

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

MAGGIE WILSON, *Rainy River Lives: Stories told by Maggie Wilson* (compiled, edited, and with an introduction by Sally Cole). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009, lxx + 232 p., index.

Rainy River Lives is based on the unpublished stories of Maggie Wilson (1879-1940), which were collected by the anthropologist Ruth Landes. The stories were lost for many years because they were misfiled in the collection of the Smithsonian Institution. In her preface to this unique collection of Native stories, editor Sally Cole explains her devotion to making these stories public: "They were irreplaceable: a native voice telling the story of colonization as experienced by the colonized.... I am honored to have been able to work on this collection and to present these stories to future readers. The younger generation of Ojibwes may find in them a renewed source of pride in their heritage. The general public will, I hope, be informed and moved by stories about Ojibwe lives a century ago and Ojibwe spirituality, which survived centuries of assault" (xiii-xv). Thus Cole reveals the significance of this compilation. Storyteller Maggie Wilson adeptly weaves traditional tales of universally relevant themes while simultaneously illustrating her culture's spiritual beliefs and everyday life at a time of great upheaval for traditional Ojibwe families.

A major theme running throughout her many stories of love and betrayal, loss and perseverance, is the resilience of women living near the Rainy River on the Ontario-Minnesota border. Wilson's stories, a blending of "personal and cultural history – part autobiography, part biography, part ethnography" (xlvi) – echo her own life as well as the lives of women she knew personally, through protagonists that continually deal with divorce, death of a loved one, "useless" and "lazy" husbands and other adversities. Through her narrative, she adeptly reveals the extent to which Rainy River women exhibited strength and perseverance in the face of tremendous suffering.

Sally Cole successfully compiles these stories with proper attention to the narratives' central themes. Divided into five sections, the book offers a thematic window into the nature of Ojibwe women's relationships with men, children, siblings, friends, and with each other. Cole devotes ample space in her introduction to setting the historical and cultural context of Wilson's stories, even outlining a brief chronology of historical events and changes which affected Ojibwe families in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. With this thorough contextualizing of Rainy River Ojibwes at the turn of the twentieth century, the stage is set for the reader to delve into Wilson's extensively detailed narratives, which paint so vividly an ethnographic portrait of Ojibwe women and men's lives on the Manitou Rapids Reserve in northwestern Ontario. A complete

glossary at the end of the book lists Ojibwe terms that appear in the stories, serving as an additional resource for gaining insight into Native spirituality.

While Cole is successful in organizing and contextualizing these stories, her actual editing of the narrative is not without minor defects. She explains her approach to editing as follows: “I have added punctuation ... and standardized spelling to help smooth the flow for readers who face the written text and do not have the mediating presence of the person and voice of the storyteller. Where a word has been forgotten or left out, I have added it for ease of reading... I have also adjusted spellings that did not match the meaning... I have kept local grammatical forms such as ‘youse’ instead of ‘you.’ I have also retained Wilson’s construction ‘her too’ and ‘him too.’” Her intention thus appears to be to make few alterations to the writing, leaving as much of the original draft as possible to preserve its authenticity while optimizing clarity for the reader. Indeed, in much of the narrative her editing strikes this balance between obscurity and readability. However, in some places Cole fails to accomplish this goal; sometimes her voice is too conspicuous. The editing is applied inconsistently, over-editing here and under-editing there: “He never did any work, and she was very poor, for she only took [had brought] a little [few] of her clothes with her” (118-119). And still in other places the writing would benefit from additional amendments. Her decision to retain offensive language and overly graphic imagery is arguably misguided. (See pages 78 and 180, for examples.) Colloquial terms appearing throughout the collection are also sporadically defined; for example, “him/her/them too” is left to flow appropriately in some places, with the meaning clarified in others (“They tried to snare rabbits, but they could not kill anything, them too [either]”) (128).

Despite the inconsistencies in editing, Cole successfully preserves Wilson’s authentic voice in these stories, constructing a compelling collection of Native tales. Moreover, Sally Cole’s enthusiasm for Maggie Wilson’s traditional storytelling is considerable, and her wise organization of these stories offers much insight for readers into the major themes resonating throughout Wilson’s narratives. Her foresight in compiling these stories into a collection that has much relevance to anthropologists – and any reader interested in gaining understanding of traditional Ojibwe beliefs and practices – is commendable. Wilson skillfully weaves beautifully composed stories of love, loss, and fortitude, which reveal fundamental characteristics of Ojibwe culture, while simultaneously addressing universally relevant themes that speak to each reader. One finds testament not only to an accomplished traditional storyteller, but also the astounding resilience of Native women in the face of tremendous loss and privation. This book is a fine addition to the literature on Ojibwe society at the turn of the twentieth century, and will be of interest to scholars of Ojibwe and Native studies, women’s studies and historical anthropology.

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