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A SECOND LOOK: *Sing Down the Moon**

By PERRY NODELMAN

IN 1863 American soldiers forced the entire nation of the Navahos to walk the three hundred miles from their home territory to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, after destroying their villages, their livestock, and their crops. Many of them died along the way. The rest were held prisoner until 1868; in the postscript to *Sing Down the Moon*, Scott O'Dell reports that of the nearly eighty-five hundred Navahos who made the "Long Walk" to Fort Sumner, fifteen hundred died there. The Long Walk is the sort of event we tend nowadays either to ignore or to revel in. Many North Americans simply prefer not to hear about such unpleasant lapses in the good taste and manners of their ancestors. Many others like to hear again and again about such behavior as deliciously horrific confirmations of our collective social guilt. Either way, the Long Walk is a dangerous subject for a novelist to tackle – particularly for a children's novelist.

In telling of the amorality of our forefathers any novelist would find it hard to avoid turning the people they treated so cruelly into unbelievably superhuman, unremittingly heroic martyrs. Any novelist would find it hard not to rant about the horror of the Long Walk and about the terrible conditions the Navahos faced after it was over. But to indulge in melodrama, to report melodramatic events in the tone they seem to deserve, would only make them seem unbelievable. For a children's novelist the major difficulty of these events is their cruelty. Given the prejudice of many adults that children's novels ought not to depict ugliness – even the ugliness that history actually records – a children's novelist might be tempted to underplay the undoubtedly ugly implications of these events, which might even be turned into a chronicle of exciting adventures, fast action without any exploration of deeper implications. A novel about the Long Walk could easily

* *Sing Down the Moon* by Scott O'Dell; Houghton, 1970. \$9.95.

be a tasteless immersion in guilt or a thoughtless cowboy movie in print.

It might be fear of these dreadful possibilities that has caused readers to pay insufficient attention to *Sing Down the Moon*; no matter how much benevolent guilt liberals feel about the way white North Americans dealt with the native peoples of this continent, it's hard to imagine a good novel about the subject. But *Sing Down the Moon* is a fine novel — a very fine novel. Neither strident nor shallow, it is a small masterpiece of dramatic understatement that never confuses painful conflict with good, clean fun.

The most interesting quality of the book is its cool quietness. When a tribe hides from the "Long Knives," the white soldiers who invade its village, we read:

We ate all of the corn and slaughtered the sheep we had brought. Then we ground up the sheep bones and made a broth, which was hard to swallow. We lived on this for two days and when it was gone we had nothing to eat. Old Bear, who had been sick since we came to the mesa, died on the third day. And that night the baby of Shining Tree died. The next night was the first night of the full moon. It was then that my father said we must leave.

If the person speaking here feels anguish, no anguish is spoken of; we must guess at it. Throughout the novel we read of horrors without any sense that the person telling us about them is astonished that they happened. They did happen. They must be related. They are related, apparently quite accurately. If we are astonished by the brutality, the inhumanity, and the pain, it is because the events themselves are brutal, inhuman, and filled with pain, and not because the person who tells us about them demands these responses from us.

This quietness becomes all the more unsettling when we realize that the person telling us of these events is a young Navaho girl who was involved in them. Scott O'Dell does not allow his heroine to speak her name until almost the end of the book; constantly treated as a nonperson, she offers no one the name that defines her as a human being. But the absence of a name throughout most of the novel turns her into a universal voice, an objective reporter of despair who never begs our sympathy but who always gets it. The name eventually revealed is an ironic comment on those dark hours in Navaho history: Bright Morning.

O'Dell makes the absence of emotion with which Bright Morning tells her story an important theme. He reminds us again and again that the traditional Navaho culture demanded restraint and acceptance from its members. In a central episode Bright Morning describes this ceremony of her womanhood: "Everyone gave me orders. . . . This was to make me industrious and obedient." Obedience to the conventions of their society is required not only of Navaho women; Bright Morning's male friend Tall Boy must unconditionally accept the fact that a bullet wound making his arm useless automatically prevents him from being equal to the other men. No matter how he feels or what he does about it, " 'he will no longer be a warrior nor a hunter. He will have to sit with the women. Perhaps he will learn to weave and cut wood and shear sheep.' "

Navaho culture, as O'Dell describes it, demands not just obedience, but calm obedience – constant quiet. At the start of the novel Bright Morning wants to express her joy at spring-time.

I felt like singing. I wanted to leap and dance with joy, yet I stood quietly and watched the river running between the greening cotton-wood trees, for I knew that it is bad luck to be so happy. The gods do not like anyone to show happiness in this way and they punish those who do not obey them.

Later, Tall Boy will not consider escaping from Fort Sumner because " 'the gods will tell us what to do. . . . Now they punish us. When the time comes they will speak and we will hear them.' "

Throughout the novel the author makes it clear that the fatalistic Navahos were doomed when confronted with the self-seeking aggressiveness of the whites. The tragedy was that the Navahos' accepting stoicism was not a flaw in their social character; in fact, it had allowed them to survive for centuries under harsh circumstances. Nevertheless, what had been expedient became dangerous for them when a new factor entered the environment; for it was this stoicism that allowed the whites so easily to take advantage of the Navahos.

Never in *Sing Down the Moon* do the Navahos respond to brutality with emotions or actions that most of us would deem appropriate but that they themselves would have taken to be evidence of failure.

We passed the ruined fields of beans and corn and melons, the peach trees stripped of their bark and branches, our burned-out homes. We turned our eyes away from them and set our faces. Our tears were unshed.

Such passages are deeply affecting; not only do we realize the intense feeling seething beneath the calm façade, but as members of a culture that places less value on stoicism, we inevitably feel horror because tears are *not* shed and because cruel aggression is *not* met with angry defiance.

Scott O'Dell finds the stoicism of the Navahos both admirable and horrifying. Much of the power of *Sing Down the Moon* emerges from his exploration of these contradictory feelings by means of a carefully organized sequence of events. The novel tells three different stories, three consecutive episodes in the life of Bright Morning; but the stories are surprisingly similar to one another.

In the first episode fourteen-year-old Bright Morning, who is supposed to be tending sheep, runs home because she is afraid of a storm; she is punished for doing so, and her family makes it clear that the proper response to the storm is to accept it, to let it happen, and not to try to protect herself from danger by seeking the security of home. The second episode is an ironic variation on the first. Bright Morning is captured by a Spaniard; he sells her to a white woman for whom she works as a servant. Another Indian servant in the house advises the girl to accept and enjoy her captivity, to see it as a gift; but Bright Morning is not content until she finds a way of escaping – just as she took it upon herself earlier to run home from the storm. In regaining her traditional culture in this way, she contradicts that culture; she takes control of her own destiny rather than accept it.

In the third episode the girl is thus prepared to be defiant when she is captured again; this time the Long Knives – the white soldiers – drive all her people away from their village on the Long Walk. For a third time she wants to go home; and now it is clearly the right thing to do, for – paradoxically – she can live the traditional life of a Navaho only by following her own emotions in an un-Navaho-like way and by persuading others to do so. Bright Morning forces Tall Boy, now her husband, to emerge from a morass of lethargic passivity, and together they escape. Having reached home in this uncharac-

teristic way, the girl is now free to act more characteristically; her description of her emotions echoes her feelings noted near the beginning of the book: "I felt like shouting and dancing, like running around in circles, as I always did when I was very happy. But I walked quietly through the spring grass."

In exploring these tensions between obedience and independence, passivity and aggressiveness, emotion and stoicism, Scott O'Dell offers young readers more than just an accurate and dramatic depiction of history. When we are young, we are all Bright Mornings. We are both nurtured and imprisoned by our families, by our homes, and by our culture's traditions; and we must learn to deal with the Long Knives of bitter experience, to defend ourselves against them lest they destroy us – or even worse, make us Long Knives, too. The novel handles these familiar emotional issues honestly and affectingly; but it also convincingly describes an alien culture – without depriving it of its alienness. *Sing Down the Moon* is about people unlike ourselves; but as we read it, we realize that – like most good novels – it is also about ourselves. The story is very strange and very familiar – both at the same time.

NOTE (2017): When I wrote this in 1984, I thought of myself as a humane and tolerant person expressing humane, tolerant views. I'm uploading it three decades later because I find much of what I say here embarrassing--and because what embarrasses me is my utterly unconscious assumption of white male privilege. I praise O'Dell's choice of not providing his young Navaho narrator with a name for much of the book--a choice I now see as a commentary on the deprivation of her personhood that in fact confirms and reinforces that deprivation. I also praised O'Dell's depiction of the Navajo stoicism and refusal to express anger at what is happening to them--another confirmation of a hoary stereotype. Worst of all, I simply took it as an absolute truth that no one who was Navajo or even remotely like a Navajo would ever be part of the audience of the book. I have uploaded the article here not only because I feel guilty about what I once took for granted, and because I hope I have learned enough and grown enough to be less guilty now than I was in 1984.