

informal history of these fascinating people before the stories are lost.) Also in need of expansion is how these works and the organization were received by those outside the ASA.

Zimon endeavours to present the facts in a lively way. While she does not shy away from presenting the various turmoils the society has been through, her judgements are rare and gentle. In a brief chapter on women in the ASA, "Token No Longer," she discusses Marion Nicoll, a catalytic artist whose talent was recognized by the likes of Barnett Newman and Will Barnet during a brief residency in New York. Barnett encouraged her to stay in a city she loved, but, Zimon notes, her husband "didn't like New York... . One is left to wonder, if their roles were reversed, what decision would he have made?" Despite Zimon's earlier claims to neutrality, this supplemental chapter reveals a point of view that would have been welcome elsewhere.

Kathy Zimon has a duty to perform for the ASA, which she does more than admirably. This is a remarkable well-researched history. It is an elegant resource that will be of great use to historians, artists and interested prairie folk for years to come.

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*Legends of the Elders*, by John W. Friesen. Calgary: Temeron Books Inc., 2000. Pp. 64.

*Legends of the Elders*, an instructive, enjoyable and memorable read, took me back to my childhood and to the way of teaching that I experienced in the company of Elders. Almost all the stories in this collection are familiar to me and those that are not, are known to me in that the concepts they teach are consistent with those I was taught growing up surrounded by extensive family from the Sandy Lake Reserve (*aka* Ahtahkakoop First Nation) in the Treaty Six area of Saskatchewan.

Dr. Friesen is a Calgary writer, professor and minister. He holds a joint professorship in the faculties of Education and General Studies at the University of Calgary, and has served as minister at Morley United Church on the Stoney (Nakoda Sioux) Indian Reserve since 1986.

The stories John Friesen has gathered in this collection are abbreviated considerably in comparison with those I remember. The stories I remember were spoken, and were often embellished with many anecdotal stories woven in to enhance and reinforce a central point. This was the historical way stories were told by First Nation peoples. The narrative devices within that storytelling tradition were deliberately circuitous, and were intended to foster attentiveness and analytical thinking in the listener. Those who did not make the mental effort required to follow this multi-dimensional approach would lose the thread of the story as all strands had to be gathered in order to stitch the lesson together.

This method of oral storytelling so well known to members of my generation made the stories we were told not only more interesting, but also more memorable, because the method engaged our minds in such a way that we felt we were on a pictorial journey with the storyteller. Plains Cree — which is my first language — is very precise and full of vivid imagery. A story told in Cree seems to take on actual

form and motion as it is told. This vividness is due largely to the language itself, although it is eternally difficult to explain this to non-Cree speakers. No story I have ever heard in English creates the moving pictorial mental journey experienced listening to a Cree storyteller.

*Legends of the Elders* is divided into three major sections: "Entertainment Legends," "Teaching Legends" and "Moral Legends." In his introduction, Friesen provides a context for the significance of Indian legends and reminds readers that at one time, "all cultures relied solely on the oral tradition." In a world that lately seems so sharply divided along the lines of the validity of oral versus written history, this is an enlightening reminder of the common origin of all peoples.

"Entertainment Legends" contains the trickster stories but the word "trickster," we must not forget, has now been so long in circulation that even we, as Indian people, use it despite the fact that it is something of a misnomer. The characters at the centre of the stories in this section — known by various names across the continent as Friesen informs us — teach not so much through *tricks*, but through *negative and humorous example*. By listening to stories about the trouble these characters get themselves into, we benefit by their mistakes. These stories are *always* funny and this is part of their teaching method. Humour has been key in storytelling as the stories in this section confirm. There are no stern warnings or criticisms in the plot-lines or behaviour of the characters, but rather lots of funny antics and repercussions that entertain listeners, thereby enabling them to remember and learn!

The stories in "Teaching Legends" are somewhat more instructional as compared with those in the previous section and animals often do the teaching. In fact, animals were long considered to be teachers and healers by our people which may be the original reason our old stories contain animal-centred rather than people-centred plots. First Nation peoples knew they could learn from the animals as it is the animals that are more in harmony with the earth and its cycles, and that as part of Creation they are our relations just as inanimate objects are valued — because they are the historical repository of all life in Creation. Here we find stories about why the crow's feathers are black, and why the bear has a short tail; we also learn why it is important to persevere, and how to make the best of our mistakes.

The stories in the final section, "Moral Lessons," contain plots and characters who confront issues relating to tolerance, fairness, self-confidence, self-determination, gratitude, sincerity and with keeping trusts. These stories inform the listener of the values of ideal or proper behaviour.

*Legends of the Elders* is sparsely but tastefully illustrated with black and white line-drawings of people, animals, cultural objects, and scenes from nature. The cover art — a beautiful leaf print — is credited to Dean Macdonald and Alvin Choong, but there is no record, unfortunately, of who drew the illustrations that accompany the stories.

Friesen also mentions the categories of story not included in this collection: the sacred, or spiritual stories, but there is another category of story that is curiously perpetuated as *not* existing in the general cache of old Indian stories. These are the stories perceived to be somewhat "ribald" by the members of the mainstream culture. Notably, the ravenous appetites of some of the characters — especially pertaining to sex! Why *those* particular stories were left out is curious. Were none of these stories told to Friesen or did he consider them to be in the same guise as the sacred or spiritual stories?

Some of the stories in this collection may well be in print for the first time but all of them will resonate with readers across the continent, particularly First Nation readers who will be familiar with some or all of the stories.

I did wonder about the origins of the stories — where each came from, who it was who shared their stories with Friesen, and I regretted the absence of this validation. Acknowledging sources is very important in the tradition of passing on stories as many are considered to be the “property” of an individual or family. Some people may give a story away as a gift but overall the process of validation is important as it occurs when the storytellers are named. Because of this omission, the missing information about the storytellers may be considered to be something of an oversight in the book overall. Finally, I wondered if the storytellers Friesen sourced had concerns about how their story loses conceptual imagery as it is translated from the original language, but there is no indication of the storytellers’ thoughts anywhere in the text.

In the last two decades we have witnessed an unprecedented increase in the volume of old stories that have been taken from our oral histories and committed to print. The earliest of these were recorded by anthropologists upon first contact with First Nation peoples. Many of us are grateful for those early European interests in preserving our stories, but more recently we have experienced the rewards to be gained from the recording and translating of the old stories by translators who are fluent both in their mother tongue and English. Freda Ahenakew, translator and scholar of Plains Cree, is the paragon in this area. Her work was preceded by Edward Ahenakew, who published *Trickster Tales*, and who recorded the stories of Chief Thunderchild with the editorial assistance of Ruth Matheson Buck after his death. *Legends of the Elders* is a welcome addition to the growing body of printed oral stories. It will be of interest to young and old alike and to students and scholars at every level.

*Postscript: I was moved by Dr. Friesen’s dedication of these stories to his grand-daughter, Victoria. His gesture is in the proper spirit of First Nation value-based sharing. It signifies a gesture of respect which serves to bridge rather than separate our seemingly disparate cultures. I could not have imagined I would witness the day when a little girl named Victoria might be gifted with the written wisdom our Elders imparted in telling our old stories. Because of the tangible record Friesen’s book is, she in turn may pass them on to her grandchildren and hopefully she will share stories from her own culture with them too. This is the only way our stories can live on. These are the blocks to build our bridge—with stories that will benefit the members of all cultures.*

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