

Extra Indians

Eric Gansworth

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Soldiers come home from wars with all kinds of wounds, some visible to strangers and some hidden so deeply that even close friends can't discern the damage until it's too late.

Tommy Jack McMorsey found his own way to calm the demons he brought back to Texas from Vietnam. He scours junk sales and refinishes old furniture and buildings. Polishing old wood until it gleams has saved him from the effects of the post-traumatic stress syndrome that his wife and adopted child can't begin to help with.

His best friend, Fred Howkowski, isn't as lucky. After returning from Vietnam, he transfers his son into Tommy Jack's care and moves to Hollywood to try and make it as an actor. The pressures of a daily life are too much and he ends it via a gun to the head. Years later, Tommy Jack is still acutely affected by the loss when his estranged son and a woman who may be his daughter come to visit. The two friends have seen Tommy Jack on television, being interviewed about his benign involvement in the death of a Japanese woman, and they have come for answers to questions they barely dare to ask.

Eric Gansworth, recipient of several awards for previous novels, poems, and plays, proves himself adept at handling several interwoven, complex plot lines. This is no easy feat, especially when the reader is asked to move rather rapidly back and forth in time. One reason Gansworth is so successful at keeping his stories clear is his careful attention to character; this novel is populated by living, breathing people who have much to lose, much to gain, and much to teach. The combined sense of loss and hope that infuses the end of the book is strong because the characters are so immediately accessible.

Extra Indians is also illuminated by incandescent language that manages to hold decades of history in a single, readable moment. "They can say they meant it with regard to the weather, but to me, it was an exposure to this country and all of its crazy, casual violations of the soul that really did her in." This is Tommy Jack's description of the Japanese girl who arrives in Minnesota looking for the buried ransom money from the movie *Fargo*, but it could just as well be about his friend Fred, or himself. The novel is well-planted with lines like this that resonate beyond the limits of the page.

Extra Indians is an inspiring and important book to read now that America is welcoming back its newest generation of soldiers.

ANDI DIEHN (November / December 2010)

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