

3. The notion of “rugged individualism” carries with it the idea of “every man for himself,” or that people should strive for self-sufficiency before they even consider taking responsibility for the welfare of others. Tribalism, as set forth by Native American novelists, asserts a much different attitude concerning the individual’s responsibility to others. Using examples from the book, how does the tribe cohere even under domination by outsiders? What role do the elders play? What function do traditional stories have? What are the benefits of individualism? What are the problems? What are the benefits of tribalism? What are the problems? The romantic notion of Native Americans as wildmen in paradise who act as they please without conscience or inhibitions seems far different than the character of Archilde. What things trouble Archilde’s conscience? What considerations both motivate and inhibit his actions?

4. Chapter ten recounts events in boarding school that diminished Archilde’s faith in Catholicism. When others are kneeling to pray before a cloud shaped like a crucifix (“The sign! Kneel and pray!”), Archilde notices a bird flying past the cloud, according the cloud no special notice or regard. The bird recognized no “sign,” and Archilde uses this in his own mind to prove that the significance of the cloud was merely an abstraction, a human invention. What does the Bible say about man’s dominion over the animals? Why might a Christian not be troubled if animals fail to recognize the importance of a religious event? Archilde seems to gather a sort of wisdom from the bird’s flight. Is that paganism? Or is that term a misnomer for Archilde’s relationship to other creatures?

5. The aged Modesto begins the ceremony with the words, “Ho! Let it be as it was in old times!” When Ronald Reagan hosted the “G.E.Theater” on TV, he emphasized his sponsor’s motto: “At G.E., progress is our most important product.” Discuss how these opposing statements embody a vast difference in the values of these two cultures. How do those values affect a person’s lifestyle? How do those values affect a person’s definition of success?

Supplemental Reading

- McNickle, D’Arcy. *The Hawk is Hungry and Other Stories*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992.
- McNickle, D’Arcy. *They Came Here First: The Epic of the American Indian*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1949.
- McNickle, D’Arcy. *Wind from an Enemy Sky*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988.
- Parker, Dorothy. *Singing an Indian Song: A Biography of D’Arcy McNickle*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992.
- Purdy, John L. *Word Ways: The Novels of D’Arcy McNickle*. Tucson: University of Arizona, 1990. A study of the novels.

***Soul of a People: Writing America’s Story* is a major documentary television program about the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers’ Project produced by Spark Media, a Washington, D.C.-based production and outreach company specializing in issues of social change. *Soul of a People* is being broadcast on the Smithsonian Channel HD (<http://www.smithsonianchannel.com>).**

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SOUL OF A PEOPLE

Writing America’s Story

The Surrounded

by D’Arcy McNickle

Discussion guide by Lowell Jaeger

D’Arcy McNickle and the Federal Writers’ Project

For D’Arcy McNickle, the summer of 1935 marked the deepest pit of the Depression. His fiction had accumulated rejection slips since the 1920s and the nation’s economic despair had made publication of his novel even more unlikely. In September 1935 McNickle joined the Federal Writers’ Project staff in Washington, D.C., to bring a Native American perspective to the WPA guides. Until then he had been ambivalent about his Native American background. From that time onward he declared himself a “native of the Flathead Reservation in Montana.” In December 1935, a publisher accepted *The Surrounded* for publication in early 1936. McNickle could scarcely believe that his years of work had finally come to fruition. His job with the Writers’ Project led to a permanent job with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where McNickle worked tirelessly as an advocate for Native Americans for many years.

—David A. Taylor, co-writer and co-producer, *Soul of a People: Writing America’s Story*

D'Arcy McNickle's first novel, *The Surrounded*, is in many ways the beginning of a "Native American renaissance" in contemporary literature, and McNickle's work might be looked upon as the mold from which other modern Native American novels are cast. McNickle's novels prefigure the writings of James Welch, Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and Louise Erdrich. Each of these authors shares McNickle's interest in the culture clash between white individualism and Native American tribalism. Each of their protagonists, like Archilde in *The Surrounded*, has come back home for the spiritual nourishment and sense of belonging which is insufficiently available, if not unattainable, outside the circle of tribal life.

D'Arcy McNickle was born in St. Ignatius, Montana, in 1904, but soon after his birth, he was kidnapped by whites. He was eventually educated at the University of Montana and Oxford University, and became an anthropologist, professor, author, administrator, and founder of the Newberry Library in Chicago, which houses a prestigious collection of books by and about Native Americans. Successful in the non-Native American world, McNickle also valued and nourished his tribal heritage. Thus he could write with expertise on the contrasts between these two realities.

In *The Surrounded*, Archilde Leon has come home to the reservation to visit his family. He has been educated in boarding schools far from Montana and now supports himself as a fiddler in a show house in Portland, Oregon. During his absence, Archilde has become estranged from his family and the Native American way of life. At first he has difficulty relating to his own people, reminding himself that "When you came home to your Indian mother you had to remember that it was a different world." Archilde intends only a brief visit with his relatives and plans to return to his life in Portland soon. However, a complex chain of circumstances prolongs Archilde's stay in St. Ignatius. Soon—enmeshed in troubles—he cannot leave.

What brings Archilde home to the reservation in the first place? Perhaps it is a basic human need to return from time to time to the place of one's origin. We trace our family trees to reach some

deeper perspective about who we are and from what histories we've descended. This "homing" instinct seems particularly strong in Native American cultures. The story of Archilde Leon is similar in this regard to the novels of many other Native American authors whose protagonists return to their native land and eventually—though often unwittingly—to their Native values and perspectives.

So the "why" of Archilde's return is not to be questioned; he simply must go home as if in response to an irresistible call within his own psyche. In the opening of the book, Archilde sits at the creek's edge and meditates upon his return, knowing that the forces which had brought him home "were nothing that could be touched and yet they had strength and substance. He had come a thousand miles because of their pull upon him; some day they might pull him from half across the world."

What prevents Archilde from leaving? What circumstances compel him to postpone his return to Portland? Archilde, like D'Arcy McNickle, is a man torn between two contrasting ways of life. He has mastered the ways of the white man's individualism. He is educated, self-supporting, and is striking out on a path of his own outside the reservation. But his instincts are also tribal; he feels obligated to his people and puts their needs above his own. Thus Archilde embodies the clash of two cultures—he is reluctant to give up his hard-won, self-sufficient individualism in the white world, but he cannot bring himself to completely forsake the collective needs of his own people, his own tribe.

So the question—What prevents Archilde from leaving?—is an important consideration in understanding the nature of tribalism. It is easy for non-Native Americans to empathize with (and approve of) Archilde's plans for himself in Portland, but more challenging for them to comprehend the forces that pull Archilde back into his tribe and hold him there. In the end it is more than fate, dumb luck, or mere circumstance that binds Archilde to his home. When Archilde's white father, Max Leon, first sees his son after an absence, he exclaims bitterly, "So you've joined the tribe again, eh?" Archilde takes offense at this

remark, but chapter by chapter Max Leon's words come true.

Other characters in the book are also drifting away from the laws, customs, and religion of the non-Native American world that surrounds the reservation on all sides. When the government agent commands that Mike and Narcisse, Archilde's two small nephews, be returned to boarding school, the boys resist by fleeing to the woods and living in a teepee. Significantly, the boys are afraid of the "Black Robes" (priests) and the teachings of Catholicism. Mike has been punished at school and suffers episodes of bed wetting and nightmares. He is cured of these troubles when old Modeste arranges to give him special honors at a traditional Salish ceremony. Similarly, Archilde's mother confesses her troubles to the priests, but doesn't feel right within herself until she participates in a traditional Salish "whipping." Although she has been a devout Catholic for most of her life, Archilde's mother rejects the white man's religion entirely by the close of the book, asking on her death bed not to let the priests preside over her.

A concise and readable history of the Black Robes amidst the Flatheads in Montana can be found in K. Ross Toole's *Montana: An Uncommon Land*. Toole tells in greater detail of the Flathead expeditions (1831, 1835, 1837, 1839) which journeyed from St. Ignatius to St. Louis in search of Catholicism and the "power of the crossed sticks." In 1840, the famous Jesuit missionary, Father De Smet, arrived in St. Ignatius to manage the church and convert the eager Flatheads.

For awhile, relations between the Black Robes and the Flatheads proceeded smoothly, but in 1845 Father Ravalli wrote that the Flatheads had suddenly reverted "to savage obscenity and shameless excesses of the flesh." What had gone wrong? Toole maintains that from the start Father De Smet knew the Flatheads believed that the powers of the Black Robes would protect the tribe against the Blackfeet, whom the Flatheads feared and hated. He also knew that the priests had "quite obviously overestimated the depth of the moral and abstract nature of the conversions they had made and underestimated the extent to

which the Flatheads thought of Catholicism as a practical protective cloak—in other words, simply as powerful medicine. *The Surrounded*, although it speaks of events occurring almost a century after the Flathead apostasy of the 1840s, tells of similar failings of Catholicism among the Flatheads. In conversation with Max Leon, Father Grepilloux admits that Catholicism and the imposition of European values have been more of a bane to the Flatheads than a blessing. "You have least to complain of," Father Grepilloux tells Max Leon, "You lose your sons, but these people have lost a way of life, and with it their pride, their dignity, their strength." Then dutifully he adds, "Of course... they have God."

Questions for Discussion

1. In chapter four, Max Leon talks of his earliest days as a non-Native American settler in St. Ignatius: "You stood there and what you saw made you over. You were born again. What you had done before that moment was of no consequence." In chapter six, Archilde is captivated by the stories told by the elders of the tribe: "For the first time he had really seen it happen. First the great numbers and the power, then the falling away, the battles and starvation in the snow, the new hopes and the slow facing of disappointment, and then no hope at all, just this living in the past." These passages present a stark contrast between the white man's and the Native American's notions of the "past." How do they differ? How are these conflicting notions at work in the story of Archilde's return to his home?

2. Archilde's troubles may stem from the expectations other people put on him. His mother expects Archilde to take her hunting. His father expects Archilde to take over the ranch. His brother expects Archilde to join the horse thieves. Think of other characters in the book and the expectations they have of Archilde. Then think of how the consequences of those expectations get Archilde more deeply involved with his people and more deeply in trouble with the law. Is Archilde a weak character? Is he a caring person, or is he simply being used by others?