A review of

Native American Myths: Collected 1636-1919

B.C. Kennedy

This fascinating collection of Native American myths has been described as 'one of the most comprehensive collections of its kind', written by an 'expert in the genre'. Rosalind Kerven certainly is this; with an academic background in anthropology, she is a highly acclaimed and experienced author of over 60 books – including several bestsellers – and has been published in 22 countries. She has a specialist knowledge of worldwide myths, legends, folk tales and fairy tales, which she has been collecting and retelling for more than 30 years, and this is particularly evident in this latest collection of Native American mythologies that contains over 100 ancient stories, verse narratives, songs, anecdotes and fragments of wisdom, sourced from 55 different Native American peoples.

At the beginning of the book Kerven addresses the complex problem of terminology and names used in this collection. She tells us that while the term 'Indians' is considered improper, there is still no universally accepted term to describe the numerous indigenous people of North America. Since the 1950s 'Native American' has increasingly been used as a more accurate and respectful name, but this appellation is also problematic, as reflected in the websites of many groups. Whilst acknowledging this, Kerven uses the term 'Native American', believing it to be 'accurate, all-embracing and generally inoffensive'. Kerven also points out that as this is a historical collection, it uses the names recorded in the original texts followed by the correct name in parentheses.

The book, researched over three years, presents some outstanding examples of historical Native American stories between 1636-1919. The oldest written records of Native American life and stories were collected by Jesuit missionaries in the 1630s, for example, 'The Keeper of the Brains of the Dead' collected from the Wyandot people. The author notes that the source material, while giving no indication of the manner in which the story was originally narrated, does contain interesting background information about the Wyandot beliefs such as funeral customs. A cut-off date of 1920 was set in order to 'present only material firmly rooted in the past, when the old cultures were more likely to be thriving', since more modern versions tend to have subtly different details and meanings.

The stories were selected not only for their strong plots and memorable characters but also for their 'world heritage' qualities, i.e. 'their expression of universal concerns, their powerful allegory and imagery and their inspirational teachings'. This collection is not simply a reproduction of old stories since they have been sensitively retold to 'convey the flavour and colour of the oral storytellers'. This collection has been compiled in this spirit, with the intention of bringing these diverse recounts back to life as 'authentically as possible'. Kerven

assures us that all the plots and characters are entirely faithful to the originals while stylistic guidance has been obtained from a careful scrutiny of sources which claim to reproduce actual words and narrative structures allowing us, as readers, an enthralling insight into Native American storytellers and their diverse cultural backgrounds.

Ethnologists and anthropologists typically divide Native North American cultures into ten distinct areas and this book arranges the stories in the same geographical style, with myths sourced from the Great Plains, South East, North West, South West, California, Great Basin, Plateau, Artic, Subarctic and North East. Each of the ten sections of the collection has an introductory section describing the life, history and storytelling traditions of the people behind these stories, complete with historical pictures that resonate with the stories that follow. While each region has its own distinctive flavour and unique narrative, certain themes and motifs share a commonality such as the fluid boundary between humans and animals that reflects a perspective in which humans are an extricable part of the wider natural world. In some stories the protagonists are named as specific animals – the most widespread being the bear – that sometimes shift shape between animal and human form. Other stories depict people marrying a particular animal, such as in 'Raven Gets Married', or animals acting as a kindly foster parent to an abandoned child as seen in 'The Boy who was Raised by a Bear'. In many of the myths is the concept that earth is not the only world, and that a sky world exists for example, as in 'The Woman who Married a Star'. Animals and humans alike could reach these worlds, often by rope, a chain of linked arrows, climbing a tree that grows to the heavens or through a doorway as demonstrated in 'The Origin of Hunting and Farming'. In some myths there are worlds under the sea and, less commonly, under the ground. In 'Doctor Mouse' for example, the narrator describes how 'in the first days people broke through the crust of the earth'.

In the myths numbers play an important role, with different regions regarding diverse numbers as significant, for example the number four represents the four directions. The myths also incorporate creation narratives and stories where deities personify the natural world such as in 'The Battle of Winter and Summer', while the Raven is often depicted as the trickster as retold in 'Raven Steals Daylight'. Many of the stories use fantastical allegory to portray the human condition, while others provide insight into controversial issues such as domestic violence, child abuse, intergenerational conflict and mental illness. Wisdom and death are explored in many of the stories displaying a strong moral slant which would be recognised, Kerven suggests, by all the great world religions. Each story is accompanied by short notes giving details of the original narrator, where known, and summarising related stories. Kerven makes no attempt to explain or interpret the stories but rather encourages the reader to look at the various layers of depth and meaning. There is no conclusion to this collection as the author allows the stories to speak for themselves. Overall, it was a pleasure to review this book. I recommend it without reservation; the scholarship is excellent.

Author: Rosalind Kerven.
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