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Northern Lights by James Matthew Green

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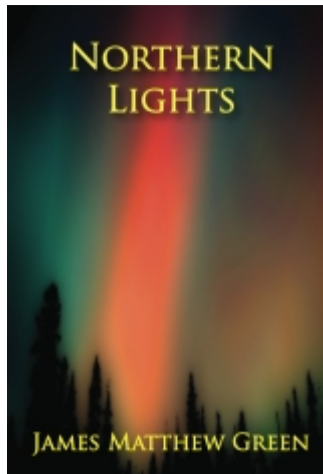
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‘Northern Lights’ by James Matthew Green

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Northern Lights

By James Matthew Green

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The Ojibwe saw the creatures and objects in their universe as animate or inanimate, rather than male or female. They recognized that men could have female qualities; such men would live as women and would take on male husbands. The Ojibwe also recognized that women could have male qualities; these women would live as men and take on female wives. The Ojibwe considered these relationships as part of the natural order of things. French missionaries and explorers noted the existence of *agokwa* (“two-spirits”) among the Ojibwe, using the pejorative French term *berdache* (from the Persian *bardaj*, meaning “male prostitute,” “passive homosexual partner,” or “pretty young boy”) instead. Unlike other European colonizers, however, the French who settled in the New World respected the Ojibwe—who outnumbered them—as trading partners with a strong culture and religious tradition of their own. The French missionaries worked in harmony with Ojibwe religious leaders (including some *agokwa*) to maintain peaceful relations between the two peoples, and soon enough a new people emerged—the Metís, descendants of French and Scottish settlers and Ojibwe and other tribes from French North America.

There was no word in Ojibwe for a contemporary “gay” man attracted to masculine men, and these types of gay men in Catholic France did not live openly, for fear of excommunication or sodomy charges. Imagine the dilemma that a young Metís man would face if he was a warrior with no desire to live as an *agokwa*, but desired other warriors. Surely such a fellow would exist.

In his first novel *Northern Lights*, James Matthew Green presents Daniel Allouez, a French-Ojibwe Metis coming of age and attempting to come out during the French and Indian War.

Green is not a historian, but a psychotherapist with French and Ojibwe roots. A native Minnesotan, he is a member of the White Earth Reservation. He has studied theology extensively, specializes in spirituality for emotional healing, and currently serves LGBTIQ clients in North Carolina. Green demonstrates his spiritual and therapeutic expertise in the dialogues that Daniel Allouez has in his head, as well as with other characters, during his identity formation, accepting the death of his first lover, attempting heterosexual marriage and fatherhood, and falling in love with Rorie, Scottish soldier serving the French military. While Daniel is a warrior, he is a reflective, gentle soul, far from a stoic brute. Experiencing these emotional, psychological, and spiritual processes with Daniel as he interprets them through Ojibwe and Catholic theology are the great strengths of the book. For this reason, *Northern Lights* would be an appropriate book to share with a young man experiencing these attractions for another man for the first time.

While readers may be most likely to read *Northern Lights* for the love story between Daniel and Rorie, the book also introduces readers to traditional Ojibwe culture and language. Green provides a glossary of all Ojibwe words used, as well as the historical information and resources used to present as authentic a setting as possible. Green shatters the stereotype of an intolerant, homophobic, colonizing Catholic Church by introducing us to the French Recollect Order, who incorporated Ojibwe traditions into Catholic ones. The tenets of this order manifest themselves in Jacques Renville, a Metis boy who travels to France for his education at a Recollect boarding school. He eventually becomes Father Jacques, and a confessor to both Daniel and Rorie. From Father Jacques we learn what the Catholic Church, at that time, had to say about same-sex relations between men.

It is a challenge for writers to put themselves in the shoes of people who lived centuries ago. No matter how diligently they do their research, they will find neither sound recordings nor videos of people from the mid eighteenth century. If their research subjects were prominent historical figures, the writers might locate their personal papers, as well as essays or articles that people wrote about those “celebrities” while they were still alive. The odds of finding such documentation decreases when writers want to breathe life into Native Americans and others living on the frontier during the French and Indian War. We cannot know how men from the mid-eighteenth century, from vastly different cultures, would have interacted with each other. We also cannot know how the Ojibwe during that same time period—who did record their language through pictographs and other types of written documentation—would have spoken to each other, or how an Ojibwe man would have spoken to an *agokwa*, or vice versa. We can only imagine, and simply enjoy the story as it unfolds. For these reasons, we must read James Matthew Green’s *Northern Lights* with an open mind and forgiveness in our hearts.

Further Reading:

Desy, Pierrette. (1993). "The Berdache: 'Man-Woman' in North America." [translated from the French by S.M. Van Wyck]. Retrieved on August 23, 2013 from http://classiques.uqac.ca/contemporains/desy_pierrette/the_berdaches/the_berdaches_texte.html

New World Encyclopedia (2008). "Ojibwa." Retrieved on August 23, 2013 from <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/ojibwa>

Williams, Walter L. (1992). *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.