ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

To Catch The Lightning: A Novel of American Dreaming
Alan Cheuse
Sourcebooks
978-1-4022-1404-2
(October 2008)

Fame, of course, is fleeting, but immortality belongs to those bold enough to chase it. At least in sheer volume of images, Edward Sheriff Curtis (1868—1952) will never be surpassed as the greatest photographer of Native Americans in any century. Long before digital photography made capturing images so simple that children can do it, Curtis devoted his life to creating the most significant and comprehensive retrospective of American Indian culture, which he viewed as "one of the great races of mankind." Curtis correctly predicted that the culture was near extinction. With the patronage of J.P. Morgan, Curtis's lifelong passion was generously funded, and much of his work remains the only recorded history of a civilization even then becoming the stuff of legend. Curtis's body of work—thousands of photographs, recordings, and writings—can be viewed in the Smithsonian, and in reprints of *The North American Indian*, the foreword to which was written by one of Curtis's clients, Theodore Roosevelt.

Alan Cheuse, who has served for more than two decades as NPR's "voice of books," and who is the author of three prior novels, several short story collections, two novellas, and works of nonfiction, uses the historical roots of Edward Curtis's life to spin an engrossing tale of sacrifice, passion, and devotion to purpose not often exhibited by any man.

Edward's desire to complete his destiny as foretold by Chief Joseph, to photograph all eighty of the American Indian Tribes, clashed with his deep longing to live a quiet family life with his wife, Clara, and their four children. What man or woman among us fails to lament the sacrifices we make for worthy work? Edward's skill as a portrait photographer was exhibited in Seattle, Washington, and brought him to the attention of Theodore Roosevelt. He might have lived the safe family life and left a legacy of portraiture as well as a strong family. Yet, he chose to journey where no white man had gone before nor would go again. Immortality cost Curtis dearly.

Intertwined with Edward's story is the story of Jimmy Fly-Wing, a Native American allegory character Cheuse uses to provide depth of insight into the culture Curtis sought to preserve. Perhaps the novel's most engrossing moments are the chapters containing Jimmy Fly-

Wing's tales.

But for Cheuse's deeply researched novel, Edward Curtis and his work might have become lost to modern readers. This story will appeal to a wide audience interested in the history of the American West, Native American culture, and the origins of photography. *To Catch The Lightening* will, once again, bring both fame and immortality to Edward Curtis and Alan Cheuse.

Diane Vogt