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**Nesuya's Basket.** By Carol Purdy. Boulder: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997. 110 pages. \$8.95 paper.

Literature for children, though it may ultimately be judged by the same critical standards as literature for adults, has its own difficulties in craft and in interpretation. It is virtually always written and assessed by adults attempting to recapture in some sense a child's point of view, and children—though their cognitive and reasoning abilities are still developing—can be remarkably sophisticated in their tastes as well as their social awareness and understanding. A novel that violates a child's sense of realistic dialogue (though the character speaking may be an animal) or that violates a child's profound sense of justice will be quickly discarded or soundly rebuked. On the other hand, a good children's novel can help children learn about their own emotions and personalities as well as provide a memorable introduction to another culture that will enhance their ways of seeing other people.

*Nesuya's Basket* is a historical novel set in an 1840s Maidu village in north-central California, aimed primarily at an audience of upper elementary and junior-high children, though adults interested in a well-researched depiction of traditional Maidu life and customs will also find it enjoyable. The novel is sponsored by the Council for Indian Education as part of a series selected by an Indian editorial board as suitable for use with Indian children. Nevertheless, it is equally readable for non-Indian children, and in this regard particularly valuable for its depiction of one of the smaller tribes unlikely to be afforded any attention by the mainstream visual media with its predilection for the dramatic flights on horseback of the Plains tribes.

As the novel opens, Nesuya is gathering clods of dirt with which her father is repairing the dome-shaped earthen roof of their dwelling, but before the end of page two, her young aunt has already worked one of her continuous insinuations about Nesuya's maternal ancestry into the dialogue. Nesuya's mother is from the South People, whom the tribe believes has plagued them with "poison air" in retribution for an earlier massacre. Her grandfather is the only person in the village who understands from his visions that it is the new white immigrants that brought the epidemic (malaria). In such passages, Purdy skillfully incorporates descriptions of Maidu architecture, basket-making, diet, ornamentation, social customs, and spiritual beliefs into the plot, providing the details of setting that are so primary to a historical novel without the didactic tone that often

results when such details are set apart from the action. More specifically, the novel manages to place its central focus on the weaving of a basket as an act of spiritual growth without resorting to the clichés about Indian spirituality that one might expect in connection with this theme.

More than a historical novel, this is psychodrama. The author, Carol Purdy, is a rural California psychotherapist whose specialty is play therapy for children. She is author of a resource work for psychotherapists entitled *The Kid Power Program* and has written other novels for children. Purdy cites the fiction of Laura Ingalls Wilder as a primary influence in her own childhood, and the family and survival-oriented values of Wilder's works are indeed apparent in her first novel with an Indian setting. The third-person narrative proceeds entirely from the point of view of the protagonist Nesuya, a teenage Maidu girl whose mother and grandmother have died. She lives with a strong, sensible father, a goofy younger brother, a grandfather with one foot in the spirit world, an uncle, and the uncle's teenage wife. It is this new aunt who is the source of conflict and tension in the story. Though it is true that teenage girls often seem to need no reason to subject each other to petty jealousy and cruelty, the motivation of this young aunt, Willeno, could be better established. One explanation comes from a young man from Willeno's village, somewhat late in the book: She "has been somewhat of a troublemaker all her life" (p. 74). But critical young readers may note that this particular family circle has some inherent problems. With the mother and the grandmother gone, the teenage daughter and the new bride from another village are thrown together with limited guidance from older adults. The honeymoon is over:

"Don't leave me," Willeno pleaded again.

"Silly woman," said Dupah, giving her a playful shake.

"Most men of the village are at the sweat house wondering why we're spending the winter at home with the women. It's time for you to adjust to married life as it really is."

... Her expression resembled Baby's when he was about to cry, and Nesuya saw for the first time how very young Willeno was. (p. 36)

The story essentially deals with jealousy, the harboring of old grudges, generosity, and forgiveness in the context of family and community. As such, it lies squarely within the nexus of values

that some aspects of contemporary feminist fiction (notwithstanding the above passage) share with Native American concepts of the relationship of self to community. This is not a modernist or postmodernist tale of alienation or fragmentation of the protagonist's identity. Though Nesuya uses her basketmaking to withdraw from social interaction for a time, it is Willeno who is the truly alienated figure. One can speculate that the story could generate far more *frisson* if at least part of it were told from Willeno's point of view. When she leaves her husband for several weeks, returning with the explanation that she was on a vision quest, the village responds with courteously silent disbelief, though she is accepted back into the community. The reader learns no more about this formerly despicable person who somehow, with little more than the mere acquiescence of the heroine, manages to mature somewhat by the end of the story.

Nevertheless, Nesuya's story—a young girl of good intentions beset by seemingly insurmountable family tension and persecution—is a good vehicle for the sort of reader response that involves identification and comparison of one's own problems and experience with those of the characters. This is the sort of fiction that is most clearly of value in the eye of the utilitarian educator as compared to suspenseful thrillers, mysteries, and horror tales. As a teaching tool, it offers opportunities for articulation and discussion of family and peer problems, precontact life and spiritual belief among Northern California tribes, and the effects of invasion and conquest. It lacks horror and suspense (though it does include a brief recapitulation of a traditional tale about a cannibalistic head rolling through a village), but most children—even boys—will probably find it entertaining.

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**Ocean Power.** By Ofelia Zepeda. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995. 90 pages. \$19.95 cloth; \$9.95 paper.

*Ocean Power* is Ofelia Zepeda's first book of poetry. Zepeda, a Tohono O'Odham (formerly known as Papago), is a professor, poet, mother, and linguist whose work in this collection centers on the theme of rain and its varied components in her Sonoran desert homeland of southern Arizona and northern Mexico. In this homeland where summer temperatures can rise mercilous-

ly, the women plan the domestic work around the heat and movement of the sun. The desert is brutally hot in the summer, yet awesomely beautiful in the spring. *Ocean Power* speaks of the Tohono O'Odham's intimate relationship with the landscape, a relationship thousands of years old. They listen to the land and know its demands. They are equally alert to the movements of rain clouds in a place of little rainfall, welcoming and celebrating it. Rain demands its own attention from the people and the earth. The attention paid to watching the sky for rain clouds and the accompanying wind yields myriad expressions for rain in the O'Odham language, which is Zepeda's first language, and which she uses to express the poetry of rain in some of her bilingual poems.

The opening poem, "Pulling Down the Clouds," sets the tone for the poems and stories that follow. The image of women pulling rain from clouds effectively frames the poem. Zepeda begins with a line in O'Odham, then juxtaposes a line in English followed by O'Odham, and continues this pattern throughout the six-line stanza to create parallel unity:

With my harvesting stick I will hook the clouds.  
With my harvesting stick I will pull down the clouds.  
With my harvesting stick I will stir the clouds. (p. 9)

Such lines establish how rain is associated with the ritual restoration and renewal of the people and the land. The Tohono O'Odham experience the various manifestations of rain through poetic eyes. The dreamer dreams of rain and is comforted by the aroma of approaching rain clouds. The dreamer remembers the mythic stories of female alignment with fertility and creativity. She writes, "To the women, my mother, my grandmother, there was beauty in all these events, the events of a summer rain, the things that preceded the rain and the events afterward. They laughed with joy at all of it" (p. 3). Zepeda's bilingual poems give greater expression to the knowledge and wisdom of tribal people living in balance with the rhythm of the earth's cycles and celebration of those cycles.

Another strength of this collection is how Zepeda uses her first language to express the spiritual qualities of rain. Fluent Native writers have often voiced that the English language is insufficient to express the profound intimate and spiritual relationships with the natural world. Though translations from Native languages into English are problematic, Zepeda partially resolves this dilemma by opening "O'Odham Dances" in O'Odham then transitions into English. The poem's urgent tone

illustrates that the ritual evoking of clouds is fundamentally necessary to bring forth rain to enable restoration to occur. Other O'Odham expressions of clouds "that just ruined themselves" and clouds that "just lied to use" show the personal and direct relationship the Tohono O'Odham have with rain.

"Kots," written entirely in O'Odham, offers no English translation; however, the integrity of Zepeda's creative inspiration and the O'Odham language are sustained. "For the pieces that appear only in O'Odham, the English versions never occurred, so no versions of them exist in that language," Zepeda explains (p. 4). Though the non-Tohono O'Odham audience may find some of Zepeda's poems inaccessible, nevertheless it is encouraging and vital for Native writers such as Zepeda to write in their original language despite earlier colonialist attempts to eradicate Native languages and cultures. Such efforts help to keep Native languages and literatures alive and functional.

Other poems in this collection speak of contemporary, mundane events told from a female perspective: tortillas, "waila music," hair and hairpins, and listening to a retrospective of Bob Dylan songs. "Deer Dance Exhibition" is humorous, ironic, and subtly sarcastic. "Lard for Moisturizer" humorously points out the epidermic sacrifice made to the harsh desert climate. "Bury Me with a Band" treats the inevitable demise of the speaker's mother with humor and honor when she writes:

My mother used to say,  
"Bury me with a band,"  
and I'd say, "I don't think the grave will be big enough."  
Instead, we buried her with creosote bushes,  
and a few worldly belongings.  
The creosote is for brushing her footprints away as she  
leaves.  
It is for keeping the earth away from her sacred remains.  
It is for leaving the smell of the desert with her,  
to remind her of home one last time. (p. 40)

The success of this poem relies on a tone that is neither sentimental nor melancholy; it relies on the image of the creosote bushes.

The poems in this collection are community-centered and are generated from the oral tradition of the Tohono O'Odham people. They are, therefore, rooted in tribal storytelling aesthetics. Though Zepeda skillfully builds story in her longer prose poems, the momentum is broken in "The Man Who Drowned in

the Irrigation Ditch." It is introduced through the viewpoint of a wife who fears that her aging husband's carelessness might have fatal results. The next two stanzas digress into a description of the fields and into historical background. One might suggest that this digression is didactic; however, it may also signal that Native storytelling is a cumulation of related stories and information necessary to the movement of the story. As oral literature, it demands the reader's participation. This vicarious participation is intensified when the community springs into action after receiving word of a drowning. However, the story's momentum is interrupted to explain why women carry a towel and later when the speaker remembers the purchase of a hoe. These incidental stories appear to undercut the serious tone of the drowning given the penultimate line, "With a single vocal act they release from their depths a hard, deep, mournful wail" (p. 33). Despite this exception, these remembered stories are replete with the rich texture of a Native woman's sensibility.

In *Ocean Power* Zepeda metaphorically hooks rain clouds expectant with stories of family, community, and water in her desert homeland. With her "harvesting stick" she pulls and stirs the stories that are neither simple nor explanatory. Here are stories that celebrate the Tohono O'Odham people's resilient spirit. *Ocean Power* reflects a Native writer's voice whose experience calls the reader's attention to a fuller appreciation of the poetry of rain as well as its malevolent potential in the Sonoran desert. Zepeda calls your attention to the humorous, the temporal, and the personal. She inspires you to see the desert, clouds, and rain in a more imaginative way.

The poems in *Ocean Power* offer an insight into the Tohono O'Odham people's language and spiritual connection to clouds, wind, and earth cycles. These are poems and stories about a desert people whose songs, dances, and stories support them in a rapidly changing world. Zepeda also provides an afterword for further study of the Tohono O'Odham history, language, and culture. Her work makes a significant contribution to the growing body of rich literature by Native writers. Students of Native American literature, women's studies, and language and cultural studies would find this book beneficial. *Ocean Power* is a wonderful treat. This reviewer looks forward to forthcoming work by this poet and storyteller.

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