



Elizabeth Cook-Lynn

Biography

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, is a woman and writer of distinct purpose. Born on a reservation into a family of Sioux politicians and Native scholars, Cook-Lynn writes and teaches for the “cultural, historical, and political survival of Indian nations” (Bruchac 109). In her autobiographical essay in *I Tell You Now*, Cook-Lynn points out the forces that compelled her to write. From the standpoint of exclusion, particularly concerning the absence of Native American history in history books and classes, Cook-Lynn explains the impact of a denied history. At first she housed silence - then mistrust - “and, eventually, anger” (57). “Anger,” she says, “is what started me writing. Writing, for me, then, is an act of defiance born of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. I am Dakotah. I write. It is the quintessential act of optimism born of frustration. It is an act of courage, I think. And, in the end, as Simon Ortiz says, it is an act that defies oppression” (57-8).

Yet beyond the anger and through her writing, Cook-Lynn upholds a strong sense of responsibility. In the same essay as above, she highlights the importance of this in reference to a poem in *Seek the House of Relatives* called “A Poet’s Lament: Concerning the Massacre of American Indians at Wounded Knee”: “It is the responsibility of a poet like me to ‘consecrate’ history and event, survival and joy and sorrow, the significance of ancestors and the unborn; and I use one of the most infamous crimes in all of human history, which took place against a people who did not deserve to be butchered, to make that responsibility concrete” (59). This is the standpoint from which Cook-Lynn gives us a series of books.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1930
- * Member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe
- * Novelist, poet, essayist, and Native American scholar

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Her first book, entitled *Then Badger Said This* (1977), is a 42-page collection of stories, songs and poems that depict mysteries and strengths of the Sioux. Fiction and history, like imagination and memory, mingle as the reader is expected to rise to the challenge that Cook-Lynn sets forth in the introduction. She says, “If you wish to believe [that memory and imagination are components of history], do so with the knowledge that nothing is absolutely true nor is it untrue until someone has made it so.” The prelude sets a sharp tone, inviting the reader to absorb history in a new way while also allowing the reader to share in the celebration of a rich heritage. Her second book, *Seek the House of Relatives* (1983), unites her pride in her tribe’s oral and spiritual traditions with the social issues that threaten those traditions. Cook-Lynn approaches history more directly here.

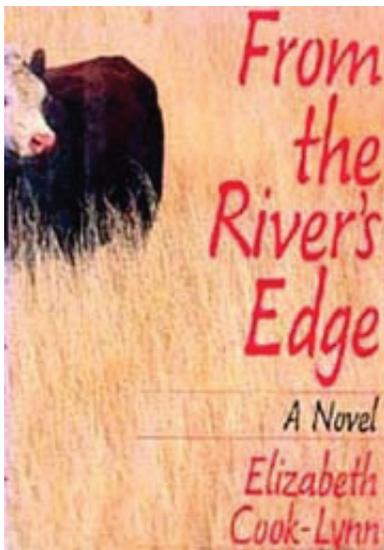
As biographer Norma C. Wilson writes, “Cook-Lynn searches for what is real and lasting amid the false history she exposes” (DLB 40). With her depictions of life on the reservation and the impeding role of the U.S. government, Cook-Lynn further strengthens her messages of tribal unity and sovereignty. Her third book, *The Power of Horses and Other Stories* (1990), extends these themes. This collection of short stories highlights falsity with a subtle wisdom that Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s characters and memories notoriously emit. The children of a man who “Beat His Dogs and His Kids” are chillingly drawn in the short story, “Last Days of a Squaw Man.” The effect of the white man’s intrusion in this family brings pain, anger and numbness in turn.

From the River’s Edge (1991) is a novel that carries readers into the political nature of Indian life in America. When forty-two of John Tatekeya’s cattle disappear, he enters a process that illuminates “the ambiguities of an entire century” (39). Tatekeya, a Dakotah, enters the white man’s system of justice when he seeks retribution for his stolen cattle and for the loss of his land to hydro-power development on the Missouri. Legal, tribal, and personal conflicts intersect, forcing Tatekeya into a reflective exploration of tribal values. The themes that Cook-Lynn addresses here intersect with the issues she confronts as a scholar. By addressing the many impositions of white values and justice on Native American cultures, Cook-Lynn advances, as she says, “a clear recognition of the sovereign nature of America’s Indian nations.” Yet, as indicated earlier, her commitment to speaking critically is even more evident in her subsequent books.



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In 1996, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn published *Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner and Other Essays*. In it she penetrates political and intellectual issues that persist among Native Americans in academia. Next, in 1998, Cook-Lynn, and attorney Mario Gonzalez (Oglala Sioux) concluded several years of collaboration with the publication of *The Politics of Hallowed Ground*. The book chronicles the legal struggles that persist among the Sioux on the reservation. Using four years of Gonzalez's diary entries along with his knowledge of law, Cook-Lynn has contextualized the years which spanned from 1989 to 1994. While the authors do not claim to be historians in the classical sense, they present a tribal history from a tribal point of view. Leonard Bruguier, Director of the Institute of American Indian Studies at the University of South Dakota, Vermillion, and Dr. Robert Warrior, Professor at Stanford University, find the book provocative and compelling. Also published in 1998 is Cook-Lynn's book of poetry entitled *I Remember the Fallen Trees*.

Just as Cook-Lynn's writing has taken many forms, her ways of approaching scholarship are varied. In 1952, she earned a BA in English and journalism at what was the South Dakota State College. Then in 1971 -- marriage, four children, and a divorce later -- she completed a masters degree in educational psychology and counseling at the University of South Dakota. In addition to her writing career, she has been a high-school teacher, a journalist, a teacher of English and Indian Studies at Eastern Washington University in Cheney, a National Endowment for the Humanities fellow at Stanford University, a writer in residence at Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington in 1990, also at West Virginia University in 1992, and at Atlantic Center for the Arts in New Smyrna Beach, Florida the same year. Additionally, as co-founder of the *Wicazo Sa [Red Pencil] Review*, an academic journal for the development of Native American Studies, Cook-Lynn had invested herself greatly, as editor and contributing scholar, into various topics that involve scholarship for American Indians. She is Professor Emerita of English and Native American studies at Eastern Washington University, resides in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and continues to write and lecture.



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