

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

All My Sins Are Relatives. By William S. Penn.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6x49d7rb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 20(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Kloppenburg, Michelle R.

Publication Date

1996-06-01

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/>

REVIEWS

All My Sins Are Relatives. By William S. Penn. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 257 pages. \$25.00 cloth.

With *All My Sins Are Relatives*, William Penn offers his readers a unique commentary—embedded in personal recollections, traditional narratives, and incisive criticism of mainstream America—on the postmodern nature of Native American literature and the dilemma of urban mixbloods. As the opening chapter suggests, Penn's primary purpose is to examine why mixbloods apparently fail when they attempt to assimilate into mainstream American society and set their goals according to white standards and the American Dream. He concludes that this inability is not a failure but a triumph by Native American standards, which emphasize cultural difference rather than homogenization, circular time rather than linear progress, inner wholeness rather than outward wealth, and coyote humor rather than logical realism.

Convinced of the constricting nature of Euro-American literature, which conventionally follows a linear chronological development, Penn has no choice but to present his observations in a nonlinear form, using multiple digressions and "entertaining intrusions" (p. 124) as in an oral narrative. As a result, readers who expect a highly theoretical analysis of Native American literature and its postmodern attributes might find Penn's methodology questionable. To my mind, however, his writing is most pleasurable and highly rewarding. By including personal recollections,

using his own past as an example to illustrate the difficult path that urban mixbloods must follow to reach an understanding of their identity, Penn brings his reflections closer to the reader in a manner that is both enticing and informative. Moreover, like an oral storyteller, Penn draws his audience into his tale by opening his meditations with a direct invitation to listen: "This is also true, and it is said this way. . ." (p. 1).

Joining renowned authors such as Gerald Vizenor, Louis Owens, and Arnold Krupat, Penn convincingly argues that Native American literature is decidedly postmodern, in that mixblood narratives bridge the gap between the past and the present: As Silko suggests in her novel *Ceremony*, all stories worth telling are those that re-remember tales that have already been told. Mixblood narratives also bridge the gap between native and nonnative culture, circular time and linear time, the fluid nature of native oral storytelling and the carefully constructed grammar, language, and form of Western literature. Penn proposes that the uniqueness of mixblood writers lies in their existence between two cultures: They are "en-gapped" (p. 184), living in a permanent dialogue between the Native American and the European cultures. Penn suggests that to lose this tension would be to sacrifice that quality that distinguishes American Indians from the mainstream: Mixblood writers are not hampered but rather liberated by their multicultural status, which opens new possibilities for enhancement and experimentation with language, literary form, and time structure. Thus, in light of the current renaissance in Native American literature established by the accomplishments of such authors as Momaday, Silko, and King, and encouraged by Americans' never-ending craving for new fads, Penn urges mixblood writers to withstand the temptation to cross the boundary and seek inclusion in the mainstream literary canon, which upholds the validity of naturalism and realism, thereby restricting the imagination and denying the legitimacy of trickster humor and doubt.

As a warning, Penn offers carefully selected examples of mixblood authors who fell prey to the "filtering systems" (p. 93) of mainstream editors to produce insipidly homogenous and inauthentic works, such as Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* and John Rollin Ridge's *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta*. Penn commends Mourning Dove for breaking ground as the first Native American woman to publish a novel in English, but he reproves her acquiescence to the appeals of her sympathetic

editor Lucullus V. McWhorter to emphasize Native American themes and concerns, whereas she had originally intended to demonstrate her storytelling abilities. Unfortunately, McWhorter was unaware that by correcting Mourning Dove's grammar and verb tenses and imposing a curiously stilted style, he had, in effect, silenced her voice and romanticized and stereotyped her vision. As Penn's grandfather declared, Americans "love Indians to death" (p. 155). Whereas Mourning Dove's goal was to bridge the gap between native and nonnative Americans by creating a voice that would foster an understanding between the two races, Ridge's sole purpose in writing was to produce a best-selling novel. Moreover, Ridge strove toward complete assimilation and separation from his indigenous past, and he scorned those Indians who were either unable or unwilling to pursue the same path.

With forthright honesty Penn points out that he, too, like Mourning Dove and Ridge before, could not withstand the pressures to assimilate, and he disavows his widely acclaimed novel *The Absence of Angels* as a "stillborn" narrative (p. 174) that underwent numerous thematic and structural changes during its five-year conception in order to be marketable in the mainstream. Like the Native American writers Penn chides, he failed to resist the attraction of commerce and celebrity, despite the fact that he had initially resisted, and he ultimately bent to the demands of his editors, compromising his convictions that storytelling and remembering the past are of primary importance. Not until he reflects on his life from his youth in grade school to adulthood as an instructor seeking university tenure does he gradually realize that mixbloods must learn to set their own goals and repudiate the white standards that slowly strangle individual thought and measure success according to one's performance, wealth, social standing, and academic status. Using a phrase similar to Toni Morrison's "re-memory" in *Beloved*, Penn stresses the importance of "re-remembering" his family. An urban mixblood raised in Los Angeles, he must reach beyond the strict guidelines of his authoritarian mixblood father and prejudiced Anglo-Saxon mother to recover his indigenous past and his grandfather's teachings and thereby discover the worth of traditional Native American values, oral storytelling, and mixblood narratives.

Brief biographies of Mourning Dove and Ridge demonstrate that their divergent attitudes toward assimilation were rooted in their past: Mourning Dove was guided by the stories of her

traditionally minded ancestors; Ridge was influenced by his wealthy father and grandfather and their espousal of white values, and he felt bitter hatred toward the Cherokee who had killed them. In his digressions, Penn pieces together his own family's history as well, using the example of his father's futile struggle to adapt to white society to illustrate why he himself can never assimilate completely into American society: because the Native American values of his paternal grandfather and the mainstream values of his success-oriented, capitalistic mother and maternal grandfather are mutually exclusive. It is in Penn's reflections on his maternal family that his harshest criticisms of American society are heard.

First, Penn disclaims the American Dream as corrupt commercialism, especially in regard to publishing houses, which pigeonhole works by Native American authors into categories that will make them sellable. He renounces literary circles and their "wordies of commercialism"—to quote Vizenor—who thrive on name recognition and reputation instead of celebrating true authors whose stories obtain their meaning from reflection on the past and connection with tradition. Secondly, he demonstrates the validity of Umberto Eco's famous criticism of the United States—that American society, in its demand for the "real thing," fabricates the absolute fake—by exposing the carefully constructed myths of historical figures such as Lewis and Clark, Reverend Henry H. Spalding and Dr. Elijah White, General Howard, and Penn's distant ancestor Chief Joseph. Finally, Penn warns against the "eco-sensibility" (p. 155) and "Wannabe Correctness" (p. 229) of the New Environmentalists who reduce Native American culture to overly sentimental, "touchy-feely" (p. 230) drivel.

If I were to find any fault with Penn's book it would be in his overwhelmingly negative portrayal of mainstream American society; not all Americans are as ruthlessly avaricious as Penn's maternal grandfather, nor are all non-Native Americans who express interest in American Indian cultures "wannabees." Penn's predominantly unpleasant experiences with his maternal family, however, have colored his perception of white America, resulting in his deliberate exclusion of his mother's family from the photographic journal included in the book and from the living room wall on its front jacket. In sum, *All My Sins Are Relatives* presents a refreshingly unique mixture of literary theory and personal reflections. Penn's playful use of the English language provides

for a most pleasant reading, while the bibliography and informative footnotes furnish material for further research. This book is a valuable contribution to the field of Native American literature and cultural studies.

Michelle R. Kloppenburg
University of Paderborn, Germany

Aniyunwiya/Real Human Beings: An Anthology of Contemporary Cherokee Prose. Edited by Joseph Bruchac. New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1995. 299 pages. \$17.95 paper.

Joseph Bruchac's (Abenaki) earlier groundbreaking anthology *Songs from this Earth on Turtle's Back* (New York: Greenfield, 1983) introduced a wide variety of native writers to a large nonnative and native audience. One member of that audience was Sherman Alexie (Spokane/Coeur d'Alene), who became inspired to write about his native experience as a result of seeing himself as a part of this writing community. With this new anthology *Aniyunwiya/Real Human Beings: An Anthology of Contemporary Cherokee Prose*, the theme of which is as broad as its title, Joseph Bruchac has followed the same essentially inclusive and egalitarian design as in *Songs*. The thirty-four prose selections by twenty-three writers are arranged alphabetically by author, with short biographies and photographs of most of the contributors.

The apparent purpose of Bruchac's collections is to recognize, promote, validate, inspire, and encourage a variety of native voices and to leave a written record of contemporary native thought and achievement for the next generations. Such is Joseph Bruchac's work as president of the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers, which produces a series of workshops and a mentoring program staffed by published native writers to assist beginning and emerging writers. Bruchac's anthologies stand as tributes to the number, variety, and talent of current native writers. In *Aniyunwiya*, the human experience of Cherokee writers offers something for almost any reader interested in a current expression of native intellectual, creative, historical, and social experience.

Aniyunwiya differs from *Songs*, however, not only in form—prose instead of poetry—but in tribal specificity. Although tribal heritage of individual writers is clearly identified in the earlier