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**Sacred Smokes.** By Theodore C. Van Alst Jr. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018. 162 pages. \$19.95 paper.

The twelve stories in this collection, nonsequential and only loosely related, are mostly drawn from the adult narrator's teenage years in Chicago's tough underclass street culture of the 1970s. The narrator and central character, variously called "Teddy" or "Theo," explains that he is "Theo Jr.," a detail that suggests the book's underpinnings are autobiographical, despite its conventional disclaimer that it is a work of fiction. In one story, "Bumblebee and the Cherokee Harelip," the narrator tells of giving a presentation "a couple of years ago" (62) titled "'Talking Circle': Speaking With and Without Reservation(s) in *The Business of Fancydancing*," which is also listed as a publication in Van Alst's actual vita (65). Emphasizing his Native American roots, Van Alst prefaces his stories with an 1854 quotation from an Indian agent, who wrote that the Blackfeet Sioux (the Sihasapa, not the Algonquian-speaking Blackfeet, the Siksika) are "continually warring and committing depredations on whites and neighboring tribes, killing men and stealing horses. . . . They, of all Indians, are now the most dreaded on the Missouri."

The suggested parallel between the historic Sihasapa and their urban descendants is clear, yet as he is growing up, the narrator's connection to his tribal roots is vague and tenuous at best, and the reader will find that being an NDN (as the book prints it) will not play a particularly significant role in the stories. Gang affiliation is more significant in this environment than either racial or ethnic identity. Teddy's parents were divorced and he lived with his father "in a few different places on the North Side—roach motels, converted SROs, dumpy apartments, studios. I was a teenage gangbanger, he was a middle-age alcoholic, and we were Indians in the city, mostly unmoored and ignorant in more ways than I can count" (2). The historical Native American tribes and their "depredations" have been replaced, in the book's Chicago urban setting, by street gangs such as the Imperial Gangsters, Satan's Disciples, Harrison Gents, Gaylords, Insane Deuces, and Greasers. And, of course, where there are gangs, there are drugs, humbugs (gang wars), and gratuitous violence. However, strange as it may seem, he had access to, and read, books as varied as Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Plato's *Republic*, Deloria's *God Is Red* (1972), Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), Howard's *Conan the Conqueror* (1936, 1984), and Collins's *Hollywood Wives* (1983). Obviously, Teddy was an avid reader, as well as a storyteller and writer; he includes a 500-word theme that received an "A" in an English class (38–40).

The narrator's careful attention to detail shows he intends to present as authentic an account as possible even when narrating events that, in some cases, happened at least forty years prior. He emphasizes his qualifications for doing so by explaining that he developed a "bear-trap ability" to remember details as a child. As an undergraduate student in his late thirties, he was able to tell his professor that a quote from Gerald Vizenor "appeared on page 1983 of the 2001 edition of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*" (32). After a series of travel adventures, by 1991 he is back in Chicago managing a band, "working for an entertainment/production company," and

trying to write (126). He ends up as an academic, an associate professor and chair of Native American studies at the University of Montana.

One story, “Jagg’d,” begins with Teddy and his friend Freckles visiting Gooch in the hospital “strapped in this . . . bed that revolves . . . because Gooch is paralyzed and they have to rotate him or something” (12). Gooch, a Satan’s Disciple, was shot seven times by a Harrison Gent. He begs Teddy to get him out of the hospital somehow, which Teddy does. The story then flashes back “a couple of years” to an incident involving Wacker, who is Gooch’s younger brother, then returns to Teddy telling of a totally unrelated incident, which he has apparently made up, probably dealing with the Civil War: a cannon has accidentally exploded and killed eight crew members and five additional soldiers. A sergeant, who happens to be an Indian, organizes a burial detail before a battle apparently begins: “The screams began shortly thereafter and continued on through the long, long night” (25).

As “Jagg’d” illustrates, the narrator is constantly digressive within the Chicago-centered and teenage setting. Frequent flash-forwards in time deal with events in Teddy’s adult life; for example, in Beirut in 1983, while he was in the Navy, the Marine barracks is bombed (91–92); in Maine, “before she went to the joint,” Martha Stewart visits a sandwich shop he owned (99); in southern New Mexico, he pressures a bus driver to stop in the middle of nowhere so he can have a smoke (103–5); in Phoenix, he is knocked unconscious in a bar fight (110–13); hitchhiking in Mississippi, he encounters “the tiredest black woman” he ever met in a store where she sold crickets for bait (116–20); in New Orleans, he is broke (121–23); in Las Cruces, he is stopped by the border patrol (123–25); and in Los Angeles, he is involved in the music “biz” (125). In addition to the chronological and thematic digressions, the narrator makes comments directly to the reader, such as, speaking of one of his aunts: “I won’t say she’s my favorite, in case this ever gets printed” and “I’m not going to lie to you and say we ate off of paper towels” (6).

The underlying implication emerging from the apparently disparate and disorganized elements of the book—which won the 2018 Tillie Olson Award for Creative Writing—is that education, formal or not, provides a means of escape from poverty and all the disadvantages that follow from a childhood that is isolated or at-risk. Education as escape is a theme, of course, not confined to Native American literature. One thinks immediately of the recent successes of Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime* (2016) and, preeminently, Tara Westover’s *Educated* (2018). In Native American literature, one thinks of the Navajo classic *Miracle Hill* by Emerson Blackhorse Mitchell (1967, 2004) as an early example. Finally, *Sacred Smokes* also shows the influence of work by Sherman Alexie and Tommy Orange. Orange’s *There, There* (2018) likewise involves an urban setting and Orange, like Van Alst, is a product of the Low Residency MFA Program at the Institute of American Indian Arts.

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