

## *Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

Johnston's attempts to make a passage or descriptive phrase more "literary" has actually altered the original, informal tone of a funny tale told among friends. For example, describing a proposal scene between two young Ojibway, Johnston writes: "Bezhinee allowed herself the luxury of gazing briefly at the sparkling diamond on her finger before shoving her hand in the pocket of her cardigan. Her fingers constantly explored the unaccustomed outline and hardness of the first ring she had ever owned." Such lines are evocative and would serve to strengthen a short story, but here they are counter-productive, unnecessary. The voices of unique, individual Ojibway storytellers are difficult to distinguish because the tone of most tales is similar to that of the autobiographical selections. Johnston does acknowledge that the act of translation is a problematic one that creates a barrier "to a fuller exposition of Ojibway humour."

Johnston notes in the foreward that the tales collected here reflect a point of transition for the Ojibway of Moose Meat point; the people of these tales struggle with the tenuous balancing act between assimilation and progress and cultural and spiritual preservation. Certainly the tales are valuable in that they offer a look at the everyday manifestations of the white man's effect on native peoples. In his forward, Johnston dedicates the collection to storytellers and to the people of Moose Meat, and "especially to the white man, without whose customs and evangelistic spirit the events recounted would not have occurred." His tone is sarcastic here, and when Johnston later takes a conciliatory stance toward the white man, describing Canadian government policy reform beginning in the 1960's as "enlightened," he seems not entirely comfortable in doing so. He begins the book with a list of dichotomies, adjectives describing the Ojibway in positive terms—having "individualistic, resourceful, informal, proud, imaginative"—and the white man in negative—having "haste, overbearing, force, and decisiveness." Such description is predictable and understandable in light of recent history, but the tales do not serve to acclaim the Ojibways' qualities as much as they do to mock them. The collection of stories in criticizing the white man, but *Ojibway Tales* fails to illustrate the Ojibway character Johnston set out to celebrate.

Vanessa Holford Diana  
Arizona State University

**Sidner J. Larson. *Catch Colt. American Indian Lives.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995) 162 pp., \$21.00.**

*Catch Colt* describes Gros Ventre writer Sidner J. Larson's experience as a mixed-blood Native American looking for his heritage, identity, and personal direction. Although minority fiction writers (such as

## *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*

Rudolfo A. Anaya and Leslie Marmon Silko) have addressed this theme, non-fiction discussions of mixed-blood Native American lives are lacking. Larson's autobiography, however, is only moderately successful because he fails to make readers identify with his struggle as a member of "two different worlds at the same time...with a degree of non-acceptance by both."

While Larson talks about joyous times, personal challenges, and moments of confusion, he tells the reader about his wide range of experiences rather than transforming them into concrete, meaningful images. For instance, he writes that a particular university teacher "taught me to believe that someone like me could live a life of the mind," but we never learn what that professor said or did to make this impression.

Such generalizations are present throughout the book. Speaking of his mother's family, Larson observes:

... the family was made up of genuine characters who were personable, entertaining, forceful, and each in his or her own way quite talented. the men were good with animals and looked larger than life on horseback. The women were capable at cooking, canning, putting up and setting by, and did not stand for much foolishness.

This description reads like a Western fiction cliché, for these phrases are equally applicable to Anglo settlers and the Native Indians Larson is describing. Larson never convinces the reader that "the women...did not stand for much foolishness," nor does he illustrate how the men were "larger than life on horseback." More problematic, however, is that Larson never explains how these "genuine characters" influenced his ability to manage his "dual life in white and Indian worlds," and he even seems to ignore the dual ethnicity issue in the latter third of the book.

That Larson is influenced by Native American writers is clear by his themes and references to other Native authors. But these allusions to well-known works of American Indian fiction seem self-conscious, as if Larson needs them to justify his own experiences. When describing a friend who returns from Vietnam depressed and unstable, Larson writes: "He reminded me of the character Abel from Scott Momaday's book *House Made of Dawn*." Many people reading this book would make that connection for themselves or, conversely, someone not familiar with Momaday's novel would be frustrated by what would be a puzzling literary reference.

Near the end of *Catch Colt*, Larson writes: "Because I allowed myself to become an outsider to family, landscape and tribal identity, I was, after a while, poorly equipped to cope with the challenges [of the modern world] that arose." These lines reflect a theme common to minority fiction—the importance of family, identity, and the land. Thus,

## *Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

while Larson rightfully concludes that Native Peoples' survival in the modern world depends on a connection to family and the earth, the story Larson tells to lead us to this conclusion is far from compelling and fails to convince us of this truth.

Dorie S. Goldman  
Arizona State University

**Melissa L. Meyer. *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation, 1889-1920.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994) 333 pp., \$40.00 hard cover.**

Employing a broad multi-disciplinary approach which includes history, anthropology, economics, demography, ecology, and political science, Meyer, a U.C.L.A. historian, has created a sensitive and sweeping analysis of the creation and metamorphosis of the Anishinaabeg ("Chippewa" or "Ojibwe") who eventually located in contemporary Minnesota on the White Earth Reservation. Eschewing stereotypes of Indians as mere victims of Euro-American history, Meyer shows how the Anishinaabeg—themselves internally heterogeneous—transform, adapt, innovate and respond according to their own interests and to changes around them.

This carefully crafted case study chronicles the ethnogenesis of these highly mobile and adaptable people in the region of Sault Ste. Marie, their life as subsistence hunter gatherers, and their subsequent engagement in the fur trade and migrations. The Anishinaabeg utilized intermarriage with Europeans as a form of alliance, thus creating a subgroup (*Metis*) which historically acted as intermediaries between the two groups.

It is in the interface of ethnic identity, legislation, and economic activity that Meyer makes an outstanding contribution to the study of ethnicity and ethnic relations. She shows how Anishinaabeg ethnicity is not static but fluid and how it has historically been utilized for manipulation and economic gain. She accomplishes this through a fine grained analysis of legislation affecting the Minnesota Anishinaabeg.

In 1867 the reservation was 'set aside' by the Federal Government for the assimilation of the Anishinaabeg. Its diverse ecosystem was judged optimal for both the continuity and gradual transformation of the life ways of these peoples. Despite contestation, both full bloods and mixed bloods (*Metis*) were deemed eligible to live on this reservation. These identifiers, mixed and full blood, are not merely genetic but more importantly behavioral markers which play a significant role in reservation history.

The Nelson Act of 1889 sought to assemble all Anishinaabeg