

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Summer 1997

Review of *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow; Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt*

Julian Rice

Florida Atlantic University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Rice, Julian, "Review of *Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow; Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt*" (1997). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1949.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1949>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

BOOK REVIEWS

Black Elk and Flaming Rainbow: Personal Memories of the Lakota Holy Man and John Neihardt. By Hilda Neihardt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. Photographs, preface, appendix, index. xiii + 136 pp. \$22.

In 1931 fourteen year-old Hilda Neihardt accompanied her father and her sister Enid to the Pine Ridge Reservation for the interviews

that became *Black Elk Speaks*. Now, sixty-four years later, she provides a "human-interest narrative" of previously unpublished anecdotes from that historically significant visit, as well as pointed revelations intended to correct "serious misunderstandings" of several unnamed but identifiable interpreters.

Some of the descriptions accurately reflect racial attitudes and stereotypes of 1931. One of the elderly witnesses to Black Elk's narrative, Chase-in-the-Morning, "was slim, hardened, and strongly built. . . . His aquiline face, twinkling eyes, and long hair completed for us the picture of the perfect Indian" (37). In context and in retrospect this description reflects outdated cultural perceptions that are more historically informative than detrimentally romantic. Similarly, Hilda Neihardt's candor illuminates cultural differences without self-serving apologies: "Black Elk often said that people should live together, or people and animals should live together, as Ben [Black Elk's son and the interpreter for *Black Elk Speaks*] pronounced it, 'like relateeves.' This tickled us because in our society *relatives* do not always demonstrate loving congeniality. Of course we did not let our Lakota friends see our amusement; our chuckling was done when we were alone in our tepee" (66).

Bridging the decades from a time of little or no cross-cultural understanding to the present plethora of translative writings, Neihardt's daughter addresses two issues: Black Elk's Catholicism and the significance of his final prayer at Harney Peak. In 1973 Michael F. Steltenkamp interviewed Black Elk's daughter, Lucy Looks Twice, to fulfill her wish that her father be remembered as a dedicated catechist who never went back to traditional belief or practice. In that interview Looks Twice tells Steltenkamp that Neihardt had exploited Black Elk by not revealing his fervent Chris-

tianity in *Black Elk Speaks*. Hilda Neihardt tells us that a year after her interview with Steltenkamp, Looks Twice read *Black Elk Speaks* for the first time. She did so because her Catholicism had not been sufficiently helpful in coping with her father's death. This reading changed her life and caused her to become a "pipe carrier" until her own death in 1978. After she had abandoned her Catholic faith she admitted to Hilda Neihardt that in 1950, just before his death, Black Elk said: "The only thing I really believe is the pipe religion" (119).

In addition to affirming Black Elk's final belief in traditional Lakota spirituality, Hilda Neihardt argues that a number of authors have misinterpreted her father's report of Black Elk's final prayer on Harney Peak as an expression of failure. In her eyewitness account she rewrites the scene where Black Elk's prayer brings rain by altering the pathetic tone: "a scant chill rain" becomes a "a scant cool" rain; the "low muttering thunder" is omitted; and the drops that seemed to fall pitilessly in *Black Elk Speaks* now, in Hilda's words, "mingled with the tears running down his face" (95).

Finally, she adds an appendix containing the transcript of a 1955 videotaped interview between her father and Ben Black Elk at the University of Missouri. Here again the brief rain expresses wonder rather than despair, though the wonder appears to belong to Ben rather than Neihardt whose "helpful" translation reveals something about cultural differences that the poet probably did not intend: "BEN: Then when he got through praying, you know the thunders . . . /NEIHARDT: The clouds came . . . /BEN: . . . the clouds came. It thundered and it rained"(128).

JULIAN RICE
Department of English
Florida Atlantic University