

Paul G. Zolbrod. *Diné Bahane': The Navajo Creation Story*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984) 431 pp., \$29.95.

Paul G. Zolbrod's *Diné Bahane': The Navajo Creation Story* is a revision of Washington Matthews' "The Navaho Origin Legend" published in *Navaho Legends* (Boston: American Folklore Society) in 1897. Zolbrod justly describes Matthews' version of this narrative as "one of the world's significant literary works," and his rewriting of it makes it accessible as never before to English speaking readers. The narrative is essentially sacred in nature, dealing with the emergence of precursors to human beings through successive primal worlds and with male and female deities who must achieve harmony, peace, and balance between themselves and throughout the world before the Navajo people can be created to live on this earth.

In his notes to *Diné Bahane'*, Zolbrod explains that Matthews' papers and publications contain no Navajo transcription of "The Navaho Origin Legend" which he apparently synthesized from memory of performances of the narrative in Navajo and English observed over the course of perhaps a dozen years. Zolbrod rewrote Matthew's dense English prose and arranged the text in order to better reflect the rhythm, incremental repetition, and overall rhetorical effect of Navajo oral narrative style. From other sources, he supplemented explicitly sexual passages which Matthews omitted, and he expanded places where he believed that Matthews toned down the emotion conveyed in oral performances of the story.

Thus, *Diné Bahane'* is very much a composite work, based on Navajo oral performances spanning a century and twice retold in written English. Lacking a Navajo transcription of the story, let alone an audio or visual recording, Zolbrod was unable to examine those finer linguistic and paralinguistic features which have led Dennis Tedlock, Dell Hymes and others to represent narratives in such Native American languages as Zuni and Clackamas in print as verse. While Zolbrod stresses the tale's poetic quality, he says in his notes that as a "longer narrative which deals explicitly with creation" he finds it more suited to "patterned prose" than verse (p. 344).

Impressed with the unity, detail, and comprehensive sweep of Matthews' version of the Navajo creation story, Zolbrod set out to compensate for its omissions and stylistic drawbacks. He prepared himself to accomplish this by consulting with Navajo storytellers, and by studying their styles and techniques, their language, the styles and techniques of storytelling in English, scholarship concerning Navajo culture, other transcriptions and translations of the Navajo creation story, and more.

Zolbrod provides extensive and helpful explanatory notes to the narrative, makes frequent reference to previous scholarship in Navajo literature and culture, and includes a large bibliography. His introduction gives background information concerning both his own and Matthews' involvement with Navajo narratives, introduces a few of the basic themes of the Navajo creation story, and constitutes a good general discussion of some of the questions and considerations that arise out of attempts to make written translations of oral performances. He contrasts the fluidity of an oral story which exists in everchanging variants of the fixity of a text once it has been written down and discusses the implications of oral literature for our understandings about the nature of literature and poetry.

Zolbrod also points out in his introduction that for many Navajos their creation story is more than just a literary or aesthetic experience. It is basic to their sense of reality, their sense of identity, and their relationship with the land, the cosmos, and what they consider sacred. Some of those whom Zolbrod asked to help him with his work agreed out of a desire to preserve information that might otherwise to be lost. Others refused out of a conviction that the story should be written down only in versions reflecting the authority of appropriate medicine men, while others still believed that it ought not be written down at all (pp. 21-25).

People who work with Native American literatures are becoming aware that there is little agreement within Indian communities whether we ought to record or translate the more sacred works of these literatures. As a reader of *Diné Bahane'*, I am torn between my gratitude for the opportunity to enjoy and learn from this beautiful, wise, and humorous narrative and the knowledge that in 1884 and 1984 alike there were Navajos who believed that it should not be published in written form.

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