it set the tone for much that would come later. As Louis Owens (Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish), author of *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (1992), observed, the fiction of John Rollin Ridge demonstrates “the tension arising from conflicting identities that would emerge as the central theme in virtually every novel by a Native American author to follow.”

Eighty years after the appearance of *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*, mixed-blood Osage writer John Joseph Matthews published his novel *Sundown* (1934). Matthews was a graduate of the University of Oklahoma and also received degrees from Oxford and the University of Geneva. He served as a member of the Osage tribal council from 1934 to 1942, critical years when traditional values and the land itself were under relentless assault. The main character of *Sundown*, Challenge Windzer, is a mixed-blood who attempts to navigate a course between the demands of “civilization” and the “something that was not understandable and was mysterious” that drew him to the world of his Indian ancestors. Unable to put the disparate pieces of his life together, Chal often is rendered inarticulate. Witnessing the disintegration and impoverishment of the Osage people, he swears to himself, “I wish I didn’t have a drop of God damn’ Indian blood in my veins.” Then, near the end of the novel, Chal stumbles through a drunken dance and sings what he imagines is an authentic song of his people. “He was fascinated by his own voice, which seemed clear and sonorous on the still air. . . . He was an Indian now.”