

The Freshour Cylinders

Speer Morgan

(October 1998)

\$23.00 (345pp)

978-1-878448-84-2

Ever since Harrison Ford brought the Indiana Jones character to life on the silver screen, archaeology has become a promising narrative force in fiction and film. Historical fiction itself has had its niche, be it accurate or contrived simply as a hook on which to hang a good plot. Speer Morgan uses both accurate archaeology and history in his fifth, and perhaps most impressive novel, *The Freshour Cylinders*.

Morgan creates a believable and enticing frame: 46 wax helical cylinders designed for a 1933-model Dictaphone have found their way into the hands of a historian who sets out to discover their contents and significance. *The Freshour Cylinders* combines intelligence, suspense, history and social commentary to tell the story of the Spiro Indian Mound, the Fort Smith, Okla. area and several well-wrought characters.

Morgan uses the town and area surrounding the Arkansas-Oklahoma border, the Spiro, Okla. Indian mound and the summer heat of the Dust bowl in 1934 as the milieu for *The Freshour Cylinders*. The sense of place envelops and immerses the reader, creating a verisimilitude that is honest, appealing and original. Morgan also peoples this intense landscape with some of the most well defined, realistic and memorable characters that I have come across in recent years. Foremost is an often sagacious part-Indian assistant prosecutor, Tom Freshour. Freshour moves this story along at an even clip, uncovering feint after feint, and becoming involved with Rainy Davis, a strong willed young widow with a free spirit and love of archaeology. Our hero presents the story much like Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe would, with dialogue and narration that is very fluid. Like Chandler, Morgan uses Freshour to make pointed, accurate, and intuitive comments about life in the Southwest during the 1930s. In the following excerpt Freshour comments on the failure of the Roosevelt Administration's Indian affairs policy. As an Indian, Freshour is inside, looking out, looking back in:

I had spent a good many years working for the living Indians, and it was frustrating, grief inspiring work. I was working for people who had given up, or wanted to give up, war-blasted cynics, existentialists...Clients who sat in their houses as useless as the leeches who were sucking out their blood, clients wasted by booze who didn't bother to farm or anything else. People with income—more income than their neighbors—who were so disorganized that they lost their teeth by thirty and died of cirrhosis at thirty-five, clients for whom the money only hurried along the rot. The money wasn't it. Not all of it. Not really. Maybe the new boys in Washington had something. Maybe it was a good idea to give up on integration. I'd been among the first wave, trained so white I didn't know how white I was. I was so white I could talk white circles around most white men. But I had been born an Indian and raised in a shithole Indian orphanage, and I had lived in one of the most Indian places in Oklahoma for several years and clerked for a wonderful man who had been a chief of the tribe. In my life I had witnessed the whole spectrum of this cursed place."

Like Chandler, Morgan feels that the place and time is important to the overall enjoyment a book offers. He also tries to convey a strong sense of history, considering himself an amateur historian, particularly regarding the Five Civilized

Tribes and the Southwest itself. Portraying history in fiction is a hard thing to do according to Morgan: "It can become boring quickly. The overall accuracy and feel are important to achieve any historical depth."

Using the strength of the characters, the plot moves steadily, building toward a climax that balances good solid storytelling with an accurate portrayal of history. "I explain in the afterward that Tom and the murders and everything that happens outside the immediate circle of the mound is fictional. However, the mound itself and the items in the mound and the speculation about those items are grounded in history or archeology. Even the nature of the exploitation of the mound is totally historical."

Morgan teaches creative writing at the University of Missouri and edits *The Missouri Review*, a job he has held for 19 years and which allows him to work with writers like Raymond Carver, Wendell Berry, Ernie Gaines and Ken Kesey. While in graduate school in the San Francisco area, Morgan even earned a few dollars writing book reviews for the then fledgling *Rolling Stone* magazine. He has also served as visiting writer at the universities of Texas and Arkansas, has given more than 50 readings in the United States and Europe and has received the National Endowment for the Arts Individual Grant. His writing credits include the novels *Belle Starr* (1979), *Brother Enemy* (1983), *The Assemblers* (1986) and *The Whipping Boy* (1994). He also co-edited a moving collection of war diaries titled *For Our Beloved Country* (1994). If *The Freshour Cylinders* is any indication, Speer Morgan is coming into his own.

As a boy Morgan spent a lot of time in the Spiro area without ever visiting the actual mound. It wasn't until 1994 in a gift shop in Santa Fe, New Mexico that he came across a book about the Spiro Indian Mound which inspired him to research and investigate its historical background. He combined his previous knowledge of the Indian tribes of the Southwest and the historical background of the area to create the setting the Freshour characters inhabit. Rarely does one piece of fiction succeed on so many levels. *The Freshour Cylinders* is a thought provoking, suspenseful, entertaining and above all an immensely satisfying novel, thick with history and social commentary. As part of MacMurray & Beck's promotional effort, *The Freshour Cylinders* has been serialized on the World Wide Web at www.macmurraybeck.com with a new chapter appearing each week since August.

Morgan has written a mystery novel that is not only significant to American fiction, history and archeology, but also begs to be made into a block-buster movie.

JIM FILKINS (September / October 1998)

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