Buffalo Nickel by C. W. Smith (review)

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has written a perceptive, incredibly deep story of humanity's desire to conquer, to expand civilization, to engage a frontier and its savage armies, and to defeat them.

CW2 is military short-hand for warrant officer, second grade. The lowest possible pilot rank in the Army, it was commonly assigned to helicopter pilots. They were neither enlisted men nor officers in status, and as a result they were usually in limbo, caught between two suspicious camps, fearful of both, yet responsible to both. In many ways, the rank itself is a metaphor for the plight of all soldiers in Vietnam, caught as they often were between politically controlled high command and a vicious and predatory enemy. In another way, it is a purely American conception, one that would have satisfied the mountain men and Army scouts of the last century as they took their personal wars off into the wilderness and relied completely on their wits and their sense of right and wrong for survival.

The protagonist of the novel, Billy Roark, arrives in Vietnam as a naive and enthusiastic young pilot. He makes quick friends among the other pilots and gunners, but soon he comes to understand that the war he is being asked to fight is personal and has little to do with geopolitics or patriotic zeal. He quickly determines that those who are in charge of his life have no understanding of his situation, and he develops his own codes, his own rules. By the end of his first tour, he has become an embittered man, no longer a boy, who flies his missions with deadly precision and who regards each comrade's death as an attack on himself.

This novel is riveting from the first page. Heath's talent for description, color, and characterization leaps from the text into the reader's mind. The story flows evenly, moving from event to event in a seamless texture that leaves the normal measurements of time and space far behind.

CW2 is a stunningly well written story of one man's coming to terms with life and death, but it is also a marvelously accurate portrait of the futility of war. Finally, it demonstrates the deeper myth that underlay the entire Vietnam experience, the relationship of that experience to the American "frontier mentality," and the harsh realization that the West is indeed more a state of mind than a geographic place.

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Buffalo Nickel. By C. W. Smith. (New York: Poseidon, 1989. 429 pages, $19.95.)

This carefully researched, beautifully written story of a Kiowa boy's transition from the world of his ancestors to the world of the fabulously wealthy is set against the Oklahoma oil boom years of the first three decades of the century. David Copperfield, the Indian boy, is both the focus and the center point of this story, but, in a way, his is a larger story of an American people.

Born on a reservation, David runs away from school when a peyote hallucination causes him to behave outrageously and stampede corralled buffalo on a stolen horse. After bumming around for a number of years, he settles on the Canadian River's banks, where oil is soon discovered by wildcatter Tom Quick. David's rise from "blanket Indian" to wealthy philanthropist seems charmed. But blessed as he is with luck in fortune, he is cursed in love. His wife, a well-worn saloon-singer named Laura, marries him for his money and, when she learns that he is not so stupid as to allow her to steal from him, declines into various debaucheries and addictions. Meanwhile, Iola, the Kiowa girl who truly loves him, tries to confront both the loss of him as a husband and their mutual loss of their Indian heritage.

Surrounded by colorful background characters, including disciples of Aimee Semple McPherson, and set in both rustic Oklahoma and booming Los Angeles, the novel encompasses both surrealistic beauty with inexplicable phenomena enhancing the fantasy of Smith's story and also grotesque cruelty and violence that recalls the barbarism of the Plains tribes. Even so, the book flows with an almost seamless serenity that reveals the characters' depth and probes deep into the fabric of our society. A sequel is promised, and, happily, looked forward to.

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New Poems: 1980–1988. By John Haines. (Brownsville, Oregon: Story Line Press, 1990. 93 pages, $16.95/$9.95.)

"Like all genuine poems," Dana Gioa says in the introduction to these poems, "they reward close reading, but . . . also repay meditation." There is no doubt that most of Haines's poems require close reading, for they have never been "easy"; indeed, almost by definition, poetry that makes use of the "deep image" technique with which Haines has built much of his work does not yield itself readily. Do these, then, repay meditation?

There is, on the surface, a difference between these poems and much, if not most, of the earlier poetry, for that poetry was clearly rooted in the land, a particular land (not "regionalism," at least in any bad sense, since Haines's poetry uses the concrete to speak beyond the immediate). But there is only one extended poem, "Rain Country" (a most moving poem), that relies directly upon images drawn from the Alaskan world; those images are used in other poems, but they are seldom developed with the biographical overtones of the earlier poetry. Biography, then, is muted; here is, rather, contemplation.

These poems are indeed, as Gioa also asserts, the poetry of maturity, yes, of more than maturity—this is the poetry of age, the poet truly, not literarily, aware that he is going towards death. And it is, therefore, a poetry of endings, if not of death. Perhaps the most powerful poem in the book is the "Meditation on a Skull Carved in Crystal" (and the weakest, since it never really escapes