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First Fish--First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim

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Haunting with its timeless air of tradition and culture, First Fish—First People dually pays homage to and mourns the passing of an archetypal icon—the salmon of the Pacific North Rim. Forging the first stage of amulti-faceted, multi-year project conceived by a non-profit producer of arts and festivals in Seattle, First Fish examines the contemporary plight of the salmon and concurrently celebrates its rich heritage with an amalgam of collected essays and poems—fiction and sobering non-fiction.

Tracing a delicate geographic arc formed by two continents, the book seamlessly blends the contributions of 13 authors, each representing the voices of diverse cultures. The Ainu of Japan, the Coastal Salish from Canada, the Makah and Spokane from the United States, to mention a few, all share a common bond in this “fish of the Gods,” which unites them in a language inherent to each foreign tongue. The writing style shifts with each passage, ranging from the dreamlike imagery of poetry to the documented essays of environmental decline and international political climates in relation to salmon population dynamics.

Rich with insight and candid departures into the very fabric of distant cultures, with modern translations of ancient chants and oral folklore, the salmon emerges a heroic centerpiece for many peoples, both spiritually and in terms of survival. Contrasting this sacred reverence for the natural world with stark contemporary pieces on commercial ocean harvesting of salmon, government friction and tribal fishing restrictions creates an effective emotional draw.

Though self-admittedly not a scholarly effort, instead a gallery of personal expression and inflection, First Fish is a natural choice for those with an interest in native cultures and folklore. Those with a love and understanding of nature and its spirituality masked beneath its outward beauty would also benefit. Complementing the unassuming nature of the text is a beautifully intricate oil painting cover, as well as numerous line drawings and historic photos throughout. First Fish successfully submerges the reader in a world of spiritual celebration of salmon and contemporary concern, where poetic opalescence and the resilience of researched essays flash like scales themselves.

KAREN WYCKOFF (January / February 1999)

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