

A Note On Reviews

This issue (January 1981) of *Explorations In Ethnic Studies* is the last in which book reviews will appear. In March we will publish our first annual review supplement, *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*. *Sights and Sounds* will consist entirely of reviews and we plan to include non-print media such as records and films, as well as books, monographs, and new journals.

Our intention is to present critical assessments of as many current publications as possible and therefore reviews must be brief (300-500 words). We will no longer publish review essays. Reviewers who feel particular titles merit lengthier discussion are invited to submit their analyses as articles to be considered for publication in *Explorations in Ethnic Studies*.

I have saved for last what we want to emphasize most: NAIES is an organization with a purpose. That purpose is the exploration of solutions to cultural oppression, particularly as it is experienced by ethnic people of color. Accordingly, the essential criterion we expect reviewers to use in evaluating a given title is how it relates or fails to relate to this purpose.

Helen MacLam, Associate Editor
NAIES Publications

Reviews

Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell and T.D. Allen. *Miracle Hill: The Story of a Navaho Boy*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967, 1980).

A unique experience awaits readers of *Miracle Hill*, the autobiography of Blackhorse Mitchell, nicknamed "Barney," a young Navaho boy who began his own story as an assignment in his twelfth grade English class in the Santa Fe Institute of American Indian Arts under the tutelage of Terry D. Allen. Unlike the other students in the class, who finished their life stories in half an hour or so, Barney found that he had a whole book stored up inside him, just waiting to

be put on paper. But Barney was still in the process of learning English as a second language, and so his manuscript was full of errors; Allen decided, however, that correcting the manuscript would result in less communication of Barney's colorful world view, in a less authentic transmission of his personality. So although she is listed as co-author, Allen did a minimum of editing and asks the reader to "hang loose" and let Barney's honest emotion flow through, despite his violation of conventional rules of grammar and spelling. Perceptive readers will find they are far less bothered by Barney's unconventional use of English than they would have supposed possible, for soon one becomes completely charmed by Barney's story and manner. In fact, those readers sensitive to language will often find Barney's "slips" felicitous—their metaphorical aptness conveys a freshness of viewpoint that is more characteristic of poetry than of prose and lends real insight into the working of Barney's mind. It becomes evident that with *Miracle Hill* "The entire production, in substance, form, tone, style, is woven out of the inner consciousness of the autobiographer,"¹ as Waldo H. Dunn said that good autobiography should be.

Beginning with his birth in March of 1945 in New Mexico near the Four Corners area, Barney enthusiastically tells the story of a boy he calls "Broneco." Until the age of seven, Broneco spent most of his time with his grandparents herding sheep. His only contact with the white world and the English language, except for the few words his grandmother knew, was with a white boy named Dale in a town five miles from Broneco's home, but that was enough to instill in Broneco a desire to learn English and white ways, a desire which became his central motivation despite the disapproval of his grandmother, the most important person in Broneco's life. When he went away to an Indian school in Colorado, Broneco's studiousness and high esteem of white ways seem to have sometimes estranged him from Indian companionship, though Barney does not explain his "differentness" in exactly those terms. Broneco's school experiences for the next twelve years, the personal relationships formed at school and those retained at home, his growth from an appealing, sensitive child to a charming, idealistic young man and budding author—these are the essence of this Navaho *bildungsroman*.

Not every adolescent will appreciate this book, for it is not filled with high adventure or plot intrigue. And some young readers will find the unconventional use of English a stumbling block. Still, adolescents surely can identify with Broneco's fears in the face of new situations, his disappointments when he feels betrayed or

ignored by friends, his stumbling efforts to establish relationships with girls, his conflict with his grandmother over the course his life is to follow, his grief over his grandmother's death, and other universal emotions and patterns. Adult readers will enjoy this very personal glimpse into the life of an intelligent and receptive human being trying to live in two extremely different cultures. Although Broneco clearly values the English language and white culture, he also values his home, his relatives, and his Indian way of life. He does not attempt to pull up his roots; rather he uses them for renewal and balance. The hill referred to in the title is a hill near his home from which he could see great distances, on which he and his grandfather sat and talked many times of Indian dreams. This hill is the source of his roots, as well as of his dreams of the wider world, and the book closes as he returns once more to the hill.

Moreover, the book is worthy of study as literature because, although some aspects of it are amateurish, it is a unified work of art with a coherent structure, three-dimensional characters, and fitting symbolism. The hill from which the book takes its name is skillfully developed from a physical place to a metaphysical symbol that informs the entire plot and philosophy of the book. Work with the book in a creative writing class comparable to the one which sparked its genesis would be especially rewarding.

Though *Miracle Hill* ends before Broneco has found his niche in the world, readers will be happy to know that Blackhorse Mitchell, as he now prefers to be called, did learn to live successfully with, as he puts it, "one leg in the white world and the other in the Indian world." Mr. Mitchell teaches Navaho studies to both Indian and non-Indian students at Navaho Community College, Shiprock, New Mexico. He is a published poet and is working on a Master's Degree in Elementary Education Administration at the University of New Mexico.

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Note

¹Waldo H. Dunn. *English Biography*. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1916). 272.