

**Richard D. Alba. *Ethnic Identity: The Transformation of White America.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) xvi, 374 pp., \$ 38.00 cloth.**

Believing that a relatively small amount of research has been done with the ethnic identity of white Americans, Alba surveyed 524 whites in the Albany, New York, area. The majority were English, French, German, and Scottish whose forebears had been in this country for several generations. There were also numerous Irish, and among later immigrants, fairly large numbers of Italian and Polish descent.

Overall, Alba finds relatively little strong ethnic consciousness among these groups. Some respondents insisted on calling themselves “Americans,” and some were not sure what “ethnicity” was, confusing it with religion and some with what might be called “family.” There was also much uncertainty about the ethnic background of close friends and even of spouses. Only among the relatively few Jewish respondents and a rather small minority (about thirty percent) of the others did ethnicity seem very important. Membership in truly ethnic organizations seems to be only about two percent.

Alba sees this condition as caused primarily by intermarriage, for only about fourteen percent of the respondents were descended from parents of the same ethnic group. Among the intermarried, with many ethnic strains in the background, it is no wonder that the person does not know which group, if any, to identify with.

One of the surprising findings is that a sense of ethnicity is stronger among younger and comparatively well-educated people than it is among the older and less well-educated.

The investigation forces Alba to the conclusion that, while a sense of ethnicity will never be completely lost, it has weakened considerably as intra-groups’ prejudices have decreased and ethnic neighborhoods have evaporated. There is also some evidence that white Americans are beginning to—and will more in the future—consider themselves as “European Americans,” based on a common pattern of leaving the poverty of the old world and finding various degrees of success in the new.

This is a book filled with statistics, with most of the answers to as many as three hundred questions tabulated and analyzed. These are in the area of ethnic identity itself, native languages, ethnic experiences, friends, neighborhoods, organizations, and attitudes towards their children’s sense of identity. Particularly in the latter does Alba see a sense of ethnic identity weakening, for many of those who consider ethnicity important for themselves do not wish to try to pass it on to their children.

The book seems to be the result of a detailed and sound investigation and is clearly written. Although the author asserts that the Albany area is a fairly typical one, my Midwest perspective makes me wonder what changes would have been caused if there had been a substantial Scandinavian population in the area. Stereotypically, this is a very ethnically conscious group, and like the Jews, Poles, and Italians, has a relatively strong language-religion-general ethnicity linkage.

Finally, I would suggest that Alba basically neglects to discuss interest in genealogy as a possible source of strengthening ethnic consciousness, and does nothing at all with the reading of ethnic newspapers, magazines, and books.

Of considerable use, I would think, to anyone doing a similar investigation, is the list of "Ethnic experiences (during preceding five years)." Even those who feel ethnicity is very important to them only had ethnic experiences six times during the period.

— Phillips G. Davies  
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**Paula Gunn Allen. *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Source Book*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991) 246 pp., \$19.95 paper.**

As Allen points out in her preface, the stories in this collection were gleaned "from the vast oral tradition of North American tribes." Allen adds that they (the stories) have served as her spiritual guides. She feels that in these tales the "great Goddess" has many guises, such as Xmucane, Sky Woman, Thinking Woman, Scomalt, et al.

Her extended introduction presents the "Living Reality of the Medicine World." A sector of the book introduces us to an Allen neologism, for she provides the title "Cosmogyny: The Goddesses"; another deals with "Ritual Magic and Aspects of the Goddesses"; and the third deals with "Myth, Magic, and Medicine in the Modern World." The collection ends with a postscript on "Cultural Dimensions." Closing the work are two helpful sections to the reader and scholar: a glossary and a bibliography.

Leading into her "Cosmogyny" is her full length discussion of the reality of the medicine world. Stories connect us to the "universe" of medicine. Apprentices to medicine practices discover that there is a separate path for them. In oral traditions, some details are from the natural world, others from the supernatural. The "bedrock" of Indian spirituality is the interchange that is carried on with the supernaturals. She goes on to define the disciplines that constitute the medicine woman's way. Before she presents stories from the various Native American cultures, she stresses the *complexity* of the concept of medicine.

There are stories from the Keres people of the Southwest, the Mayans, the Cherokees, and the Navajos. She also retells stories from tribes located elsewhere in the different regions of the United States.

This work will serve as a fine introduction for readers to the spiritual beliefs of Native Americans. Allen's structuring of her work to first include definitions and analyses, and then to illustrate them with fine stories, provides readers with material that is easily understood and grasped—even at first reading.

— Cortland P. Auser  
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