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## Review of Without Reserve: Stories from Urban Natives

Patricia A. McCormack

*Edmonton, Alberta*

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'write' this book. Rather, I served as the conduit through which these Native people could make their stories known" (p. vii). Her aim is to showcase individual Native voices rather than present a traditional authoritative study.

She acknowledges having edited the taped narratives heavily and interjecting her own perceptions. For instance, interspersed within the story of Jimmy Mix, a twenty-two-year-old Cree, are accounts of his "Famous Ancestor." The reader does not know whether these accounts were told to Shorten by Jimmy Mix, found by her in history books, or both. Her colorful descriptions of people's behavior raise further questions. When discussing fourteen-year-old Casey, a veteran of the foster home system, she comments, "He smiles at me, a handsome kid who smiles often and often for no reason. His smiles never reach his eyes. The eyes are dark and flat, their only expression a fractured anxiety" (p. 127). Such impressionistic commentary belies her claim to be simply a "conduit" for Native stories. She does not discuss her editing approaches, leaving unanswered significant questions about representation that weaken the presumed postmodern focus of the book.

The people included in the volume are not intended as a representative sample. With one exception, all the young people featured are males, aged fourteen to twenty-two. Again with one exception, all the older people are female, aged thirty-five to seventy-eight. Four of the narratives are by members of one extended family. No one interviewed was in his or her fifties or sixties. Shorten does not consider how this particular sample may have skewed the picture of Native life she presents. She contends, nevertheless, that the narratives are "powerful and speak the 'truth' about being an urban Native in Canada in a way that is more telling than the most precise of surveys or studies. Their power lies . . . in the individuals revealed" (p. vii).

What "truth" do the narratives reveal? The book leaves an overwhelming impression that all Natives have experienced intense personal and social dysfunction. There is a depressing

*Without Reserve: Stories from Urban Natives.* By Lynda Shorten. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1991. Introduction. x + 294 pp. \$16.95 paper.

*Without Reserve* is a set of profiles of nine Native people living in Edmonton, Alberta. Each person's story is told in a separate chapter, with brief anecdotes compiled in two additional chapters. Author Lynda Shorten was formerly a reporter with the *Edmonton Journal*, where she co-authored a series about urban Natives, the genesis of this broader work. *Without Reserve* is not an academic book, falling, as it does, into a genre of journalistic narratives about Native peoples, for which a significant public market exists, yet it will also attract a social science audience and will probably be assigned to students.

Shorten describes her profiles as "autobiographical stories," claiming her role to be simply that of recorder: "I did not, in any sense,

pervasiveness of violence on all levels—emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual—directed at these individuals and by them toward others. The book depicts extended families transmitting social dysfunction across generations. Although violence is actually widespread throughout North American societies, such depictions reinforce a stereotype of Native peoples as distinctively violent.

The accounts contextualize the claims by many Natives that the first time they “find their culture” is in prison. The lives presented here, especially of the young people, are characterized by a relentless anomie, with no cultural coherence to shape personal values and no personal self-esteem, producing a high level of despair.

The narratives of the older people indicate that such violence and dysfunction are not new. The old are themselves survivors and have come to see that, empowered by their own hard-won knowledge, they are particularly well suited to helping younger people: “Once you are straightened out, all that learning and suffering, it pays back,” says Grace Royer, a 47-year-old Métis woman (p.180).

The book focuses on the urban scene, yet similar problems exist on the Indian reserves and Métis settlements as well, which have their own patterns of rural violence. Personal mobility results in considerable interchange between reserve and city, a topic that warrants further exploration. Jane Ash Poitras’s rosy picture of the northern community of Fort Chipewyan is balanced by Helen’s grim account of physical and sexual abuse while living on a reserve.

Shorten’s heavily edited stories convey partial “truths” about Native urban peoples. There is a danger that the personal tragedies she relates may obscure the whole and confirm stereotypes rather than inform them. The narratives would have benefitted from the very analysis she repudiates.

PATRICIA A. MCCORMACK  
Provincial Museum of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta