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Ke-ma-ha: the Omaha Stories of Francis La Flesche. With an introduction by James W. Parins and Daniel E. Littlefield Jr.

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Author

Ramsey, Jarold

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important, is the lack of a map. The authors do provide a top-of-the-world view which identifies the homelands of circumpolar peoples. This is important as the book is careful to differentiate significant distinctions between the lives of the Copper Inuit and other Inuit people. Yet this map does not provide place names, which leaves readers to reach for their own atlases to locate the places mentioned in the text.

Inuit deserves a wide readership. Scholars and upper level college students will learn little from it, though it should be welcome on their shelves for how well it tells and shows a story they may already know. Beginning students of the Native peoples of the North could benefit greatly from the book. Certainly, college, high school, and public libraries should add this volume to their collections. And the general public interested in the North would do very well to put *Inuit* on their coffee tables, and read it well to learn a great deal about a hardy and ingenious people in a harsh and beautiful land.

James H. Ducker
Alaska History

Ke-ma-ha: the Omaha Stories of Francis La Flesche. With an introduction by James W. Parins and Daniel E. Littlefield Jr. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 134 pages. \$25 cloth.

One of the really auspicious and useful consequences of the growth of American Indian literary studies over the last two decades has been the re-publication and in some cases the literal recovery from oblivion of works by earlier Indian writers. Exemplifying this retrospective scholarship at its best is what seems to be the current boom of interest in the Omaha ethnographer and author Francis La Flesche (1857-1932).

Not that La Flesche has been in danger of being forgotten since his death: his masterful studies of Omaha and Osage ceremonies continue to be reckoned with as landmarks of ethnology, and his vivid memoir of reservation school-days, *The Middle Five*, has been persistently popular since its appearance in 1901. But La Flesche's literary significance, both as a gifted translator and editor of Native oral/traditional literary materials, and as a writer of ethnographic fiction, has never been properly assessed-and so it is good to see evidence of such an assessment underway now, in recent publications like Garrick Bailey's beautifully edited

gathering of La Flesche's writings on the Osage, *The Osage and the Invisible World* (1995), and forthcoming studies like Robin Ridington and Dennis Hastings, *Blessing for a Long Time* and essays on La Flesche in a new "Indian" volume (#175) of *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

Through such work, we may finally be able to see La Flesche as the seminal transcultural figure he probably is—and as a contribution to this revaluation, James Parins and Daniel Littlefield's reconstruction of his never-published short-story collection, *Ke-ma-ha*, is very welcome.

From manuscripts in the Alice Fletcher Collection in the Smithsonian National Anthropological Archives, Parins and Littlefield have selected eighteen stories (sixteen of them unpublished) that seem to constitute the basis of a collection of stories on Omaha life that La Flesche wrote immediately after he had finished *The Middle Five* around 1900. That the collection was never published, and in fact never completed as a book-manuscript, is indicative both of La Flesche's stubborn unwillingness to "adjust" his work to meet the stereotypical views of potential publishers to whom he sent sample stories, and of personal doubts about his capabilities for fiction. In any event, by 1904 he seems to have given up his short story career in favor of ethnography—although in 1908 he did undertake an opera, *Da-o-ma*, in collaboration with Charles Wakefield Cadman and Nellie Eberhart; the work was never performed or published.

Parins and Littlefield have plausibly organized La Flesche's narratives into three categories according to their subjects: ten "stories of boyhood and youth," portraying Omaha life as it still lived in his boyhood years; four "stories of tradition," fictive retellings of traditional Omaha tales; and four "stories of the recent past and the reservation," again the author's own inventions and focusing on the kinds of transcultural pressures and conflicts that La Flesche must have experienced in his own early life, moving from the Omaha homeland to a scholarly and bureaucratic career in Washington D.C.

Parins and Littlefield are justly restrained in their literary claims for the stories in *Ke-ma-ha*—they are not fictional masterpieces, being more sketches than fully elaborated stories—but by the same token they are fully justified in their claim that the contents of this collection "tell us a great deal about Omaha culture in ways that anthropological treatises cannot" (vii) and that with the addition of *Ke-ma-ha* to his other writings, we can

now recognize La Flesche as "the most prolific, the most versatile, and therefore, perhaps the most important Indian writer of his time" (viii).

At their best, these stories are rich in what might be called "the imagination of culture," in passages where the details and textures of the traditional Omaha way take on life, color, and plausible immediacy, in La Flesche's words. The first two stories, for example, "The Laughing Bird, the Wren" and "The Story of a Vision," are both revealingly framed by details of old-time Omaha storytelling. Likewise, in the story of "Tae-hon'-zhon," La Flesche offers an especially compelling fictive account of a boy's visionary experience (p. 48); and in "A Buffalo Hunt," two small boys bear graphic witness to the aftermath of the hunt:

[A]ll at once our horses slackened speed, the roaring ceased, the clouds of dust floated upward, and—what a sight we saw! Pillowed upon one another lay the buffalo, here, there, and everywhere With tail and mane flying in the air, a horse was galloping madly around, shying and snorting furiously at its own vitals which hung out of a great rent in its side. A man lay on the ground stunned, and a buffalo stood close by, bleeding from nostrils and mouth. The horse stumbled, fell, and became motionless; the buffalo, coughing violently, tottered forward and dropped dead. (p.24)

In such passages, what would be the depersonalized, averaged "facts" of conventional ethnographic discourse take on lived, storied meanings: and although his editors don't consider the possibility, *Ke-ma-ha* seems to establish La Flesche as a pioneer of ethnographic fiction, looking ahead to notable experiments in this vein by Franz Boas, T.T. Waterman and other anthropologists in Elsie Clews Parson's *American Indian Lives* (1923), and contemporary fiction like Laura Bohannon's *Return to Laughter*, Ursula Le Guin's *Always Coming Home*, and James Welch's *Fools Crow*.

It's on such questions of literary theory and context that this collection leaves much to be desired. Again, its value in setting forth the stories themselves is not to be doubted—but many readers will be frustrated by the theoretical and editorial limitations of the editors, introduction and notes. Nowhere do they explain *why*, on the basis of what kinds of judgments, they selected these eighteen stories out of the fifty-plus MS pieces in the Fletcher Collection. Why, for example, did they omit the tragic tale of "The Old Man Who Weeps"—as well-told a tale as any of the

texts they have included? Why, although they comment on La Flesche's literary aspirations and limitations and frequently refer to his efforts to revise particular stories, do they neglect to examine these revisions, for what they might reveal about La Flesche the writer?

More generally, Parins and Littlefield are regrettably indifferent to current ethnographic literary theory, as advanced by James Clifford, Jonathan Boyarin, Mary Louise Pratt, and others. Without recourse to such theoretical approaches, the editors' attempts to sort out the intercultural and transcultural complexities of La Flesche's writing seem very incomplete and unexamined. It may well be that "his lack of confidence or success with literary forms resulted from work habits derived from long years of ethnological work" (xxx); but surely the root of the problem, and also paradoxically the source of his distinctiveness as a writer of both scholarly ethnography and ethnographic fiction, lies in his conflicted, life-long occupation of two worlds—one Omaha-traditional and the other Anglo-scientific.

Nowhere in La Flesche's writings are these conflicts more vividly worded than in another piece in the Fletcher Collection, "The Song of Flying Crow." Parins and Littlefield quote from this memoir (xxi-xxii), without noting its recent publication (in *Bounday* 2, Fall 1992), and without noting how its autobiographical account of La Flesche's struggles between his tribal obligations and his obligations as a professional ethnographer is deeply relevant to their attempts to understand the nature and the limits of his fiction. And such theoretical considerations might have led them to consider how his brief experimentation with the short story may have contributed to his brilliant achievement (still largely unrecognized, at least in literary circles) in translating and imaginatively contextualizing the sacred ceremonies and songs of the Osage.

In sum: for the stories alone, *Ke-ma-ha* is an important and welcome addition to the range of what we know about Francis La Flesche and the period of early Indian writing he shared with Charles Eastman, Gertrude Bonnin, Alexander Posey, and others. But on interpretive and theoretical questions, readers of the collection will have to pick up where the editors have left off—without even a bibliography to guide them.

Jarold Ramsey
University of Rochester