



Elizabeth Woody



*Father tells me the wind is still free
I am bound, measured, corralled by comparison. Enslaved by the
lack of direction. The limit is my vision
which cannot twirl or encounter the meaning
of patterns
in the scrolls of its temperament. I cannot
leave my matters,
attached to others by experience,
made less by the exclusion of imprisonment.*

— “Wind’s Movement,” Luminaries of the Humble



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1959
- * Native American essayist, poet, and illustrator
- * Author of *Hand Into Stone* (1988)

Biography

Born in Ganado, Arizona into a family that would nurture her spiritually and artistically, Elizabeth Woody (Wasco/Navajo) is an enrolled member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs in Oregon. As the author that she has become, she is quick to acknowledge her parents, relatives, and friends who have been guides for her. Writing, for Woody, is one way in which she adds her part in a legacy of strength and survival. Her first book, a collection of poetry called *Hand Into Stone* (1988), earned her the 1990 American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. In it, Woody shares with us her passionate involvement in the stories of relatives, the oral narratives of “my people,” and “the events that led up to current conditions” (*Luminaries*). She poetically traces events of devastation and re-creation -- from subjects such as the destruction of Celilo Falls in 1956, and similar assaults on the land and its people, to subjects of spiritual/tribal continuity.



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Biography continued

Her second collection, *Luminaries of the Humble* (1994), is a mixture of power, complexity, and beauty. Critic Richard Dauenhauer writes in *World Literature Today* that *Luminaries* is “poetry that reaches out and reaches back, that looks around, looks forward and back -- and especially looks inward -- the individual is called on to examine one’s personal present and society, and one’s own history and future.” In “Rosette,” Woody relates a story to a weaving, celebrating the vibrancy that each story adds to life. Images of spirals and repetitions thread the speaker’s life with solace. This impression of a constant relationship between an individual and the world, a story and life, recurs in Woody’s work.

In “Home and Homeless,” neglect has a cumulative effect on undesired conditions: “The unwanted spreads by the power of neglect” (25). Much of Woody’s work highlights the importance of patterns. “The Ebb of Foolish Endeavors” places the tragedy of Celilo Falls, a loss expressed in much of Woody’s work, in the context of a pattern of misdeeds -- foolish endeavors. *Seven Hands, Seven Hearts*, also published in 1994, is an updated, added-to edition of *Hand Into Stone*. New works of poetry and prose in this collection extend Woody’s familiar images and subjects of memory, strength, and tribal sovereignty.

In addition to being a writer, Woody is an accomplished artist, having worked as a visual artist in numerous media. In *Native North American Artists*, Woody is said to work with “photography, paper, pastels, clay, beads, handweaving, leather, and cloth, and often utilizes found and discarded material from both natural and man-made sources” (Matuz 637). She is the illustrator of Sherman Alexie’s volume of poetry, *Old Skins and New Shirts*, and has collaborated with the noted Colville artist, Joe Feddersen, on several art exhibitions. An essay on their collaboration will be included in *20th Century Native American Art* (Rushing).

In an autobiographical essay in *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language*, Woody expresses the importance that these various media have for her: “It is this blessing of being able to make things that reconstructs my life, that gives me the knowledge to restore myself. . . . These messages -- that beaded birds, horses, trees, stars, and geometric abstractions -- are like prayer, a prayer for our present world to know again the root connection to our existence.” As personal as her art is, Woody extends herself and her art to a larger audience. Along with her exhibitions and lectures, she has participated in numerous organizations for the celebration of Native American art.



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Biography continued

Elizabeth Woody holds a BA in Humanities from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. She is a founding member of the Northwest Native American Writers Association; a board member of Soapstone, Inc, an organization committed to providing a writing retreat for women; and a former caucus member for Woodcraft Circle: Native Writers and Storytellers, a national organization supporting Native Americans through a variety of services. Currently Woody is Program Associate at Eco-trust of Portland, OR, a non-profit environmental organization. She also serves on the Board of Directors of Crow's Shadow Institute, located in Eastern Oregon.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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