

Book Reviews

Peter Nabokov. *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2002. 246 pp. \$55.00; \$20.00.

Peter Nabokov's *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* signals a new and more self-conscious phase of Native American historical studies. Nabokov pauses in this work to write not a new history but a treatise on the very nature of historical studies. For twenty years or more scholars in Native American studies have noted the need for a new approach to Native American history which acknowledges the value of oral texts. Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* (1970) marked a new era in Native American studies, but texts like Deloria's and Brown's have remained somewhat outside of the historical canon. In 1997 Ron Welburn wrote of contemporary U.S. and Canadian university students and faculty, "More than any other previous generation, they realize how their own perceptions and expectations of Indians derive from stereotypes, and they find just as painful their inability to articulate their distress. As Americans and Canadians in the social mainstream, they inherit a vast ignorance of conflicting images about Indians" (*American Indian Studies* xii). Nabokov seeks to carve a space for new views of Native American history and to correct some of the ignorance Welburn mentions.

Few outsiders will recognize the difficulty in approaching this subject. Nabokov walks a demanding path through the minefield of contemporary Native American studies. Nationalist sentiments, scholarly demands, and ethnographic sensitivity are often deeply at odds in this field. Nabokov is, however, uniquely qualified to write this ambitious book. His previous work includes *Indian Running: Native American History and Tradition* (1987) and *Native American Architecture* (1989). Perhaps his most noteworthy work to date is *Native American Testimony* (1978), a collection of stories, descriptions, and personal reminiscences chronicling Indian-White relations from a Native point of view, which Nabokov most recently updated in 2000. His eclectic approach to Native American studies gives him the kind of scholarly and cultural breadth as well as cultural sensitivity necessary to suggesting a new approach to Native American history. His list of acknowledgments is literally a who's who of Native American studies, and his broadly ranging expertise covers everything from archival research to field studies, folklore to history, and Mircea Eliade to Deloria.

Aimed primarily at both graduate and undergraduate college students, Nabokov's book attempts to create a new theoretical approach to Native American folklore, mythology, and ritual, what Nabokov calls "one generalist's dawning regard for the rich and scantily addressed history of American Indian intellectual life." Not primarily a history book but rather a book about "historicity," *A Forest of Time* explores the ways scholars make and understand history. Nabokov diligently works to create a framework within the field of American history by which scholars can understand Native American oral texts and material culture. More importantly, he strives to make what has variously been called "ethnohistory," "folklore," or "folk-history" a legitimate part of the mainstream historical canon.

One of the most important tools a study of Native American approaches to history has to offer college students is the gift of perspective. Careful readers of this text may come to see themselves and their own history in radically new ways. Nabokov suggests his "overall purpose is to encourage everyone to consider researching, engaging with, and enriching their own work through whatever they can learn about American Indian forms of historical consciousness." He maintains convincingly that traditional scholarly approaches to Native American history have valorized document-based history without understanding the self-imposed biases implicit in this

approach. "Any accounts of Indian-white relations," he argues, "deserved multiple representations." Past attempts to collect and record Native American histories have tended to create binary notions of American Indians who exist either as noble savages or bloodthirsty fiends, with writers like Helen Hunt Jackson and J. W. Wilbarger representing the two ends of this spectrum. Nabokov rightly suggests that "[w]hether Indians are regarded as benighted savages or nature poets continues to say more about some binary opposition in our own national psyche than anything intrinsic to Indian culture or character, past or present."

In approaching the subject of history Nabokov centers his work on one of the key issues in Native American studies. Indian school educators in the nineteenth century quickly realized that as long American Indian children had a strong sense of place, personal and cultural histories, and traditional languages, they would not be good candidates for assimilation. These educators therefore sought to remove these children from their homes, allowed them to speak only English, and actively discouraged traditional Indian approaches to history. Recognizing that history is identity, Nabokov seeks both to restore the more or less personal value of these histories and at the same time to establish the scholarly legitimacy of American Indian ways of knowing history. Thus he struggles throughout much of the book to validate the historical legitimacy of texts which have in the past only been understood as "myths" or "folktales." The irony here is that contemporary historians such as Dane Morrison have come to view much of the established, scholarly history of American Indians precisely as myth. Since Nabokov emphasizes that the "line between myth and history can no longer be drawn along a border between Western and non-Western epistemologies," it is fitting that he would use one set of myths to revise another.

The first two chapters of the book develop Nabokov's approach and his theory as well as construct an outline of the field of Native American historical studies as it now stands. Dense and somewhat difficult to read, these chapters provide a rich overview of Native American studies in general. Historical, literary, folkloric, and ethnographic scholars unfamiliar with the field will be well-rewarded for the time they spend here. Later chapters approach Native American oral traditions, legends, myths, memorates, jokes, tales, representations of geography, material culture, rituals, and contemporary literature, all from a perspective which explores their historical value. Somewhat

less dense, these chapters form a kind of handbook for writers of Native American histories. Nabokov coaches a methodology to tease usable history out of these different sources.

His chapter on oral traditions and legends is a good representative of his method in these chapters. In it he frames his approach to legends with a personal story about a buffalo head he received after participating in a hunt with some Crow Indians. He later learns that an elderly Indian needs just such a head for ritual purposes. As he presents the skull to the man, Nabokov realizes that the value and meaning of the skull are vastly more significant to the old man than to himself. What had been an interesting decoration and a kind of souvenir for Nabokov suddenly became a cultural object of great value, power, and danger in the old man's hands. Nabokov then successfully uses his experiences with the man as a framework to contextualize other encounters in the chapter. As it is in other places in the book, Nabokov's breadth of academic experience is impressive here, as he refers to the work of many scholars in a variety of sub-classifications. The chapter ends with ten short case studies in which Native American oral traditions and legends have been successfully used to inform historical studies.

Other chapters, similarly organized, are equally useful, though perhaps to different audiences. Literary scholars will appreciate chapter eight's analysis of the works of writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Louise Erdrich, and those inclined to privilege the works of Eliade, Carl Jung, or Joseph Campbell (Nabokov mistakenly refers to him as "James Campbell") will be well advised to read chapter three carefully before they apply archetypal theories to Native American texts.

Though the book is generally successful, it is not without problems. Initially, Nabokov hints that his study is about to turn history departments on their ears by claiming that most of the written histories of Native Americans are mythic, in the sense that someone like Richard Slotkin uses the term, rather than strictly factual. This move would then open the door to acknowledge "myths" as equally valuable "history." Ultimately, however, he disappoints readers who may have hoped he would enthrone myth over history, for in the end Nabokov is a historian, and documented "facts" tend to remain the bottom line in his idea of history. He suggests, for instance, that the validity of Native American legends which refer to hunting gargantuan beasts (like giant sloths or mammoths) needs to be corroborated by

etic evidence and may be partly judged by biological, climatological, and cataclysmal “guide posts” which create a more dependable frame of reference. Of course, one’s disappointment with this aspect of the book may reflect particular biases rather than a genuine failure on Nabokov’s part.

Speaking more broadly, many folklorists will find the book highly problematic. The relationship among history, myth, and folklore, which forms the core of the book, is old and well-explored ground. Folklore scholars from Dell Hymes to Dennis Tedlock and William Wilson have written about the specific relationships between folklore and history, and few would find Nabokov’s highly interdisciplinary approach satisfying. For many folklorists Nabokov’s persistent move to find the historicity of folklore undervalues the poetic and artistic qualities of the same texts. This is especially regrettable since the very chapters of his book are organized by folkloric categories.

Perhaps the most important of the text’s problems is Nabokov’s sense of audience. In the preface he claims to have written “an introductory handbook for any students and ordinary readers,” but the book is simply not successful in this goal. Nabokov’s academic prose and meticulous style are too dense for most undergraduate or casual readers. On the other hand, *A Forest of Time* should become required reading in graduate courses in Native American studies and American history. The detailed footnotes, which sometimes cover more than half a page, are a mother lode dedicated students and researchers will want to mine.

Finally, this is not a graceful text. The book’s breadth creates a serious challenge for Nabokov, causing him infrequently to explore a particular subject in depth, opting instead to survey the ground for later researchers. Moreover, he has taken such pains to create a useful research tool that his prose rarely flows with ease.

Whatever Nabokov lacks in grace, however, he makes up for with a kind of academic brute force. The scholarship he brings to bear upon his subject matter is formidable. This is a book only someone with Nabokov’s thirty-plus years of experience as historian, ethnologist, and archivist could have written. As a tool for graduate students needing to complete dissertations, it is invaluable. Nabokov himself, though, worries that the text may be perceived as “little more than a glorified lit review.” He need not fret. This is a great deal more than a review of existing literature in this rich field, “glorified” or otherwise. When readers compare this text to books like Gary Witherspoon’s

Language and Art in the Navajo Universe (1977), Daniel K. Richter's *Facing East From Indian Country* (2001), or James Axtell's *Natives and Newcomers* (2001), they will be forced to recognize Nabokov's broader goals and loftier ambitions. With this text he is attempting to revise the very nature of American history and to understand an entire category of materials in an utterly new light. He recognizes that the items one selects as legitimate "historical evidence" greatly affect the story one will eventually tell. What is ultimately at risk is not simply an understanding of *Native American* history specifically but of *history* in general. That is a tall order for any book, and Nabokov deserves credit for opening the door to a new way of thinking about Native American oral texts. *A Forest of Time* is an important book and will find a well-deserved place in libraries and classrooms across the country.

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Schakel, Peter J. *Imagination and the Arts in C. S. Lewis: Journeying to Narnia and Other Worlds*. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2002. 214 pp. \$32.50.

Peter Schakel's latest book on C. S. Lewis offers a useful overview of the role of the arts in Lewis's life and writings. Though "imagination" is the first word in the title, the focus is really on Lewis's literary uses—and in some cases his practice—of various creative and imaginative arts: poetry and prose fiction, music, dance, drawing, painting, architecture, and even clothing, which, as Schakel reminds us, can be viewed as one of the fine arts. Among the best features of the book is the way it demonstrates the disjunction that sometimes