

Dance in a Buffalo Skull

Zitkala-Sa

S. D. Nelson, Illustrator

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A little girl first heard this story as she and her tribe members sat around the campfire nearly 125 years ago on the Yankton Sioux Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Gertrude Simmons Bonnin (1876-1938) is the girl who eventually grew to fame as a strong advocate for the Sioux Indians. She adopted the pen name Zitkala-Sa, meaning Red Bird, and transcribed this story and others, publishing them as a collection in a 1901 book called *Old Indian Legends*.

Dance in a Buffalo Skull is about a group of field mice that have such a good time one night frolicking, feasting, and dancing that they aren't aware of lurking danger. An old dried out buffalo skull is the location of their escapade. The story unfolds slowly, showing larger animals, deer and buffalo, as night descends. Visually, the reader moves back and forth between the inside of the skull, and outside on the prairie.

Nelson's artwork reflects the detail of the written words. The opening lines refer to "the stars...twinkling bright their red and yellow lights." On that first page, behind the deer—some grazing, a couple heads up and alert—is the blue deepening-into-purple-black sky with a few dots of red and yellow amongst the stars. Nelson, a member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, has an Art Degree from Minnesota State University. He's the author/illustrator of several children's picture books about Native Americans, including *Gift Horse: A Lakota Story* and *The Star People*. This book is the second in the Prairie Tale Series of fairy tales set on the plains and prairies of South Dakota.

Gliding up from the river bottom is a wildcat, depicted as a ghostly spirit with two fiery eyes. There's a wonderful illustration of the cat, camouflaged in the dark, except for his glowing orbs. It's a jolt when suddenly the two yellow eyes appear from outside to peer through the skull's empty eye sockets. As the mice scamper away to safety, an important cross-cultural lesson is learned: Pay attention to the world around you.

ROBIN FARRELL EDMUNDS (April 14, 2008)

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