

Book Reviews

Per Seyersted, **Leslie Marmon Silko**. Boise State University, Boise, Idaho. 1980. 50 pp.

Leslie Marmon Silko is a Native American author, now in her early thirties, who has written some extraordinary poems and short stories and a truly outstanding novel, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977. Reprinted in paperback, New York: Signet, 1978). All of her work is permeated with the spirit of the place where she has spent most of her life, Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico. She has written of herself, "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is: Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being." Yet she is far more than merely a regionalist: her work is resonant with themes that have meaning far beyond the confines of Laguna Pueblo or the State of New Mexico. She is one of a small but growing number of American Indian writers who have been producing first-class fiction and poetry; the names of N. Scott Momaday and James Welch spring to mind immediately, but there are others nearly as distinguished. In the work of all these writers certain themes, that are common to the Native American experience in our time are recurrent: their attitude towards the land and the animals upon it, which is one of religious reverence; their treatment at the hands of the dominant white race; the debasement of many modern Indians through drink and above all through being made to feel inferior and being the victims of constant discrimination; the effect of the Second World War upon the life of the reservations, which resulted in the return of many Indian war veterans who had seen far more of the outside world than their fathers and mothers. In addition, and especially in the work of Silko and Momaday, there is the importance of the remaining old people as living repositories of knowledge about traditional ways - and an increasing awareness on the part of the young that they will only find their true identities in a return to those ways. Concomitant with this, the old ceremonies re-assume primary importance, as does the art of story-telling by means of which the history and lore of the tribes will be transmitted from generation to generation.

All of this has a significance which goes beyond the boundaries of North America, for the Native Americans are by no means the only indigenous people in the world whose lands have been taken from them and whose very existence has been threatened by exploitative and aggressive majorities. The situation of the Lapps in Scandinavia is in many ways analogous, as is that of the Eskimos of Canada, Alaska and Greenland, the Maori of New Zealand, the Aborigines of Australia, and many of the vanishing tribes of South America. It is a fact of immense significance that many of these people have now recognized that they are all more or less in the same boat, and are beginning to make common.

cause through their organization, the World Council of Indigenous Peoples. Their situations vary widely, of course, as does the effectiveness with which different groups among them have begun to express their grievances and make known their feelings. The statement of the Laps, or Samer as they prefer to be called, that "We are Samer and want to remain Samer" (Statement issued at the 7th Same conference, Gällivare, 1971) undoubtedly strikes the essential note of what all of these people feel: it is their very identities that are threatened, and which they feel they must defend. Through literature and music, too, these people are trying to find a voice, a voice that can leap national limits and be understood by all. It is precisely in this sense that the work of Silko and others assumes the widest importance: "Through me many long dumb voices, / Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves ..." (Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," 24).

And yet it is also important to note that neither Silko nor most of her contemporaries among Native American authors is *only* a "protest writer." One remembers the classic exchange between Richard Wright and James Baldwin, in which Wright expostulated that "All literature is protest" to which Baldwin's riposte was that this might be so, but that all protest is not literature. (The story is told in Baldwin's essay, "Alas, Poor Richard" which was reprinted in the volume *Nobody Knows My Name*. New York: Dell paperback edition, 1961). It must be art first, and protest second, if it is to transcend parochialism and have a chance to endure. Silko herself has expressed her impatience with the simplistic views of certain radical Indian politicians who seem to think that all whites are evil, and all Indians good. One of the most impressive things in her work is her vision of evil as being widespread among all human beings. Her work, in other words, can speak to all of us.

Per Seyersted of the University of Oslo has written a concise and useful monograph on Silko which could well serve, not only as an introduction to her work but to that of other contemporary Native American authors. He is well qualified for the task, as he knows Silko personally and has previously published two illuminating interviews with her in this journal (*American Studies in Scandinavia*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1981). The pamphlet, which resembles the well-known Minnesota series on American writers, appears as No. 45 of the Boise State University Western Writers Series - a project that appears to be laudable in every respect except possibly that by tagging these authors as "Western Writers" it may appear to be branding them as regionalists, which is the very thing I have been saying Silko is not. But then, the Boise concept of a "Western Writer" is catholic indeed, as it includes the likes of Jack Kerouac (born in Lowell, Mass.) and several others who are certainly not known primarily (or even secondarily) as westerners. But this is a minor quibble indeed: the important thing is that this is an excellent and needed contribution to a useful series.

As for Leslie Marmon Silko herself, it is gratifying to know that she is alive and well and presumably hard at work. She has recently received a handsome award from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation of Chicago which will pay all of her living expenses for five years. One hopes this will tenable her to carry on her literary work without distraction. She is a writer who has already given us much of value, and from whom much more may be expected.

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