

An Interview With N.(avarre) Scott Momaday

By Richard Mace

*N*avarre Scott Momaday is the Regents Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Arizona. Born on February 27th, 1934 in Lawton, Oklahoma, Momaday spent the first year of his life living on the Kiowa reservation where his father was brought up. Momaday's mother, an author was English and Cherokee and his father was full-blooded Kiowa. Momaday and his parents moved from the Kiowa reservation in Oklahoma to reservations in Arizona and New Mexico. It was here where N. Scott was taught stories in the oral tradition and these stories and teachings have permeated his writings. Momaday's father, Alfred was an artist and his illustrations can be found in museum art collections and in his son's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. Momaday earned his Bachelors degree from the University of New Mexico, and then went on to earn his Masters and PhD from Stanford University, which he received in 1963. After receiving his doctorate, Momaday went on to teach at The University of California at Berkeley and later Stanford, before moving to Arizona and teaching at the University of Arizona in 1982. Like both of his parents, Momaday taught on reservations as well. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *House Made of Dawn* in 1969. Momaday has dedicated his life to teaching and writings and has had books published for more than thirty years. Along with the more than one dozen novels, essays, and books of poems he has written, Momaday has also collaborated on collections of poetry and written children's books.

Selected Works

House Made of Dawn (1968)

The Way To Rainy Mountain (1969)

The Names: A Memoir (1976)

The Ancient Child (1989)

The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages (1997)

In the Bear's House (1999)

RM: Most Universities offer programs and courses in African, Latin American, and Asian Studies, but Native American Studies tend to be either not or under offered. Do you see this as a problem, and if so, how can it be remedied?

NSM: The number of universities offering courses in Native American Studies is growing. I can't tell you the number of such programs in existence, but I imagine there are more than you would think. Some notable ones are UNM (University of New Mexico), Dartmouth, Harvard, UC Berkeley, the University of Arizona, the University of Oklahoma, the University of Alaska, and Cornell University. There are also the Native American colleges on reservations. The problem is not the number of such programs, but their quality and their objectives. To my knowledge the best programs in Native American Studies are those that attempt to understand the Native American on his own terms, in the full light of his unique culture. It is important to understand that the Native American has as much to offer American education as he has to gain. His long tenure in the land and his ancient wisdom are invaluable. We must avail ourselves of them.

RM: What do you see as the future of Native American Studies?

NSM: The future of Native American Studies is bright. The more we learn about the Native American, the more nearly indispensable that learning becomes. The subject is one that American education must comprehend.

RM: What would you say is the role of Native American Literature in the Humanities?

NSM: In Native American oral tradition is the origin of American Literature. I was taught that American literature began with the Puritans in New England. Actually, it began thousands of years ago when some Native man or woman recorded a story in pictographs on a rock wall.

RM: What would you say are the five most influential works by Native authors?

NSM: Making such a selection is a very arbitrary business. You have a range from ancient oral tradition to present-day writers. I suspect that the greatest works to date are in the oral tradition. In my view nothing in American literature surpasses in beauty and power the Prayer of the Night Chant in Navajo.

RM: Which authors have been particularly influential on you?

NSM: Who has been influential I don't know. But I can name writers I admire, Shakespeare, Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Isak Dinesen among them. I might add that my writing has surely been influenced by the stories from Kiowa oral tradition that were told to me by my father when I was a small child.

RM: Are you currently in the process of writing anything?

NSM: Yes, I am always writing something. Just now I am working on a new collection of poems.

RM: How do you teach your own books? Is there anything specific you try to get across as most important?

NSM: I teach a course in oral tradition. In it I teach my *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. It is a book that reflects the tradition in interesting ways. It has three alternating voices (each in its own typeface), the mythic, the historical, and the personal. It shows us a kind of wheel of language that is at the very heart of my literature—how myth becomes history becomes memoir becomes myth. It is the story of literature, and each time I teach it, it is as if it is the first time. Someone has said that *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is my spiritual autobiography. It may be so.

RM: What is the greatest challenge you face as an educator?

NSM: The greatest challenge, it seems to be, is to share some part of my learning and experience with my students and to have them share theirs with me.

RM: What advice would you give to future generations of authors and educators?

NSM: Take your time, reserve the right to define yourself, and strive to save your soul.

RM: You are someone that I personally admire, and I thank my professor Dr. David Sheehan for introducing me to your work. I would like to know if there is a message you try to impart on your students, and using this journal as your mouthpiece, what one piece of advice/wisdom do you feel would benefit all students to keep in mind throughout their academic careers?

NSM: The previous answer applies.