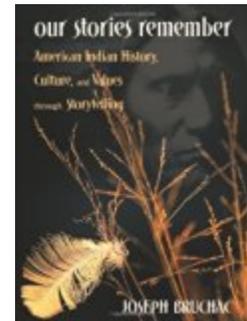


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Joseph Bruchac. *Our Stories Remember: American Indian History, Culture, and Values through Storytelling*. Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 2003. 192 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55591-129-4.

Reviewed by Mary Scriver (Independent Scholar)  
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## Tracking the Stories

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An anthropologist named Malcolm McFee used to have a concept he called the 200% man.[1] At the time (the 1950s) people were very concerned about “half-breed” Indians, but he insisted that there were people who were fully Native American and fully European at the same time—a powerful synergy. Joseph Bruchac is one of those people, fully Abenaki and fully Slovak at once. His synergy takes the form of stories, both in many of the one hundred books he has written and/or edited and in the oral storytelling tradition.

He is sustained by Quaker values: gentleness, good conscience, generosity, and renewal. I know this for a fact, having watched him go through an “interesting” situation on the Blackfeet Reservation in which his inexperienced hosts gave him a broken car, a chilly motel, no meals, and no guide. Luckily, he has a network of close friends around the country who look out for him. In this case it was Jack Gladstone, the Blackfeet musician, who came to the rescue. Despite the problems, teachers were amazed when Bruchac held a gymnasium of normally irrepressible junior high school kids rapt while he told stories, and then brought a bunch of tough high schoolers almost to tears with other stories. No notes, no video, no unnecessary drama—just time-tested and true narratives. It’s possible that it was on this visit that he visited Running Eagle Falls in Glacier National Park, as he describes in this book (pp. 165-166), so he was taking in new tales all the time he was telling old ones.

On seeing *Our Stories Remember*, my first thought was, “Oh, yeah? Whose stories remember whose past?” Native Americans are very different from one part of the country to another, even in conflict sometimes, so how can they all be packed into one small volume? The answer is, as with porcupines making love, that it must be done very carefully by those with experience. Few writers are situated properly for this kind of task, but Bruchac—inarguably—is able, willing, and temperamentally suited to finding the commonalities among the original peoples of the continent, quietly laying them out like smooth stones for our contemplation. Some of these stories and thoughts have been retold among tribes for centuries. A few are contemporary. Most will be shared by all of us for a long time to come. Bruchac hopes to help us see from a Native American point of view, as it truly exists. This is not a book of legends.

Many of the stories in this book are funny—and not just the trickster stories, some of which are from real life. For instance, consider “Laughing Larry,” a jolly fellow who was given an old broken-down car “if he thought he could make it run.” “Don’t worry,” assures Larry, “I’ll have it humming right along in no time.” His plan was to get the car pushed to an incline where it would coast down to start the engine when he put it in gear. But a family of hornets had been living in the car and didn’t want to relocate! Zinging loudly, they began to sting Larry, who could get neither the driver’s door nor the brakes to work, and the car plummeted to the bottom of the hill, landing in a crash. Larry, lumpy and bruised,

emerged laughing, “Now that’s what I call *really* humming right along!” In a harsh world it pays to take the attitude of Laughing Larry.

Between the stories Bruchac offers what can only be called “friendly persuasion” about a host of mistaken ideas that people (even Native Americans themselves!) insist upon when dealing with Native American subjects. He’s not afraid to talk about the dark things, but without rancor or scolding. “Just dump out that cup of bitterness,” he advises, quoting Lance Henson. “Make room for something new.” Thus this book is a good place to start for a beginner, a nice prompter for experienced people who work with Native American ideas and history, and an excellent source for personal meditation. The writing is organized in ten broad themes, then divided into shorter aspects, which suits the book well to daily reflection. Each chapter ends with a few bibliographic suggestions for further reading. Some of these books are familiar classics; others sound more innovative or obscure. None are “faux” Indian lore.

Quite aside from book writing, Bruchac maintains a crammed schedule of storytelling in schools, writing workshops in prisons, and participation in an ongoing annual convocation called “Returning the Gift” that brings together and celebrates Native American writers. The anthology he edited from the first meeting in Norman, Oklahoma, in 1992 has proven to be a seed bed for many careers.[2] In addition, the Greenfield Press, his family business, maintains a presence online as well as in Bowman’s Corners, where Bruchac grew up.[3] His sister, Marge, is also a careful scholar and an influence for common sense and reconciliation. (Also well worth seeking out is *Bowman’s Store: A Journey to Myself*, Joe Bruchac’s memoir, an inspiring and endearing account of growing up with a wise grandfather.[4] Forget Forrest Carter’s *The Education of Little Tree*, which has a dubious pedigree and is fiction anyway.)[5]

I would like to say a word for production values. *Our Stories Remembered* is a small book, carefully designed and proportioned. It is a pleasure to take along on the day’s journey or to leave on a convenient table to welcome one’s return. The feather that recurs as a motif is not the usual bold eagle feather, but a much softer, downy feather—I’m guessing from an owl. Maybe for wisdom.

Now I’m going to do something rather unusual in a book review, but made possible by online publishing. The table of contents in this book is so minimal as to be useless, so I’ve constructed another one to use as a supplement, in particular for those who will want to refer

back to specific stories. I’ve added subheadings. *Italics* indicate chapters that are unlisted in the official table of contents, perhaps because they are meant to be short reflections anyway. An asterisk indicates that the title is a story, although there are many stories woven into the chapters, not even counting the stories about how the stories were found or used. You might want to keep this list in your computer so you can add notes, or you might want to print it out to fold into the book.

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Those who know Indians understand that Indians in different parts of North America are dependent on different totems: the salmon in the Northwest, the moose in lake country, corn and beans in the Midwest, and so on. Ending with "deer" shows that Bruchac is a Woodland Indian, a silent hunter on foot rather than the familiar whooping Plains Indians on horseback in movies. The story in this section is what Boria Sax would call an "animal bride" story, which is to say it is about our relationship to nature.[6]

For a small book, *Our Stories Remember* is as complex as a conversation with a friend, weaving in and out of the topics. Trust Bruchac, stick with him, but keep track of the trail so you can return to the parts you can best use.

Notes

[1]. Malcolm McFee, *Modern Blackfeet: Montanans on a Reservation* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

[2]. Joseph Bruchac, ed., *Returning the Gift: Poetry and Prose from the First North American Native Writers' Festival* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1994).

[3]. Greenfield Press, <http://www.greenfieldpress.com>.

[4]. Joseph Bruchac, *Bowman's Store: A Journey to Myself* (New York: Dial Books, 1997).

[5]. Forrest Carter, *The Education of Little Tree* (New York: Delacorte, 1976). Strong objections to this book came from the Native American community. In the first place, Carter was formerly a KKK and George Wallace staff racist. Second, the book is a sentimental and stereotypical generic Indian story with no basis in reality. And third, although the subject matter and writing suggest that children might enjoy the book, there are in fact situations in it that would require explanation. For more information, see John Leland with Marc Peyser, "New Age Fable from an Old School Bigot? The Murky History of the Best Selling Little Tree," *Newsweek*, 14 October 1991, p. 62, or Dan T. Carter, "Transformation of a Klansman," *New York Times*, 4 October 1991, p.31.

[6]. Boria Sax, *The Serpent and the Swan: The Animal Bride in Folklore and Literature* (Blacksburg: McDonald & Woodward, 1998).

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<https://networks.h-net.org/h-nilas>

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