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REVIEWS

The Absence of Angels. By W.S. Penn. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994. 274 pages. $13.95 paper.

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

Never mind the country's bootless, serial obsession with black male celebrity: the O.J. Simpson verdict, the million-man march, Colin Powell's peekaboo candidacy. When even the sullied national pastime has been granted a kind of absolution through the performance of a spectacular autumn ritual in which the "Braves" beat the "Indians"—to the grotesque and antic (or, strictly speaking, fanatical) accompaniment of tomahawk-chopping and mumbo-jumbo-chanting whites in redface—there's suddenly ample reason not to succumb to academia's theoretical boredom with identity politics. And a good thing, too, because otherwise a promising debut novel, recently given a wider audience through inclusion in Oklahoma's American Indian Literature and Critical Studies Series, might be doomed by its press kit, which unhelpfully reduces its story to the "struggle of a young mixblood Indian to reconcile his two cultures."

You would certainly expect an Angeleno of mixed parentage, the third generation of his family to carry the colonial patronym "William Penn," to have some interesting things to say about coming to terms with heritage, individuality, and spirituality. And, juggling questions of urban cross-blood ethnicity with the

kind of good humor and anti-essentialism we have come to associate with Gerald Vizenor, Penn does not disappoint. Although his autobiographical protagonist Alley Hummingbird, the son of an assimilated Indian father and an alienated, slightly crackpot, Anglo mother, does get in touch with his Nez Perce and Osage heritage with the indirect help of an obligatory grandfather character, he does not fetishize that heritage, tending rather to honor and deflate his grandfather's cryptic tribal wisdom at the same time. "It never did me any good. Being red," concludes Grandfather, who is interested in producing red offspring not out of "some snotty feeling of the superiority of blood" but out of a practical hope to decrease their susceptibility to sunburn. "If it can help you, make it." In fact, Alley is quicker to identify with "Negroes, Mexicans, and Jews"—especially Jews, with whose humor and mythology he feels an instinctive affinity. ("Jews are not white people," declares Grandfather, whose own dying "oy-yo-hey" sounds suspiciously Yiddish.) The novel is not, then, strictly speaking, what its back-cover blurbs make it out to be.

The Absence of Angels starts out strong, recounting Alley's improbable origin-myth: A portentously Gargantuan 10-1/2 pounds, the newborn is nevertheless sickly, moribund, quite literally green. Death, a pathetic, whinging character who lingers outside Alley's oxygen tent, is foiled only by the arrival of Grandfather, who casually breaks laws of time and motion through "sheer concentration," making the fifteen-hour drive from Chosposi Mesa to Los Angeles in eleven, though never speeding. From this miraculous beginning, the novel unhurriedly follows Alley as he meanders through a Lynda Barry childhood and adolescence, by turns lyrical and disturbing—cheating his white school pals out of their "rightful" history (outsmarting rather than dying at cowboys-and-Indians); stumbling through a precocious sexual initiation; sleepwalking through high school as a basketball benchwarmer and half-hearted hellraiser; and anchoring himself in summers (and later, in a kind of telepathy, in the novel's eponymous zone) with his grandfather. He winds up, almost in spite of himself, at Clearmont College, where racial minorities are "folded . . . into the batter of freshmen in order to allow rich white boys to encounter what they were not and thus begin the primal stages of self-definition" (p. 148). These sections of the book are seasoned with terrific characters, wrought for the most part with great subtlety and generosity, and peppered also with some knockout prose: "She laughed like tinfoil," Alley says of an

unsympathetic aunt, who "was dressed in a white pant suit, starched until it was as noisy as her hatred for my uncle's family" (p. 99). But for all his quick-witted, piercing analysis, the Hummingbird, trickster-like, affects slowness as a disguise against the slings and arrows of growing up; and Trickster pays him back in kind at Clearmont with an addiction to speed.

Those strengths that propel the first two-thirds of the novel—its nonlinearity, its wry characterizations, its casual admission of the improbable and the surreal, the mock-dimwitted unflappability of its hero; in short, its offhandedness and its humor—gradually slip away in the final third, where Penn has either suffered a failure of nerve or has yielded to a previously repressed inclination toward solemnity and sentimentality. The turn comes soon after the introduction of the candid, free-thinking, and utterly *bien-dans-sa-peau* love interest, Sara Baites, whose idealized integrity and attractiveness is unfortunately signaled by her "makeupless face." Her relationship with Alley—almost literally Platonic at first (consisting of too-perfect dialogues in which she completes his sentences and tutors him in aesthetics)—swiftly turns into an embarassingly heartwarming and uplifting affair, replete with significant hand-squeezes, wherein the preternaturally intelligent and nurturing young woman symbolically completes her hackneyed mission of coaxing the schlubby, self-conscious hero out of his shell by taking him skinny-dipping and making love to him on the rocks. Alley's subsequent sophomoric ruminations on the nature of love are the pseudo-intellectual equivalent of "Love is . . ." greeting cards; such trite emotion in what had been an uncompromisingly clear-eyed book cannot help but ring false.

Meanwhile, Penn effectively abandons all of his more complex supporting characters, replacing them with a set of one-dimensionally urbane fantasy parents (a professor and his wife who have taken an interest in Alley) who foster the meeting of true minds by offering their second-story garage flat as a rent-free haven. Even more startling, Penn suddenly burdens the remainder of the book with a plot, and an uncharacteristically melodramatic one at that: Alley develops a brain tumor, and the odds of his surviving the operation are less than even. Despite its having a certain amount of symbolic logic, the turn comes off as contrived. It clumsily belabors an already overworked "sawdust-in-the-brain" metaphor for Alley's paradoxically muddle-headed insightfulness; provides an excuse to parade all the discarded characters one last time across the stage of Alley's hospital room,

amalgamating them into an emotive chorus of hitherto unexpressed touchy-feeliness; and seems ultimately to serve only as the dramatic catalyst for a brink-of-death coma in which Alley has a mandatory "vision" reconciling him to his old familiar Death—who reappears, several pages later, to escort Grandfather into the afterlife. That scene, thankfully, struggles self-consciously not to become maudlin and succeeds. But the "reconciliation" with Death is mechanical, and the purportedly epiphanic vision that inspired it is superfluous. Neither one produces insights in Alley or the reader that were not already implicit in Alley's historically serene relationship with Grandfather or in several comically matter-of-fact run-ins with Death before now.

But these textural flaws only amount, perhaps—as Alley charitably says of his grandfather's failure (by one hour and thirty-nine minutes) to abide as long as he had intended—to a "lapse of concentration." They detract from, but do not cancel out, the considerable strengths of the early sections of the book. And, anyway, the faults, whatever else they are, are not, strictly speaking, "sophomoric," since this is actually Penn's first published longer work. Another novel is in the works. His true sophomore effort, the wonderfully titled collection of essays, *All My Sins Are Relatives*, is more accomplished—and more frankly and successfully about the pitfalls and quandaries of mixed-blood identity (including those pertaining to the place of Native Americans on "academic campuses, the reservations created as a way to keep all kinds of potentially troublesome or troubling people out of power"). The collection serves as an invaluable companion piece to *The Absence of Angels*, partly for Penn's canny and sometimes bitter analysis of how a dubious politics of identity has fueled past and current fads for "Indian" novels; and partly for the light that analysis sheds on his own novel's shortcomings, which seem to derive at least in part from being composed and revised under precisely such market demands, as articulated by prospective editors and publishers. How much blame can be fairly assigned to that compromised process is not entirely clear, since Penn professes, somewhat disingenuously, to be too weary to discuss it any more. But perhaps Sara Baites speaks both for and to Penn when she tells Alley that "putting too much myth into your stories makes you sound phony" (*Absence*, p. 192). That question of excess, balance, and proportion is one of which Penn ordinarily is keenly aware, averring in *All My Sins* that the mixed-blood writer must be a metaphor, carefully bridging a delicate gap in double

consciousness that publishers like to short-circuit into what Gerald Vizenor calls a "bankable simulation": the Indian, one of Baudrillard's "absolute fakes" on which American culture periodically depends.

One of the most hilarious trickster scenes in *The Absence of Angels* depicts Alley's interview with an administrator of the Stanford IQ Test, frustrated because Alley has, impossibly, scored a zero. It turns out that Alley insists on answers that are not among the multiple choices and consistently rejects the absurd premises of the story-problems. For a puzzle that requires finding a lost set of keys on a baseball diamond by creating a Cartesian grid-map, Alley proposes searching by means of a spiral. Years later, a well-established misfit, he realizes the lesson the test did not intend to teach: It is the keys to America that you find on that baseball diamond. W.S. Penn keeps on his desk a snapshot that he took twenty-five years ago of the mass grave at Wounded Knee, to remind him that appearances do not always hide reality. He decided when he took it "that there wasn't a politics equal to the silence of that grave and that, if I ever told stories, then what was Indian about them," like America, "would be buried but present" (*All My Sins,* p. 200). Sometimes the cartoon reveals as much as the palimpsest, the transparent fake as much as the absolute: At Municipal Stadium in Cleveland, at Fulton County Stadium in Atlanta, Indians are buried, too. At its best, *The Absence of Angels* spirals across those diamonds and chances upon some keys.

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The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence. By William G. McLoughlin. Edited by Walter H. Conser, Jr. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1994. 343 pages. $45.00 cloth.

The death of William McLoughlin on 28 December 1992 left a void in Cherokee studies. An outstanding scholar of American religion, he devoted the last twenty years of his life to an exploration of nineteenth-century Cherokee people at the intersection of Christian and Indian cultures. Other scholars, notably Francis Paul Prucha, Robert Berkhofer, Pierce Beaver, and Henry Bowdon, preceded McLoughlin in scholarly analyses of Christian reform