

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First North American Native Writers' Festival. Edited by Joseph Bruchac.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j14w9f8>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 19(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Nowak, Mark

Publication Date

1995-06-01

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/>

there were several Ojibwa men with a similar name in Minnesota along the St. Croix River and at Mille Lacs in the nineteenth century. One of these men was portrayed in the famed McKenney and Hall Indian portrait gallery. Many Ojibwa in this region were members of a wolf clan that consisted of descendants of marriages that took place between Dakota men and Ojibwa women in the many peaceful times among the two peoples. Although there are still many puzzling aspects about Catlin's painting, the fact that the man had a Dakota name does not preclude his being Ojibwa.

Otherwise, Peers's discussion of the changes in clothing and their implications for an understanding of broader cultural choices is a demonstration of the best of this kind of analysis. Using paintings, drawings, and photographs, Peers points out that changes to the Plains styles of clothing appear to have arrived quicker among Ojibwa men than women. This fits into her broader discussion of the role of women in Ojibwa society and the implications of the adoption of the Sun Dance and men's warrior societies by the Ojibwa. Peers effectively deals with the stereotypical view of Ojibwa women as drudges, in a discussion of the available roles for Ojibwa women and the power they had in Woodland communities, but she notes that many groups in the Plains environment tended to emphasize the power of men. As in other cases, Peers does not provide the final answer to such questions but explores the issues in creative ways.

As a whole, Laura Peers's book is a valuable study, one that counters many stereotypes of native history and fulfills a key need to delineate important topics for future discussion. Any future work in the field will have to be measured against the impressive range of Peers's work.

Bruce M. White

Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First North American Native Writers' Festival. Edited by Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994. 369 pages. \$45.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

Commemorating an unprecedented gathering of more than three hundred North American native writers at the University of Oklahoma in July 1992, the *Returning the Gift* anthology culls from that festival poetry and prose by nearly one hundred authors.

What readers should most enjoy about this anthology—its incredible range of writers (with tribal affiliations, languages, and cultures from every corner of the continent)—also poses a difficult question: Can such a dynamic, diverse, large, and growing community be adequately represented by an anthology that often gives less than three pages to each author?

In his introduction to this volume, Joseph Bruchac outlines many of the decision-making processes that went into not only the selection of work for this volume but the overall festival as well. These include significant questions concerning the reasoning behind the choice of the term *North American Native*, a series of guidelines for writers' identification of tribal affiliation, and the stipulation that only new, unpublished work would be considered for the anthology. Particularly elucidative about Bruchac's introduction is the comparison he draws between "the relegation of indigenous voices to the margins" and the tenets of New Criticism (a theoretical fixture that Bruchac incisively describes as being "predicated on the belief that there is one simple empirical [or imperial!] truth in literature"). Instead, Bruchac proposes that works such as those included here be read as part of a world literature continuum.

One of the most interesting sections in the entire volume follows Bruchac's introduction: festival historian Geary Hobson's account, "On a Festival Called Returning the Gift." Hobson details the multifarious origins of this festival, how it sprang from numerous discussions by native writers at conferences across the continent. In one section, for example, Hobson describes how the festival got its name:

Maurice Kenny, the host of the Saranac Lake [Steering Committee] meeting, had invited Chief Tom Porter of the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation to come by and greet us and, if he would, inspire us with his wisdom. He did just that. He remarked that in our avocation as Native writers, involved as we are in taking our peoples' literature back to them in the form of stories and songs, we are actually returning the gift—the gift of storytelling, culture, continuance—to the people, the source from whence it had come. We then immediately decided that we now had a name for our 1992 gathering. (p. xxv)

In fact, one might wish for Geary Hobson or one of the other festival organizers to write a more complete narrative, recounting

the entire story of this unprecedented gathering. Judging from the fragments and brief anecdotes in Hobson's account, it would be a memorable book and a significant record of this momentous event.

Of the more than 170 poems and prose selections to be found in *Returning the Gift*, none more clearly articulates this festival's purpose, and its meaning to participants, than Duane Niatum's "North American Native Writers Journey to a Place Where the Air Is a Gift of Promise." Setting the tone by citing, as epigraph, a Lakota proverb ("A people without history is like the wind on the buffalo grass"), Niatum goes on to recount the effects of this gathering:

Their journey will be remembered as a sacred place where the voices of many tribes gathered to be one body and one spirit on this earth. The trek back to this center started with the collective knowledge that we are slowly drifting away from the origins of our songs, stories, and dreams, the words that have their nests in trees, flowers, buffalo grass, stone, and river. We have come to Oklahoma country in the belief that the mound builders of this land will give our blood a new dream path if we thank our elders in a way that links all things to our recovery of the ritual dance of words. (p. 201)

Besides the writing of Niatum, *Returning the Gift* boasts an abundance of exceptional writers. From the familiar names of Maurice Kenny, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, and Linda Hogan to writers many are becoming acquainted with, such as Sherman Alexie, Diane Glancy, and Jeannette Armstrong, this anthology presents works from authors who will satisfy almost everyone's predilection. This is not to say that some major writers are not missing from the anthology; Paula Gunn Allen, N. Scott Momaday, Gerald Vizenor, and Louise Erdrich immediately come to mind. But *Returning the Gift* is not a typical volume presenting merely the finest, most well-recognized authors. Its purposes are in other places, particularly in displaying the strength of new and emerging writers who are often given their first university press exposure; preeminent among these is the work of Gloria Bird.

Gloria Bird (Spokane) deservedly received the "Returning the Gift-Diane Decorah First Book Award for Poetry" (along with cowinner Joe Dale Tate Nevaquaya). One of her three fine contributions to the anthology, "The Graverobbers and the Oldest Word" (arguably the strongest piece of work in this entire vol-

ume), documents the appropriation of the ways of "the Old Ones" at the hands of characters referred to as distant, metallic beings. These metallic beings, Bird says, "wrote their ominous shadows over the earth's surface . . . so as to dominate all discourse that might follow." A series of four events provides points of transformation at which the Old Ones, who had merged into the hermaphroditic figure Per, make themselves known to the people in the many forms of water: voluminous overhead clouds, raging rivers, waterfalls, male and female rain. The metallic beings, due to their own mistranslations of the appropriated peoples' language, hear instead rumors of buried treasures and begin to plunder the earth with their spades. It is a narrative all too familiar to indigenous people the world over: "The metallic beings, their eyes unaccustomed to sacred places, could not discern the spirits of the Old Ones in the forms of water and motes of dust in what they uncovered." Unable in their ignorance to "find a sign," the metallic ones "designed to negate the people, naming them 'Others' and blamed their alterity for the failure." Gloria Bird's dense prose and taut poetics, suggestive of much recent work by authors such as Gerald Vizenor, radiate among the typically more straightforward narrative works in this volume.

Another fine, emerging writer exploring a framework of traditional oral poetic forms is Evalina Zuni Lucero (Isleta/San Juan Pueblo). Her poem "Going Across" will remind readers of, for example, the *Yaqui Deer Songs* collected and transcribed by Felipe Molina and Larry Evers. "Across the river muddy brown, going am I," the poem opens, "Silent, powerful, steady moves it. . . ." The vitality produced by the repeated placement of inverted phrases at the end of the first line of each stanza, coupled with the metaphysical beauty of the lines themselves ("Toward the fields go I / The fields so cold and quiet, / waiting to receive the seed they do;") makes Evalina Zuni Lucero's poetry some of the most noteworthy in this entire anthology.

One other fine, emerging, and (as mentioned earlier) prize-winning writer, who unfortunately is represented by only one rather short poem, is Joe Dale Tate Nevaquaya (Yuchi/Comanche). The strength of his untitled poem ("Bruised inside") suggests that readers should keep an eye out for a collection of his work, *Leaving Holes*, which is said to be forthcoming from Contact II Publications.

In the end, it is the lack of space, especially for the young writers to whom *Returning the Gift* offers their first large-scale exposure,

that is the most significant drawback of the book. In addition, one might have wished for a slightly more rigorous introduction from Joseph Bruchac in which he cites sources for some of his claims. Then there is the problem of how this book will be used. The absence of too many major writers, coupled with the fact that most authors have only one or two selections included—and those often not nearly their best works—leaves the many other fine anthologies out there, such as the Duane Niatum's (ed.) *Harper's Anthology of 20th Century Native American Poetry* or, better still, complete books by any of the authors included in this anthology, as the obvious choices for classroom use. Also, it would have been helpful if the brief biographies of the authors had been placed within the section of each author's work instead of with the notes, so as to alleviate needless flipping back and forth. Finally, the book was poorly copy edited, particularly in the biographical notes section; the most egregious error, no doubt, is the listing of Gogisgi/Caroll Arnett as a woman!

Nevertheless, few if any anthologies will satisfy the wants and needs of all readers. In the end, what makes *Returning the Gift* worthwhile is the incredible range of works it includes in a limited number of pages. For example, readers will be enthusiastic to find in this volume the *poetry* of Nora Marks Dauenhauer, internationally known for her recording and explication of Tlingit oral literature, and Ofelia Zepeda, Sun Tracks series editor and Tohono O'odham linguist. This overarching sense of the union and continuation of voices is nowhere more splendidly articulated than in Judith Mtn. Leaf Volborth's "Pollen-Old-Woman":

Listen . . .

Pollen-Old-Woman

slides her cane in a crescent moon motion,
in her fissured palm she breathes on tiny seeds,
sings poetry into life.
There is pollen beneath her tongue.

For it is this tradition living "beneath [the] tongue" of all contemporary North American native authors that *Returning the Gift* ultimately celebrates, a spirit of words "beneath [the] tongue" having been spoken openly, together, for the first time.

Mark Nowak

College of St. Catherine, Minneapolis