

negligible utility (Price + Risk Utility = Rumor) is a way to understand why rumors about a particular company start.

Crack, not a corporate activity, does not fit into this formula. Even though many whites use crack, the rumor persists in the Black community that there is a conspiracy to sell it to African Americans to control and eventually eliminate them from American society.

Her final chapter, "Epilogue: Continuing Concerns," points out that the collection of rumors is a continuing area of research. Since she mailed the draft of the book to her editor in 1991, she has collected rumors on forced birth control, Liz Claiborne, and expensive liquor. She is confident that each year will bring even more rumors and urban legends.

So Patricia Turner's research on rumors will never end because new rumors appear as fast as she documents old ones. We can look forward to the future work of Turner, because *I Heard It Through the Grapevine* is a carefully researched, well documented book that has a graceful style and organization that appeal to both the scholar and the general reader.

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**Velma Wallis. *Two Old Women*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1993) 140 pp., \$9.00.**

Velma Wallis says of *Two Old Women*, it is "a story about my people and my past—something about me that I could grasp and call mine." She introduces her written story as an attempt to continue that which is rapidly being silenced by television and modern "conveniences"—the children who now seem uninterested in traditional tales to one day be able to call the legend theirs. In setting this tale to paper, she succeeds not only in her goal to interest future generations among her own people, but also in offering outside readers of all ages a representation of Athabaskan lore.

In a straightforward and engaging manner, and with vivid details that reify a landscape many readers can hardly imagine, Wallis retells the traditional Athabaskan legend of a nomadic tribe, caught in a brutally harsh winter, that can no longer care for a pair of old women who have become somewhat of a burden to them. Faced with imminent starvation, the tribe decides to leave the women, ages eighty and seventy-five, behind. Once the old women have recovered from the initial shock of being abandoned, they begin an unexpectedly spirited battle against the cruelest of elements and circumstances and uncover their untapped potential in the struggle to survive. Rediscovering the skills they learned in their youth, the

## *Explorations in Sights and Sounds*

women defy their death sentence to the great surprise of the tribe, which meets them again months later. The conclusion affirms the importance of community, respect, and mutual contribution.

*Two Old Women* has been reviewed by some as young adult literature. The illustrations by Jim Grant and Wallis' uncomplicated prose style will appeal to young readers and listeners, but the tale offers universal appeal that crosses age boundaries. However, although any reader can appreciate the struggle and determination of Ch'idzigyaak and Sa', the two main characters, there is a focus on gender that seems to restrict the legend's audience. Wallis introduces the story as one passed on from mothers to daughters. Indeed, this is a tale for women because it celebrates woman's inner strength and often untapped potential, but it may also be read as a warning to women to either remain useful or risk abandonment.

Wallis expresses some concern about how her tale will be received, worrying that it maybe misinterpreted. She does not say whether the story of the two old women is not true; she merely calls it a tale from "a time long before the arrival of the Western culture." Wallis may worry that outsiders will view the Athabascans as heartless because they abandoned the old women. While the decision to leave the women behind is initially shocking, Wallis shows the human struggles behind that decision, as well as vivid images of ruthless, life-threatening environment, and thus makes the tribe's actions understandable. Through the tale, complacency is criticized. In the beginning of the story, the women allowed themselves to be cared for; their contributions were not as great as they could have been. But once challenged to survive, they discovered the potential Wallis describes. The legend functions as a cautionary tale when told to children, warning that each member of the community must do her part to ensure the survival of the group.

The tale relates to ethnic experience with a twofold contribution. For Athabascans, it is a source of pride and cultural understanding. For all readers, the representation of an existence determined by survival can be applicable to experiences of minority groups in general. Wallis explains, "Within each individual on this large and complicated world there lives an astounding potential of greatness. Yet it is rare that these hidden gifts are brought to life unless by the chance of fate." In *Two Old Women*, it is the challenge to survive that reveals the potential for greatness. Wallis hopes, "Perhaps tomorrow's generation also will yearn for stories such as this so that they may better understand their past, their people and, hopefully, themselves." Winner of the 1993 Western States Book Award and the 1994 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, *Two Old Women* is both a product of and a contribution to that yearning. By retelling her people's tale with vivid details that bring it to

life through all five senses and by making real the human experiences of Ch'idziguaak and Sa', Velma Wallis can be sure that *Two Old Women* will create both fascination and pride in future readers.

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**Anna Lee Walters. *Talking Indian: Reflections on Survival and Writing*. (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1992) 222 pp. \$22.95 cloth, \$10.95 paper.**

Anna Lee Walters creates an interesting chronicle that is both personal and historical. As she writes of self and family, she also writes about a multitribal web of cultural beliefs and historical interactions with whites that have come to define tribal people today.

Walters includes a few of her short stories, some previously published and others published for the first time here; excerpts from her novel, *Ghost Singer*; and individual histories of Pawnee, Otoe-Missouria, and Navajo from the time of contact with white to the present, offering a litany of ancestors' names along the way. Walters recognizes that her own survival is due to the survival of those ancestors. Many are positive figures; others are more controversial. Her honest inclusivity serves as a bridge toward understanding. By allowing her readers the opportunity to acknowledge a rich ancestry that conjures up a certain ambivalence, her readers may feel more at ease with their own family histories. Her white readers may also begin to realize that "Indian" history is, first, a human story.

The contexts for Walters' discussion of these personal/comunal histories and of her own literature is the idea of talking Indian, thinking Indian. Her own literary perspective starts in the oral tradition—personal word memories and voices from her earliest recollections define her literary experience. She begins the book by discussing the oral tradition. Obviously, her literary expression cannot be separated from her experience of tribal expression. The voice of oral tradition "emanates from several directions," Walters says, "and leads the people around to other times and places, as far out as into the heavens and up to the stars, a journey still accessible, but only through the spoken word...It is our voice and the voice of our ancestors, and yet it is something me, something larger. We cannot separate ourselves from it because it is impossible to know where it ends and we begin...It is an ancient being, this voice that survives longer than one human being..."

Walters is much more eloquent and powerful in her nonfiction prose than in her fiction. Her stories are enjoyable, but they seem