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Book Review: The Anguish of Snails: Native American Folklore in the West

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Anguish of Snails: Native American Folklore in the West. By Barre Toelken. Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003. xii + 204 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$39.85 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

For half a century Barre Toelken has studied Native American cultures in the West. In this volume he offers a perspective on how outsiders can approach the study of Native Americans using methods developed by the discipline of folklore. In doing so he displays a rare humility, exemplified by the book's title. The structure of its shell, he tells us, records "the ongoing responses of the living snail"; over time these form patterns whose meanings can be explored. Taking the snail shell as his metaphor for culture, he proposes that just as we can learn from studying the patterns in the shell "the 'agonies' experienced by snails," so, too, we as outsiders can learn from the study of Native American cultural expressions something about a group's beliefs and assumptions—its "anguish," that is, "the accumulated emotional load articulated in traditional contexts."

Toelken investigates in turn a variety of traditional contexts, looking for patterns in cultural performance. He starts with the most concrete types of traditional forms ("patterned formulations of complex, shared value systems") and moves to the more abstract: visual arts and architecture, dance, stories and songs, humor, and patterns of thinking and discovering. Here another aspect of the snail metaphor deserves mention: just as a snail shell is circular in form, spiraling and building on itself, so these chapters achieve a similar interrelation-

ship, implicitly contrasting with the lineal organization of Euro-American cultures.

Lavishly illustrated with sixty-two black-and-white and color photographs, these illustrations are integral to the text. The author's focus is not on the great masterpieces of Native American art forms, but on representative examples revealing the cultural patterns that make those art forms live. The instances of beadwork, basketry, carving, and architecture make us look at these objects with deeper appreciation, both esthetically and contextually. Toelken sees, for example, in a Sioux beaded baseball cap and sneakers not a perversion of traditional culture but the "cooptation of white designs," artistic expressions that "turn our attention away from the practical considerations of the white world toward the cultural performances of Native artists."

This is an intensely personal book, chatty and autobiographical. It is a pleasure to read and provides simultaneous introductions to Native American culture, the discipline of folklore, and one of the great folklorists of our time. Reading *The Anguish of Snails* is like an extended visit with Barry Toelken, who employs his skill as a raconteur—surely a reflection of his studies of Native literature—to enlighten, persuade, and entertain. Anyone, whether a novice in the study of Native Americans or of folklore, or a seasoned professional, will enjoy the visit and come away with something of value.

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