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Review of *Reuben Snake, Your Humble Serpent: Indian Visionary and Activist* By Jay Fikes, as told to by Reuben Snake

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Reuben Snake, Your Humble Serpent: Indian Visionary and Activist [By Jay Fikes, as told to by Reuben Snake]. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Clear Light Publications, 1996. 287 pp. \$24.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.

The Great Plains region has given us minority civil and cultural rights leaders out of all proportion to the minority population of the region: Crazy Horse, Quanah Parker, Gordon Parks, Dull Knife, Rudolpho Gonzales, Zitkala Sa, Suzette La Flesche, Earl Little (Malcolm X's father), Tomas Rivera, Ernie Chambers, and on and on. Biographical scholarship unfortunately has not given us many good accounts of these leaders. The gap is dramatized and at least partially filled by Fikes' book. Jay Fikes, working with Reuben Snake just before his death, has written a work that ultimately celebrates both the latter's humility and his greatness.

Fikes is well positioned for this task since he has completed postdoctoral work in anthropology at the Smithsonian, has lobbied for Indian causes, written a good debunking of Carlos Castaneda's manipulation of Indian religious lore, done a film on Huichol ceremony, and worked with Reuben Snake on the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. He received the basic material in this book in dictations given by Reuben Snake in the weeks before his death, and he explains how he edited the dictations lightly, leaving out only pauses, mistaken sentence starts, and the like. Additional material by James Botsford and Walter Echo-Hawk, plus a dictation on the peyote religion given by Reuben Snake to another researcher complete the book. Fikes' scholarly interests come through in the more than twenty pages of finely printed footnotes that close the book and supply background material on the Winnebago culture and the historical milieu out of which Reuben Snake's work emerged.

Fikes makes clear that his account is no impartial story, and I should add that I am no impartial reviewer since I was Mr. Snake's friend from 1968 until his death in 1993. The

record contained in this book accurately reflects Reuben's life and carries the nuances of the stories that I heard him tell about other parts of his life. The detail of the account is remarkable since Snake's part of the work was created as he stood looking in at death's door, his body ravaged by heart disease, diabetes, and a host of other ailments. The book gives an account of Snake's rather traditional Winnebago childhood in the late 1930s—remarkably traditional for this period—his education in a series of religious and melting pot public schools, his life as a Green Beret in Berlin, his down-and-out period as a street person thereafter, his marriage, and finally his long period as advocate and prophet in the movement toward Indian revitalization.

The biography leaves out some stories, probably because Snake had time only to offer touchstones in his last weeks. His participation in anti-Vietnam peace activities, his development of a joint Indian-white movement to defeat a particularly harsh sheriff in northeastern Nebraska, the full range of the educational reforms that he sought to achieve in his mission to develop a culture-based education among the tribes, and many details of his work with the American Indian Movement are left out or given short shrift. Especially important are the book's descriptions of the numerous visionary episodes that Snake and his group experienced and his apparently anachronistic attachment to Christ. Snake's Christ, however, is not the Christ of post-Nicene Christology but of the precepts of love fitted to Winnebago clan and family tradition as is clear in his rehearsal of a vision that the ancient ones in his religious tradition experienced. Snake also relates the serpent's precepts of love to Winnebago Medicine Lodge teachings about compassion, respect, honor, and sharing. Near the end of his life, Snake sees a vision of his brother, Sterling, fanning him with a golden eagle feather, a vision anticipatory of the last ritual that he experienced before his own death.

What may seem paradoxical to non-Indian readers of this book is Snake's combination of

powerful religious seeing and powerful political construction. Western religious leaders tend to reflect the status quo. Snake worked more in the mode of the Hebrew prophets, the liberation theologians, the black church leaders of the 60s. His insight into possible futures and his action were one.

This book cannot communicate the power of his personality but it makes a good try. When I last saw Reuben Snake alive, we came together a few months before his death, ate a few vegetables and—as I recall—some beef roast. Our families talked small talk about the environmental meeting in Rio De Janeiro and about Chun K'in Viejo, and elderly Lacandon leader known to Reuben and to my daughter, about our kids and his. Then we went to a local college peace meeting where Reuben, standing at death's door but still standing, talked to the mixed-race crowd of students, telling them that peace was a matter between person and person but also between person and earth: "Peace is a matter for native and natural peoples to create, and, ultimately, race has nothing to do with its creation." He talked to the small crowd of college students for over an hour and answered questions for more time though he himself had little time left. He was to die in a few months. It was typical Reuben.

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