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## Preface

So you want to write about American Indians. Tens of thousands of books and essays about Indigenous people are already on the library shelves, and at the rate they are being published it appears that many more are on the way. That's a lot of writing, but surprisingly all this investigation and imagining has only scratched the surface of the complexity of Native America. Perhaps your thesis, dissertation, book, novel, or essay will be unique and will assist in educating America about how tribes lived – and still live – and can offer solutions to the myriad problems tribes face.

This is not a book that offers detailed instructions about grammar, plot development, or writing mysteries. Many readers already know how to find information in libraries, how to outline essays and books, and how the publication process works. These readers may find some of the information here similar to what they have learned from basic English courses and from their own publication experiences. Others are familiar with how to approach tribes for permission to write about them and how to conduct interviews.

Still, I am consistently asked questions about how to write, where to find ideas, how to submit a proposal to tribes, and how to submit essays and book manuscripts to journal editors and book publishers. Even writers with many published books and essays are curious about how others find and organize data. I certainly am. Many more are frustrated by the processes of submitting their work and peer review, and they want to know how they can make their experiences smoother. Therefore, I have tried to incorporate the most common questions and concerns that I repeatedly hear regarding writing and publishing about American Indians. Some readers will notice that I have missed a few aspects of the business, but I hope all readers will find some useful tips.

This book contains a chapter on writing fiction. The field of American Indian literary criticism has exploded, and today there are hun-

dreds of Natives and non-Natives writing poetry, novels, and short stories. While some of this work might be considered “popular” writing – that is, the work is geared toward mainstream America and not toward Natives or academics – the process of gathering ideas, finding inspiration, and locating publishers is similar to what nonfiction writers face. Many Native writers (such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Paula Gunn Allen, Daniel Justice, Craig Womack, Gerald Vizenor, and Jack Forbes) are interested in writing both fiction and nonfiction, and their academic and “mainstream” work are inexorably tied together. The most prevalent readers of Native literature are scholars in the academy who make it their business to dissect and analyze what fellow Native writers have to say.

This book is as a primer for those contemplating writing about Natives and for those who have already experienced writing success. It offers ideas for research, inspiration, and organization. Also included are discussions of key concepts that every author writing about Natives should be aware of: stereotypes, author bias, the politics of publishing, ethics in research and writing, accountability in research and language use, ethnic fraud, and contract negotiation. This book is for students and established writers, for those who have completed an essay or book and do not know how to find a publisher, and for those who cannot figure out why they are unable to find a publisher for their work.

I don’t consider myself to be a particularly good writer, but I am persistent. I have never taken a literature class or a course on creative writing, but both my first nonfiction book and my first fiction book won writing awards. While awards may seem important to some, my purpose for writing is to educate, inspire, and correct misleading stories about Natives. Politics abound in the world of Native Studies; debates over authoritative voice and usefulness of writing swirl in every corner of the academy. “Popular” writing outside the academy is also scrutinized, honored, and criticized. It is a tough business indeed to write about Natives, but I am living proof that determination and self-education about writing can take you a long way.

I have written nine nonfiction and fiction books and edited four volumes about Natives, in addition to writing dozens of essays. As editor of the *American Indian Quarterly* (AIQ), I have encountered a spectrum of authors, who range from knowing precisely what we accept and

how we prefer to receive submissions to those who obviously have no idea what *AIQ* publishes and are not familiar with professional protocol in submitting formal papers. As editor of the University of Nebraska Press's new book series titled *Contemporary Indigenous Issues* and a reader of dozens of submitted manuscripts over the past decade, I have also seen quite an array of proposed book manuscripts. Some are polished and thoroughly researched, while others appear disorganized, poorly written, and "retreaded," that is, the book is about a topic that has been written about repeatedly. I have seen and read a lot, enough to have a fairly good grasp of what works and what does not, and I have attempted to address these issues and more in this volume.

There is a lot in this slim book and all of it can relate to writing about Natives. While much of it is general information that could be used by any writer, the reality is that regardless of your subject – American Indians, Asians, bird watching, or architecture – you will go through the same experiences: agonies over writer's block and equipment malfunctions; frustrations over editing and reediting; elation at finally finding just the right sentence to complete a paragraph and then dejection at having a reader tell you it doesn't "work" (and then elation again when more readers say they love it); lengthy (and sometimes tedious) publication procedures; anxiety when waiting for book reviews; and peace when your writing flows. When I hear the word "writer" – with a Native focus or not – these are some of the things that come to mind. This book is not meant to discourage anyone from writing about Natives but rather to encourage sensitive, truthful, inclusive, and honest writing. If you do your research correctly, you will see the wealth of possibilities.

### **Note on Terminology**

You will see that throughout the book I use the terms "American Indians" and "Natives" interchangeably. I sometimes use the former only because it is most recognizable to most Americans, but many Native people find the phrase offensive because it is a label assigned by Euro-Americans, not by the people themselves. I prefer "Indigenous" or "Native" (but not with "American") because both make a statement: Natives were created on this hemisphere and did not migrate from another continent. "Native American" refers to anyone born here, includ-

ing those people with no relation to tribes. For a more detailed overview on the politics of naming, look at Michael Yellow Bird's "What We Want to Be Called: Indigenous Peoples' Perspectives on Racial and Ethnic Identity Labels," *American Indian Quarterly* 23:2 (spring 1999): 1–21.

CHAPTER ONE

## Think on These Things First

Writers must reflect on why they are using Native images and characters in their nonfiction and fiction stories. Is it to make money or to help with Natives' current situations? Out of respect and hopefully concern, Natives hope it's the latter.

There is always a market for original, well-written, thoroughly researched nonfiction and fiction. Many books written about Natives need revision so that tribes' viewpoints and voices are included. Desperately needed are problem-solving books and essays.

Teachers at all grade levels need intelligent, complete works that can assist them in properly educating their students about the diversity of Native America and the contributions Natives have made to this country and to the world.

Also needed are imaginative, inspiring, nonstereotypical fiction works about Natives. Both nonfiction and fiction can properly educate non-Indians about Native history and culture and can inspire, assist, and educate Indians themselves.

### **Are You Writing for Love or Money?**

Before you get started on your project, ask yourself why you want to write about American Indians. Think carefully about these questions:

- Are you a student who must complete your thesis or dissertation in order to graduate?
- Are you a fiction writer who has ideas for a fiction novel or short stories?
- Are you a Native writer with a yearning to express yourself?
- Are you a professor who wants to make a name for yourself in your field of study?
- Are you a professor who must write in order to keep your job?
- Do you have visions of making money?

- Do you write for self-satisfaction?
- Are you someone who sees the myriad problems tribes face and would like to offer solutions through your writings?

There are dozens of examples of books that were written for all of the above reasons. Some are unique and inspiring, others are stereotypical, harmful to tribes, and of no use to anyone but the author.

If you're writing about Natives to make money, you may want to reconsider. Unless you have found what it is that mainstream America wants to read about American Indians – such as non-Native mystery writer Tony Hillerman or Native writers Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie – or you are a popular New Age writer (these writers often make their money unscrupulously by claiming to be “Indian shamans”), you probably won't make much monetary profit from your work. You may wonder how it is that some writers who don't write any better than dozens of other “nonfamous” Native writers can make so much money and get their names in *People* magazine and appear on NPR. The answer is they make a tidy profit because they have found a dynamite agent and publicist, are willing to promote themselves, and write what America wants to read.

Some of us who write scholarly works make a modest amount through royalties, but it is part of our jobs to write; we are paid primarily for our work as professors. Our promotion and tenure decisions are based in part on our publications. The adage “publish or perish” is very true in many instances and scholars must learn to write even if writing is not their primary career interest. Other nonscholarly writers might find success with a book or two, but most don't make enough money to quit their job.

### **Sure Ways to Make Money**

Some people are under the impression that using Indian images and characters in their work will make it more attractive to readers; consider the popularity of *Dances with Wolves* and the Karl May and Hillerman novels; the images that helped form the foundations of the Boy and Girl Scouts, countless cartoons, and sports mascots; and desecration of burial sites. Most Americans and people around the world have

always had a fascination with the original inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere.

Other writers, however, write because they want to, because they like the feeling of accomplishment completing a truthful, helpful book, essay, novel, or children's book can bring. If you are in this category, with few exceptions you will find it tough to make money. If you write critically about how Natives have been researched and written about and are an activist pushing for revisions to one-sided histories, then you will find grateful readers among most Natives, but your type of writing also will put you at odds with those who prefer to eschew Native viewpoints in favor of non-Native perspectives.

If you really want to make money, take as your example authors who have done the following:

- Write a stereotypical, biased work that includes no Native voices or perspectives and is patriotic in tone, that is, write about Indians in detail, but be sure to include “facts” that tell us white Americans were superior and tribes who lost lives, land, and culture really had it coming. Interestingly, another stereotypical and popular theme is the Bad White Man image that many readers like: show that all whites are evil that all Natives were innocent, childlike victims of the white onslaught.
- Write a fiction book that includes plenty of mystical characters who talk to animals and at least a few characters who are alcoholics and poverty-stricken. Ditto with a children's book that also includes plenty of pictures of Indians wearing braids and many animals mingling around; at least one animal must be perched on the Indian's shoulder.
- Write a children's book describing the major characters (one must be a grandpa) as having no sense of humor and whose life's purpose is to give advice to children who are confused about their identity, living in the city, going to the doctor, and so on.
- Write a book that tells about a certain tribe, replete with overblown details about poverty, alcoholism, and abuse, even if you really don't know about the tribe at all.
- Write a New Age book that reveals real or fabricated tribal religious secrets.

### **Realities of Writing about Natives**

Besides the facts of money, there are other realities that anyone planning on focusing on Natives as a book or essay topic should know. These facts are undeniable, although many successful writers deny them anyway, mainly because they are usually writers who write the way the system (publishing houses, major professors, grant and award committees) wants them to. Many writers, especially those who adhere to the status quo (that is, the standard way of writing about Indians: not including Native viewpoints or Native versions of the past and present), have little difficulty finding outlets for their work. Native writers, on the other hand, often find the road to writing success bumpy at best. What I and many other writers have discovered are the following:

- Some of the controversies that are currently raging include
  - how books and essays should be written (objectively or subjectively)
  - what facts are the most reliable (written or oral testimonies)
  - who can better document the past and present (outsiders [non-Natives] or those who are more close to the topic [Natives with strong cultural connections and vested interest in the topic])
  - what the purpose is of writing about Natives (for profit, to assist tribes, or to do “comparative” works).
- Natives are misunderstood and misrepresented by the majority of people who write about them.
- Being “interdisciplinary,” that is, utilizing techniques from a variety of fields to gather and analyze data, may be the most effective way of making sure you have included all information, but it still is not accepted by the old guard of scholars who demand that writers remain “discipline specific.”
- There already are too many stereotypical books either biased in favor of white America (which means tribes are depicted as savage, uneducated drunks) or heavily slanted toward environmentally conscious, flowing-haired, nature-loving, ignorant savages of the wilderness. Indians can hardly recognize themselves in many works of nonfiction or fiction.

- The number of Native intellectuals is growing and they are challenging the way Natives are portrayed in fiction and nonfiction.
- Native writers who challenge the status quo in their writings have more problems getting published, graduating, and gaining tenure than those who support the colonial power structure.
- Many people have written nonfiction and fiction books without any adherence to research guidelines and without any concern about the tribes they focus on. Others believe that Natives are “fair game” and that they can write about any topic they choose without facing repercussions from the people they write about.
- Many writers write about topics that we have seen repeatedly; they often cite each other and incorporate no Native perspectives. Many Natives believe that there have been enough works written about them and that there is no need for further writings, except perhaps to offer suggestions for making their lives better.
- There are controversies over ethnic fraud. Only tribes decide who can be a member of their group, yet thousands of individuals claim to be Native for profit or for attention. For example, many writers continue to cite and quote the late Jamake Highwater because he claimed to be Blackfeet and hosted the television show *Primal Mind*. (Highwater’s last name was actually Marks; he is Greek, not Native.) Many of the popular “Native” writers of fiction in the academy have questionable identities (that is, they cannot prove they belong to any tribe), yet because American Indian literary criticism is a field that does not do much in-depth questioning of writers’ identities, many non-Natives who claim to be Indians gravitate to it.
- You must find ways to recognize stereotypes and bias in historical writings, including your own. Finding truthful information is critical to avoiding stereotypes.
- You cannot write a dry, repetitive, and unoriginal book and expect it to succeed. You must come up with new and different slants on common themes. Readers become bored very quickly and if you cannot hook them within the first five or ten pages, they will abandon your work for another.

Therefore, because of controversies over authoritative voice and usefulness in writing nonfiction and fiction:

- Expressing yourself is political.
  - Writing about Natives is political.
  - You are judged by what you write.
  - There will be both good and bad consequences to writing about Natives.
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These works explore the current controversies over writing about Natives:

Cook-Lynn, Elizabeth. *Anti-Indianism in Modern America: A Voice from Tatekeya's Earth*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

———. *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.

Mihesuah, Devon A. "Suggested Guidelines for Researchers Who Study American Indians." *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 17:3 (1993): 131–39.

———, ed. *Natives and Academics: Discussions on Researching and Writing about American Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998.

Mihesuah, Devon A., and Angela Wilson, eds. *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books, 1999.

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### **Your Challenges as a Writer**

Acquiring a germ of an idea for a book or essay usually isn't difficult. But acting on those ideas and then sustaining that idea for an entire nonfiction or fiction work is. You must not only keep your interest so you can complete the thing and enjoy the process, you also must write clearly and provocatively enough to keep your readers interested in what you have to say. How can you meet these challenges with minimal stress?

#### **BE ORGANIZED**

A talent for writing is not the only tool you need to succeed. The topic must be thoroughly researched and put together in an organized and orderly fashion.

#### **GET PERMISSIONS AND UNDERSTAND GUIDELINES**

If you are a student, your thesis or dissertation must conform to the standards of your university, including your school's Institutional Research Guidelines. It also must be completed to the satisfaction of your major professor/adviser and to the tribe you are writing about. If you plan to submit your revised dissertation to a publisher, you also have to follow their guidelines.

#### **DO YOUR RESEARCH**

Research for nonfiction and fiction is time-consuming, tedious, and often stressful. Learning how to use the sometimes complex systems of a library, archive, museum, and the Web is only part of your education. You also must know how to interview Natives, how to ask permission to interview them, and how to consider the information you have found. You must learn how the social, political, religious, and economic aspects of American Indian life are interconnected. You cannot talk about the political aspects of a tribe without also considering how religion, gender roles, economy, worldview, and Euro-American policies affect tribal policies. Writers disassociated from tribal life do not understand how these issues interrelate, but this methodology makes perfect sense to Natives who are culturally aware.

#### **LEARN METHODOLOGIES**

Another serious debate in Native studies revolves around being “discipline specific,” which means using only the methods of finding and analyzing data according to the tenets of your discipline (such as history, psychology, anthropology, etc.), or to be “interdisciplinary,” meaning you use methods employed by a variety of disciplines to achieve a better, more well-rounded product. So, if you are a historian, you might use anthropological methods to find information and you may use data gathered by psychologists and biologists in your work. Many people who are anti-interdisciplinary argue that they do not believe that Native voices are accurate and they prefer to use only textualized data that they find in libraries. This stance is considered by many Natives to be racist because it purposely omits using Native voices.

**KEEP READERS INTERESTED**

In fiction writing, your work has to possess enough unique characters and situations to keep readers interested. Ineffective novels and short stories are those that have an uninteresting plot, little character development, and pervasive stereotypes. Nonfiction also must be creative and interesting enough to keep readers turning the page. Writers must choose a topic that has not been previously studied or must write about a familiar topic in a unique way. This is called creative nonfiction and all writers should learn how to write creatively.

**EDUCATE**

Good fiction and nonfiction about Natives must educate non-Indians about Natives, and it must be inspiring and educational to Natives.

**BE SENSITIVE**

Authors must be sensitive in what they write about. They must check with tribes to make certain that they do not overstep their bounds, and they must refrain from making overzealous judgments. It is your responsibility to learn stereotypes and to avoid them.

**KEEP IN MIND THAT YOUR WRITING CAN AFFECT PEOPLE**

Good examples of how Natives are strongly affected by books written about them are Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books. This series may be popular with non-Natives who know little about Natives, but for northern plains tribes who are portrayed as mindless savages who would best be exterminated, the books are stereotypical, insulting, and devastating to their self-esteem. My friend and Dakota writer Waziyatawin Angela Wilson has spent much time protesting the Little House books. Why? Not only is she Dakota, but as a mother she must remain cognizant of what her three children read. What are her children supposed to think about how their tribe is depicted in these works of fiction? How can she protect her children from insults from other children after their teachers require these books to be read in the classroom? Why should she even have to worry about books such as these? As authors of works about Natives, we must make certain we are fair in what and how we write. Your published work about Native