

Book Reviews

I suppose, too, that references to stuck records are fitting here, since *Language Lessons* is the first book published by Third Man Books, a division of Third Man Records, which still produces vinyl records in this era of everything digital. In a day when we can carry fifty or five-hundred books or songs on little handheld devices, the publication of a book only in hardcover, with accompanying records in vinyl, is unusual, but that's the Third Man way. From the records to the posters to the book, every piece of art in *Language Lessons* is part of the essential aesthetic experience.

White Indians

Being the First Part of Two

by Michael Gills

Guide Dog Books, 2013

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124 pages

Reviewed by Jacque E. Day

White Indians begins with a drowning, and it ends with a baptism. In summing up Michael Gills's latest effort—a visionary memoir rooted in his close encounters with the beautiful mess of living in this world—I have come up with *fleeing in search of*. Whether Gills is facing down a forest fire at Flaming Gorge, Utah, or enduring a Zuni Sundance ceremony in the July New Mexico heat, he is both seeking and running from the specter of his mother, whose own drowning death has left him inconsolable. This relentless quest for solace puts the man he wants to be—a grounded husband and father—at war with the man raging to emerge, one who seeks out the extreme and lunges into it. It is a battle of elements, with earth and air in the middle, and fire and water pulling him hard from the outside.

Gills begins his collection with the essay “What the Newly Dead Don't Know but Learn.” Had the first sentence borne a different

outcome, this book wouldn't be here to be read, and we'd have never known a Michael Gills: "My cousin found a hand-grenade in a Camp Robinson stock pond that summer, pulled the pin and tossed it at me. *Die*, he said" It was a dry, Arkansas summer, and the twelve-year-old Gills had been sent to live with his Uncle Earl after "Mama and Daddy had started burning each others' clothes in the backyard" Earl ran an outfit called Diamond V Stables, offering weekend horse trail rides at \$100 a clip through Camp Robinson, an Arkansas National Guard training center, where it was "not uncommon to find a booby-trap behind every bush." The young Gills stands, frozen, the dud grenade at his feet, and the adult author reflects that perhaps his decision to do nothing—to not run, nor tell his uncle what his cousin had done—brought on the bad luck "that summer afternoon that severed me from my childhood."

Earl has decided to take the horse tour across the Saline River, and like with many situations that go terribly wrong, it starts out calm and okay. The tour enters the water, begins to cross. Earl goes first, riding Chico, then Earl's friend Macky on a Palomino named May Day. Gills, riding a horse named Blazed, is the last in line. The lead riders don't see the lurking death trap, a fisherman's leftover quivering line stretched the full width of the river. The scene quickly turns surreal. May Day, neck-hooked to the line, panics in the water. The rest of the team quickly returns to shore, "some crying out and some just staring, the way you look at a house on fire," while Earl and Macky attempt to free the terrified animal. But the current is too swift, the hooks too fixed and the struggling horse too strong. "Maybe five minutes passed and I don't think anyone knew what to do—it's like that, watching a drowning. People scream for you to help them, they beg and plead and cuss and pray, but finally there's not a whole lot that can be done"

Years later, reeling in horror and grief following his mother's drowning, Gills travels with his wife and daughter into Flaming Gorge, Utah, the setting of the second essay, "Earth's Last Night." Once again, Gills begins with an idyllic moment, this time on the banks of the Green River.

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The looming danger eases into their space with a kind of serenity that you'd expect from a quiet cloud overhead. In fact, Gills tells his wife, "Clouds. It's just a cloud," when in fact it is a raging forest fire bearing down on them. In the moments to follow, an officer tells them to leave, now, and even to leave their dogs (they don't). As they flee on the only open road out, Gills calls the fire ahead, about to cross in front of them, a "red tsunami."

... I drove straight into it, this quiet place, thinking this is it, here she is.

The road out was two narrow lanes, fairly straight, though there was one stretch with a hard S-turn, a steep switchback. We were the very last. The helicopter flew straight above us. Our windows were down. Roaring to our left, the fire was near enough to have sucked the oxygen, and therefore sound, from the air. I would later learn that we drove into an actual vacuum.

In the third, and longest, essay, "White Indians," Gills recalls his experience at a Native American Sundance on Zuni Territory, New Mexico. Four years after his mother's death, he is still running, and now, he runs headlong into the fire. The result is a relentlessly hot essay. In the sweltering desert, Gills serves as a fireman—one who tends the sweat-lodge flame—for the violent days-long ceremony, in an effort to connect more closely with the earth and with the spirit world (some, though not Gills, even undergo flesh-sacrifice). He is still *in search of*, and he has come to this place to look death in the eye: "... where the dead go, is there love? Part of me is here for her, Mama."

The experience of reading *White Indians* is to stumble into the presence of a man who plunges into danger as if he has nothing to lose, then follow him into the pits of hell for the sheer curiosity of finding out how it all ends. You go with him into the Sundance because it's almost unbelievable that such a thing could occur, and when he escapes (after fulfilling his obligation but before the ceremony

has ended), you'll know, *feel*, that he can't fast enough get out of the realm where the living and dead exist together. "As I leave ceremony, a hundred, a thousand beings, pissed beyond belief, they scream behind me. The souls of all the dead rage behind my back. They feel like fire. They *are* fire." And when he camps next to a river on the way home, then completely submerges himself in the current—for now choosing the danger of the water over the peril of the flame—maybe, as I did, you'll breathe a big, giant sigh of relief for him.