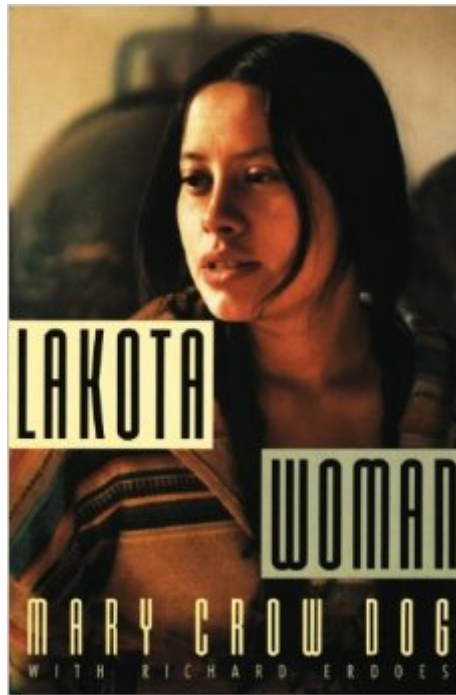


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Lakota Woman



Synopsis

Mary Brave Bird grew up fatherless in a one-room cabin, without running water or electricity, on the Rosebud Indian Reservation in South Dakota. Rebelling against the aimless drinking, punishing missionary school, narrow strictures for women, and violence and hopelessness of reservation life, she joined the new movement of tribal pride sweeping Native American communities in the sixties and seventies. Mary eventually married Leonard Crow Dog, the American Indian Movement's chief medicine man, who revived the sacred but outlawed Ghost Dance. Originally published in 1990, *Lakota Woman* was a national best seller and winner of the American Book Award. It is a unique document, unparalleled in American Indian literature, a story of death, of determination against all odds, of the cruelties perpetuated against American Indians, and of the Native American struggle for rights. Working with Richard Erdoes, one of the twentieth century's leading writers on Native American affairs, Brave Bird recounts her difficult upbringing and the path of her fascinating life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This is one of the best books available to people interested in contemporary Native Americans. Mary Brave Bird's life story sheds light on traditions of her Lakota (Sioux) people from the Pine Ridge and Rosebud reservations in South Dakota. She shows, in a very clear way, their tortured history with the missionaries, state bureaucracy, the courts, the FBI and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). We see to what extent the government has succeeded in destroying the old life and how small groups of the Sioux managed to preserve traditional ways and ceremonies. The book is written

in a way which preserves the unique appreciation Indians have for unadulterated truth - a style which is simple, direct and in which personal experiences are recounted in a frank, almost brutally dispassionate manner. It reveals perfectly the heartless school system ran by abusive Catholic priests and nuns trying hard to deprive young people of their traditions (don't these people have better things to do?); we see the corrupt BIA system designed to prevent cultural and economic emancipation of the Native American "traditionals" (and steal federal money) and the pointless fear that the FBI has of organized Indian movements. Above all, we see the violence that the Sioux face daily from the white South Dakotans as well as the inter-Sioux violence caused by the hopelessness of the life on the rez. I was especially amazed to see that South Dakota has preserved, at the least up to early 1980ies, the barbaric attitudes towards the Native Americans (who are, after all, the original inhabitants, and who were cheated out of their own land by the very same whites who persecute them) which have by and large disappeared from the rest of the civilized world.

This is a very powerful book about Mary Crow Dog's experiences growing up as a Lakota (Sioux) woman on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. It should be required reading for anyone who feigns ignorance of the ways that Native Americans continue to be treated in the US today. Local whites, the state of South Dakota, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the rest of the power establishment have their inhumanity exposed. Crow Dog writes in a very sparse style, and writes of brutal incidents in a matter-of-fact way. While this style makes the book compelling, it is also responsible for a major weakness of the book. Throughout the book, Crow Dog is never introspective. Things happen (she uses drugs, starts shoplifting, chooses men poorly) or happen to her (she is raped, among other things), but she doesn't think about why these things happen. She conveys neither a sense of her own agency in these events, or a sense of her own lack of agency. Oddly for an autobiography, Mary Crow Dog is the object, not the subject, of this story. Even at Wounded Knee, she doesn't really understand why she is there, other than the fact that she has followed the male authority figures of the movement into the siege. She made her choice and put her body on the line but can't really explain why. How life on the reservation produces people like this is certainly worth reflection. This siege at Wounded Knee provides the centerpiece of the book, and its natural climax. Crow Dog has a very different view of these events than the accounts provided by the leadership, who knew their history and knew what they were trying to do. Crow Dog also talks about the aftermath of the siege, and the period when her husband was in jail.

In this 1990 autobiography Mary Crow Dog relates her life growing up on a Sioux reservation and

her involvement with the American Indian Movement during the 1970s. There is another writer's name, Richard Erdoes, next to hers on the cover which makes me assume that she did not write this herself. Perhaps that accounts for the style, which is overly simplistic as the book seems to be targeted towards young adults. However, I have very scant knowledge of American Indians even though they have always fascinated me. And that is why I enjoyed this book completely. It feels true and real and its starkness only underlines the story which, in reality, is not only Mary Crow Dog's personal story, but that of all American Indians in our country. We are right there with her in the one room shack she was raised in with 8 other people in North Dakota, a house without electricity, plumbing or a single modern convenience. As there were no television or any connection with the outside world, she thought that everyone lived like this and had a happy childhood, warm and secure in the bosom of a loving family. And then she was sent off to boarding school run by the Jesuits. Here, the children were beaten, humiliated, punished by being sent into isolation, and forced into a mold that was foreign to them. It was the 60's then, and she rebelled, leaving school and joining forces with other Native American teenagers who drank and shoplifted and lived on the fringe of society. Then the American Indian Movement came along and she joined, identifying with her people's struggles and learning the history. She was at the siege of the National Indian Affairs building in Washington, DC and then again at the 71-day takeover of Wounded Knee in the 1970s.

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