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## Review of Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak

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*Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak.* By Laura Coltelli. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Introduction, notes, selected bibliography. 211 pp. \$22.50.

If we are to make valid critical interpretations of Native American literature, we must "discover, or rediscover, cultural values other than those rooted in Western aesthetic or individual aesthetic sensibilities," Laura Coltelli recommends. She provides this perspective through a series of ten "oral autobiographies" (interviews) with contemporary American Indian authors. This format provides a particularly poignant form of self-revelation given the rich oral tradition of First Americans.

Coltelli deftly and incisively engages her subjects on a wide range of topics. The reader is given a rare opportunity to learn of the writers' views on issues such as gender, Pan-Indianness, the frequent appearance of mixed-blood characters in their fiction and poetry, the authors' use of the colonizer's language, the place of Indian literature in the university and in the American literary canon. Some of the more memorable responses include Linda Hogan's reaction to white shamanism ("First of all it's a theft, and it speaks a lot about the bankruptcy of other religious traditions and the need to renovate them"); N. Scott Momaday's theory of the origin of American literature ("I have an idea that American literature really begins with the first human expression of man in the American landscape, and who knows how far back that goes; but it certainly antedates writing . . ."); Wendy Rose's connection with anthropology ("But the fact is that the only academic department at Berkeley that would deal with my dissertation, which involves Indian literature, is the anthropology department."); Leslie Marmon Silko's recognition that it was not she, but Angelita (one of her characters from her novel, *Almanac of the Dead*), who had answered Coltelli's questions.

Only since Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* won the 1969 Pulitzer Prize have Native American authors begun to receive attention from

the general reading public and literary critics. Still, contemporary Indian literature is making an undeniable contribution to the larger body of American literature. For poet Joy Harjo, that contribution is the use of a "land-based language" that depends above all on a well-nourished sense of place. For Momaday, however, that contribution is the oral tradition, the presence of which has caused scholars to redraw the boundaries of American literature so that it includes oral story-telling, a form unacknowledged in the literary canon just twenty-five years ago.

Nonetheless, Native American authors continue to find it difficult to get their work in print. "I think it's easier for a non-Indian to write a book about Indian people than it is for us," Hogan observes. "Our own experiences and our own lives don't fit the stereotypes." Paula Gunn Allen agrees that publication is difficult for those who do not "dance to the white man's Indian music." Yet, despite these harsh realities, most of the authors Coltelli interviewed were optimistic. "And well, you wait till 2050," Allen predicts. "We'll be one of the major forces in the literary world. I'll lay odds."

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