



BOOK REVIEW

The Sorcerer's Dream. Alysa Braceau. *Booklocker.com*, 2010, 281 pp. ISBN 978-1-60910-156-5.

This provocative book begins in 2004 near a canal in Amsterdam—in other words, what many indigenous people call “Middle Earth.” But before it is finished, the author, Alysa Braceau, has taken her readers into other worlds and other realities.

At a workshop devoted to the writings of Carlos Castaneda, Braceau meets a Native American shaman, Running Deer, who sees “great power” in her. Eventually, he starts to teach her a number of shamanic techniques and provides a curriculum of esoteric wisdom. Before long, she is working as his apprentice, in a manner that resembles Castaneda’s studies with the alleged Yaqui sorcerer, don Juan Matus. He tells Braceau that mastery of these lessons will last for two and a half years and that she will reach “the totality” through dreaming. Again, this is reminiscent of Castaneda’s remarkable book *The Art of Dreaming* (1993). Both systems emphasize “lucid dreaming,” a phenomenon in which a dreamer becomes aware that he or she is dreaming.

Braceau meets with Running Deer on a fairly regular basis to receive instruction, usually through exercises and experiences. Some of don Juan Matus’ language emerges in these lessons, examples being “assemblage point,” “dream body,” and “impeccable action.” There is some overlap between Running Deer’s worldview and that of don Juan Matus, even though they hail from very different cultural systems—the former from a more northern part of the continent and the latter from Mesoamerica, mainly the Toltecs, Aztecs, and (by extension) the Mayas. Running Deer tells Braceau that the two systems should not be compared, and I would urge the reader who is familiar with the Castaneda books to avoid making these comparisons while immersing oneself in this particular tradition and what it has to offer.

However, I do want to make one important comparison between the teachers themselves. For me, don Juan Matus was primarily a sorcerer. He told

Castaneda that he healed people at one time, which would have made him a shaman. But his role in the Castaneda books is that of a practitioner who knows how to accumulate and utilize power. Running Deer, on the other hand, provides many useful techniques for self-healing. This is attained through awareness of those aspects of the world that Westerners typically ignore, allowing this knowledge to enlarge one's grasp of reality. And with this new-found knowledge, one can obtain freedom from emotional blocks and growth. This would put Running Deer into the category of shamanic healers. But his behavior in other parts of the book is more like that of a sorcerer. For anthropologists, the critical difference is that a shaman works within the context of a community while the sorcerer is more independent, even more isolated. Running Deer seems to fit this profile. But, again, anthropologists constantly create distinctions that real-life encounters dispel and disregard.

Running Deer helps Braceau find her inner child, improve her relationships, encounter non-ordinary entities, and feel more comfortable with the natural world. To me, this is the supreme irony of the book: the more one is at ease with Nature, the easier it is to contact spiritual beings who have no place in the accepted Western worldview.

Castaneda was a more gripping writer than Braceau, but Braceau's book is easier to read and to apply. She has an engaging narrative style and tells stories that are engrossing—so much so that some critical readers will suspend judgment on their veridicality. Nonetheless, there is a lack of literature on female sorcerers and this book makes an admirable effort to fill this lacuna. When, at the end, she attains “totality,” the reader will share Braceau's exaltation and will wonder to what use she will put this new awareness. Maybe a sequel will provide the answer.

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REFERENCE CITED

- Castaneda, Carlos
1993 *The Art of Dreaming*. New York: HarperCollins.