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Medicine River. By Thomas King. Toronto: Viking Penguin, 1990. 261 pages. \$5.95 paper.

When Will loses his job in Toronto, he returns to live in Medicine River, a prairie town off the Blackfoot Reserve in Canada, but his sense of place is uncertain; he feels he has no real connection to Medicine River as home. A local busybody and gossip by the name of Harlen Bigbear tells him of the potential for opening a photography studio in the community. Will is distant from Medicine River as a place: "Autumn was the best season [in Medicine River]. It wasn't good, just better than the other three" (p. 1). He also is incapable of making human connections. As narrator, Will rarely speaks more than two or three sentences in a row. He is most articulate inside his own head, recalling episodic childhood anecdotes, but he does not tell anyone but the reader these revealing stories about himself, his brother James, his Blackfoot mother, or the irresponsible white father he never knew. Will is numb, stricken by an emotional malaise that blocks him from linking his past to his present.

Will's opposite in the story is the meddlesome Harlen Bigbear. King juxtaposes the minimalism of the narrator's comments with Harlen's verbosity. Harlen is the storytelling character in the novel, and in spite of the fact that he sticks his nose in everyone else's business, he is the word shaman, the man who connects word with deed, past with present. In fact, Harlen finds some old letters that Will's drifter, rodeoing father had written to his mother Rose, and Harlen gives the letters to Will. It is Will's reading of the letters that serves as a catalyst for his confrontation with the past.

Harlen is reminiscent of V. K. Ratliff, that irrepressible disseminator of gossip in Faulkner's fiction, who, in spite of the failure of his many quirky plans, still works as a cohesive force in the community. Harlen relates to Will what he knows about Will's father, who has been a blank in Will's mind.

Harlen gets Will to play on an Indian basketball team, the Medicine River Friendship Centre Warriors, a team that is a comic microcosm of all the things that can go wrong in small town athletics: The opposite words *friendship* and *warrior* underscore the problem with the team. Harlen also nags Will into a relationship with an unwed mother, Louise; both characters, because of their suffering, benefit from the match.

The tone of this novel is big-hearted. The narrator says, "Harlen Bigbear was my friend, and being Harlen's friend was hard. I can tell you that" (p. 11). In spite of Will's struggle with Harlen's intrusiveness, depicted realistically in the novel as a thorn in their friendship, Will has a generosity of spirit that comes through in the deadpan humor with which he accepts their trying relationship. Harlen is always in the midst of selling an idea to Will, whether it is to join the basketball team, to take the game seriously, or to date Louise. All his ploys are purposeful attempts to move Will from the sidelines to active participation in the life of the community. What makes Harlen eminently bearable is that he does more than just talk. His willingness to jump into the fray is underscored when he starts practicing with the team himself, even though he is old and out of shape. Will reports comically that his "hook shot, which he liked to shoot from twenty-five feet out, reminded me of John Wayne throwing hand grenades. He had a set shot from half-court that occasionally went in. But he ran and he jumped and he sweated with the rest of us..." (p. 18). Though not a basketball star, Harlen advocates involvement with life, and his machinations in the novel center around finding ways to get Will to join him.

The narrative shifts from the episodic events of Will's past to his present situation. Will's problem is that he is unable to provide the transitions that connect the events of his childhood—related to the reader in the form of interior monologues—to current realities. The blank spaces in the text represent the time lapses between recalled episodes, interspersed throughout the story of Will's present-day affairs. The spaces also symbolize Will's need to recognize that his past has carried forward into his adult life. For example, in one episode, Will recalls his anger at a basketball coach who made him sit out an entire season during his last year of high

school. On the Medicine River team, Harlen decides to start in a game in Will's place. He says, "You'll get to play. Just want to try a few new things" (p. 20). The team ends up winning. For Will, Harlen's substitution brings back all the pain of his adolescent bench sitting. Although the narrator feels anger at Harlen for not letting him play, he never verbalizes his anger, and he does not consciously recognize the relationship between his adolescent insecurity and his ongoing adult need for self-confidence. In a related childhood episode, he defaced some of his brother James's drawings; James's lack of anger and failure to respond parallel Will's own problem with his repressed anger towards Harlen.

One of Will's teammates, Floyd, unwittingly voices the dominant culture's view of the past. Floyd accuses Harlen of always looking back in order to compensate for a past failure. He believes that Harlen was formerly a champion hoop dancer who had to stop dancing because of an injury. Floyd says, "[He] hurt his foot, but mostly it was his pride. That's why he's always trying to compensate . . . All you old guys are trying to recapture the past" (p. 19). Floyd does not realize that Harlen's concern for past events is not nostalgic; Harlen uses the past as a springboard for full participation in the present, negating the stasis that pervades the lives of the other team members.

Although the reader is constantly aware that this is a Native American novel, the book deals with native culture obliquely. King speaks quietly, yet effectively, of the culture of the community. An example of this is Will's visit with a medicine person, Martha Oldcrow. A lesser writer might have given Will an easy cure or a quick-fix through a ceremonial, but what Will gets from Martha is a rattle to give to Louise's new baby. The rattle does not provide instantaneous healing but is rather a nagging reminder of Will's responsibilities. His substantive relationship with Louise and her daughter contrasts sharply with the superficial relationship he develops with a woman from Toronto who does not, like Louise, bring him closer to connection with self and community.

The same gentle undercurrent of native sensibilities comes through when Harlen pulls the van over to the side of the road to give the boys a fatherly pep talk as the team is returning from a tournament in Browning. Interestingly, Harlen connects the team's poor performance to their lack of sense of place and their inability to recognize the sacred landscape around them. Harlen says, "'Come on, boys, hop out. I want you to see something'" (p. 15). Significantly, Will devalues the landscape: "There wasn't much to

see, just the river and the prairies stretched out gold and rolling" (p. 15). Harlen begins with, "You boys don't try hard enough," but then he shifts the focus of his admonition to, "You boys look around you . . . What do you see? Go on, look around. Where are you? What are you standing on" (p. 15)? The team members fail to see the same thing Harlen does: "'Looks like a road to me,' said Floyd. 'What about you, Elwood'" (p. 15)? Harlen's crucial response identifies the nature of the men's problem: They have not internalized the landscape; thus they lack personal identity, and their vague sense themselves affects their performance on the basketball court. Harlen says, "That's why you miss them jump shots. That's why you get drunk on Friday night and can hardly get your shoes tied on Saturday. That's why we lose those games when we should be winning . . . cause you don't know *where* you are [my emphasis]" (p. 15). Harlen says the men's problems stem from not knowing *where* they are. This notion is contrary to much of contemporary culture, which does not link human identity to a sense of place, to knowing the landscape that surrounds us.

A recurring motif in the novel is the prairie wind, which symbolizes impermanence. The climax of the story occurs during a temporary visit by Harlen's brother, Joe Bigbear, who, like Will's father and his brother James, lives the life of a wanderer, blown about like prairie dust. The connection of these characters to their loved ones is through postcards or, in Joe Bigbear's case, occasional visits, when his friends are subjected to his stories of masculine bravado. The cigar-smoking, leather-vested brother of Harlen is scornful of Indian culture. He shakes hands with the intent of injury and says to Will, "You shake hands like a damn Indian" (p. 147). Joe's philosophy is, "You got to let go, try everything at least once" (p. 147).

Paradoxically, the wind also suggests continuity; it never stops blowing in Medicine River. This paradox comes to a powerful conclusion when Joe dares Harlen and Will to jump off a trestle bridge with him. They both decline because the wind is blowing too hard. While Joe, true to his nature, lets go of everything and jumps from the dizzying height, Harlen and Will sit "on that narrow piece of steel like a pair of barn owls, hanging on for dear life" (p. 164). Will and Harlen's decision to hang on, stay put, cling to community and traditions provides the dénouement for the book.

If the novel ends ambiguously, it is, at least, not without hopeful possibilities. Will moves closer to a sense of home and connection. In a conversation with his brother James, Will for the first time

speaks to another person about one of his childhood memories; he apologizes to James for having thrown his ball into the river. It is a conversation of emotional import, the only one in the novel where the narrator externalizes his feelings. The last line circles back to the beginning of the novel and shows us how far the narrator has come. Will told us on the first page, "Autumn was the best season. It wasn't good, just better than the other three" (p. 1). At the end of the novel, after his conversation with James, he says, "The day had started out overcast, but standing in the kitchen window, I could see that the winter sun was out now and lying low on Medicine River. Later that afternoon, I went for a long walk in the snow" (p. 261).

Craig S. Womack

The Middle Ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650–1815. By Richard White. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991. 544 pages. \$69.50 cloth. \$20.00 paper.

Ethnohistorians are no longer content just to refute Frederick Jackson Turner's long-enthroned concept of "The Frontier" as a line between "civilization" and "savagery." Perceiving the nonexistence of a dividing line in regions where Indians and Euro-Americans mixed, some scholars now strive to understand and explain what actually happened in those regions. Richard White's *Middle Ground* is a welcome and important addition to this work. The book must be read for appreciation of its richness, but it requires careful analysis, and some guidelines may be helpful.

The title phrase, which permeates the book, alternates aspects. Sometimes it is a region with elastic boundaries. As such, its alter ego is the French term *pays d'en haut*. Elsewhere it is a relationship, a "cultural and social entity" of ethnic mixing, and, in still other cases, the phrase refers to a ritual of negotiation. In the latter unique form of diplomacy, French, British, or United States officials recognized Indian "chiefs" who often were not traditional tribal sachems. Such chiefs were selected for their flexibility as go-betweens and were given large presents to enhance their power and influence. White carefully notes that the presents were not bribes in an ordinary sense, because they were promptly redistributed among the chiefs' followers. (Thus Germanic tribes of the