

State's Indian literature—finding the spirit again

By Chris Harper

At 70, John Turner, one of only five full-blooded Omaha Indians, remains a storyteller. He places his black cowboy hat at his side, rubs his beaten face, smiles and says: "That old monkey, he's always doin' something, always doin' something," and another story begins.

The monkey, rabbit and thunder stories are important elements of the education of Indian children, Turner said. The tales teach children the necessary discipline in order to work diligently and lead a fruitful life, he added.

"If you go the way that the stories tell you, you'll make a lot of friends. You'll become a good human being," Turner said.

opinion of author

Is Nebraska a cultural wasteland? Perhaps the critics have failed to glance at the beauty of the literature of the Sioux Winnebago and Omaha Indians. Perhaps it blinded them.

America, however, has a good habit of overlooking or ignoring its non-dominant cultures. A few readers dabble in Native American literature while others lust for the excitement of a good ole Injun battle.

Some persons perceive Indian literature as a means to answer questions about their own culture. Many Indians view the literature as a tool for the maintenance of their own culture, a culture that almost has become another scratch on the gun handle of white culture.

It is hoped that this brief overview of Plains Indian literature will aid the dabblers, the searchers and upset the lusters.

Indian literature depends heavily upon the chants, myths, customs and ceremonies of each tribe. Much of the literature that is oral has been translated into English.

An Indian's preception is quite different from a white's attitude. It is necessary to investigate the rituals and history of a certain tribe before understanding its literature.

Most Nebraskans have read or heard about *Black Elk Speaks* by John Neihardt. The book gives great insight into the Sioux ceremonies and perspective so long as Black Elk speaks, not Neihardt. When Neihardt's interpretation enters at the end of the book, it appears to directly contradict Black Elk's vision at Wounded Knee. The author is a good reporter, but at this point he becomes a poor interpreter.



The Sacred Pipe, by Joseph Brown, provides a good picture of the sacred Sioux ceremonies. *The*

Peyote Cult, by Weston LaBarre, examines a central religious ceremony in most Plains Indian cultures.

Other works that may aid cultural analysis are *The Winnebago Tribe*, by Paul Radin, and *The Savage Mind*, by French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss.

Radin's book traces the migrations of the Winnebago from Wisconsin to Nebraska and is a reasonably good investigation of the tribe's culture.

The Savage Mind, perhaps inappropriately titled, examines the different attitudes of Native American cultures and the white civilization.

A note of warning about books written by whites concerning Indian cultures — few authors are extremely sensitive and their books are excellent. Many more writers, however, have produced horrid appraisals of native American life and literature.

The folklore of the Plains Indians often is difficult to find. You can't run down to your local bookstore and pick it up hot off the presses. With some effort, however, the literature can be obtained.

Sioux Indian tales are available from Vivian One Feather, c/o The Curriculum Center, Holy Rosary School, Pine Ridge, S. D. Winnebago ceremonies and stories are available in two books by Paul Radin; *The Road of Life and Death* and *The Trickster*. Omaha Indian literature is available from Paul Olson, 338 Andrews.

An anthology that may provide some insight into the Plains Indians is *Shaking the Pumpkin*, by Jerome Rothenberg. The book contains the chants, ceremonies and folklore of many Indian tribes and does include some Plains Indian pieces.

These traditional Indian folklore and customs serve as the focal point for the American Indian movement. Unlike the struggles of other minority groups, many leaders of the Indian movement are traditionalists. Perhaps an oversimplification of the movement's demands is that theirs include a return to the traditional Indian religion and culture and right of self-determination for each tribe.

Some excellent political novels have been written about and by Plains Indians. Of Utmost Good Faith, by Vine Deloria Jr., a Standing Rock Sioux from Pine Ridge, examines treaties between the Plains tribes and the U.S. government during the 19th Century. Legal documents tend to be quite confusing but these treaties are indeed masterpieces of deception.

Stan Steiner's *The New Indians* and the takeover of Alcatraz Island in California provided impetus to the Indian political movement. Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, may prove worthwhile for a political investigation of the Plains tribes.

The white culture has much to learn from Native Americans. If whites can't learn from the Indian cultures, at least they can allow the civilizations to exist intact.

"The old people, they looked for life. They went underground, through the water and into the sky. They found life through the spirit," Turner said. "The white man uses machines—they have to change the spirit. If my people help me, we can find the spirit again."

CEP project sparks Sioux culture study

A Centennial Education Program (CEP) project has opened the door for a small group of students to study the Lakota Sioux culture and fulfill their language requirement concurrently.

"An understanding of the language is almost essential to an understanding of the culture," said Lee Neligh, one student working in the project.

"For instance, you begin to realize the conception of time is different. In the Lakota language the present tense is also used to indicate the past. It can get confusing."

One tangible result of the project is the development of a Lakota language course.

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But the project has taken several other directions. Various students are studying Lakota mythology (from translation) history and psychology of the culture.

Much of the research is done in libraries or the State Historical Society archives. But the group also has benefited from working with Lakota speakers.

They've met with people from the Lincoln Indian Center, with Lakota students and with people from the educational facilities at the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Neligh said an exchange program with students from the Rosebud Reservation has been suggested.

