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Review of *I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions* By Louis Owens

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I Hear the Train: Reflections, Inventions, Refractions. By Louis Owens. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001. Photographs, notes, works cited, index. xiv + 265 pp. \$29.95.

In *I Hear the Train*, novelist and scholar Louis Owens combines memoir, fiction, and criticism; stories, he calls them, written in an effort "to make sense of the otherwise uninhabitable world we must, of necessity, inhabit." He makes that sense, in large measure, by writ-

ing about himself and the importance of family. The "Reflections" are memoirs in which the author recalls his own struggles with inhabiting the world, recounting adolescence and young-adult experiences and describing having found and spent three days with his brother, a Vietnam vet, whom he had neither seen nor heard from in twenty-five years. After the short visit, Owens realizes that he would like his daughters to meet their uncle: "Maybe then they'd know their father better. Perhaps their memories would become more real." In the "Inventions" section, Owens speculates about his ancestors. In one such speculation based on family legend and a photo, for example, he describes his grandmother's experiences at age six on a river raft called *Blessed Sunshine*. The "Refractions" are critical essays that constitute what Owens calls "wistful readings" of others' stories and include a reading of American Indian literature as postcolonial, of Gerald Vizenor's *Ishi and the Wood Ducks*, and of Michael Dorris and Louise Erdrich's *The Crown of Columbus*.

Not all chapters have the clearly distinct genre boundaries suggested by the volume's subtitle. In "The Syllogistic Mixedblood" (in "Reflections"), for instance, Owens combines reflection, invention, and criticism to analyze a photograph of his mixedblood great-grandfather's family. He offers both a story of his ancestors and a critique of how photography invents "real" Indians, arguing that mixedbloods, in contrast, "are recorded and erased, having no place in the metanarrative of fixed colonial others." Because there is no place for mixedbloods, they "remain uninvented." Owens asks difficult questions: "How do we combat this essentialist discourse?" and what does it mean to be "Indian" when "Indian" is an invention? He concludes the chapter by warning his own descendants of the dangers of essentializing: "I tell my children I am not an Indian in the photographs they preserve."

In a chapter called "In the Service of Forests," Owens reflects on the danger and ex-

citement of his days fighting wildfires in the Southwest and working as a ranger in the Northwest. Even after marriage and a career change, he does not forget the pull of the High Cascades or the thrill of fire: "In my dreams I seek out wildfire and search for eagles that soar over granite and glacier. In my next life I will do it all over again, every single thing." Let us hope that Louis Owens, who died in August of 2002, is doing just that.

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