

## BOOK REVIEWS

Colombo, John Robert (Editor): *Windigo: An Anthology of Fact and Fantastic Fiction*. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1982, VIII + 208 pp. Figs. ISBN 0-88833-097-9.

The book is a collection of writings; the subject of all these works is the Windigo. The form of each contribution varies, with some - such as Paul LeJeune's extract from the Jesuit Relations - mentioning the Windigo briefly, and others, comprising most of the book, featuring the Windigo as the subject of short stories. The editor has also added scientific accounts of the Windigo by Morton Teicher and Ruth Landes. Six pages of illustrations are included in the text.

The Windigo is included in the Northern Algonkian pantheon of spirits: let me briefly present this belief using the Ojibwa form as an example.

Through childhood the Ojibwa was urged to acquire a spirit-helper, one who would guide his hunting and protect him from evil. The hunter was dependent upon supernatural forces in obtaining a livelihood for himself and his dependents. If one was successful, one's spirit-helpers were strong; if the hunt was poor and the person could not provide for his family, his spirit-helpers were weak.

For the hunter the anxiety is great, for he must find food for his family. If nothing can be found the hunter may become depressed and withdrawn, his spirit-helpers having abandoned him. Cannibalism may be the last mode of survival. This is the most inhuman, appalling act known to the people. The person has become a Windigo.

What is a Windigo? Briefly, Windigo is either a spirit or a flesh-and-blood-being continually hunting for human prey.

One may become a Windigo either by consuming human flesh or by being bitten by a Windigo. A Windigo spirit can be sent, through sorcery, to possess or become a spirit-helper of an enemy, causing the person to become a Windigo. Game animals can be driven from the enemy's hunting area, or the weather can be altered to make hunting impossible, through the use of sorcery. This can cause famine and the possible development of a Windigo being.

The development of a "heart of ice", possibly symbolic of the cold environment, is diagnostic of a person who is becoming a Windigo. The urge to eat people is the evidence that one is a Windigo. If this urge is not curbed and a cannibalistic act results, the person is beyond help and is usually killed. The body is burned, the "heart of ice" is removed and smashed, and the pieces thrown back into the fire.

Why? Perhaps people who are confronted with an act of unritualized

cannibalism may seek a reason for its occurrence and find it in the Windigo myth. A person who has been labelled a Windigo may become obsessed with the idea, believe himself possessed by the spirit, and begin to act the role of the Windigo. The society may also react, dealing with the afflicted using the methods outlined in the myth. This is undoubtedly an example of a myth which serves to rationalize unnatural behaviour. Through time, this same myth may influence behaviour; once a person is labelled a Windigo that person may begin to act like the creature of legend.

Though there are a great number of articles and stories concerning the Windigo in circulation, Colombo is the first to collect an excellent cross-section of them. He has chronicled choice phrases, stories and articles from the Jesuit relations of the mid 1600's to the works of contemporary times.

The book is educational, mystifying, entertaining and even frightening. If you wish to learn about this cultural phenomenon and experience the "horror" implicit in the myth then the book will suffice. The book exudes the isolation and fear instilled by the environment; it portrays a phenomenal cultural disease and it analyzes, psychiatrically, this abnormal behaviour.

I would like to draw attention to Norval Morrisseau's depiction of the Windigo (p. 94). The painting clearly portrays the Windigo. The creature is shown with its lipless, fanged mouth, large, bloody eyes and cold heart of ice. It does not seem to be doing a jig, nor does it appear less than frightening as Colombo has stated. In its taloned hand and its stomach are men whom the Windigo has perceived as beavers. The Windigo is also a giant cannibal who sees humans as game animals. In this case, in its delusions, the Windigo believes the people to be rather large beavers.

Darryl Jones,  
P.O. Box 2413,  
The Pas, Manitoba,  
Canada, R9A 1M1.

Harrington, Richard: *The Inuit: Life as it was*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1981, 143 pp. No price. Paper. Photos.

Richard Harrington presents us with close to 150 first-class photographs of the Inuit traditional way of life taken between 1947 and 1953. Approximately thirty brief captions and twelve pages of text accompany them.

To judge such a book, the following should be kept in mind. Anyone presenting a document on a people to another people should have a minimal aim: to make the readers realize how culturally different the people described are, and yet how equal that culture is to their own (Todorov, 1982).

What is Harrington's achievement in this respect? A total failure. First, about 120 photographs have no captions. We are left ignorant of who or what is being shown. Second, thirty are provided with captions but we are not told to

what group the people displayed belong. The general impression left to the reader is that Inuit were a single homogeneous people. This is false. One of the important traits of Inuit civilization is that it was divided into linguistically and culturally tiny regional groups. Third, the text is marred by errors or contradictions. Harrington (p. 18) presents the total Arctic Inuit population as counting only a few thousand individuals. In fact, they were at least 36000 (Kroeber, 1939:157). On page 46, he writes that caribou hunting was the main winter activity, and on page 68, he tells that it was seal hunting. What is correct is that for some inland groups it was caribou that mattered, and for others seals (cf. Mauss, 1979; Gubser, 1965). On page 18, the Inuit are presented as always cheerful and happy with each other. The truth is that traditional Inuit culture was characterized by strong factionalism and blood feuding (Weyer, 1932:220-224). Fourth, as this was not enough, the author reduces Inuit life to a struggle for survival. What is accurate is that Inuit culture was much more than a set of recipes on how to survive, and in any case was not essentially this. What about these people's intellectual lives? Not a word.

This book, like many of its kind, presents the Inuit as a small physical wonder of nature, and in the end, denies these people the right to be known for what is essential to them: their cultural specificity. Harrington's pictures are truly beautiful. Obviously the man loves Inuit. But, what is love if it goes with a denial of the other's identity?

Dominique Legros,  
 Department of Sociology  
 and Anthropology,  
 1455 de Maisonneuve West,  
 Concordia University,  
 Montreal, Quebec,  
 Canada, H3G 1M5.

#### REFERENCES

Gubser, Nicholas J.

1965 *The Nunamiut Eskimos Hunters of Caribou*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kroeber, A.L.

1939 *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology Vol. 38.

Mauss, Marcel

1979 *Seasonal Variations of the Eskimo: A Study in Social Morphology*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Todorov, Tzvetan

1932 *La Conquête de l'Amérique: La question de l'autre*. Paris: Le Seuil.

Weyer, Edward, Moffat

1932 *The Eskimos, Their Environment and Folkways*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Kinsella, W.P.: *Dance Me Outside* (1977), *Scars* (1978), *Born Indian* (1981). Toronto: Oberson Press. \$8.95 each, paperback. *The Moccasin Telegram and Other Stories* (1983). Markham, Ontario: Penguin Books. \$5.95.

It's a rare occasion when a true storyteller makes an appearance on the book market; major publishers, it seems these days, are more interested in producing low-level, squirrely novels supposedly directed at a more general audience, all for the sake of raking in big money. It's still a rarer happening that an author makes such a sensation among people that the mere mention of his name, or any of his literary pieces, causes an uproar short of bringing the building down. And it is even harder to believe that in all this uproar you hear only how good the author in question is. Well, I'd hardly seen the likes of it, not until I bought the books by W.P. Kinsella.

Hearing about them through word of mouth, I thought it best to see (or, I should say, read) what the commotion was all about. So it was that I purchased copies of Kinsella's four books. As it happened, I had just bought them during a coffee break, so had them with me when I entered the cafeteria. I was astonished to find out that some of my colleagues had actually read a couple of the books, and immediately got quite excited about them; in fact, not only did it remain the topic of conversation for the entire break but for the rest of the week, and then some!

Now that I've raved on about how good the books are (and could continue to do so), my reader is undoubtedly wondering what the books are all about. Read the books! They are a collection of short stories previously published in leading literary periodicals. Kinsella writes his stories through the first person narrative of our "hero", Sties Ermineskin, an eighteen-to-twenty-year-old Cree living on the Hobbema reserve near Edmonton. Through Silas, Kinsella creates the perfect medium by which to describe and relate the lives of Native individuals, and how they perceive the world in which they, and we, all live in. It is not meant, however, to embarrass the reader about the Indian condition; on the contrary, Kinsella writes to make you smile - and laugh you do! Kinsella has a wit for satire, seldom seen since Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*. And it is in Mark Twain's style that the flavour of the stories comes out, since Silas has the inability to properly cope with a foreign language, namely English.

Mr. Nichols down to the Technical School in Westaskiwin, read my

stories and gets the school secretary to type them up. He corrects my spelling and puts in those commas and stuff, but he say he leave my syntax like it is. He explain syntax to me once but I didn't understand much. I just glad Mr. Nichols like it enough to leave it along. (Between, *Dance Me Outside*, p. 133).

Silas is a naive character, innocent of many of the harsh realities of modern white society, yet he always has the best intention in whatever he does. On the reserve he is somewhat set apart from his peers because, without lacking intelligence, he has common sense; that is he feels the difference between right and wrong, good and bad. That's not to say that he is an angel, some of the things he and his friends do are downright mischeivous, but all in fun like any teenager is bound to try (meaning that the reader really must laugh at all the trouble they get themselves into). Still, Silas has a conscience, and that alone makes him human.

Lots of white men don't figure that Indians is people but usually they never get into a position where they can do nobody any harm because of the way they think. (Mrs. Whitey, *Scars*, p. 5)

The reader comes to fully understand the way Silas thinks, and you begin to appreciate it. The beautiful manner in which the stories are written accurately represents the normal Indian form of oral tradition, with their common similes - "eyes be almost black and big and round as the bottoms of beer bottles" - which illustrates the use of associations (in this case with contemporary environment), *and* also the multiple sidetracking asides in the stories which are all part of narrating but have no real consequence for the tale being told. Another feature is the typical Indian burnout, great because they can poke fun at themselves and enjoy it as much as poking fun at white people.

Mr. Whitey don't have much to say, hut he feed me good and the first pay day he gave me an extra ten dollars. When I thank him he say, "Most guys would have stolen twenty dollars worth of tools by now. You're a good Indian, Silas."

"I ain't dead," I say. He does his inbreathing laugh again but I don't think he catch on to the joke. (Mr. Whitey, *Scars*, p. 7)

Not all the stories are total comedy, there are some tragic scenes, even though we have to smile at what some of the characters say during the story. This cold, hard feeling is evident when reading the purposely-titled cover stories *Dance Me Outside*, *Scars*, and *Born Indian*. In them we see the real world of the Native, what it is like to be "born Indian".

"They say what killed him was . . ." and she point her beefy big hand at me.

"Something called Sudden Infant Death Syndrome," I say.

Kingston's eyes are blank. "Babies die and nobody knows why,"  
I go on quick. Kingston Oldshoes face grow longer and become  
expressionless as a pancake.

"That's what *they say*," snort Mad Etta. "But *we know*."  
(Born Indian, *Born Indian*, p. 10)

Throughout the book as well we have good indications of the socio-cultural context of the Indian situation: life on the reserve, life of an urban Indian, life under Indian Affairs officials, and so on. Underneath the laughter and enjoyment there is the hard life that the Natives endure. Reading Silas makes it that much easier, though, for the reader to appreciate how well meaning he stays, and how optimistic he remains.

Annie look like people been beating on her all her life. Seeing  
Annie Bottle live the way she do is the reason I believe in a heaven  
of some kind. There got to be a better place than Hobbema for  
people like Annie after they die. (Scars, *Scars*, p. 150)

One of the delightful things is that these stories are a collection from various journals and magazines. Mostly, readers are confined to the odd masterpiece by a writer, but in these publications Kinsella has consistently presented us with the most impressive series of stories ever to come out under book cover.

W.P. Kinsella is pure entertainment. I'm sure readers will have their own favourite stories, but each and every one has a quality all its own. These are books which should be incorporated at least into the high school curriculum as good examples of Canadian literature. I would look for more from Kinsella, they would be a gem of a find. And... read these books!

Eric C. Simonds,  
Department of Native Ethnology,  
Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature,  
Winnipeg, Manitoba,  
Canada, R3B 0N2.