

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Winona's Web. By Priscilla Cogan.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3x0317st>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 23(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Davids, Catherine R.

**Publication Date**

1999-03-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

free of jargon. For example, Moses follows the Show Indians from isolated reservations, around the American landscape, across the Atlantic to England, and through the European continent—all without once referring to “border crossings” or postmodern notions of “travel.” Moses discusses Indian identity in similarly straightforward terms, satisfied that the contrast between the reformers’ vision of culturally invisible Indians and Cody’s elevation of Indians “as Indians” is sharp enough to indicate that the latter gave more space for unrestrained self-expression. Some readers may wonder, however, what he means when he writes, “one of the things that Show Indians helped to create was a *genuine* ‘Indian’ identity that went well beyond ethnic or national affiliation” (p. xiv, emphasis added). Perhaps Moses oversimplifies, but the result is a satisfying narrative with sharply drawn good and bad guys.

Those looking for a more complex story may also lament some inherent weaknesses in Moses’ sources. In his preface he promises to “frequently [use] the words of the [Indian] participants” (p. xii), but later regrets that “given the holes in the historical record regarding Show Indians, it is difficult to present much in their own words or from their perspective” (p. xiv). The Indians’ “words” turn out to be taken mostly from newspaper accounts of the shows, sources which Moses analyzes with both creativity and judicious restraint, but which can give only a partial glimpse into the Show Indians’ actual experiences. A careful investigation of oral histories might yield a fascinating study of the short- and long-term impact of the Show Indians’ employment.

On the whole, *Wild West Shows* makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the assimilation period. It takes a group of Indians usually dismissed as sad victims and casts them as heroic resisters of the reformers’ forced assimilation schemes. We follow these Indians around the world as they enjoy the freedoms and adventures that a government tried to deny them. Sadly, the audience for academic books can hardly rival that for the Wild West shows, but once again the Show Indians will ride to cheers.

*Erik Trump*

Saginaw Valley State University

**Winona’s Web.** By Priscilla Cogan. New York: Face To Face Books, 1996; 1998. 274 pages. \$24.95 cloth; \$12.95 paper.

Northern Michigan streams navigate through forests to the profusion of lakes that nourish the environment, year-round residents, and the tourist industry—creating a trinity of economy, recreation, and survival. First-time novelist Priscilla Cogan weaves an incredible story of discovery whose characters and lives are as melodic and as sustaining as the trinity carved out by the meandering streams.

*Winona’s Web* introduces readers to Leelanau Peninsula (northwest tip of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula) inhabitant Dr. Meggie O’Conner a thirty-nine-year-old psychologist. She is intelligent, funny, physically fit, introspective, and happily single after a semi-disastrous marriage. Meggie is not looking for the meaning of life, but instead aspires to become fully human. Her heartaches

are a protective shield without becoming barriers. Meggie skillfully handles home and property repairs. She is wary of men, but not bitter. She is politely impatient. She has a creative imagination, is down-to-earth, and is sometimes totally distracted. Meggie and second lead character Winona Pathfinder are two modern-day fictional women, like Sue Grafton's private detective Kinsey Millhone, who are truly authentic.

Priscilla Cogan developed Meggie's personality and character without delving into historical inaccuracies or fashionable New Age psychobabble that typically takes place when Anglo-Europeans meet American Indians in fiction, New Age self-help, and history books. *Winona's Web* features no violent clashes of culture. Rather, there is a gracious encounter of Winona's and Meggie's worlds. Their meetings, and Meggie's introduction to Winona's family, unfold with respectful caution, bewilderment, and humor. For American Indian people this is wholly relevant.

*Winona's Web* avoids stereotypes that typify the vast majority of American Indian characters established in media from sports team mascots to product logos. Bigotry is cunningly addressed in a painful yet humorous manner that meticulously depicts racial woes affecting American Indian people. Anglo-European authors (as in Rosemary Aleta's *Proud Spirit*) pen volumes of New Age materials by professing authentic connections with American Indian culture through assorted clairvoyants such as ghost spirits that take readers on a hallucinogenic journey through Indian country. Traditional American Indian cultures are bastardized and trivialized, thus becoming unrecognizable.

Experiences in these books—whether they are historical tomes, bodice-ripping romances, or New Age theologies—are nearly always the same: a white person becomes catalyst for everything good that happens to and for American Indian people. Indian ghost spirits materialize and guide quest-seekers to mind-boggling revelations and enlightenment. Civilizing forces prevail. Kindness is disguised as paternalism. Writers reveal themselves in traditional American Indian regalia (or bits and pieces of it) in book jacket photographs, constructing the notion that the writer is American Indian. American Indian people are both amused and angered by wannabe tribal members whose status is solely based on scout merit badges or from dressing up as Pocahontas or Geronimo on Halloween. These deceptive writings imply that living, breathing American Indians are not worthy of receiving a message from their relations who have walked on to the Spirit World. These specimens of books perpetuate a model of racism that American Indian people grapple with on a daily basis.

Cogan has bypassed all of these stereotypical literary pitfalls. Her husband, Duncan Sings-Alone, is Cherokee, and it is evident that Cogan approaches her marriage, and all her relations, with an enormous measure of regard. It is natural to discern the correlations between Priscilla Cogan, Meggie O'Conner, and Winona Pathfinder. None makes false claims. Hence the book resonates with truth.

*Winona's Web* is absolutely refreshing, depicting intelligent, humorous, loving, sexy, pained, and complex American Indian people. Characters and plot have substance, which is never sacrificed for style or technique. The men and women are inherently decent, and, like the characters in the film *Medicine*

*River*, are portrayed with grace and dignity. Romance is a delicate stream of empathy, not a raging river of hormones. Cogan's characters are timeless, giving this book an ageless quality.

Meggie has turned her parent's summer home into her permanent home after leaving the hustle and bustle of New York City. Like most other full-time residents and tourists of northern Michigan (and elsewhere), her connection to the American Indian community has been nonexistent. Meggie's life is forever changed when her office partner and friend, Dr. Beverly Patterson (good-hearted, lively, somewhat cynical and sarcastic) introduces her to Winona Pathfinder, who more than lives up to the meaning of her name. The dimensions of Meggie's world begin to expand like a small stream after a rainstorm.

Winona is a Lakota elder who becomes a reluctant patient of Meggie's at the urging of her daughter, Lucy Arbre, a nurse with Indian Health Services. Lucy's husband Larry (Ojibwa) calls bingo at Peshawbestown. One soon becomes aware that Winona is not the one with problems. Her life is in order with a clarity that is met with confusion by some of the other characters.

Endowing Winona with Lakota heritage is an engaging facet of this book, accurately demonstrating that American Indian people from distinct tribes abide in many regions and that tribes and histories are inextricably bound together through marriages and other alliances. Lucy's remoteness from her Lakota traditions and Larry's Ojibwa legacy present a dilemma that American Indians face within their families, clans, and tribal communities. Lucy has both feet on the ground, but on different paths: one Indian and one white. Cogan blends these outward inconsistencies in a consistent manner familiar to American Indian people.

Meggie unwittingly forfeits her control during Winona's therapy sessions. The nature of Winona as traditional elder makes this utterly acceptable, for this is the role of a traditional elder. She becomes the psychologist/healer for everyone, including Lucy who favors the cold sterility of science over centuries-old traditions. *Winona's Web* raises the question: who is the healer and who is being healed? We come to realize that all of the characters, and most profoundly Lucy, are in their own way a fine union of both.

Cogan introduces American Indians and Anglo-Europeans to each other without pretense, and their lives become entwined through the phenomenon of everyday life. There are no grandiose intrigues or over-the-top insights. Ordinary people become extraordinary through aspiring friendships, courtesies, and kindnesses. There are no earth-shattering discoveries of self; instead, there are amusing and painful discoveries of reality that journey through their lives like streams through the woods—twisting, turning, and always moving with great purpose. There is an intuitive awakening to life, an affirmation of clarity over confusion.

Cogan astutely prefaces the prologue, and each of the forty-nine chapters, with words from esteemed leaders and writers like Geronimo, Wallace Black Elk, Dylan Thomas, and Emily Dickinson. She introduces the reader to these minuscule works, arousing the desire to read more and learn more because, after all, variety is the spice of life. Clever prologue and chapter titles run the gamut from fanciful to comedic one-liners: Inner Fires, Empty Walls,

Our Lady of All Wild Things, Gaps in the Story, and Wood Cuttings, to name just a few.

American Indian writers such as Sherman Alexie, Louise Erdrich, Carter Revard, Patrisia Gonzales, Vine Deloria Jr., Tim Giago, Charlene Teters, and Mary Brave Bird write from an exact place based on specific experiences of belonging to American Indian country. Whether they create fictional characters, or write of actual people, events, and issues, they write from the unique perspective of American Indian history, tradition, and people. It is exceedingly rare for someone other than an American Indian writer to “get it right” when it comes to American Indian people, but Cogan has gotten it exactly right. The characters and plot in *Winona’s Web* leave one’s mind and heart in good condition: satisfied and nourished.

*Catherine R. Davids*  
University of Michigan-Flint