
Tiffany Midge. *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's*. Foreword by Geary Hobson. Bison Books/University of Nebraska Press, 2019. 195 pp. ISBN: 9781496215574. <https://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/bison-books/9781496215574/>

This funny little book means a lot. I say "little" because it is under two hundred pages long and contains much white space and several blank pages separating its eleven parts, but it is not small in significance. On the contrary, this first humor book by Tiffany Midge, a Lakota poet and memoirist, is full of insight and delight. Unsurprisingly, though this wide-ranging collection is comedic, it contains the aspects of poignant memoir and poetic language that were featured in two previous books by Midge: *Outlaws, Renegades, and Saints: Diary of a Mixed-Up Halfbreed* (1996) and *The Woman Who Married a Bear* (2016). Although Tiffany Midge is a citizen of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and strongly identifies and speaks as a Native woman, she offers a special perspective. She notes she is not necessarily recognized by strangers as Indigenous and did not grow up on ancestral Lakota land, but in the Northwest. Midge writes:

I am an undeterminable ethnicity, tending to blend in, more or less, in any particular group. As a child, I was assumed to belong to a family of Japanese tourists while waiting for a raft to cross over at Disneyland's Tom Sawyer's Island. At different times I wasn't allowed to play with the children of bigots. I am repeatedly asked my cultural origins as if I'm an oddity or unfathomable puzzle (31).

To Sigmund Freud and, closer to home, another author of Standing Rock Sioux nationality, the legendary Vine Deloria, Jr., humor is not merely amusement, but a deep and revealing facet of human expression. Deloria writes in his classic chapter "Indian Humor" from *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969): "Laughter encompasses the limits of the soul. In humor life is redefined and accepted" (146). Irony and satire offer keen insights into the psyche of individuals and collectives. *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's* deploys several forms including one-liner gags, domestic humor, Indian humor, memoir, political satire, social criticism, and feminist humor, all in various ratios. Humor from an Indigenous point of view strategically employs an accessible and inviting form to shake up mainstream readers and educate them on the experiences of Native peoples: how their rights have been and continue to be ignored or trampled upon and their identities and resources appropriated or plundered. Midge's humorous pieces published in mainstream outlets online gained popularity and thus represent a significant intervention, and those articles collected in such a book as this potentially open lines of sympathy and communication between mainstream non-Native readers

and Native Americans. As Vine Deloria, Jr. noted, “people have little sympathy for stolid groups” (146). Deloria argues that author and comedian Dick Gregory achieved much more than he was given credit for when he injected humor into the Civil Rights struggle. With his books, albums, and stand-up comedy routines, Gregory invited “non-blacks to enter into the thought world of the black community and experience the hurt it suffered. When all people shared the humorous but ironic situation of the black, the urgency and morality of Civil Rights was communicated” (148). Likewise, Midge does similar work in cultivating sympathy and empathy for Native Americans, such as the abused water protectors objecting to the Dakota Access pipeline at Standing Rock—her ancestral homelands—and so raises issues of cultural appropriation in teasing and chiding subsets of non-Native readers.

The most compelling writing found therein is about herself and people she has known, including her late Lakota mother and late white father. The dialogues between the author and her mother found in the title piece and “Conversations with My Lakota Mom” are nothing short of hilarious. One great example of Midge’s familial writing and wry perspective is her account of her father playing the role of Chief Bromden in a local stage adaptation of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, co-opting one of her mother’s old wigs. Although her father had “plenty of cultural insider awareness, he played mostly to stereotype, and his Bromden was stiff as a cigar-store Indian” (28). The author liked to think her dad attempted to bring some relevance to the role, “having been married to a Native woman, for all those years, but he was by no means a Will Sampson or Jason Momoa” (28). Along with the brilliant and frank writing about her mother’s final months in the title piece and her father’s “Ugly American” imperialist attitudes while living in Asia (“The Siam Sequences”), Midge is also a deft character portraitist. My personal favorite is “The Jimmy Report,” about an eccentric vintage clothes shop owner in Bellingham, Washington. Sassy Jimmy is a transgressive trickster whose pranks and hoaxes keep the narrator and reader in stitches. Tiffany Midge has a sharp eye for ironic detail and an appreciation of oddball aesthetics.

The issue of the audience for this book is an interesting one, but it would seem to have broad appeal to both a general audience and Native American readers. Sometimes the audience is by implication heterogeneously Native, but also including non-Natives having some familiarity with Native culture. At other times, it is constructed as a gaggle of yoga-pants wearing, Hillary-loving, liberal Democrat women. Such women treasure Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and its recent adaptation as a chilling Trump-era dystopia, not realizing that such subjugation has been a reality for Native American women for centuries, Midge claims in “An Open Letter to White Women Concerning

The Handmaid's Tale and America's Historical Amnesia." (Atwood, for her part, has stated that all her iconic novel's horrors and humiliations were based on historical precedents.) At other times, the audience is constructed as white women in general, half of whom frustratingly voted for Trump in the 2016 election. They are trendy consumerists, "basic bitches" obsessed with Pumpkin Spice ("An Open Letter to White Girls Regarding Pumpkin Spice and Cultural Appropriation"). In fact, much attention is lavished on white women and their novel, mellifluous names, such as Finnegan, Delaney, and Saffron, which Tiffany Midge enjoys uttering, punctuating her pieces and lending them a certain poetry amidst satire. But in general, the intended audience seems mainstream, although many of the pieces were originally published in *Indian Country Today*. This book would be a good one to recommend to resistant non-Natives to help explain why "Indian" costumes, Donald Trump's gauche celebration of President Andrew Jackson, and his taunting of Elizabeth Warren as "Pocahontas" are problematic, even maddening to many Native Americans. Midge takes the bull by the horns: "And if valorizing Andrew Jackson and signing pipeline orders *on the same day* isn't evidence enough to prove that the president holds no regard whatsoever for Indigenous people or the law or treaties or the environment, he also flagrantly tossed around racial epithets during a White House meeting with senators" (187). One of my favorite disses in the book is when Midge declares: "Trump is the personification of imperialism, a fat taker; he puts the *colon* in *colonialism* and worse"; meanwhile, Melania is "our future First Naked Lady" (163). Here's to Tiffany Midge, who gets straight to the utter unprecedented nature of our strange times, the absurdity of it all.

While the book is enjoyable and thought-provoking, there is some room for improvement. One suggestion would be to make more contemporary references to Native American literature and culture. Many of the allusions are vintage, from the title referencing Dee Brown's 1970 nonfiction bestseller about the mistreatment of the Indians of the West in the nineteenth century, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, to gags referencing a famous line from Chief Joseph's 1877 speech, here given the Erma Bombeck treatment: "I will fight no more about putting the toothpaste cap on, forever" (6). Such references are pretty old-school, recalling some of the jokes that Vine Deloria, Jr. catalogues in his chapter on "Indian Humor" from *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969). For example, there is much riffing on the old 'Indians used every part of the animal and wasted nothing' trope, which is used a number of times. Perhaps some more recent references or jokes about Bunky Echo-Hawk, Joy Harjo, or A Tribe Called Red could be added. Or how about an allusion to a contemporary Native writer who uses humor and satire, such as Gerald Vizenor, LeAnne Howe, or even the controversial Sherman Alexie? The topics of critique are often not surprising, but Midge usually finds

something new to say: Thanksgiving, casual racism in everyday speech and restaurant names, cultural appropriation in offensive Halloween costumes, and of course, Pumpkin Spice (which sounds like the fifth Spice Girl, joining Baby, Sporty, Scary, and Posh Spice). Speaking of which, a minor quibble with this book is that, at rare moments, it felt like University of Nebraska Press editors might have been a bit more proactive about making this feel more like of a coherent book rather than a collection of previously-published pieces. For example, although these short pieces are well grouped topically into eleven parts, certain jokes are repeated as many as three times in the book, if we count Geary Hobson's foreword. This collection is enjoyable, but not every piece is side-splittingly funny. Some of the political humor already seems dated. Such pieces were great for a timely newspaper column, but when placed between hardcovers, they seem a bit underwhelming.

The foreword by Geary Hobson, the gifted and vastly underappreciated Cherokee-Quapaw and Chickasaw fiction writer and storyteller, feels kind of vintage as well, yet everyone will learn something from it. It catalogues moments of Native humor from literary history, concluding: "yes, non-Indian American people, humor does exist among Native American people" (xvi). However, this proclamation echoes what Deloria wrote over fifty years ago. In "Indian Humor" Deloria writes: "It has always been a great disappointment to Indian people that the humorous side of Indian life has not been mentioned by professed experts on Indian Affairs. Rather the image of the granite-faced grunting redskin has been perpetuated by American mythology" (148). Along those lines Midge delivers, in "Redeeming the English Language (Acquisition) Series," an excellent discourse on the origins and history of "Ugh," the favorite expression of the "grunting redskin," beginning with a memoir of the 1870s, traveling across the canonical novels of James Fennimore Cooper, and discussing a particularly problematic song in *Peter Pan*. In his foreword, Hobson goes all the way back to an 1832 reference in Washington Irving's classic travel narrative, *A Tour on the Prairies*, in which "he describes some Osage warriors around a campfire, cracking up Irving and his fellow tourists with their antics" (xv). If it seems like there has not been much progress from the time that Deloria was writing in the late 1960s to today, perhaps most Americans really do remain in thrall to enduring stereotypes of the stoic Indian, not much more enlightened to realities of Native life. This is depressing, but much evidence would support such a view. Back in 1926, H. L. Mencken wrote: "No one in this world... has ever lost money by underestimating the intelligence of the great masses of the plain people" (Kahn). I am grateful to Geary Hobson for showing how extensive was the rise of American Indian journalists using humor in the post-Civil War

period, which encircled a Cherokee—DeWitt Duncan Clinton—and a Muscogee Creek—Alexander L. Posey (Fus Fixico)—among others.

Two of my favorite pieces which take on ethnic fraud evoke hearty laughter, comprising a slam-bang satirical pair. The first is “Things Pseudo-Native Authors Have Claimed to Be but Actually Are Not,” which includes a Chameleon who can “blend into the brightly colored tablecloths or barstools, making it easier for them to prey upon unwitting directors of reputable publishing houses or editors of endowed literary journals” (132-33). The second warns “You Might Be a Pretendian... if both of your parents emigrated from Germany” or “if you buy black hair dye by the case” (135). I have definitely seen “that guy” at a Native conference or two.

I made a comparison to Erma Bombeck earlier, which is very much meant to be a compliment. For “Aunt Erma” was my homegirl. Reading Tiffany Midge’s book kept reminding me of Bombeck, which led me on a memory path; I checked out from my local public library an e-book collection of three of Bombeck’s humor books. Bombeck was writing her early domestic humor columns in the same suburb (“Welcome to Warm and Cheerful Centerville, Ohio”) where I later grew up reading her in the *Dayton Daily News* even though, as a boy, I was not her target audience. Her family home in Centerville was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015. My mother once went to a Bombeck book signing. My Grandmother Snyder, a retired schoolteacher, was a fan and owned a number of her hardcover books from the 1970s with titles such as *If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, Then What I am Doing in the Pits?* and *The Grass is Always Greener over the Septic Tank*. These zany titles grabbed your attention and curiosity just like *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese’s*. And some of Tiffany Midge’s columns, with their accessible idiosyncrasies, are reminiscent of Bombeck’s work. Midge is known to write of her marriage and domestic life; her piece in *Chuck E. Cheese’s* called “Eight Types of Native Moms” is perhaps the most Bombeckesque. Like Tiffany Midge, Erma Bombeck was a strong advocate for women’s rights, and fought for the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). In 1978, Bombeck’s feminism was outed when she was appointed to the President’s National Advisory Committee for Women and “embarked on a two-year speaking tour urging holdout states to ratify the Congressionally-sanctioned Equal Rights Amendment,” Kristen Levithan notes in her article “Erma Bombeck: Feminist Housewife.” While advocating for the ERA, Bombeck “blended her trademark humor with a spirit of activism.” Addressing the National Student Nurses’ Association convention in Utah, Bombeck jested: “We’ve got to get sex out of the gutter and back into the Constitution where it belongs... The ERA cause—‘equality of rights under the law’—may be the most

misunderstood words since 'one size fits all'" (qtd. in Levithan). While Bombeck's late-twentieth-century columns were generally not explicitly political, in her 1983 book *Motherhood: The Second Oldest Profession*, she posed the rhetorical question: "What kind of a mother would go to her grave thinking ERA stood for Earned Run Average?" (21). Midge's fierce feminist satire shines through such pieces as "Committee of Barnyard Swine to Determine Fates for Women's Health." For taking me back to Erma Bombeck and associated memories, I am grateful to Tiffany Midge.

One visionary piece is "Thousands of Jingle Dress Dancers Magically Appear at Standing Rock Protector Site." Both in its sharp political commentary and its use of imagery and dialogue, this is an excellent piece of writing. "The jingle dress dancers could not be reached for a comment. They appeared momentarily on the highway, danced, lifted the spirits of the people, and then dissolved back over the hills from whence they came. The swish and tinkle of their jingles could be heard from beyond the horizon," the piece concludes onomatopoeically (83). Midge notes that this piece garnered many likes and shares online to the point that it went viral amidst the depression of the election results coming in. In a followup article, "Satire Article Goes Viral on Day of 2016 Presidential Election Results," Tiffany Midge concludes that the popularity of the first piece indicates that its readers believed that the story was real reportage rather than "satire" as she puts it, that "people can't discern what is real and what is false" (86). I would call it fiction or fantasy blended with political commentary, not satire particularly. If it is satire, what is being satirized? Midge took the popularity of the article to mean that "the majority of the population is illiterate with regards to Native culture and grossly misinformed about Indigenous people" (85). While this is true, and no doubt some of the comments that were made online after her piece was published support that conclusion, surely some of these readers understood what she was up to. Otherwise, it seems too depressing to view the viral success of something you wrote as evidence of widespread ignorance in Trump's America, rather than your own inspirational talent.

I particularly appreciate Midge's highlighting of the problem of the "white savior" narrative that is still so common today, "the all-too-familiar trope in which a heroic white character rescues folks of color from their plight" (29). This trope suggests that Natives are merely passive tragic victims who are acted upon. Although it is common, in many cases it seems to go largely without notice or criticism. In Midge's memoir, this issue arises as she describes how her late white father, while serving a prison sentence, was studying different Shakespearean plays and scenes with Native and black inmates. She imagines an idea for Hollywood: a heartwarming white-messiah prison movie. One

example within my area of research is David Grann's romanticizing treatments in *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (2017) of the attorney W. W. Vaughan, who was thrown from a train, and the FBI agent Tom White, who was brought in by J. Edgar Hoover to solve the Osage murder cases and is given a large section of the book (which is being made into a Martin Scorsese film starring Robert DeNiro and Leonardo DiCaprio). Vaughan was surely killed because he was going to share what he knew about conspirators Bill Hale and H. G. Burt with the FBI and was killed before he could. That is noble, but as I explain in my forthcoming book, *Our Osage Hills*, to be published by Lehigh University Press, W. W. Vaughan was more than happy to charge Osages ten thousand dollars a head to restore them to "competency" in his regular law practice so they would not be subject to the chiseling of a white guardian; that sum of money has the buying power of about \$140,000 in 2018. Furthermore, the Osages might have paid nothing; according to Terry Wilson in *The Underground Reservation* (1985), lawyers "profited by representing Osages applying for competency even though the agency handled all such cases free" (140).

So this book, while humorous and at times whimsical, takes on some serious issues facing not only Indian Country but the United States at large. *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's* deserves a large audience so that, among other reasons, Native American humor can move closer to the status it held in the early twentieth century, when America's most popular entertainer—who, like Tiffany Midge, also penned a humorous newspaper column—was Will Rogers, "The Cherokee Kid."

As Vine Deloria, Jr. writes, "When a people can laugh at themselves and laugh at others and hold all aspects of life together without letting anybody drive them to extremes, then it seems to me that that people can survive" (167). *Bury My Heart at Chuck E. Cheese's* achieves this balance, its comedy amply evidencing and promoting not just survival but also survivance, as theorized by Gerald Vizenor, an enduring, "active sense of presence" renouncing narratives of "dominance, tragedy and victimry" (vii).

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