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Review of *Where the Tall Grass Grows: Becoming Indigenous and the Mythological Legacy of the American West* by Bobby Bridger

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Musician, writer, and entertainer Bobby Bridger, a descendant of the well-known western trapper and scout Jim Bridger, has written a book attempting to link the past to the present by connecting historical eras of the American western movement with how Native Americans have been viewed, not only at the time, but in modern writing, especially fiction, stage productions, and, most importantly, motion pictures. His thesis is apparently based on a sentiment expressed by Indigenous author Joseph Marshall III at a Western Writers of America Conference to the effect that, although Indians have walked in the white world, whites have not walked in the Native world. His inspiration is also drawn from Indigenous author Joseph Marshall III at a Western Writers of America Conference to the effect that, although Indians have walked in the white world, whites have not walked in the Native world. His inspiration is also drawn from John Neihardt’s classic Black Elk Speaks, Dee Brown’s Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, as well as the works of Vine and Philip Deloria.

Bridger argues that no one of non-Indian descent can fully understand the mystical, psychological, and historical dimensions of Native America unless they have completed the circle of universe and life as explained by the Oglala Lakota holy man Black Elk. Bridger believes that few non-Indians have walked that path and therefore cannot claim Indigenousness to the Americas. The thesis is nothing new and does not take into account myriads of people of mixed ancestry and their roles in western history, moving for centuries in both white and Native worlds and often keeping those worlds functional. Bridger admirably explores all stages of western American expansion, tapping how Indians were stereotyped during each era and how those stereotypes are perpetuated or are changing for the better in providing an Indigenous voice in modern literature and media.

Readers will appreciate Bridger’s perceptive personal experience in realizing and conveying these important messages, especially in literature. His historical examples remain another story both in fact and interpretation. His chapter on white female captivity, for example, is particularly weak in linking eastern colonial captivity with practices and realities in the West. Bridger attempts to ascribe the highly controversial “Stockholm Syndrome” to explain female captives’ attachments to their captors. There are very few examples of this in the West. Bridger uses the often quoted case of Cynthia Ann Parker’s capture by Comanches in Texas in 1836. She married and loved a Comanche husband, gave birth to Quanah Parker, resisted rejoining white relatives, and remained culturally Comanche. Bridger fails to examine that Parker was only nine at the time of her capture, making the bulk of her childhood years of acculturation Comanche. Bridger then links the story to The Searchers, the popular 1956 movie that dealt with adults, while spending far too much time rambling about the acting career of John Wayne and other movie stars, along with his first-hand experiences with authors and actors. Wayne’s tryst with Marlene Dietrich has nothing to do with Bridger’s historical comparisons to modern entertainment, comparisons that often fail to support his intent of linking past to present.

General readers will find that Bridger’s book entertains and presents some insight into themes with which they may not be familiar. But serious scholars may find much of the book lacking.

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