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Book Review: First to Fight

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First to Fight is a brief life history of Henry Mihesuah, a Comanche born in the 1920s. It is exactly what it promises to be—a collection of personal reminiscences by Henry Mihesuah of his life, recorded and arranged by his daughter-in-law.
A major strength of the book is its addressing a wide range of subjects that have had a profound impact on Native Americans of Mihesuah's generation: the Depression, farming, Christian churches, military service, post-World War II relocation programs, the widespread attachment to allotments as "home places," and frequent visits to the tribal community. The book poignantly demonstrates the powerful impact of the boarding school experience on altering Indian ways of life and on the loss of tribal culture and language. It also provides highlights of Mihesuah's life through childhood activities, family support, and military service, along with some of the low points involving poverty, racism, employment and wage discrimination, cultural separation through relocation, a tragic car accident, tribal factionalism, and the effects of alcoholism in Indian communities.

Aside from a temporal discrepancy (Henry's birth in the 1920s and Quanah's death in 1911—perhaps intended to refer to Henry's father) and a few editorial flaws, the volume's only shortcoming is its brevity. I was left with a desire to know more about Henry Mihesuah and his life experiences. But what the book lacks in length is made up for in the richness of its accounts and personal reflections. The material is forthright, down to earth, and representative of many aspects of Comanche culture and life in the mid to late twentieth century. Moreover, it demonstrates its subject's tremendous personal and cultural pride, determination, and inner strength, qualities that have enabled many American Indians to navigate successfully their way through the seemingly endless legal, political, economic, educational, and racial obstacles they continue to face in their daily lives.

In short, First to Fight is an important addition to the growing number of autobiographical works by Native writers.

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