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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Kindred Spirits: 2 Collections of Native Mythology for Children and Their Adults

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ANCESTOR APPROVED
Intertribal Stories for Kids
Edited by Cynthia Leitich Smith

THE SEA-RINGED WORLD
Sacred Stories of the Americas
By María García Esperón
Illustrated by Amanda Mijangos
Translated by David Bowles

If the past 11 months have seemed illogical and unstoppable, consider these questions. What if the hummingbird darting from flower to flower is actually a nobleman eternally searching for his beloved maiden? Or the sun and the moon are an angry married couple destined to chase each other across the sky? These age-old myths unsettle everyday logic to reveal larger truths. Unpredictability is but a literary device that helps explain an increasingly bizarre world.

Mythology is not only the relic of ancient civilizations, but also the engine of contemporary cultures. Its stories provide comfort by bringing people together to make sense of strangeness through shared foresight.

Native American mythology, which stretches across North, Central and South America, transmutes from one tribe to the next. Fifteen thousand years old, it abounds with divine characters, celestial battles and natural manifestations of human behavior.

Its legends probe identity, origin and one's connection to Mother Earth — concepts that Native American communities in the United States and Canada gather together to celebrate.

"Ancestor Approved" is a Native American-themed short story anthology with one such gathering, a powwow, at its center. A powwow is a festive, bustling, multigenerational affair at which children and adults perform traditional dances in their tribe's regalia, sell handmade wares and enjoy Native foods such as fry bread. As expected in a book for young readers, the school-age protagonists of the stories make friends, honor their heritage and learn how to respect others.

When commissioning pieces for the anthology, its editor, Cynthia Leitich Smith, asked the authors — a mix of new and veteran Native writers — to all set their stories at "the Dance for Mother Earth Powwow." The lenses through which they view the event, however, run the gamut, from a shy teenager nervous about his first dance to a grandmother in possession of a winning raffle ticket.

Newcomers learn what a powwow is all about, and what a boost it can be, while insiders take up the drumbeat that reverberates throughout the venue. Herself a citizen of the Muscogee Creek Nation and a best-selling author of Native American children's and young adult literature, Smith has curated the anthology

with an eye to attracting both kinds of readers.

This kaleidoscopic perspective accentuates the intrigue of the powwow, for which the characters spend months preparing. By the time they (and we) pull up to the venue, all are ready to be amazed and transported. Consider the contributor Joseph Bruchac's "Bad Dog," in which a young boy chats with an unusual old man, who we later realize was his long-dead great-grandfather. Or Dawn Quigley's "Joey Reads the Sky," in which Joey is revealed to have superpowers that save his family from a tornado.

Smith and her authors are mindful of their readers' ages, and situate some of the powwow's miracles in more everyday plots. In Brian Young's stories, school enemies become good friends. In "Flying Together," by Kim Rogers, a mother deployed to the Middle East returns early — a miracle as far as her daughter is concerned.

The first-person stories are the strongest. As these protagonists are figuring out new friendships, foster parents and relatives whom they've only just met or haven't seen in years, readers get to experience what they're experiencing.

But descriptions of the performances and tribal attire are consistently inadequate, and difficult to visualize. Illustrations would have enhanced each story, and shown readers more of the powwow.

In contrast, "The Sea-Ringed World," by the Mexican poet María García Esperón ("A Tortoise Named Harriet"), contains hypnotizing art, by Amanda Mijangos. Consistent with her cover design, Mijangos's illustrations are predominantly blue, with some white and black, and evoke the elements: sometimes benevolent, sometimes enraged.

The stories in this collection are differentiated by tribe. Esperón entreats her readers to "respect and admire the lore that has endured unto this moment and to weep for all that has been irrevocably lost."

Her tone is somber but also sacred; it signals that she is writing for slightly older children, and for adults as well. Esperón wants her readers — again, gathered together in solidarity — in the right mind-space to receive stories that are at once devotional and defiant, hopeful and horrific.

These tales have been sourced from 18 Indigenous cultures, spanning two continents, from Argentina to Alaska. Readers hop from the wisdom of one tribe to the wisdom of the next, mostly across swaths of Central and South America.

There is no pervading moral about the triumph of good over evil, life over death, gods over humans. Characters — in various forms — fall in love, seek revenge and attain salvation. Humans turn into animals; gods inhabit vegetation.

Some learn their lesson, others don't. Many of the stories end abruptly, brutally, sadly. Love is often cut short or left unrequited.

But the simplicity of the language, thanks in part to the collection's translator, David Bowles, is disarming. We feel compelled to turn the page and begin again, hoping that the earth can start afresh or that two characters can live happily ever after. Sometimes they do, but this unpredictability — inherent to mythology — has a humbling effect.

The collection's structure prompts a similar reaction. Along with a story about the sun and the moon in love, readers will encounter one about the sun throwing ash in the moon's face, and another about the sun and the moon as half-siblings born of rival fathers.

“The Sea-Ringed World” is provocative as well. In “K’awil and the Prince,” from the Mopan (Maya) tradition, K’awil (God of Lightning and Magic) and the prince are homosexual lovers. In “Aakulujjuusi and Uumarnituq,” from the Inuit tradition, the first two humans to emerge “from mounds of earth on Igloolik Island” are men. They fall in love. One becomes pregnant and is transformed into a woman to give birth. Without being fussed over, sexuality and gender are presented as fluid.

In this way Esperón keeps readers wondering, wobbling. Her deliberate arrangement of this lore, a mixture of confusing plots and unexpected endings, tells readers to be patient about extracting meaning.

One of the later stories, “Universe,” a Nahuan legend, lays out how the universe is structured and who controls it. A few others trace the origins of recognizable places such as Lima (the capital of Peru) and Mexico. These tales would have been helpful blueprints up front, but Esperón offers them at seemingly random intervals, as puzzle pieces that will form a coherent picture only after the entire book has been read.

Puzzle-making and bonfire storytelling feel like luxuries in a society moving at pandemic-spreading speed. Thank goodness for mythology, in which time is irrelevant and endings are unseeable; it is more relatable than ever before.