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Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota. By Wallace Black Elk and William S. Lyon. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990. 193 pages. \$16.95 cloth. \$8.95 paper.

I read *Black Elk: The Sacred Ways of a Lakota* several times before I was able to write a review. I could not find the proper approach to the book. I first thought a psychosocial interpretation of the text was appropriate. Then I thought about juxtaposing the text to Nicholas Black Elk's seminal works. I rejected both of these approaches and decided to read the book one more time. During this third reading, I realized that the book could stand on its own. There was no need to situate it in some academic context or cultural milieu. The book is a presentation of one person's life, a life rich in experience and meaning. In simple terms, the book presents a story worth telling.

Black Elk really is a story: It is a contemporary Lakota shaman's narrative of his life. Wallace Black Elk was born on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota in 1921. He remains active today, traveling throughout North America, Europe, and Asia, lecturing about his experiences and beliefs. His recounting of his experiences constitutes the body of the text.

This oral history is divided into two parts. The first is Black Elk's description of how and why he became a Lakota shaman. At the age of five, he was chosen by his grandfather and grandmother to learn the sacred ways of the Lakota. His kin clearly saw an urgent need to pass on the sacred ways to an acolyte. The Lakota people faced a cultural crisis, and, as Black Elk says, the elders "decided that they wanted to leave something with our people, so that in the future times there would be little guys behind" (p. 3). Their decision was well made, for even though Black Elk began his training at an early age, he never questioned why he was chosen and placed on the sacred red road.

Unlike other Lakota shamans (and shamans in other cultures), Black Elk did not answer a mystical call to become a shaman. Rather, he was expressly chosen by his tribal elders. But this selection does not debase his experiences as a shaman. Like other shamans, Black Elk recognizes that he was chosen by his elders and regards the sacred powers as a gift.

Once chosen, Black Elk was placed under the tutelage of eleven spiritual grandfathers. (One of these grandfathers was Nicholas Black Elk, coauthor of *Black Elk Speaks* and *The Sacred Pipe*. There is no apparent blood relationship between Wallace Black Elk and

Nick Black Elk. Wallace does not address the nature of his relationship with Nick, yet it becomes clear to the reader that there is a parallel in the shamanistic experiences of Wallace and Nick. On that level, they certainly are related, and Wallace even claims that they still speak to one another.) The tutelage of his spiritual grandfathers led him to participate in a ceremony at the age of five, during which he had his first vision. From age five until age nine, he learned about the sacred powers manifested in his vision:

In those four years everything was like a moving picture. Everything that I see, hear, smell, taste—I have a little color TV back there that records it. That's how I came to know what I know (pp. 9–10).

After his vision and education, at the age of nine he participated in another ceremony and had another vision, in which he learned about the *Chanunpa*, the sacred pipe. The *Chanunpa* was to become the touchstone of all Black Elk's subsequent experiences. He continually calls upon the pipe to evoke a vision, perform a healing ceremony, or gain an understanding of his condition. In fact, he calls the *Chanunpa* the "most sacred of sacreds in the whole universe" (p. 51).

This introduction to the *Chanunpa* acts as a catalyst that allows Black Elk to continue his education and transformation. He provides engaging accounts of his metamorphosis, revisiting some of the more than thirty vision quests in which he participated. These first-person accounts reveal to the reader in a very immediate fashion Black Elk's sacred experiences and the power of prayer. His descriptions are wonderful, transforming the reader from observer into witness to these experiences. Little can be gained in trying to summarize or analyze them. They have their own legitimacy and authority and can be seen as providing at least a glimpse of a world outside of everyday experience.

In the second half of the book, Black Elk describes his life as a Lakota shaman in the twentieth century. He recounts specific instances in which his powers allow him to participate in historical or personal events. And his accounts of his participation make for great reading. For example, he discusses how he and another shaman foresaw the destruction of flight 007 in 1983; how a Lakota views UFOs; how he used sacred powers to help a friend reclaim some family property. Also of interest are Black Elk's descriptions of how he straddles the sacred and the profane. Of special interest is his account of his meeting with several senior officials of various

governmental agencies. These officials wanted to participate in a Lakota ceremony. Black Elk obliged and instructed them to help him prepare for the ceremony. The description of the preparation and the ceremony itself reveals the profound differences between cultures and the lack of understanding of the government officials in relation to their charges.

Black Elk did not write the text alone; in fact, he did not write it at all. It is Black Elk's companion of twelve years, William S. Lyon, who actually composed the book. Lyon first met Black Elk in the summer of 1978, when they taught a summer class together. Over the next twelve years, Lyon worked with Black Elk, carefully documenting both his experiences and Black Elk's words (via tape recorder). The result is this book.

Lyon faced several problems writing this book. First, he had to categorize and edit the volumes of information he had collected. Twelve years of tapes presented him with a plethora of data. Next, he had the problems of translation and style. Lyon warns the reader in the preface that, while Black Elk speaks English, he thinks in Lakota, so Lyon still had to translate Black Elk's English into English! Moreover, Black Elk's narrative is not linear; it may best be described as circuitous. He presents multiple descriptions of an event or a concept, sometimes jumping from topic to topic. Such a circular style may truthfully present Black Elk's Lakota *lebenswelt*, but it is a style that may trouble some readers. Yet, on reflection, a reader should come to see such a style as enhancing the narrative, because it preserves Black Elk's perspective. Moreover, it represents Lyon's commitment to both the narrator and the story.

In spite of these strengths, I did find the text lacking at times. While Black Elk's circuitous narrative presents many firsthand accounts of the central themes of Lakota culture, it does not explore some of these themes in detail. For example, Black Elk continually talks about the centrality of the *Chanunpa* to his own shamanistic development—and to Lakota culture in general. He gives the best account of the creation of the sacred pipe that I have ever read (pp. 18ff). In spite of his dedication to the *Chanunpa*, however, Black Elk does not describe the ritual used to consecrate the newly created pipe, the very ritual that transforms the pipe from mundane object into the "sacred of all sacreds." Also, he gives only a brief account of the ceremony surrounding the mixing of *kinnikinnick*. And he gives no account of the ceremony of smoking the pipe or the importance of the smoke itself. To fill in

Black Elk's narrative, I read accounts given by other Lakota (also in the form of oral histories) in William R. Walker's *Lakota Belief and Ritual*. These Lakota (especially George Sword and Ringing Shield) give excellent accounts that complement Black Elk's discussion of the sacred pipe and the pipe ceremony.

Also, even though Black Elk makes mention of his healing powers, he gives only brief descriptions of the healing ceremonies that he participated in and the herbs used in such ceremonies. And while he discusses the prayers used in various ceremonies, he never reveals to the reader these prayers themselves. (The only prayer I could find in the entire text was the dedication prayer.) Again, I found myself reading Walker's *Lakota Belief and Ritual* to fill in Black Elk's presentation of these topics. Two final comments: Because the book is a narrative, the authors should have included either photographs or drawings to give it a personal element. And, while Lyon does provide a fairly comprehensive glossary of Lakota, he does not include such fundamental terms as *ton* and *kan*. In fact, Lyon is quite selective in his use of Lakota terms in the text.

In spite of these minor complaints, I recommend this book to both professionals and amateurs. The topics covered are central to Lakota culture, and they are presented in a fresh and meaningful way. The level of scholarship manifest in the text also deserves recognition. Future collaborators on oral histories would be well served by copying Lyon's methodology.

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The Upstream People: An Annotated Research Bibliography of the Omaha Tribe. By Michael L. Tate. Metuchen, NJ and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1991. 522 pages. \$62.50 cloth.

The Upstream People: An Annotated Research Bibliography of the Omaha Tribe is number 14 in the Native American Bibliography Series, edited by Jack W. Marken, South Dakota State University. The book contains 1,836 entries providing basically full and "analytic" annotations. Some are almost wholly summaries, with little or no critique; others provide quite perceptive critiques.

The entries come from a wide variety of sources, including both major and minor newspapers and newsletters that show Omaha