

BOOK BREAK

'All My Sins . . .' is worthwhile reading



VICTORIA DIAZ

"All My Sins Are Relatives," by W. S. Penn (257 pp., \$25.00, University of Nebraska Press).

W. S. Penn ("The Absence of Angela") is an associate professor of English at Michigan State University, a member of the National Advisory Council on Native American Writing and the Native Writers Circle. He writes here of his experience as a misblood of Anglo, Nez Perce/Osage descent, who grew up not on a reservation, but in the city of Los Angeles.

Though the title may imply otherwise, "All My Sins Are Relatives" is not light reading. It is flavored by Penn's background as a scholar who takes his subject very seriously, and expects his readers to meet him at least halfway. Somehow, you just know he'd prefer that you sit up straight and didn't chew gum while reading this book. Grousing about via rambling, elaborately-punctuated sentences, amidst a con-

fusion of time frames and tenses, he shows us that he can make the mysterious even more so, especially for those are not familiar with what he calls "the digressive circularity of the oral tradition."

Even so, Penn's book is a worthwhile read, especially for readers who have special interest in literature focusing on the Native American experience. It touches, elucidates, and wittily perceives, lending warmth to the commentary (and to Penn). "Indians are popular right now," he observes drily. "... you find movies like 'Dances (sic) with Wolves' that dress Indian women in Eastern beaded buckskin ... or make Indian men into sentimentalists who shout 'You are my brother!' from the ends of stories."

And "You have to care," he reveals to those who want to know exactly how he writes a book. "Enough to get out of bed ... and overcome the inertial despair of shoelaces."

Now and then, Penn's filigreed prose turns surprisingly brief and lively, seems almost to break into dance. "Exclamation marks ... make dull

sentences important!" he writes at one point. "They give horns to crows!"

Two of the most memorable sections of "All My Sins Are Relatives" reflect his marked scene-making gifts. When, as a young man, he accompanies his mother on a rare visit to her parents' home, readers may feel his isolation so sharply they will be relieved to reach scene's end, and head somewhere else, anywhere else. And, when Penn learns to "hurry up and wait" among a motley crew of resourceful Army grunts mixing urine samples in a desperate attempt to escape Viet Nam assignments, laughter and tears seem equally apropos.

Penn has many specific bones to pick, and indulges himself by doing some of the picking here. His mother who, according to him, wrote him out of her will one day, heads the list. ("Poor Mother," he says, claiming that, at her funeral, he "wept from laughter"). Next, in no particular order, he hones in on: an agent's assistant who once wrote him "the meanest letter"; the TV couple who fall in love over that "crystallized coffee gunk"; the Coca-Cola Bottling Co.; editors; mainstream literary

agents; missionaries; his mother's family. . .

Old bones aside, however, it's Penn's oral-tradition-on-paper that really most distracts and detracts here.

For instance: "I can't help but wonder if Parins didn't pick this example to cite in his biography of Ridge because it encapsulates — especially at this period of the young Rollins life, about to watch his father killed, and later killing one of the killers in a dispute over a horse — the kernels of John Rollin Ridge seeing in himself an example of the Romantic hero who is singled out by fate for special attention, a true poetic artist on a quest for the ideal which was unattainable, and a . . .

You get the picture.

LAST WORDS: Come to Borders Birmingham on Friday, Feb. 16 at 7 p.m. to meet Christopher Paul Curtis, Flint native and author of "The Watsons Go To Birmingham — 1963." Curtis' debut novel has received both a Newbery Honor and a Coretta Scott King Honor Award. He will read from his work, in addition to autographing his book for readers. Call 810-644-1515.

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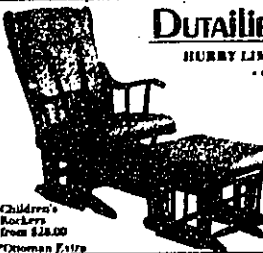
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