

Book Reviews

Four Souls. Louise Erdrich. New York: HarperCollins, 2004; ISBN: 0-06-620975-7; 210 pges, \$23.95 US.

Four Souls is the latest of Erdrich's novels which continues the lives of both reservation and non-reservation Anishnaabe peoples whose stories began in *Tracks*. These hearty people have survived boarding schools, smallpox and other epidemics, the theft of their land, and enforced Christianity. Both light and dark humor carry the story along. In *Four Souls* Erdrich once again employs the system of chapters being told by alternating narrators. Like the tracks of Fleur's pushcart, these concomitant stories, Fleur's life in Minneapolis and Nanapush's life back on the reservation, drive the novel forward and back, revealing more than just their own histories. While trickster/storyteller Nanapush weaves his own tales, Fleur still does not reveal her own story. Instead, her story is revealed through the eyes of John James Mauser's ex-sister-in-law, Polly Elizabeth.

Originally, Fleur goes to the city to find the scoundrel who stole her land and the land of many other Anishnaabe people back on her reservation. She finds the dying Mauser, whom she helps to nurse back to life, so that she can make him pay for what he has done to her people. Using all of her charms, she makes him her husband with the intent to kill him so that she would inherit his (her) land.

Meanwhile, on the reservation, Nanapush is having a few domestic difficulties of his own with Margaret. These two characters provide most of the humor throughout the novel, as a trickster is supposed to do. His insane jealousies about Margaret and Shesheeb, Nanapush's brother-in-law, drive most of his actions concerning the years Fleur is away from the reservation. Convinced that Shesheeb has gone Windigo, Nanapush watches him. Margaret, with insecurities and jealousies of her own, flirts with Nanapush just enough to keep him guessing about what is really happening.

Eventually Fleur and Nanapush's paths converge as Fleur returns with her nameless son. She has a white son and drives a big white car, which she gambles away to secure even more of her land. In these chapters narrated by Margaret, Fleur connects with her ancestors, *Four Souls* and the others who have made her so strong. Once again united with water, Fleur reemerges as the Anishnaabekwe she is supposed to be.

In the novel, Erdrich uses more Anishnaabe language, but it can generally be understood based on context. This use is not enough to chase away a non-speaker. In *Four Souls* the reader learns more about Fleur during her time in the city and how her son was born.

With each successive novel, Erdrich reveals more about the characters who inhabit her world, delving deeper into different characters in each book. Men and women who have read Erdrich's entire collection will recall connecting events from other books, but new readers will not be lost; instead, they will want to read the other episodes, too. In the end Fleur emerges victorious, but not without the aid of her family, past and present.

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Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat. Paula Gunn Allen. New York: HarperCollins, 2003; ISBN: 0-06-053687-X; 350 pges; \$41.95US.

What if Pocahontas was really a top secret spy chosen by her people to infiltrate the English forts and courts? And what if this spy was also a powerful medicine woman with her sights set on learning all she could about Christianity, British society, and as a result, influencing the course of history?

This is the premise of renowned Laguna pueblo/Metis author Paula Gunn Allen in her groundbreaking new biography *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat*. This is a refreshing view of history and of a woman about whom we have been fed a steady Disney diet of true love, romance, and talking cartoon animals.

This Pocahontas, one very different from the romantic British/American version of her as a comely Indian maiden who was willing to throw it all away for love, is seen and interpreted by Allen through a very indigenized lens. As a result we see how her status among her people, her relations with the British and the successful partnership with her husband John Rolfe may have helped to shape the history of trade and diplomatic relations between England and what is now known as the United States of America.

Through Allen's writing, we come to see Pocahontas as a strong, powerful historical figure who played an important part in her nations' spiritual practice; a chosen one perhaps, whose gifts made it possible for her to be the perfect go between as relations shifted and changed between the Powhatans and the British. Calling Pocahontas a pathfinder, Allen believes we do a great injustice to her and others like her "by discounting their massive contributions to the modern world and instead

considering them as having lived tragic lives, victims of European greed" (8).

This is not your average historical biography, however. Allen warns us from the beginning that she will create a narrative based on Native oral tradition that encompasses magic, stories from other Nations, and ways of knowing that we seldom have access to in more academic writing. What happens is that the biography unfolds like a story woven with facts and figures from history, while encouraging the reader to use her imagination.

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Rock, Ghost, Willow, Deer: A Story of Survival.

Allison Adelle Hedge Coke. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2004; illustrations; ISBN 0-8032-1527-4; 198 pages; \$24.95 US.

When the phrase "truth is stranger than fiction" was coined, they could have had this book in mind. Hedge Coke is truly a resilient soul who endured more hardships than any one person should have to, and has survived to write about those experiences today. This heartbreaking memoir includes surviving a household where her mother was schizophrenic and her brother was a bully; repeated rapings; drug and alcohol addictions; physical and sexual abuse by her husbands; and enduring life threatening health issues. Hedge Coke writes an honest, straightforward account as she retells the stories of how she got to be where she is today and the strength she drew from her family and herself to survive.

The actions of Hedge Coke's mother had catastrophic effects on her children, including forcing Allison to start staying away from home by the age of nine. She said the one stabilizing factor in her life was her father, who created a normal home life for his family and instilled them with stories of their Tsala-gi heritage. These people and their stories are what kept Hedge Coke alive.

This book examines some very tough subjects, such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and rape. Through each episode Hedge Coke recounts the facts simply, truthfully, without embellishment, and with just enough emotion to allow the reader to be there, feeling her pain, yet without recounting all the horrors that would cause the reader to abandon the book without finishing it. Once accused by her sister Pumpkin of being uneducated and backward because her language was not sophisticated enough, Hedge Coke here does an excellent job of keeping the language real and accessible.

Although the atrocities faced by Hedge Coke seemed insurmountable at times, she persevered

nonetheless, earned an MFA, raised two sons, and worked as an activist for many Native-related causes. This book takes a hard look at how police and other authorities fail to respond to women and to Native people's concerns by ignoring what has happened or making light of what has taken place. Hedge Coke provided examples of how people don't listen to women, such as giving her Novocain for dental work, and the near-death results she suffered because of others' refusal to listen.

Hedge Coke tells her life like it was. No stranger to hard work, she writes in depth about being poor, working as a migrant laborer, handling horses, trolling for fish, and making something out of nothing. Her family was an important support system, but mainly she relied on herself. This memoir stands as an inspiration to others who have lead a hard life and shows that if you have a determination to survive, you can overcome just about every obstacle.

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Skins: Contemporary Indigenous Writing.

Compiled and edited by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm & Josie Douglas. Cape Croker Reserve, Ontario & Australia: Kegeдонce Press and Jukurpa Books, 2000; ISBN 1-86465-032-X; vix + 172 pges; \$24.95.

There were times I sat with Dora Rouge in the little room with the antlers and turtle shell rattles and the box I snooped in. We would breathe together the way wolves do with their kith and kin, the way they nurture relations by breathing. This breath was alive. It joined us as we were joined in so many other ways.

This passage into American Indian author Linda Hogan's "Dora Rouge's Bones" emphasizes and describes the Indigenous experience in this collection of stories from 19 Indigenous authors from Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand.

Compiled and edited by one of Canada's recognized Indigenous authors, Kateri Akewenzie-Damm and Josie Douglas, coordinator of the Australian collection, the book introduces a stimulating and riveting collection of short stories that can be appreciated by the student, the novice, and seasoned reader and would be especially relevant in Indigenous studies programs. Under the soft burnt-umber cover is a rich collection of short stories pulsing with action, drama, romance, tragedy and humor.