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Review of Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday

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Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday. By Charles L. Woodard. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. Illustrations, notes, index. xii + 229 pp. \$19.95.

We expect a collection of interviews with an author to provide the types of anecdotes, information, and opinions that often don't get into scholarly articles but do illuminate the author and his or her work. Charles Woodard's *Ancestral Voice* fulfills those expectations and goes beyond them.

The fulfillment comes in the form of N. Scott Momaday's comments about his background—for instance, the relationship between his active imagination and his youth as an only child—and his observations about his fascination with (indeed possession by) bear power (13-18) and about place and journeys (49 ff.), word power (86 ff.), naming (88 ff.), voice (111 ff.), humor (129 ff.), repetition (133 ff., 141 ff.), poetry (143 ff.), "appropriateness" (198), and many other concepts central to understanding *House Made of Dawn*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *The Gourd Dancer*, *The Names*, and his most recent novel, *Ancient Child* (originally entitled *Set*). Of course, much of the credit for the relevance of Momaday's talk should go to Woodard. Because he knows Momaday's work so well, he can pick the questions most likely to lead to comments autobiographical and aesthetic that will illuminate the writing in significant ways.

Ancestral Voice exceeds typical expectations about interview collections in its organization and flashes of visual and verbal eloquence. The five major sections of the book progress from specific aspects of Momaday's identity formation ("The Center Holds") to broader relationships between personal and tribal migrations ("Into the Sun") to wide-ranging discussions of verbal and visual artistry ("Wordwalker" and "The Vision Plains") to philosophies of life ("And Infinity"). Woodard introduces each section with a concise essay and examples of Momaday's work. The "Wordwalker" essay, which grows out of his analysis of the poem "Plainview: I," is particularly effective. Throughout the book, Momaday's words play against repro-

ductions of his drawings and paintings. These images and words can be strikingly eloquent. I was particularly taken by the haunting expressionist qualities of *Shaman*, *Squaw Dance*, *Rainy Mountain Christmas Doll*, and *Set-anyga* and by his definition of a good critic ("a reliable witness to the value of something" [136]).

My delight turned to frustration in the few instances when Woodard cut short potentially interesting lines of inquiry. At one point, for instance, Momaday discusses his admiration for the Navajo. I hoped this would lead to comments about the use of Navajo concepts and ceremonial songs in *House Made of Dawn*, but, after a couple observations by Momaday, Woodard abandoned the Navajo (38-39). The rapid tour through reservations, universities, dreams, the sacred, God, and Evil makes section five seem at times superficial and forced. The real problem here and earlier may be the difficulty of transforming an oral into a written performance. Woodard could see and hear when a question had played out and should be abandoned. We can't "see" those important contexts.

But this is a minor complaint about a major book on Momaday and a significant book about contemporary poetry and fiction. *Ancestral Voice* speaks well of Momaday and Woodard.

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