

Nicholas Black Elk, as told through John G. Neihardt, Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux. 1932, reprint Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

Black Elk Speaks was published in 1932. It is a record of the life of a Lakota holy man from the time of his birth in 1863 until the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890, an event that ended Lakota hopes for a return to their former life as followers of the buffalo on the Great Plains. As Black Elk said, through John G. Neihardt:

I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from the high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered. . . . And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. (276)

Black Elk's voice, whether it was his authentic voice or one filtered and adapted by Neihardt, resonated strongly among the book's readers. The passage just quoted is a famous one, but it obscures as much as it reveals about Black Elk. As Michael Steltenkamp has observed, the man lived a rich full life well beyond the time of Wounded Knee (until 1952, in fact), and these words seemed to suggest that "the holy man's late-life worldview was grounded upon the desolate killing field of 1890."¹ Given that Black Elk became well known as a Catholic catechist following his conversion in 1904, it has been strongly argued that his world view did not end in 1890.

When Black Elk Speaks was published, its title was accompanied by the subtitle "as told by John Neihardt." (The phrase became "as told through" in the 1961 edition, following some criticism from Lakota readers that Neihardt had manipulated Black Elk's voice.²) The book was the product of conversations between Black Elk and Neihardt in 1930 and 1931. Those conversations were translated by Emil Afraid of Hawk in 1930 and by Black Elk's son, Ben, in 1931. They were stenographically transcribed by Neihardt's daughter, Hilda, and later revised by Neihardt. Black Elk's memories were augmented by those of older

¹ Michael E. Steltenkamp, Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Misionary, Mystic (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), p. 81.

² The State University of New York Press published an annotated edition of Black Elk Speaks in 2008, the annotations being the work of Lakota scholar Raymond DeMallie. The book addresses a number of critical issues about authorship and intent and includes the original illustrations created by Nicholas Black Elk's friend, Standing Bear.

friends of his—Fire Thunder, Iron Hawk, and Standing Bear. The book is an exercise in collaboration.

Black Elk Speaks, written chronologically, deals with several themes. Black Elk and John Neihardt began their conversations by smoking red willow bark in the former's sacred pipe as an offering to the Great Spirit. Black Elk's memories recount the near destruction of the Lakota way of life by white expansion. He was well situated to witness that destruction. He was three years old when Red Cloud led the Lakota's attempt to drive federal garrisons from the Bozeman Trail, and he speaks of the knowledge of that war that came to him from Lakota warriors, including his older friend, Fire Thunder, as well as his own father. Both men fought in the Battle of the Hundred Slain—the victory over Fetterman. Similarly, Black Elk knew warriors who had fought in the Wagon Box Fight and had spoken to him about their deeds. He was five years old when the Lakota succeeded and federal troops abandoned the area. He witnessed the effects on the great buffalo herds of the transcontinental railroad's construction, and he lived through the upheavals that followed the return of federal garrisons. He was thirteen at the time of the Battle of the Little Big Horn, which he witnessed and fought in (killing at least two soldiers and taking a scalp), and he was wounded at Wounded Knee in 1890. He was a young man when Crazy Horse was murdered. He traveled to Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, though he was disillusioned by the experience, as was Sitting Bull. His family moved away from areas of Lakota-white conflict several times. His memories provide a historical record of the steady pressure that broke Lakota power. They are intercut with the history of his own growing awareness of visionary powers.

The book's second theme is the emergence of Black Elk's visionary powers, and it provides an account of his spiritual development, which helped make the book famous. Black Elk began to hear voices when he was four years old and experienced his first vision (of two men sharing a sacred song) when he was five. His next recorded vision occurred when he was nine. (The time in between visions was marked by his family's movements away from the pressure of white settlement and the railroad.) He was alarmed by his visions and kept their existence to himself, though he finally had a vision that was so powerful that he became sick and unable to walk and had to be carried when the camp moved. Lying down in his family's teepee, looking through the opening at the top that allowed smoke to escape, Black Elk saw men he had seen in an earlier vision. The new vision was quite complex. After seeing four groups of horses, one from each cardinal direction, animals that were able to change form into that of other animals, Black Elk comes to a cloud that changes shape into a teepee, one whose entrance is marked by a rainbow, and he meets the six Grandfathers. They reveal to him that his grandfathers all over the world are meeting in council to teach him what he needs to know spiritually.

The lessons are highly complex, spiritually beautiful, and deeply alarming. Black Elk is shown the trouble and war that is to come and is charged as someone who will be instrumental in saving many others. (At one point in the vision he rides through a dying village, and the people in it regain life as he passes through.) The rainbow tepee disappears. Black Elk sees his own village and hurries toward it. He enters his tepee and

sees his parents attending a sick boy who is, in fact, himself. He then awakens, but is unable to explain where he has been in a way that his parents understand.

The great vision brings frustration, for Black Elk has been charged with great responsibility but cannot fulfill it. In a section titled “The Compelling Fear” (Chapter 13), Black Elk recounts both the frustration of his people, caught between their free way of life and reservation life, and his own frustration at being unable to act on his vision. An elder named Black Road mentors him and helps him prepare for an even more powerful vision by helping to construct a sacred teepee. Following purification, Black Elk experiences the great vision again and, with it, understanding of his new role as a spiritual leader. There are other powerful visions, and Black Elk crafts ceremonies to help heal others. Healing is to be the manner in which he fulfills his vision.

The two themes—the destruction of the Lakota way of life and the growth of Black Elk’s healing powers—intertwine, for Black Elk’s visions and work as a healer are responses to the destructive forces. Black Elk’s vision and John Neihardt’s poetic skills produce a book that is both sad and uplifting.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Black Elk’s life parallel the historical developments that changed his people’s way of life?
2. What was Black Elk’s experience at the Little Big Horn, and how did it shape him?
3. How did Black Elk develop a sense of mission about the intertwining of his own experience with that of the fate of his people?
4. How did Black Elk’s experience as a visionary begin? What was the import of his first vision?
5. What was the reaction of Black Elk’s family and friends to his visions?
6. What was Black Elk’s “great fear”?
7. How did Black Elk overcome his fear?
8. What was Black Elk’s experience at Wounded Knee? Why did the event convince him that his people’s traditional way of life was over?
9. What controversies exist concerning the writing of Black Elk Speaks?
10. How does Neihardt’s poetic voice serve to advance the power of Black Elk’s visionary voice?

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Black Elk (Hehaka Sapa) was born in December 1863 and died in August 1950. A member of the Oglala Lakota, he was the second cousin of Crazy Horse and was a witness of the Battle of the Little Big Horn and a wounded victim at the Wounded Knee Massacre in 1890. He also was a member of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show when it traveled to England in 1887. Like Sitting Bull on another occasion, Black Elk found the participation to be a bad experience, given the liberties that Cody took with the truth. Black Elk was both a holy man and a Catholic convert. In addition, he was a heyoka (jester or contrarian) who forced people to confront issues in different ways than were

dictated by social convention. When Black Elk put on furs during a heat wave and shed clothing during a cold spell, he was satirizing the limits placed on life by the elements.

John G. Neihardt (January 8, 1881, to November 24, 1973) was an American poet (The Song of Hugh Glass and A Cycle of the West, among others) who also published prose studies of Plains history (When the Tree Flowered, The Splendid Wayfaring, and Indian Tales and Others). His work focused on the Plains experience, including the displacement of Native Americans by European migrants. Born in Illinois, Neihardt moved to Bancroft, Nebraska, in 1901, living on the edge of the Omaha Reservation. He graduated at the age of sixteen from Nebraska Normal College (now Wayne State College) and turned to running a newspaper called The Bancroft Blade for several years. He was Nebraska Poet Laureate from 1921 until his death, though he lived in Missouri from 1920 until 1969. Black Elk speaks, which appeared in 1932, is generally regarded as one of the most influential books written in the Midwest.

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