ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Morningstar: A Warrior's Spirit
Morningstar Mercredi
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Morningstar's remarkable story is one of parental neglect, alcoholism, and sexual abuse—and her gradual discovery of these same behaviors embedded in the lives of her parents and grandparents. She traces the cycle of neglect and abuse in her family to the fact that three generations were survivors of Canada's Aboriginal residential schools.

In a series of painful flashbacks Jolene (the author's childhood name) recounts vivid memories from her past. By age twenty-five, her mother had five daughters, her husband was beating her, and she had turned to alcohol. The girls were shuttled from one foster family to another; when their mother had her seventh child, they were all united for a time in Edmonton. It was there that Jolene's stepfather began sexually abusing her, a practice which continued for years.

Jolene internalizes all the horrors of her home life, and begins acting out at school in increasingly violent episodes. The family moves frequently, but the beatings, alcohol and sexual abuse follow them from place to place. By thirteen, she writes, "everyday became a quest to escape from reality." As she moves into adulthood, she easily slips into the grip of alcohol, and a pattern of casual sex. When she does marry, she sobers up, but only briefly; she raises her son in spurts, her husband doing most of the childrearing, even after their divorce.

In and out of rehab and battling depression, Jolene befriends an empathetic Native activist and his wife, who eventually convince her to give up alcohol. Her newfound pride in her Native heritage leads to her involvement with the powwow circuit, and at a Sun Dance she receives her spirit name, Morningstar. Soon after, she lands a job as a consultant, facilitating workshops on family violence, sexual abuse, and alcoholism—behavioral syndromes with which she is all too familiar. In the course of this work, Mercredi interviews dozens of women who attended residential mission schools. They all share an uncannily similar generic profile, including difficulty with intimacy in relationships and a lack of parenting skills. All reported memories of being beaten if they spoke Cree or Chipewyan, loneliness, isolation from family, and the condemnation of Native spirituality.

Morningstar, a poet, storyteller, and the author of *Fort Chipewayan Homecomin*g, now better understands her mother's behavior; she also feels she is "unraveling a tapestry of neatly woven misconceptions" hidden in Canada's history. Though still dealing with residential school syndrome in her own family, she has at last begun to confront the underlying causes.

The lingering effects on Native Americans of forced residential schools aimed at annihilating all traces of their cultural heritage has long been a subject of fiction by and about Native Americans, from the magical, multi-generational novels of Louise Erdrich to the latest Navajoland mystery from Tony Hillerman. Mercredi's ultimately hopeful memoir poignantly uncovers some truths upon which such fiction is based, and demonstrates how those truths led one woman to heal herself.