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## Review of *Seeing the White Buffalo* By Robert B. Pickering

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author, curator of anthropology for the Denver Museum of Natural History, has written an accessible, informative guide that surveys the popular response to Miracle, the female white buffalo calf born in 1994. Pickering covers four areas: first, the personal perspectives of Dave and Val Heider, the Janesville, Minnesota, couple who run a small buffalo herd in which Miracle was born; then the "historical-cultural perspectives of American Indians"; the "spiritual perspectives" of Native and non-Native peoples toward Miracle; and the biology and husbandry of the modern buffalo.

The section on Dave and Val Heider, which opens and closes the book, is written in a relaxed, informal style recording Pickering's journey to the Heider farm and his meeting Val and Dave, who turn out to be down-to-earth, Midwestern farmers to whom the fuss and furor surrounding Miracle's birth was a complete and unsettling surprise. Their adjustment was difficult: within weeks of Miracle's birth, people began showing up at their door telling them about the prophetic and spiritual significance of the female buffalo now in their care. In two years over 75,000 people visited the farm, totally disrupting the Heiders' lives.

The next section surveys the role of the white buffalo among mostly nineteenth-century Plains groups. Pickering reports a narrative by Archie Lane Deer concerning the White Buffalo Woman who brought sacred rites to the Lakota and promised to return again in the form of a white female buffalo calf. He traces references to the white buffalo through ethnographic sources and shows how in all cases it was highly revered; hunters who killed the animal performed special offerings of the prepared hide and often made it into a medicine bundle. He then throws in an overview of buffalo hunting, the role of buffalo in Native life, and the loss of buffalo in the twentieth century.

The section on Native American "spiritual perspectives" is the most engrossing, consisting as it does of transcripts of interviews with Arval Looking Horse, Pipe Keeper for the

*Seeing the White Buffalo.* By Robert B. Pickering. Denver: Denver Museum of Natural History Press, 1997. Photographs, suggested reading, index. xiv + 146 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$16.95 paper.

For those unfamiliar with the White Buffalo and its relationship with Native American spirituality, this is the book to read. The

Lakota (who sees Miracle as a sign to people in the seventh generation after Wounded Knee to return to Native spiritual traditions); John Tarnesse (a Shoshone Sun Dance leader at Wind River who sees Miracle as one of many such appearances that are occurring to other Native peoples, as does his Wife Virgene, who sees it as a sign of “the coming Indian Messiah”); and Lakota Floyd Hand (who sees Miracle as a manifestation of the Virgin Mary connected to a series of warnings of coming disasters which will lead to a new era of peace). All agree that the birth is prophetic, a sign marking a return to Native spiritual traditions, some mixed with Christian apocalyptic expectations.

The remainder of the book discusses the biology and hereditary frequency of the white buffalo (very rare), the wanton destruction of the original herds from seventy million to a thousand by 1889, the attempts by white ranchers to “save the buffalo” (such a bill passed in Congress, but was vetoed by President Grant because the army was convinced that destruction of the herds was a sure solution for the “Indian problem”), and the slow return of the buffalo (now about 150,000) built up from private herds and protected by the National Bison Association and the Inter-Tribal Bison Cooperative. Meanwhile, two other white buffalo have been born in other herds, the most recent to the Pine Ridge Oglala. Native elders predict four, but for many people Miracle remains the outstanding example, having gone from white to black to red, an affirmation of Native spirituality that some Native elders interpret as including all races and peoples.

*Seeing the White Buffalo* offers readers a clear introduction to a complex subject.

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