

Arnold Krupat, Ed., *Companion to James Welch's The Heartsong of Charging Elk*. University of Nebraska, 2015. 279 pages. ISBN 978-0-8032-5432-9.

Readers of the *Companion to James Welch's The Heartsong of Charging Elk* edited by Arnold Krupat might, at first glance, be surprised by the narrowness of the work's focus. What is it about the *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2000) that makes it so special? Why does it warrant a "Companion" that introduces not only author James Welch, but also the novel's evolution from first drafts to the final version, and a range of older and recent critical studies about it?

The most obvious answer to these questions is that from early in his writing career, James Welch (Gros Ventre/Blackfeet, 1940-2003) was considered one of the most influential writers of the so-called American Indian Renaissance, and that this final novel has been highly acclaimed. A second reason is that the quality of scholarship represented here is reason enough for reading this *Companion*: Krupat gathers the insights of some of the most respected critics of Native American literary and cultural studies today. He not only edits the book and writes its introduction, but also contributes two additional chapters. A perhaps even better reason for reading the book is because of the ways in which Krupat and the other contributors succeed in engaging readers in current debates in Native American Studies, and more generally, in literary cultural studies.

The central question for Welch in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* and by extension, for Krupat, is expressed in the Introduction: "What options might be available to a traditionally raised [Plains] Indian person in the reservation period [in the late 19th and early 20th century]?" (Krupat, *Companion* x). The character of Black Elk was born in the Dakotas in 1866. After Crazy Horse's surrender in 1877, he tries to live for a time in his tribe's traditional way. As this resolve eventually becomes too difficult, he decides to join Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West (Krupat notes that Cody did not add the term "show") as the troupe prepares to leave for Europe in 1889. Charging Elk travels with Cody to Marseille, France, performs there, and falls ill. He ends up in a hospital, gets caught in a series of bureaucratic bumbles, and wakes up to discover that not only is he presumed dead, but also that the Wild West troupe has left Marseille without him. From this early point in his story, Charging Elk lives in France. He decides, by the end of the novel, to remain there. His personal narrative, then, becomes an unexpected

cultural narrative. It complicates the assumptions that many American and European readers continue to hold about the life choices made by Native Americans starting at the end of the 19th century (Krupat, *Companion* 198).

In short, Charging Elk's story departs from the pattern of returning "home" to his original community. This tendency, noted by William Bevis, characterized most Native American fiction until the late 1980s (Krupat, *Companion* xiii). Nevertheless, it is around the issue of "home" that the *Companion* turns: Where can it be found? What does it mean for a Native person such as Charging Elk to find a "home" in a Western context that is not in the Americas? For Krupat, the character of Charging Elk exemplifies "hitherto unimagined possibilities for what might be called an indigenous cosmopolitanism" (Krupat, *Companion* x).

As such, this book emphasizes an approach to interpreting indigenous writing that Krupat articulated in his earlier, influential essay, "Nationalism, Indigenism, Cosmopolitanism: Three perspectives on Native American Literatures."³ More to the point, Krupat and the other contributors to the *Companion* challenge earlier criticism and reviews of *Heartsong* that tend to see Charging Elk as a reinvention of the "vanishing" Indian more than as a resilient human being faced with difficult life choices in a foreign environment. Rather, Krupat argues, "neither the fictional Charging Elk nor his generation of historical Lakota persons, including those who achieved more nearly cosmopolitan identities, can be said to have succumbed to alienation, despair, and a loss of Lakota identity" (Krupat, *Companion* xv).

The *Companion* consists of three sections and illustrated with seven black and white photographs, maps, and pages from the 1889 and 1905 Wild West Programmes: The first section of the book, "Hearing, Reading, and Remembering James Welch (1940-2003)" includes three interviews with Welch. Krupat notes that he wanted the book to begin with Welch's own words. For Welch, this novel was the most challenging one he had written to date, both because of the work's historical setting, and because "This guy [is] in an absolutely foreign culture and he can't speak. He can't communicate because nobody in France can speak Lakota" (Krupat, *Companion* 7). The fourth chapter is an excerpt from the first draft of the novel, appearing for the first time in print. In the fifth chapter, Welch's wife, Lois Welch, writes an engaging and empathetic personal narrative. She narrates

3 Arnold Krupat, *Red Matters: Native American Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 1-23.

the development of *Heartsong* from its conception, to research and revision that included travel and friendships between France and Montana. Chapter Six is another personal recollection by John Purdy that situates Welch's work "at a crucial time in the evolution of Native literatures and literary studies" (Krupat, *Companion* 58). Purdy notes that *Heartsong*, along with Gerald Vizenor's *The Heirs of Columbus*, and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, explores the European side of the identity conundrum for many mixed-bloods (Krupat, *Companion* 60).

The second and third sections of the book are critical essays that extend discussions of Charging Elk's character as integrally connected with discourses of Native identity, history, language, and culture. In the second section on "Reprinted Essays," Krupat includes essays by both American and European scholars (appropriate for a novel about transatlantic exchanges): James J. Donahue writing on the Indian historical novel, Ulla Haselstein on "Ghost Dance Literature: Spectrality in *Heartsong*," and Hans Bak on "Tribal or Transnational? Memory, History, and Identity in *Heartsong*." Whereas the essays in this second section focus largely on the cultural and historical problems of interpreting the novel, the six pieces of the *Companion*'s third section of "Original Essays" also address language and literary achievement. The third part of the book includes chapters by acclaimed scholars of Native studies: Amanda Cobb-Greetham, Kathryn W. Shanley, Craig Womack, James Ruppert, and two essays by Krupat. I found Craig Womack's essay on "The Fatal Blow Job" especially provocative. Womack argues that the homophobic representations in the novel unfortunately may be reinforced by the homophobic blindness of some of Welch's readers.

I have only one minor criticism of this *Companion*: In the Introduction, Krupat could have been more explicit about how his contributors engage with, and sometimes complicate each other's perspectives on *Heartsong*. That said, as a whole, this excellent study will be interesting to a wide audience of readers in American Studies, in Indigenous studies, and more broadly in literary and cultural studies. The issues it addresses, and the methods of research it demonstrates, are extremely relevant in our 21st century of instant global communication, large-scale migration, and resurgence of religious and political fundamentalism fueled by fear of "others." The *Companion to James Welch's The Heartsong of Charging Elk* is a valuable and thought-provoking challenge to these sorts of polarized thinking.