

Jack W. Marken and Charles L. Woodard, eds. Shaping Survival: Essays by Four American Indian Tribal Women. Lanham, Maryland, Toronto, Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2002.

### SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The working title for this book was Ways of Knowing, because of its emphasis on the bi-cultural educations of tribal people in South Dakota. The eventual permanent title, chosen by the four authors, speaks more specifically to their often difficult experiences while learning to live in two worlds.

Those two worlds, of course, were and continue to be very different, and this book dramatizes those differences in very informative ways. There are four long essays in it, narratives of their authors' lives, really, and each is written from a different geographical, tribal, and experiential perspective. Lanniko Lee, a member of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in northwestern South Dakota, writes of her boarding school experiences and of the consequences for her people when dams were built on the Missouri River. Karen Lone Hill, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe in southwestern South Dakota, writes of her experiences in reservation schools and in one of the public universities. Florestine Kiyukanpi Renville, a member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate in northeastern South Dakota, writes both of boarding school experiences and of experiences in predominantly non-Indian schools. Lydia Whirlwind Soldier, a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in west-central South Dakota, writes primarily of boarding school experiences and their consequences, for her and for her family and her community.

Lee's essay, entitled "Ways of River Wisdom," is as compelling a description and explanation of traditional tribal ways of living on this earth as one will find anywhere. The power and beauty and the extraordinary meaningfulness of the "river world" Lee describes is a measure of the tragic consequences of the construction of the Oahe Dam north of Pierre. She gives the reader a vivid account of how things were before the dam, some of which she creatively presents in the present tense as experienced when she was five, and then she chronicles the loss—of place, of connectedness, of the community of creation. What she calls a "domino effect of negative changes for native people" continues into her accounts of her experiences in boarding school, a place antithetical in almost every way to the "river world" within which she was so nurtured and well-taught. Finally, she looks back in sadness at what might have been and at the great damage that has been done in the name of "progress."

Karen Lone Hill's essay is entitled "On Learning," and in it she describes her experiences growing up on the Pine Ridge reservation and attending day schools, her experiences as a summer exchange student in Germany, her experiences at Black Hills State in Spearfish, and her evolution into teaching at Oglala Lakota College. In the course of all of these accounts, she also describes her experiences as a young single mother, her difficulties as a result of the substance abuse of the father of her child, the challenges and rewards of raising a special needs child, and especially how she came to embrace her traditional culture and religion. Her accounts of the physical and the emotional healings she and members of her family received as a result of this embrace are quite remarkable, and the argument she makes for culture-based education for her people at the end of her essay is persuasive.

Florestine Kiyukanpi Renville's essay, entitled "Dakota Identity Renewed," shifts the focus to eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota landscapes and places. She writes of the long-term consequences of her parents' boarding school experiences and their subsequent struggles to raise children and maintain family stability in a mainstream society, which is clearly prejudiced against them. Although Renville expresses mixed feelings about her two years in boarding school and her brief stays in foster homes, she expresses little ambivalence about the white schools and churches that provided most of her formal schooling and religious training. Her indictment of these systems as discriminatory and mono-cultural is very convincing, and her essay ought to be required reading for contemporary educators in this increasingly multicultural society. Her essay is also a moving tribute to traditional family and extended family relationships among tribal people, and especially to her parents, whose increasingly dysfunctional lives were, she realizes, the result of a long legacy of pain and loss and ongoing problems that were to a considerable extent beyond their control. She remembers them lovingly for who they were when they were their most deep-hearted selves and wisely chooses to make those parts of their beings her legacy.

The final essay in the volume, Lydia Whirlwind Soldier's "Memories," is a compendium of very persuasive observations about the worst excesses of the boarding school systems. While it can be argued that conditions varied from boarding school to boarding school, and while there are believable accounts of more positive experiences in some of the schools, there can be no doubt that there were schools such as the one this author describes, institutions fully committed to the "Kill the Indian to Save the Man" slogan, which was gospel when these systems were first created. This author is a storyteller in the best sense of the word, and her stories of the suffering and trauma of the children in her boarding school environments are painfully real and completely believable. Yet this author is also a poet, and her lyrical descriptions of the traditional cultural values which enabled her to survive so many dark experiences are inspirational.

And that is finally the most important thing to be said about the essays in this book: they are inspirational accounts of survival and ultimately, therefore, pathways to light. These women write as they live their lives, with courage and determination, turning negative experiences into positive energy, and demonstrating that there is always promise beyond pain.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What have been your predominant "ways of knowing"?
2. How might you compare and contrast your childhood experiences with the childhood experiences described in this book?
3. How might you compare and contrast your family relationships with those described in this book?
4. How might you compare and contrast the tones of the voices in these essays?
5. Which of these women might you be most interested in knowing on a personal level? Why?
6. How do you feel about how these essays are sequenced? Is it effective? If so, why? If not, what would be a better sequence?
7. What did you learn about family relationships among tribal people in reading these essays?

8. Could these essayists be characterized as “feminists”? Why or why not?
9. Many stories are told throughout this book. Which one might you remember the most? Why?
10. Are these essays “literature”? Why or why not?
11. Which of these essays might be most suited to expansion to book length? Why?
12. The historian Roy Harvey Pearce wrote, “We are not responsible for history but to it.” How might that statement be applied to this book?
13. How do the essayists in this book define “culture”? How do you define it?
14. Compare your ideas about “home” to the ideas expressed in this book?
15. Compare your ideas about the earth to the ideas expressed in this book?
16. Compare majority society ideas about healing to the ideas expressed in this book?
17. Compare majority society ideas about religion to the ideas expressed in this book?
18. What does language have to do with survival?
19. Memoir writing is an increasingly popular genre. Why do you think that is?
20. Would you recommend this text to other readers? Why or why not?

### **BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF THE EDITORS**

Jack W. Marken was born February 11, 1922, in Akron, Ohio. He served in the army in World War II, and then earned his bachelor’s degree in humanities at Akron University in 1947, followed by master’s and doctoral degrees from Indiana University in 1950 and 1953. He taught at the University of Kentucky, Ohio Wesleyan, Central Michigan and Slippery Rock State before accepting the position of English Department head at South Dakota State University, a position he held for ten years. He retired from SDSU in 1986 after a nineteen-year career there. He was general editor of the Native American Bibliography Series for Scarecrow Press, and he also authored a number of other works in the field of American Indian Studies, including The American Indian: Language and Literature. He created the American Indian Studies minor at SDSU and SDSU’s Native American Advisory Committee, and he was one of the founders of the South Dakota Committee on the Humanities. In 2004, he was inducted into the South Dakota Hall of Fame in the Arts and Humanities category. He died November 17, 2005.

Editor Charles L. Woodard, a Distinguished Professor of English at South Dakota State University, has been teaching at the school since 1975. He grew up in White, South Dakota, where he played football, basketball, and other sports while attending high school there. After obtaining his bachelor’s degree from Dakota State University and his Master’s degree from the University of Nebraska at Omaha, he served as a Marine Corps infantry officer in Vietnam. The dissertation that he wrote to obtain his Ph.D. degree at the University of Oklahoma was on Kiowa novelist and poet N. Scott Momaday. Woodard is the author of Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday (1991) and editor of As Far As I Can See: Contemporary Writing of the Middle Plains (1989). He has edited more than a dozen books, including several volumes written by native writers and books on subjects ranging from country churches and one-room schools to home front stories during America’s wars.

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