

1-1-2009

Review of "Native American Fiction: A User's Manual." By David Treuer.

James Ruppert

University of Alaska Fairbanks

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Ruppert, James, "Review of "Native American Fiction: A User's Manual." By David Treuer." (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. Paper 1164. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1164>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Native American Fiction: A User's Manual. By David Treuer. St. Paul, MN: Graywolf Press, 2006. 212 pp. Notes. \$15.00 paper.

In his *User's Manual*, David Treuer reviews many of the works of contemporary Native American writers as well as Henry Rowe Schoolcraft and Asa Carter to demonstrate that “there is no such thing as Native American Literature—at least, no such thing as Native American novels anyway.” For Treuer, good literature is good literature and the standards that govern the great works of Western literature govern novels by Native writers. He sees the inclusion of myth, oral tradition, and ceremony as a longing for culture and not culture itself and believes that readers and writers have misconstrued artistic structure for authenticity.

Certainly he has a point if one were to look at criticism of Native American literature from the 1970s and 1980s, but both the positions of writers and the approaches of critics in the 1990s did not lean in that direction. Fortunately for Treuer, he did not really need to look at much criticism to make his points. His whole section on Silko's *Ceremony* ignores the vast scholarship of thirty years, because, though the novel takes place in Laguna

Pueblo, he finds more relevant connections to Chateaubriand, Hemingway, and Luke Skywalker. “The problem—and this extends to most other Native American novels—with interpreting *Ceremony*,” he writes, “is one of orientation: it is fruitless to ask about where the book is coming from. It is much more interesting to look at where it is going and to ask how the reader is being carried along.” Many scholars have done this, and Silko even suggests answers to the question. The reader may be carried to new perspectives on a different worldview, and the characters return to reestablish a new equilibrium at their places of origin.

Treuer explores James Welch’s novel *Fools Crow* by comparing it with *The Odyssey* because if one looks at the speech of characters in Welch’s rendition of nineteenth-century Blackfeet, “[t]he similarities between *The Odyssey* and *Fools Crow* are immediately obvious.” Like a graduate student paper, his discussions are replete with references to Eric Auerbach, Cleanth Brooks, Aristotle, R. P. Blackmur, almost any mainstream literary critic, so that he can keep the discussions away from anything that might suggest a connection to communities, traditions, and Native world-views.

Essentially, this book is one long complaint against writers, readers, and critics who think literature is a window on culture and therefore judge Native texts on the basis of authenticity. He takes very little time, however, to show that this even exists in contemporary writing and criticism. A friend of mine commented that this was a writer talking about criticism. I guess so, since he insists that “the study of Native American fiction should be the study of style.” Perhaps this is the author of three novels telling us how to appreciate his own work. Do you think he will notice I just violated one of the tenets of New Criticism?

JAMES RUPPERT
English and Alaska Native Studies
University of Alaska Fairbanks