

Fortunate Eagle, Adam. *Scalping Columbus and Other Damn Indian Stories: Truths, Half-Truths, and Outright Lies*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014. 216pp.

<http://www.oupres.com/ECommerce/Book/Detail/1827/scalping%20columbus%20and%20othe%20damn%20indian%20stories>

In the opening Acknowledgements of his fourth book, Adam Fortunate Eagle (Red Lake Chippewa) gives thanks to his editor for transcribing his handwritten stories and arranging them into the loosely chronological order in which they are presented. Clearly it was no easy task—the collection includes stories about outhouses, “TP,” and flatulence alongside those that recount the Indian occupation of Alcatraz, the “discovery” of Italy, and an audience with the Pope. Five short paragraphs of thank-yous introduce the threads that hold the stories together—Fortunate Eagle’s American Indian identity, his “Shoshone wife, Bobbie,” his distinctive narrative voice, and his appreciation for “one of mankind’s oldest oral art forms: bullshit” (xi).

Scalping Columbus and Other Damn Indian Stories: Truths, Half-Truths, and Outright Lies is a celebration of storytelling and stories—“bullshit” and not. Through the telling of stories, Fortunate Eagle shares the story of his life journey—in bits and pieces. Not all of the 50 “stories” (including front and back matter) are autobiographical, but the fabrications and remembered jokes that he chooses to share tell us as much about him as the accounts of his numerous escapades as a child, businessman, social activist, ceremonial dancer, artist, and more. The Appendix, entitled “Percentage of Bullshit per Story,” ostensibly provides a quantitative guide to each chapter’s veracity, but beware—“[t]hese tales test not only the literary creativity of the author but also the gullibility of the reader” (xv). At 84 years of age, Fortunate Eagle has led a full life, and it is a life that he is proud to share. While some readers might find him a bit too proud of his own accomplishments, none could argue that he’s afraid to say what’s on his mind.

The humorous tone set by the title and author’s introductory comments is sustained, often in almost slapstick fashion, throughout the book. But it would be a mistake to pass judgment based only on his frequent references to the passing of bodily byproducts—Fortunate Eagle’s sense of humor extends beyond the outhouse. The “Scalping Columbus” chapter expands on the version of a true story told by Fortunate Eagle in *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz* (53–4), making the 1968 “scalping” of a local (San Francisco) Italian American part of an international saga that includes a 1973 trip to the Vatican wearing his “beaded buckskin shirt and all the trimmings, along with human hair scalp locks” (43). The story documents Fortunate Eagle’s ironic affront to colonization and its devastating effects. Although his showmanship and the enjoyment with which he accepts being cast as an ambassador for all Native Americans are at times disconcerting because they promote stereotypical portrayals of Indians, his antics can be seen as acts of survivance. By generating international attention to specific concerns of contemporary Native Americans—by living these stories and then by telling them over and over again—he “creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry” (Vizenor 1).

In “Tell Me Another Damn Indian Story, Grandpa,” like other funny stories in the collection, Native presence, culture, and family are central to the narrative. Driving through Montana with his wife and granddaughters, Fortunate Eagle makes it a point to stop at “the famous Crow Fair” for a “reunion with [his] adopted Crow family, the Old Elks” (124). He explains: “My wife, Bobbie, and I have always believed it is important to immerse our children and grandchildren in

the Indian ways and traditions. Perhaps they can pass that knowledge down to future generations” (124). As the trip continues, he passes the time by telling “Indian stories and legends” for his granddaughter Mahnee, “who demonstrated a genuine interest in her tribal past” (125). Fortunate Eagle highlights the importance of family and kinship while he demonstrates the power of stories to entertain and teach. In this context he sets up the punch line of the story—which is about picking up an odiferous hitchhiker and dropping her off as quickly as possible. When the excitement of the encounter with the hitchhiker subsides and Mahnee requests “another damn Indian story,” her grandpa replies, “You just experienced one, my dear” (126). By characterizing the story of their lived experience as another of the “Indian stories and legends” that pass on tribal knowledge and traditions, Fortunate Eagle not only asserts Native presence, but he also challenges us to think about what makes “Indian stories” Indian.

If Fortunate Eagle’s hitchhiker story is an Indian story, does that mean that all of his silly anecdotes are Indian stories, too? Perhaps. This is a question that I have been asking myself since I picked up the book and recognized the chapter “TP” as a story that my father (a white, French-Canadian American) told me as a child. Does Fortunate Eagle’s telling the tale of the “Chief” who drowns “in his own tea pee” make it an Indian story? (10) Or does his telling accentuate the ridiculous ways in which many stories about Indians fail to acknowledge Indian presence—the ways in which such stories continue to exercise the kind of racism that often gets trivialized by those who tell them? Or is it simply a bad joke, a childish pun? It’s difficult to tell what Fortunate Eagle thinks—because the fabricated “BS” stories and the “100% true” stories are told in the same voice and style, and there is no context provided to explain where many of the stories come from or when they were first heard. The answers to these questions are left for readers to contemplate—which is clearly the intention of the author, who asks us directly in the Preface, “don’t you agree that bullshit is the fertilizer of the mind?” (xv).

The nature of the stories in *Scalping Columbus and Other Damn Indian Stories*—short, stand-alone, and straightforward—makes it a book that can be read from cover to cover or one story at a time. Reading it from start to finish, however, enables us to more fully understand its most serious offering, the epistolary chapter “Peace and Friendship.” In this letter Fortunate Eagle remembers the stages of his long life—the stories of his life—and he recognizes in those stories the process of “trying to find meaning through his work and his being in the Indian past and the Indian present” (162). Adam Fortunate Eagle’s adventures as a self-proclaimed “contrary warrior” (xiii, 39) and his willingness to play *the* American Indian certainly invite controversy, but it’s the kind of controversy that, like his bullshit, promotes thinking critically about how we fit into the world around us.

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Works Cited

- Fortunate Eagle, Adam. *Heart of the Rock: The Indian Invasion of Alcatraz*. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2002. Print.
- Vizenor, Gerald. “Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice.” *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. Ed. Gerald Vizenor. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008. 1-23. Print.