

“The Sun Still Rises in the Same Sky: Native American Literature”

By Joseph Bruchac

Few peoples have been as appreciated and, at the same time, as misrepresented as the many different cultures today called American Indian or Native American. Images of Indians central to mainstream America, from Longfellow's misnamed epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (which actually tells the story of the Chippewa hero Manabozho, not the Iroquois Hiawatha) to the "cowboys and Indians" tradition of movies about the Old West. Yet it's only recently that the authentic literary voices of Native Americans have received serious attention. Native American literature has been a living oral tradition, but it was never treated with the same respect as European, or Western, literature. But Western literature itself has its roots firmly planted in the oral tradition—such ancient classics as the *Odyssey*¹ and *Beowulf*,² long before they were written down, were stories kept alive by word of mouth. The vast body of American Indian oral literature, encompassing dozens of epic narratives and countless thousands of stories, poems, songs, oratory, and chants, was not even recognized by Western scholars until the late 1800s. Until then, it was assumed that Native Americans had no literature.

Part of the problem scholars had in recognizing the rich traditions of American Indian literature was translating the texts from hundreds of different languages—a task often best done by Native Americans themselves. Over the decades, various American Indian writers—N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich, Simon J. Ortiz, and Leslie Marmon Silko, among others—have revitalized Native American literature by combing their fluency in English with a deep understanding of their own languages and traditions.

We can make some important generalizations about American Indian oral traditions. First of all, Native American cultures use stories to teach moral lessons and convey practical information about the natural world. A story from the Abenaki people of Maine, for example, tells how Gluskabe catches all of the game animals. He is then told by his grandmother to return the animals to the woods. They will die if they are kept in his bag, she tells him, and if they do die, there will be no game left for the people to come. In this one brief tale, important, life-sustaining lessons about greed, the wisdom of elders, and game management are conveyed in an entertaining and engaging way.

American Indian literature also reflects a view of the natural world that is more inclusive than the one typically seen in Western literature. The Native American universe is not dominated by human beings. Animals and humans are often interchangeable in myths and folk tales. Origin myths may even feature animals as the instruments of creation.

All American Indian cultures also show a keen awareness of the power of metaphor. Words are as powerful and alive as the human breath that carries them. Songs and chants can make things happen—call game animals, bring rain, cure the sick, or destroy an enemy. For Native Americans, speech, or oratory—often relying on striking similes drawn from nature—is a highly developed and respected literary form.

Passed on from generation to generation, oral traditions preserve historical continuity. But these traditions are also, like the Native American peoples themselves, tenacious, dynamic, and responsive to change. The American Indian worldview is not that of a progressive straight line, but of an endless circle. This cyclical nature of existence is reflected both in the natural world itself, with its changing seasons and cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, and in Native American ceremonies repeated year after year. Each summer, for example, the Lakota people have their Sun Dance. In pre-Columbian times, they went to the Sun Dance on foot; after the coming of the Spanish, they rode horses to the annual event. Today, the Lakota arrive by automobile. While a European eye might see the technology of transport as the important point of this anecdote, to a Lakota the issue of changing transportation is unimportant. It is, after all, only a different way of getting to the same place. The sun still rises in the same sky.

1. *Odyssey*: ancient Greek epic poem, attributed to Homer.

2. *Beowulf*: epic poem composed in Old English between a.d. 700 and 750.1

Introduction to 2nd Catalogue of Native American Literature by Joseph Bruchac

When people ask me what led me to become a writer and storyteller, I always tell them that it was due in large part to the influence of my maternal grandparents who raised me. And, I add, my lifelong interest in my Native American heritage stems from my dark-skinned Abenaki grandfather, Jesse Bowman. My grandmother kept our house filled with books. However, as far as I know, Grampa Jesse never read a one of them. He could barely read a newspaper. His formal schooling ended in fourth grade when he jumped out a schoolhouse window after having been called a "dirty Indian" one too many times. Yet it is his voice that I often hear when I begin to tell a story and I feel his gentle encouraging presence with me as I start to write. Time and again, I have seen my grandfather's face in the faces of Native elders who have been my teachers and I have heard echoes of his slow, storytelling cadence and gentle humor in their voices.

My grandfather never raised his hand to me or raised his voice in anger at me when I was a child. I will never forget what my grandfather told me about his own upbringing. "My father never hit me," he said, "no matter what I done. He'd just talk to me, tell me a story." Then he chuckled. "There was times I think I would of rather had him hit me. Them stories was strong."

Years later, when I was in graduate school at Syracuse University, I would drive the Harley motorcycle that was my main means of transportation out to the Onondaga Reservation -- on whose land the city of Syracuse had been built. There, as I sat in the house of my Clan Mother friend Dewasentah, I would learn that child-rearing without abuse, child-rearing through the telling of stories, had always been the norm for the Iroquois people, as well. Beating and harsh words can twist the spirit of a child. A story stays in a child's heart and helps that child grow up straight and strong. The more I traveled and listened, the clearer it became to me that throughout Native North America the rule was "Spare the rod and tell the story."

Strong stories. That is one of the things which most Native American authors of this last quarter century have in common. Whether they are poets such as Simon Ortiz and Mary TallMountain, Ray Young Bear and Joy Harjo or prose writers such as Louis Owens and Linda Hogan, N. Scott Momaday and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, they tell strong stories. More than one Native author has told me how important it was to them to hear the stories when they were young, how those stories have remained with them. Simon Ortiz's father was well known as a storyteller at Acoma Pueblo. Simon once told me with pride how people used to refer to him as "the storyteller's son." It is no accident that an audio tape of N. Scott Momaday reading his own work was titled *Storyteller* or that *Storyteller* is the name of one of Leslie Silko's books.

As a writer who is also a professional storyteller, I have learned that the best stories -- whether they are written down or carried on our breath -- always serve at least two purposes. First, they are interesting and entertaining. That way they will be heard. Secondly, they carry teachings which are morally and practically useful. Thus they teach lessons. No matter how well-meaning it may be, a dull story will either be ignored or forgotten. George Bernard Shaw, the British writer, learned that in his career as a playwright after discovering his earlier works, though earnest, were not being heard. The majority of Native American writers either grew up with that understanding or, like myself, rediscovered it as adults when they began to write seriously.

In the late 1800s, the American government embarked upon a campaign which was designed "to kill the Indian and save the man." Coercive assimilation was United States Indian Policy from 1887 to 1934. Native culture had to be eradicated to make the Indians properly American. Literacy was an important part of that campaign as Native children were taken from their families and sent to Indian schools. There their own clothing would be taken away and they would be put into military uniforms. Their hair would be cut short and they would be forbidden to speak Native languages. If they disobeyed they would be brutally beaten. Many of those children died of infectious diseases or committed suicide.

At Onondaga many of the children were taken to the Thomas Indian Boarding School. "It was awful," Dewasentah said to me, remembering those days when the truck would come to take the children away. "The parents had been told it was best for their children, so they would have them ready. But the children would cry and scream for their parents as they dragged them away. I can still hear them crying."

The irony of that government effort was that it developed a deep interest in books among the graduates of those schools. Some of those who came back believed what the government had taught them about their old ways being wrong. But among some the opposite was true. Many of the graduates of such Indian Schools as Carlisle in Pennsylvania became strong advocates for Native culture and Native rights. Instead of forgetting the old stories, they added in a love of written literature. I cannot tell you how often I have entered the homes of Native elders who were boarding school survivors and found the walls lined, like Dewasentah's, with books -- most of them about Indians. It was not an uncritical love of books, I might add, for those elders were usually quick to point out to me the books in their collections which (invariably written by non-Indian Indian experts) contained lies about their people.

When I went to West Africa as a volunteer teacher in the 1960s I became friends with Chinua Achebe, a well-known African novelist. Chinua told me straightforwardly that one of the major reasons he became a writer was a British novel called *Mr. Johnson*, which portrayed Achebe's Igbo people as ignorant, dirty and superstitious. Achebe, who had grown up in a spiritually rich storytelling tradition, wanted to tell a different story and did so in a magnificent first novel called *Things Fall Apart*.

That, of course, is the wonderful irony about literacy. If a supposedly superior culture forces literacy upon Native cultures, that "superior" culture then finds -- to the dismay of the missionaries -- that being able to read means being able to read not just the approved books, but also those which tell the other side of the story. Being able to write means the Natives will find ways to express the values of their original cultures in that new medium and that new language.

And so it is today. The works of the Native writers of the last three decades continue to tell those strong old stories, stories of spiritual survival, in poems and stories, in novels and essays and plays written in large part in English. The children and grandchildren of those who were taken from their homes by force and taught to have contempt for their tribal cultures today look back to the oral tradition, are inspired by it, and then continue the circle of stories, continue it through their writing.

