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Review of Word Ways: The Novels of D'Arcy McNickle

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Word Ways: The Novels of D'Arcy McNickle. By John Lloyd Purdy. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1990. Photographs, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. xiv + 167 pp. \$27.95.

D'Arcy McNickle is best known for his ethno-historical works, *They Came Here First* (1949), *Indians and Other Americans* (1959), and *Native American Tribalism: Indian Survival and Renewals* (1973). He also is recognized for his extraordinary efforts on behalf of Indian self-determination while a member of John Collier's Bureau of Indian Affairs staff. Yet in reading John Purdy's thorough and sensitive analysis of McNickle's three novels, *The Surrounded* (1936), *Runner in the Sun* (1954), and *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978), it may ultimately be McNickle's work in fiction that most effectively preserves Indians' social and spiritual values while stimulating Euro-Americans to bi-cultural sightedness.

The strength of Purdy's analysis grows out of his knowledge of McNickle's primary materials, his understanding of the moral essence of Native American tales, his respect and admiration for McNickle's growth as a man and as a writer, and the clarity and insight of Purdy's own analytical style.

Purdy begins with a recognition of McNickle's dilemma as an assimilated mixed-blood man who through research, writing, and work, moves to recover a Native American identity that had been denied him. The chapters are organized around a vision quest. The changes from the early manuscripts of *The Surrounded*, which do not yet include the Indian feast, the ceremonial dance, or developed Indian characters other than Archilde, into a work that reflects on Indian/White relations from multiple voices, and incorporates traditional oral narratives and complex Indian portrayals, are a measure of McNickle's personal growth as well as an artistic achievement. This movement is reflected in the drafts leading to the final versions of the other two novels.

Purdy also uses the oral tradition to reinforce McNickle's understanding of the power of narratives to sustain cultures. In his first chapter

Purdy recounts several Salish legends, explains their Indian interpretation, and then he uses those legends to demonstrate how McNickle's characters act out of the same insights and beliefs. He also discusses the importance of storytelling and song as they have an impact on the lives of McNickle's Indian characters. Furthermore, a knowledge of the oral tradition explains Purdy's positive reading of the tragic events that end *The Surrounded* and *Wind from an Enemy Sky*. While these events are revelatory of the miscommunication and misunderstanding between cultures, Purdy argues that McNickle's novels belong to an ongoing storytelling tradition that teaches Indians how to survive in a dysfunctional world. *Word Ways* provides a thought-provoking introduction to D'Arcy McNickle's novels and deserves a wide readership.

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