

BOOKS

American Indian Writing, Seen Through a New Lens

By DINITIA SMITH AUG. 19, 2006

LEECH LAKE RESERVATION, Minn. — The novelist and critic David Treuer of the Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe here does not look like the received image of a Native American. With his pale skin and brown hair, many people would not even take him for an Indian.

Nor, Mr. Treuer noted as he sat in a faded bar on the Leech Lake Reservation, does his résumé sound like the stereotype of the Native American.

Now 35, he was educated at Princeton (as were his two brothers; they were inspired to apply there by the movie “Risky Business”), and is an English professor at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. His mother, an Ojibwe tribal judge, met his father, a Jewish Holocaust refugee from Austria, when he was teaching high school on the reservation.

“My life will rarely be interpreted as Indian unless I translate it myself,” Mr. Truer said.

But in two books to be published later this month by Graywolf Press, he is mounting a challenge to the whole idea of Indian identity as depicted by both Native and white writers.

“Native American Fiction: A User’s Manual” is a kind of manifesto, which argues that Native American writing should be judged as literature, not as a cultural artifact,

or as a means of revealing the mystical or sociological core of Indian life to non-

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“He’s exploring and revealing a truer history of Native Americans,” said Toni Morrison, his former professor at Princeton. “We tend, even now, to like ethnic literature to contain our notion of what the iconography is.”

In the book Mr. Treuer takes on Louise Erdrich, Leslie Marmon Silko, James Welch, Sherman Alexie and other Native American writers. He finds much to praise but argues that the works of Indian authors are often read as ethnographies, when they should be read as literature. In addition, some Native writers, he says, use pictures of Indianness passed down by white authors including Rousseau, Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Walt Whitman. He contends that they even reflect “The Education of Little Tree,” a best seller in the 1970’s and 80’s written by Forrest Carter, who was discovered to be a violent racist, a Ku Klux Klan member and a speechwriter for Gov. George Wallace of Alabama.

Ms. Erdrich, also an Ojibwe, is a great novelist, Mr. Truer writes, but her books are not authentic Native texts, though they may appear to be. She misuses Ojibwe words, he says, calling them “display, with language itself a museum piece.” The characters in “Love Medicine,” her best-known book, are modeled on people of the Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, but don’t even speak the right dialect, he says. Ms. Erdrich did not return calls for comment.

While also praising Mr. Alexie, a Spokane-Coeur d’Alene Indian, for his abilities as a novelist, Mr. Treuer compares him to Mr. Carter. The characters in Mr. Alexie’s novel “Reservation Blues,” Mr. Truer says, are like those in “Little Tree”: burlesques, with prose full of mixed metaphors and far-reaching similes. For example, in “Reservation Blues,” when someone speaks, Mr. Alexie writes that “his words sounded like stones in his mouth and coals in his stomach.”

Flawed prose and clichéd images and ideas, Mr. Treuer contends, are typical of writing about Natives — whether by Indians or whites — and are excused because they fit the culture’s preconceived notions of what Indians and Indian life are like.

“What he’s saying is that the identity of the writer doesn’t count,” Mr. Alexie said of Mr. Treuer in a telephone interview. “That eliminates the way books work in the world.”

Actually, Mr. Treuer is very much concerned with identity. “The Translation of Dr. Apelles: A Love Story,” the other book he is publishing next month, is his third novel. It’s a story within a story. On the one hand, it’s a 19th-century Indian romance, replete with stock characters from Native literature: the orphaned hero, the spiritual leader who shows him the true way, Indians with a special harmony with nature.

But the main character, Dr. Apelles, is, like Mr. Treuer, a contemporary Indian, an intellectual and a mix of modernity and tradition who, the book suggests, is translating the story from an unnamed language.

Dr. Apelles is himself untranslated, a man who cannot make sense of his own history, his personal narrative, perhaps because it falls between two cultures, two languages.

Something of the same could also be said of the author. Mr. Treuer was born in Washington, where his father, Robert, worked for various federal social service programs. His mother, Margaret, was a nurse and attended law school, ultimately becoming one of the first female tribal judges.

David was 7 when the family moved from Washington to a small house with an attached trailer on the edge of the Leech Lake Reservation. “By reservation standards we were very comfortable,” he said.

He attended Bemidji High School, whose student population was a blend of Indians and whites. He was in the marching band and played Dungeons and Dragons. But his mother also encouraged him to attend Ojibwe ceremonies, and he learned to live off the land like many of his Native relatives.

At Princeton, for the first time, he found himself almost without the companionship of other Indians, and his years there were lonely — a time, he said, when he “had to prepare the story of my own life,” to try to explain himself and his

apparently anomalous background as a Native American to his fellow students and professors. While in Ms. Morrison's class, he began his first novel, called "Little," about a mysterious Indian boy who goes missing. It was published in 1995. (His second novel, "The Hiawatha," was published in 1999.)

Today Mr. Treuer — with his wife, Gretchen, who is half Seneca Indian, and their small daughter, Elsinä — still lives part-time near the Leech Lake Reservation, a vast expanse of flat, sandy land in northern Minnesota, dotted with clear blue lakes and pine forests. There, near many of the 150 members of his extended family, he continues to hunt, trap and harvest wild rice.

He is on leave from the university, and will spend the next year and a half on the reservation recording, transcribing and translating Ojibwe speech in hopes of preserving the language, which is spoken by only about 15 percent of the tribe.

He sees no disjunction among his efforts to preserve Ojibwe language, his fiction and his criticism of exceptionalism in Native American literature. All, he said, are concerned with his interest in narratives.

From the Boston Tea Party to "Dances With Wolves," to the New Age movement, Mr. Treuer said, sitting in the bar in Bena, a small settlement on the reservation, Natives are inextricably bound up in the myths white Americans have created about what the country was, what it is and what it represents.

Indians occupy "vast territories of the imagination," he said. "The stories America tells itself about itself involve us, but most people will never meet or talk to one of us."

With his work, whether fiction, criticism or lexicography, Mr. Treuer said he was trying to create a new Indian story, one in which Native literature joins the mainstream of American letters, while Indian traditions receive their proper attention from scholars and are preserved from extinction.

"Words are the most powerful shaping tool," he said. "Writing, speech, language don't just communicate fact, they create fact."

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