

## *Number 15 (Summer 1995)*

So just for fun he kept switching it until he got a call from a lady in Germany telling him to 'Cut it out!'"

The introductions also give valuable information about the characteristics and trends of various forms of humor. True, they are mainly generalizations, but they are generalizations which create a basis from which a researcher can move forward for further study. *Humor Scholarship* is not, of course, a book to be read cover to cover, but it is a valuable reference tool to keep handy on the shelf for anyone interested in reading or writing about humor.

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**Louis Owens. *Bone Game. American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series.* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994) 243 pp, \$19.95 cloth.**

Tricksters in Native American thought often include the gambler and skinwalker. Traditionally, the character of the gambler appears in order to test a person, who must play and win a life and death game so that the individual (specifically) and the tribe (generally) will survive. And, according to anthropologist Larry Sunderland, a Navajo skinwalker ostensibly inserts a bone into a victim's body without breaking the skin. This action often results in mental and/or physical injury, illness, and death. The bone can only be removed ceremoniously by a shaman (*hitaali*); both the gambler and skinwalker are shapeshifters. During the Morning Star Ceremony, which is demonstrated in *Bone Game* and was ended by Metalsharo (Pawnee) in 1813, a maiden's body would be painted half black and half white, staked to the ground, and shot full of arrows in a Dionysian ceremony. Owens delicately intertwines these three ceremonies and figures in a story filled with action, mystery, and surprises.

Similar to the traditional gambler, who collects scalps and hands of victims, *Bone Game* opens with the students and faculty at the University of Santa Cruz (where Owens taught Native American Literatures) in a frenzy because the head and hands of students have started to wash up on a nearby shoreline. The plot is further complicated because Dr. Cole McCurtain, who suffers from "ghost sickness" (96), must stop his slow alcohol-induced suicide before he can face his destiny and stop the murders. The protagonist in *Bone Game*, Cole (Choctaw/Irish, middle-aged, survivor's guilt, divorced), is the unwilling and unknowing hero who must confront the gambler/trickster/skinwalker. Although Cole seems aware of the magnitude of what he must do, his traditional family rushes to assist him because, as the medicine man Luther states: "This story's

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so big Cole only sees a little bit of it" (79).

Gerald Vizenor, the academic trickster, states that "that game, the four ages of man [and woman], continues to be played with evil gamblers in the cities" (*Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths and Metaphors*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990, (180)), and similarly, throughout his text, Owens implies that this mortal game is still being played.

In *Bone Game* the trickster/gambler/skinwalker is both literal and mythical in this text where Owen's (Choctaw/Cherokee/Irish) has the past and present, dreams and waking, real and surreal, and natural and supernatural exist simultaneously. Owens text is easily accessible to both Indian and non-Indian alike, and he effectively grabs his readers and shakes them into a realization (which would be shared by Mikhail Bakhtin) that myths and every day reality exist simultaneously (157)—maybe we had better start listening.

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**W.S. Penn. *All My Sins are Relatives*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). 257 pp., \$25.00 cloth.**

W.S. Penn writes with wit and cleverness, but also with passion and love, about himself, his blood relatives, and his spiritual relatives. If the sins of the father are visited upon the son, Penn is doubly doomed by his need to understand his grandfather's generation as well as his father's. It is his grandfather and his father, as well as numerous others, to whom the book is dedicated, and it is this line of family members who have created the writer and critic who explores his own life as a mixed blood by simultaneously exploring the lives of his relatives and of his relatives and of other writers such as Wendy Rose, Leslie Silko, and Mourning Dove.

Penn lives and writes in the shadows of trickster coyote, Chief Joseph, other writers, and his family, among others. He seeks his own identity through words, recollections of Nez Perce history, advice from his grandfather, and the writings of his contemporaries. Penn's identity is forged by both white and Indian ancestry, and both sides have struggled to take control. In looking back, he recognizes the negative influence of his white mother and harshly relates her desire "to want us not to be Indian" (55). In the end, he must grapple with the issues of his own identity and says, "I had to invent myself, to live" (52). Penn's book is autobiographical, but it is not linear and seldom chronological. Time and life (or lives) are circular and experiences repeat themselves through generations and throughout individual lives. In discussing time, Penn notes,