ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Fast Cars and Frybread: Reports from the Rez
Gordon Johnson
Heyday Books
978-1-59714-066-9
(September 2007)

Before cable TV, laptop computers, and cell phones obliterate all traces of the "rez times," the author seeks to pass on memories from his childhood years spent on the Pala Indian Reservation in northern San Diego County. A former newspaper columnist, Johnson has gathered some of his most memorable columns written between 1993 and 2000—columns which bring these reminiscences vividly to life.

The scenes he describes range from Fiesta nights in the early 1970s—the dancing, the fighting, the peon fires burning—to All Saints Day every year, and the indelible image of his grandmother faithfully visiting each family grave.

On the land that his tribe lost in federal court in 1902, the author and a group of thirty gathered at the foot of Hot Springs Mountain in one "night of song and sweat" to pay homage to the old ones now gone. The singers are determined to revive songs not heard by those mountains for 100 years.

Perhaps surprisingly, many of Johnson's captured childhood recollections are universal, bringing a smile of recognition to town-raised pale faces as well as to his rez cohorts. He reminisces about how different life was in the '50s, when the reservation was much slower-paced and self-contained. In the summer he and his friends collected pop bottles to cash in for candy and gum, and Kool Aid was doled out in frosty aluminum tumblers. Summer clothes were ordered in the spring from the Sears catalogue. And after his dad, a military man, finally finished college, the family took a road trip through the Pacific Northwest into Canada, and back down through Montana and states south—visiting relatives, camping out, and exploring a different world.

Johnson's essays elicit a range of responses from his readers. One poignant tale tells of an Indian cowboy who tended twenty-five head of cattle for years. When he died too young, some of those beloved cattle had to be sold to pay for his humble funeral. Following that, Johnson has the reader chuckling with his humorous take on the high-fat, high-cholesterol diet provided by government commodities—leading to the pudgy "commod bods" so prevalent on

the rez.

One article, “A Surrealistic Juxtaposition of Cultures” deftly encapsulates this provocative collection. Right behind the Fantasy Springs Casino, complete with Caribbean stud poker and transplanted palms, are Indian habitation sites thousands of years old. Johnson says on a Saturday night you can usually find a powwow there, featuring traditional dancers, and gourd rattles accompanying ancient bird songs. He is always dazzled by “the head-on collision between old and new.”

This, too, is the feeling one gets from reading these insightful essays painting a way of life perhaps gone by, but thanks to Johnson, making an imprint on future generations.

Deborah Donovan