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REVIEWS

Literatures of the American Indian. By A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff. New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991. 112 pages. \$17.95 cloth.

Literatures of the American Indian is part of the Chelsea House series, *Indians of North America*, a multivolume enterprise intended for young adults and consisting, roughly, of one book per tribe (*The Iroquois*, *The Cherokee*, *The Pima-Maricopa*, and so on). Although beautifully designed and visually exciting, this particular volume nevertheless is quite odd. It seems as if the editors and publishers thought it would be a good idea to have a book somewhere in the series devoted to literature, so Ruoff took on the job and wrote the text. Her problem then became how to find the right voice for young adults, not an easy task for a serious scholar like Ruoff, and not an especially successful one—at least from the point of view of this older reviewer. But the editors and publishers also invested staff and money in design and graphics, and in that respect the volume is a great success, a visual delight, a small feast for all readers.

The book's principal mission seems to be first to catch the attention of young adult readers by its interesting pictures, photographs, and drawings, and then to lead those readers to the text. That text asserts the obvious, namely that American Indians have their literatures—which include ceremony and song, oral story telling, oratory, and autobiography, in addition to inherited European literary forms. The book is an extended advertisement, a procla-

mation of the existence of American Indian literature, and it seems best suited for readers who had no idea that was the case—young adults, yes, but perhaps others as well.

Designed by Debora Smith, the graphics are fascinating and strategically placed, and send a message that American Indian literature brims with vitality and sunlight, despite all the loss and sorrow associated with American Indian history. From first to last, from the frontispiece—Al Momaday's Kiowa buffalo hunter bursting out of clouds—to a full-page photo of smiling Joy Harjo with untucked shirt, the illustrations invite the reader in. Probably the most arresting feature of the book is the eight pages devoted to color plates of twentieth-century Indian paintings, which, along with the commentary about them, lead one to look closely at their exquisite detail and pay new attention to the narratives they depict. Other illustrations strike other notes: the unearthliness of Arapaho women performing a Ghost Dance; the ghastly waxed-and-ashen demeanor of commissioner of Indian affairs John C. Collier; the unposed dignity of John Stands in Timber; the weirdness of John Joseph Mathews in his cluttered living room. Young adults will love all this. From time to time, too, there is a poem or song set off from the rest of the text by an elaborate border, an eye-catching device that makes one focus on the work itself as if it were a word painting. Some of those same young adults just might get interested.

But much of the literary commentary in this volume is another matter. The following is a typical Ruoff explanation:

Because it combines song, narrative, and oratory, the most complex form of oral literature is the ritual drama. (*Ritual drama is the term most commonly used by scholars to refer to what Indian people usually call chants, chantways, ceremonies, or rituals.*) American Indians use ritual dramas to order their spiritual and physical world.

The tool for creating this order is the power of word, whether it is chanted, spoken, or sung. A tribe often has special words or even entire languages that are used only when performing ceremonies. For instance, the Sioux Indians have two types of sacred language: *wakan ȩve* and *hanbloklaka*. The former is used among medicine men; the latter is used by medicine men to communicate with spirit helpers.

Ritual dramas always have a well-defined structure. All parts must be performed in a particular sequence if the ceremony is to achieve the desired effect. The specific goals of ritual dramas vary (p. 23).

Young adults often may be boring and simple, but even they deserve better than this mind-numbing, plodding prose, which prevails in the first half of the volume (devoted to explaining and defining literary forms). And it seems a crime to unload on them so early the limiting terminology of category-mad scholars: the "structure" of "ritual drama?" Why not stick with chants and chantways, such sonorous words for such mysterious things? Or give us more about those spirit helpers. The rich and uncatalogable variety of American Indian works is fast becoming just another academic field; the terminology is all in place and, even in books for teenagers, rigor mortis is setting in. One fears that this and other volumes in the series will end up on high school library shelves to be used mostly for dreary, plagiarized reports on, say, the ritual drama of the American Indian.

The second half of the book, devoted to conventional if simplified literary history, is more alive and does provide a valuable public service: who, what, when, where, plus plot summaries, minibiographies, and a good bibliography. The chapter entitled "Writing in English: 1772-1967" is full of names and information that will be news to young adults everywhere. It is possible, for example, to imagine a student reading Ruoff's account of Emily Pauline Johnson, the Canadian Mohawk, and going off to learn more about her, to read her books, to develop a real interest. Most young people, however, will be drawn to the final chapter, "A Literary Renaissance: 1968-the present," where Ruoff enthusiastically boosts those writers we all know: Momaday, Silko, Dorris, Erdrich, Allen, Welch, and many others. No judgments are made, no searching insights offered—such are not the aims of this book—yet one still wonders why, in the midst of all this contemporary energy, Ruoff finds it necessary to issue such banalities as, "In their works, Indian women writers frequently focus on the roles of women, especially of those in their own family" (p. 101). No young adults are young enough to need this. Although the text of *Literatures of the American Indian* has its moments, best to study the pictures, the poems, the songs, the chants.

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