

Winona LaDuke. *Last Standing Woman*. Stillwater: Voyageur Press, 1997. \$22.95 (U.S.), hardcover.

review by Denise McConney

Remarkable as it was, things remained relatively calm at the White Earth Tribal offices and in the villages. It was as if the state of seige had waned and waxed for one hundred years, and this was just one more phase of war. [p. 214]

It is always difficult to describe a well-done work of Native literature or history. When these are inherently true to the people being described or portrayed, the works themselves take on the complexity and integrity of the many interconnected facets of Indian societies, whether these are in contrast or conflict with European societies and ways or not. Clearly, the above quotation from *Last Standing Woman* suggests that these conflicts have had profound and long-term effects on Indian communities. Therefore, the tasks of both writing such books and writing about these works are fraught with difficulties. Winona LaDuke has managed these possible pitfalls magnificently. She has written a book that sings the songs of her people.<sup>1</sup> Her portrayal of how this particular community maintained itself within time is both truthful and creative.

The characters, particularly the Indian women, are alive. They are strong and vital, living with great passion and determination. This book demonstrates that Anishnaebae society was, is and will always be alive. These lifeways are not used as "decoration." They simply, plainly and clearly are. This is especially true of the contemporary characters in the novel. They carry<sup>2</sup> their current conditions, their history, their spirituality, their prayers, songs and dances in their bones, muscles, hearts, minds and spirits.

LaDuke opens her novel with some history of the people. This is both structurally and traditionally important. Indeed, many scholars are now closely re-examining Native literature, and perhaps even more importantly the literature about Native people. They are using such histories as indicators of what, for example, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn identifies as "tribal voice."<sup>3</sup> LaDuke tells of the ancient Anishnaebae migration to the interior woodlands and waterways of this continent. Like those waterways, time does not simply pass for the characters in this novel, it flows and carries the people in it. Personalities, conditions and events ebb and eddy and swirl in on themselves. The quotation cited at the beginning is both an example of

this and a crucial key to understanding the structure and stories in the novel. From the horror of the White Earth experiments on “race” – when the people were “tested” for “Indianness” based on their reaction to physical pain – to the organizational success of the Rummage Queen,<sup>4</sup> the novel clearly demonstrates the consistent state of seige in which multiple generations of the people of White Earth have lived. They live in this “state” and maintain their ways in every space they can find or devise. Their struggles with the myriad of alien forces arrayed against them are vividly depicted.

Even better than the way LaDuke shows the struggles and pains of this community’s history and current realities, are the ways she shows what the people are collectively doing about these. I suspect many of us involved in these actions have long been waiting for these crucial aspects of Indian life to work their way into the literary works of Native writers.<sup>5</sup> It should come as no surprise that LaDuke’s own activism animates many of her characters. Their various and occasionally nefarious and sometimes humorous strategies for moving themselves, their community and the Eurocentric world that surrounds them towards a better balance are both inspired and inspirational. Many of us (both Native and non-Native) are struggling with the legacy of the residential school decades. In *Last Standing Woman*, several of the central women of White Earth take on this challenge for themselves, for the children and for the men. Their direct action in protecting a child, revealing an abuser and making a statement to the community – all in one motion – to encourage bringing an end to toleration of the inherited, ongoing traumas of child sexual abuse is both profound and joyous.

In keeping with her Anishnaebae understanding of time, she also takes us into the future. LaDuke has no fear of “millennia bugs.” Like many others, she understands that the lost pieces from the opening histories must come home for the people to be whole. These include the people as well as the “artifacts” stolen and hidden away in museums. She takes us on a trip through the reality of laws about Indians, specifically the *Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act*, and her community’s efforts to have their stolen effects returned.<sup>6</sup> In this process she also manages to give the concept of “marginalization” a whole new twist.<sup>7</sup>

The stories in the novel travel full circle. The people in the opening histories are the ones whose bones and burial items were stolen. As the contemporary people regain their strength, they take up their responsibilities for the well-being of both the ancestors and the current population. These contemporary fictional members of the White Earth band act to address dangers within their community. They act to regain their land base. They act to regain their heritage. All of this clearly demonstrates the traditional understanding that responsibility is about how we behave, and that it is fully

possible to live these traditions today.

In a jacket comment, Sherman Alexie says he could "smell the rice" in this book.<sup>8</sup> Like Alexie, I, too, "smell the rice" and the water and the forest and, most important, the cedar smoke. *Chi meegwetch dibaajimokwe* – I hope your grandmothers and grandfathers are proud of your work here.

### Notes

- 1 It is true that when I think of Anishnaebae people I think of them in terms of songs and singing the prayer songs.
- 2 I have heard the Anishnaebae traditional teachers frequently use the English term "carry" to explain how the people were meant to live their responsibilities. For more on this, see "Dear Wynonah," *Native Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (1996): 116–124.
- 3 For more on this, see Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays*. See also Carter Revard, *Family Affairs and Tribal Matters*, and Robert Warrior, *Tribal Secrets*.
- 4 I could explain this reference, but I want to leave you all intrigued enough to read (and, it is hoped, buy) the book.
- 5 This is not to forget about other important works such as Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*, which is clearly about resistance to the contemporary forces of colonialism. It is only to note that that collective action has not been a frequent theme for many other Indian fiction writers.
- 6 I would also like to admit here to having a hard time coming up with what to say after "stolen." Since I am talking here about the skeletal remains of people, neither "goods" nor "artifacts" seemed to be respectful words to use, though I am aware they are the *proper* archaeological or anthropological terms.
- 7 See footnote 2. And buy the book.
- 8 I assume he, too, is talking about the smell of wild rice cooking.

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Connie Fife (anthologizer). *The Colour of Resistance: A Contemporary Collection of Writing by Aboriginal Women*. Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1993.

review by Dorinda M. Stahl

It is time to listen.

Without a doubt, this is the strongest and most powerful message derived from Connie Fife's *The Colour of Resistance: A Contemporary Collection of Writing by Aboriginal Women*. The anthology, which features a wide variety of literature in the form of poetry, fiction and non-fiction, discloses much of the anger and pain that many Aboriginal women experience in their lives.