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Mary Austin. *One-Smoke Stories*. 1934. Intro. by Noreen Groover Lape. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2003. 177p.

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Even though it was first published in 1934, Mary Austin's slim volume *One-Smoke Stories* introduces critical and cultural questions that clearly still resonate in contemporary discussions. Can one blend the genres of fiction and folklore, and is it acceptable to claim authorship of the tales of another culture? Where do we draw the line at cultural advancement in an effort to conserve our natural surroundings? How do we foster a recognition of and respect for Native American art and culture? And how can we best conceptualize this muddled American identity that necessarily draws together peoples and traditions from disparate places and insists on some semblance of cooperation, if not order?

Perhaps most impressive in Austin's collection is that she not only addresses such quandaries in the first place, but that she does so in a way that complicates and furthers even today's debates. Consider, for example, Austin's handling of authenticity versus authorship: in the brief tale "The Spirit of the Bear Walking," we hear of the Native American tribesman Hotándanai, who longs to see the legendary Paháwitz-na'an, the Spirit of the Bear that Fathered Him. Whoever sees the spirit without being seen himself will become the greatest hunter of his generation, but the spirit can never be seen by anyone who is thinking about him. Hotándanai does indeed see the great spirit, but not until he is an old man returned to the mountain to build a spirit fire in honor of his dead son (59-60). Austin later questions her own authorship of the Bear Walking legend in "Speaking of Bears," a tale of a man named Seaforth who publishes a story about bears that later raises issues of ownership and even plagiarism when it is discovered that the same story was told in the letters another man wrote to the local newspaper. It is far more than merely an issue of "nature faking" versus the "historic method," as Austin suggests both in the tale's natural conclusion and, suggestively, in the story's opening line: "Any good bear story is bound to have as many layers as a quamash root" (69).

Austin further complicates this consideration of folklore versus fiction with a third bear story, "The Colonel's Bear," in which an aged and mostly domesticated circus bear is set loose to allow a Colonel the pleasure of a good hunt. The story is rife with both irony and humor, particularly when the Colonel does indeed shoot a bear, but his bear turns out to be a lovelorn male that has been tracking Pepita, the tame female (163). All told, Austin's authorial quamash root grows increasingly more layered and more thickly enmeshed as she carries this thread of folklore versus fiction through the collection.

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When she raises issues of environmental conservation in such stories as “Lone Tree” and “Wolf People,” Austin is, once again, a generation ahead of her time. In “Lone Tree,” Hogan is a lone prospector who grows to resent the silhouette of a solitary tree, mostly because “it was the only sizable, living thing on the horizon” (19), and, in a fit of irrational irritation, he chops it down. Some time later, Hogan finds himself trapped in a murderous sandstorm and longing for the water that he knew dripped beneath the lone tree he once killed. In the end, Hogan dies in a sandy basin, his bones scattered among the stark branches of the withered Lone Tree (21).

In “Wolf People,” Antelope-Over-the-Hill tells an Indian School teacher of the inherent cooperation of Indian peoples and Wolves. The domestic dog is not simply a beast tamed by man, Antelope-Over-the-Hill tells her, but a wolf that has become a dog of its own free choosing in light of the natural order of things (106-107).

We see Austin’s reverence for Native American art and culture, as well as her attempts to grapple with defining who we are as Americans, in her overarching metaphor of the One-Smoke story. In her introduction, Austin describes the One-Smoke story as a tale that can be told in the time it takes listeners to smoke a traditional Navajo corn-husk cigarette. There is no need, Austin writes, for the cultural baggage of introductions, conclusions, and explanations; the story is, necessarily, compact and resounding:

The essence of all such stories is that they should be located somewhere in the inner sense of the audience, unencumbered by what in our more discursive method is known as background.... Just before the end, like the rattle that warns that the story is about to strike, comes the fang of the experience, most often in the shape of a wise saying. Then the speaker resumes the soul-consoling smoke, while another takes up the dropped stitch of narrative and weaves it into the pattern of the talk. (2)

*One-Smoke Stories* is a compilation of thirty-nine varied short pieces, including short stories, legends, and pithy cultural sayings. Although Austin’s One-Smoke metaphor suggests an emphasis on Native American traditions, Austin opens the smokers’ circle to include tales from a variety of American influences, including Anglo, Mexican-American, and Chinese-American, in addition to Native peoples. And Austin’s tales do not rest stagnant on the page; instead, true to the complexity of an increasingly layered sense of who we are as Americans, Austin’s pieces in *One-Smoke Stories* speak to one another through thematic repetitions similar to the bear tales described earlier.

Often criticized for her thin dabbling in a variety of genres, rather than allowing her talents to grow in a single venue, Mary Hunter Austin authored more than

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thirty books of essays, short stories, drama, poetry, and novels. *One-Smoke Stories* was published just months before her death, and perhaps because it comes at the end of an impressively prolific and varied career, we find in its pages the wisdom and depth that often comes with age and experience. Although Austin does occasionally tread dangerously when she presumes to speak, for example, for a Chinese-American man or a Native American warrior, Austin herself never claimed to be an expert. As Noreen Groover Lape writes in her critical introduction to Austin's collection, Austin favored "re-expression" over the false ideal of authenticity: "In denying that she is an 'authority on things Amerindian' yet claiming to have 'succeeded in being an Indian,' she opts for intellectual and emotional identification with Indians over the more appropriative role of 'authority'" (xlix).

Austin seeks in her collection to give voice to peoples who, particularly in her day, had little means of speaking out in a culture so clearly dominated by Anglo-American interests. Whether or not she is successful in accurately portraying their experiences, Austin presents us with a thoughtful and complex model of storytelling that allows for varied cultures to come together as each new speaker both admits to extant biases and strives for multicultural empathy as, invariably, the next round of corn-husk cigarettes is lit. ✱