
Frances Washburn. *The Red Bird All-Indian Traveling Band*. Tucson: Arizona UP, 2014.

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The opening chapter of Frances Washburn's third novel, *The Red Bird All-Indian Traveling Band*, is lyrical and down-to-earth, and thoroughly engrossing. We immediately want to know more about the kind of trouble in which the "gift or [...] curse" of "being a human wailing wall" entangles Sissy Roberts, and we want details about the death of Buffalo Ames (3-4).

Like her other novels, Washburn sets *The Red Bird All-Indian Traveling Band* in central-southern South Dakota, between Pine Ridge and Rosebud. The band and its fans travel among small towns that only those who have lived in or passed through Lakota country are likely to have heard of. But most days find Sissy in the fictional Jackson, an off-reservation town where local ranchers, both Lakota and white, do business, and where Indians and whites intermingle at school and work, and in cafes and bars. It's 1969, and Sissy is trying to figure out how to escape the ceaseless round of Saturday nights playing in the band or drinking too much, hanging with people she's known all her life, and working as a waitress. She can't imagine settling into marriage and child-rearing, yet her future seems just beyond the horizon, out of sight but tantalizingly immanent. Her dream of seeing the world is like the women's movement that Sissy almost embodies as she observes the competition and frustrations resulting from unexamined social norms, or like the American Indian Movement that is not quite behind the interracial tension and near riot that breaks out in a chapter titled "Red Power." Like Sissy's future, these social movements haven't yet arrived in South Dakota in the summer of 1969. Washburn portrays the restlessness, precursor to the sexual and ethnic revolutions, as she focuses on an array of interesting and flawed characters. By the end of the novel, the mystery of Buffalo Ames's death is solved and Sissy has found a way to get out of Jackson while maintaining ties to her family.

Sissy is an appealing character who stands out among her friends and neighbors; she is a little smarter, a little more interested in the world, a little more reliable, like the older Lakota women, despite the piles of dirty dishes and clothes she leaves in her wake. Sissy is witness to or part of a series of events that are both raw and entertaining, like the bull rider who is thrown into a soupy pile of dung. With its strong female protagonist and its engaging dramas of the everyday, *The Red Bird All-Indian Traveling Band* may be Washburn's most successful novel. Washburn has an unfortunate tendency of letting her narrators drift into lectures on Indian affairs; while it's not surprising that Hazel in *The Sacred White Turkey* or Oscar in *Elsie's Business* knows such details, and while the information may help readers new to Indigenous Studies understand the import of the serious issues—white violence against Native women and corruption in tribal governments respectively—that these earlier novels address, the asides are leaden. Except for a few scenes during which the FBI agent speaks like a crime report and a few unnecessary details in the early chapters, the writing in *Red Bird* is both graceful and hilarious. Washburn has a gift for humor that allows her to make even a topic like suicide

laughable, without undermining its seriousness. The suicide scene begins with urgency, a panicked girl seeking Sissy's help, a crowd of men pounding on a door, trying to talk their friend out of his desperate act, but the dialog quickly turns absurd. Quotes can't do the scene justice. It's better you read it yourself.

Like *The Lesser Blessed* by Richard Van Camp, *The Red Bird All-Indian Traveling Band* is rich in pop culture references, especially to music. Some may feel this makes it less a Native American novel than Washburn's first two books, which represent racism, traditional arts, living off the land, or ceremony. That would be a mistake. Sissy Roberts is a joy to spend time with, and the question of how a band can play country western standards and still be "all-Indian" is worth pondering.

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