

Susan Devan Harness. *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption*. University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 335 pp. ISBN: 9781496207463.

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It seems important to identify myself before beginning this review. I am a non-enrolled member of the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). I grew up on the Flathead Indian Reservation for most of my life, although, as an academic I have been more transient than I would like in my adult life. My síle? (grandfather) worked for the Tribes all of my life, and my túpye? (great-grandfather) was a cornerstone of the Séliš u Qlispé Culture Committee until he passed away in the spring of 2016. Because of these connections to the CSKT community, and the Flathead Indian Reservation more broadly, I am in a unique position to review Susan Devan Harness's memoir, *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption*. The following review has not been vetted or approved by the CSKT community, but rather reflects my individual engagement with Harness's deeply moving and powerfully honest book.

Harness's book showcases both her expertise as a cultural anthropologist researching transracial Native American adoption and her personal experiences with the difficulties of growing up Indian in a white world in Montana. *Bitterroot* is a profoundly personal account of what it means to battle two diametrically opposed versions of internalized and externalized racism. Harness's academic training as a cultural anthropologist makes the work feel widely accessible and universalizes a particular subset of the struggles associated with what it means to be Native in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The book is part of a series on "American Indian Lives" published by the University of Nebraska Press, a collection that spans genres: from interviews, historiographies, and community stories to biographies, autobiographies, and memoirs. *Bitterroot* fits nicely into this collection of first- and second-hand accounts of Native lives, with the added valence of telling a story that looks in from the outside and out from the inside. Harness's memoir captures what happens when you know you are an Indian, but do not have the privilege of knowing the sense of community and pride that should accompany that identity. In the absence of positive representations of Native people, Harness's childhood was punctuated with negative and racialized stereotypes of Native people that run rampant in Montana and the rest of the North America. Harness felt compelled to not be the Indian depicted in pop culture. She wanted to be a different kind of Indian, one who would be accepted by the white community she grew up in. This understandable compulsion manifested in a lifelong identity struggle that impacted her mental health, self-esteem, personal relationships, and, perhaps most importantly, her efforts to reconnect to the Salish family that she lost when she was a baby.

Bitterroot proceeds in a mostly chronological fashion, beginning with Harness's childhood in her white adoptive family and moving through her tumultuous collegiate and early adult experiences before focusing on the process of finding and reconnecting with her Salish family on the Flathead Indian Reservation. There are interruptions that sometimes flash forward—but, more often, backward—to provide context or provide historical explanations for major components of Salish identity and experience, like the Dawes Act of 1887, the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, and the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (ICWA). These historical interventions are welcome reprieves from the autobiographical writing that, although moving, can feel overwhelmingly negative and a little repetitive when reading for longer durations. Furthermore, they make the text accessible

to Native and non-Native people who do not have a detailed background in the legal and governmental aspects of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes' colonial history.

Like many Native children born pre-ICWA, Harness, along with two of her siblings, were removed from their family home on the Flathead Indian Reservation and put up for adoption in 1960. She was adopted rather quickly by a white couple who moved around Montana, following her adoptive father's job as a wildlife biologist. Her parents were transparent about Harness having been adopted, but less so about why she was in the system to begin with. The chapters about Harness's childhood (roughly chapters 1-6) are shaped by the initial conversation with her father in 1974 when she was fifteen years old about her "real parents" (5). When she asked her adoptive-father what happened to her biological parents, she was told they died in a drunk-driving accident. Pressing on, Harness asked about what other family she might have left. Her father told her, "I don't know about brothers and sisters. I heard you had an uncle somewhere in Arizona. Phoenix, I think it was. But he was a drunk, no-good bum. It's better you don't get ahold of him... He and his family would leech off you for as long as you'd let them, and you have a kind and generous heart, they'd realize they'd hit the mother lode" (8). Her father's racist characterization of Native people seems to be validated by Harness's early experiences in the world as a brown child in a white family: being followed while shopping, being refused service in favor of white patrons, hearing stories from other adults about the difficulties of renting to Natives, etc.

It is these racialized stereotypes that fueled Harness's adoption in the first place. Natives were (and often still are) considered unfit parents due to poverty, addiction, non-traditional family structures, and absentee parents. It was assumed that Harness would have a "better life" growing up with white parents. The lie behind this assumption is, perhaps, the central point made by *Bitterroot*. Since she was taken as a very young baby from her biological (read Native) family, Harness's early stories focus on the life she had with her adoptive family—many of these narratives show that problems often considered endemic to Native communities, are just as prevalent and traumatic in white families. As a young adoptee, Harness struggled with her father's alcoholism, her parents' unamicable divorce, and her mother's absenteeism resulting from undiagnosed and untreated bipolar disorder. Regardless of having grown up in a non-Native home, Harness was "uncomfortably aware of [her] role as a statistic: I am American Indian; I am from a 'broken home'; one of my parents was an alcoholic; and one of my parents had mental-health issues" (80).

This understanding was the backdrop to her first attempt at college at Montana State University (MSU) in Bozeman. After succumbing to the pressure of the party crowd as a form of escapism, Harness was put on academic probation, then academic leave, eventually dropping out of MSU. After working for a while at Yellowstone National Park, Harness returned to school at the University of Montana (UM) in Missoula, a short, forty-five-minute drive from the Flathead Indian Reservation. She majored in anthropology, "a forbidden discipline among Natives" because she "believes it is the only way [she is] ever going to learn about Indians, about being an Indian" (102). The successful completion of her degree at UM marks the transition from Harness's accounts of her youth to a more pointed recounting of her experience as an adult trying to find her way back to the Reservation and the Salish community in a meaningful and fulfilling way.

After finding out the details of her adoption and biological family, Harness makes several unsuccessful attempts to reconnect with her birth-mother, before a letter to the editor in the tribal newspaper, the *Charkoosta*, prompted one of her sisters to call her in May of 1993: “This is your sister, Roberta. Ronni Marie, your other sister is here with me. We’ve been looking for you since you turned eighteen” (141). However, this phone call was not the beginning of a fairy-tale ending to *Bitterroot*, but rather the continuation of a life-long attempt to figure out how Harness could understand who she is without knowing where she came from. The phone call and subsequent family reunion did not result in deep connections with her birthmother or siblings, but did help foster important connections to aunts, uncles, and other tribal members who have supported Harness in her personal life and academic work.

This final section of *Bitterroot* (chapters 10-19) integrates Harness’s personal and academic experiences into a collage of self-discovery that is raw, honest, and equal parts elating and unexpected. These vignettes expose and articulate the revelation that has whirled like a deadly undercurrent throughout the whole story: “[t]he shame comes because living in white America hurts, [but] being rejected by my tribal people hurts more” (236). The conversations between Harness and her biological brother, Vern, that conclude the book show that “drinking and its consequences are the same worldwide” (205). Vern grew up with his and Harness’s biological mother, and, much like Harness, suffered the effects of alcoholism. Harness and Vern meditate on the way that alcoholism affects both Native and White communities, but is stigmatized in much different ways. Harness’s adoption into a White family did not save her from the trauma of alcoholism, but it did complicate her relationship with alcoholism and race-based stereotypes in a way that wasn’t true for Vern. He was able to reconcile his experience of alcoholism within a community of Native people who understood the nuances and effects of tropes like the “drunk Native.” Unlike the first two sections which are colored with Harness’s internalized anti-Native racism, this final section, reframed by Vern through the lens of confession and understanding, escapes those traps and feels triumphant in its own ways. It’s not the ending most readers would hope to find—the one that ends with a series of photos from years of big, joyful holiday gatherings—but rather the “real,” untidy ending, reflective of transracial adoption and the Native experience as a whole.

Overall, *Bitterroot: A Salish Memoir of Transracial Adoption* will find an audience in both Native and non-Native audiences, not just because of its topic or genre, but because the bifurcated identity that did so much damage to Harness is the thing that allows a varied readership to engage and empathize with her experience. In this way, *Bitterroot* is a unique approach to Native American narratives. Most contemporary stories of Native experience focus on a central Native figure situated within a Native community. These narratives often showcase stories of success and triumph, of individuals and communities coming together to overcome whatever stigma or struggle they collectively have. Alternatively, Harness tells the story of a Native girl forced to confront all the same stigmas and challenges, but doing it alone, without the benefit of a Native community. While we never get a final image of Harness fully reconciled and at home in a wholly Native community, we do get a sense of clarity from her—clarity about who she is and how she can embrace her identity along with the trauma that forged it to help others who are in similar situations. She does not focus extensively on what she learned from tribal elders throughout her journey to reconnect with her Native family, but, as a person who has had

the privilege of learning from Salish elders, I find Harness's style reflective of these teachings. During language camps, coyote stories, and other gatherings we are often reminded that the young people among us are the most important, the ones who are learning and watching and listening. It is those young people who will remember and pass on our ways, and so it is for them that we heal. It is for the young people that we reconcile our pasts, write our trauma, tell our stories, so that they might know better how to carry on in the future. Harness's memoir tells a story that we are not often told, one that has taken a generation of knowledge from us and held it hostage, trapped in liminal spaces just out of reach, locked in government offices and files. Hers is a story that our old people remember, but cannot tell, and one that our young people need to hear. Her homecoming may not have been what she wanted it to be—she still remains slightly removed from her Native family. But this dissatisfying ending reminds us of what we lost in the generations before ICWA and what has remained lost in the years since.

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