

**Noodin, Margaret. *Weweni*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015. 98 pages.**  
<http://www.wsupress.wayne.edu/books/detail/weweni>

“It feels like we are singing.”

My aunt, who died some years ago, lived the last few decades of her life on earth as an Anishinaabe elder: honored, respected, consulted and, she told me and my dad, lonely for someone with whom she could speak her native first language. Although as a teacher of the Ojibwe language she had the opportunity to speak with a variety of students and seekers, from neophytes to those with some degree of fluency, it wasn't the same as conversing with another native speaker. How she looked forward to occasional rare visits with a ladyfriend who lived some distance away, a woman who shared the same reference points of age, life experience and language. “I listen to us as we talk back and forth, back and forth; I love the sound. It feels like we are singing,” she said.

She had a cool, airy voice; when she spoke Ojibwemowin/Anishinaabewowin the sound was melodic, a pattern and rhythm that was poetic. A great reader, she enjoyed the fiction and poetry of Native writers of many tribes. The first time I opened this book I thought of my aunt's musical speech and her love of reading.

Margaret Noodin's *Weweni* is a collection of original poems written in both Anishinaabemowin and English. Each poem is presented on two pages, in Anishinaabemowin on the left side and in English language on the right. The presentation, which follows the left-to-right order by which we read, draws the consciousness of the reader to the Anishinaabe words first and then anchors the reading of the poem in English to its original words. In what might be the first modern collection of its kind, Noodin wrote the poems first in Anishinaabemowin and then translated them into English. The translations, which are not always literal but always conceptual, are an acknowledgement and regard for the “life of its own” and lyricism of the language (ix, x).

This collection has much to it that is beyond Noodin's stunningly written poetry. “Weweni” is one of those concept words that can be translated both conceptually and literally, and it is a fitting title for this book. Although there is no single English word like it that could be used interchangeably and accurately, “carefully” begins to approach the implications of the word “weweni” which has not sharp edges but rounded curves in pronunciation and meaning (as well as in its linguistic root sources). To approach a task or action carefully, in the style and tradition of the Anishinaabeg, is to do so properly, with an awareness that all exists by the grace of the Creator; in other words, with gratitude, humility and care. Clearly, Noodin had this in mind as she wrote the poetry that became this book.

Within the poetic rhythms and phrases in these poems are words that form recurring themes in the book. These can be found on both pages of the opened book, in both English and Anishinaabemowin, threading their ways lightly throughout the collection. Some examples of these are *weweni*, of course, as well as *apane* (always) and *bimaadiziwin* (the living of life). Noodin introduces the concept of goodness and what constitutes the living of a good life early in the preface, always taking care to acknowledge and respect variations in dialects, the several words and roots within the word that is used to identify the people, Anishinaabeg. She identifies *nishin*, the good and excellent people who were created by the Great Spirit and then gently lowered to the ground, where they would live their lives with thankfulness, humility and generosity (thus excellence), those values that define goodness (10). Another descriptive word

for that which is good, proper and excellent, *mino*, is part of the imagery and phrasing of much that is in this collection.

As there are many and varied ways to say something in English, so are there many and varied ways to say something in Anishinaabemowin. In these poems Noodin shows skill in using a lyricism grounded in the fluidity of that concept: there are myriad meanings and complexities of Anishinaabe language. At the same time, in Anishinaabe epistemology *mino bimaadiziwin*, the living of the good life that is the careful and proper “essence of Anishinaabemowin” (ix) is not only present but integral. This is evident throughout the collection, even in the pronunciation key that looks and reads like a poem.

There are at least as many ways to read and experience this book as there are lovers of poetry and levels of familiarity with Anishinaabowin. As poetry, the skill and creative discipline of the writer are evident in every piece and the lyrical imagery shines, in both the original Anishinaabemowin and in translation to English, as an example of the heartbeat that is indigenous thought and cosmology. A reader new to the language is provided with background in Anishinaabe history and worldview that gives meaning to an initial reading of the poems in English; for that reader the pronunciation key makes possible an enjoyable read-aloud. For readers with some familiarity with the language (relative neophytes as well as proficient Anishinaabe speakers who are longtime students of the language) the poems can be read in native language first and then in English language on the opposite page.

For this reader, whose language skills are limited but who had exposure as a child to the sounds of Anishinaabe speech, the matching of words and phrases to both English and my own treasured, memory-weighted and beloved small collection of Ojibwe (Anishinaabe) language nuggets was pleasurable. It was particularly fun and satisfying to identify in English translation the variations from the literal in order to express Anishinaabe worldview and examinations of thought and meaning. Where might such physical functions as taste and weight intersect in English language, or taste, sweetness and *bimaadiziwin*? In Anishinaabemowin, and in these poems. Noodin’s indirect lyricism in translation parallels the gentle manner of old-time Anishinaabe storytelling, which allows for expression of the storyteller’s (in this book the storyteller/poet’s) carefully thought out and reverent sharing of history, experience and knowledge.

The list of acknowledgements at the end of this collection includes the standard, expected recognitions of publications in which some of the poems have been published; it also includes thanks and acknowledgement, again in English and Anishinaabemowin, to “the moon, the sun, the earth, and great lakes” as well as Noodin’s family, friends and fellow poets (98).

The last time I visited at my aunt’s, her brother was visiting from up north. We drank tea at the kitchen table at her apartment here in Onigamiising; her brother, a quiet *akiwenzii* (old man) smiled as they spoke in English and occasionally switched to Anishinaabowin, the cool, airy warble of her speech and the fuller autumnal tones of his carefully slowed in consideration of their guest, who was me. It did sound like singing.

Read aloud or silently, so does this book that is excellent in the most good and proper Anishinaabe ways.

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