

Short Stack

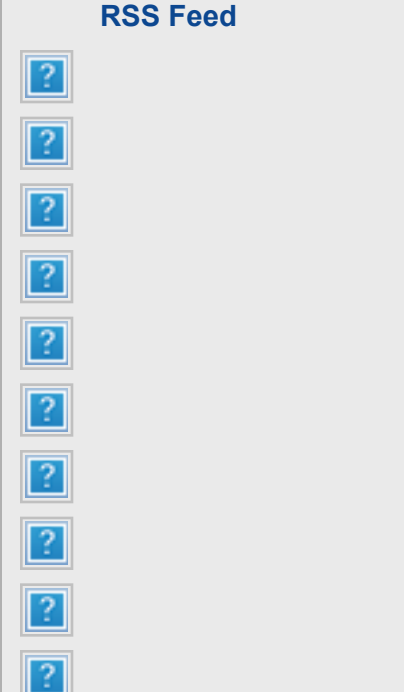
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.Polite

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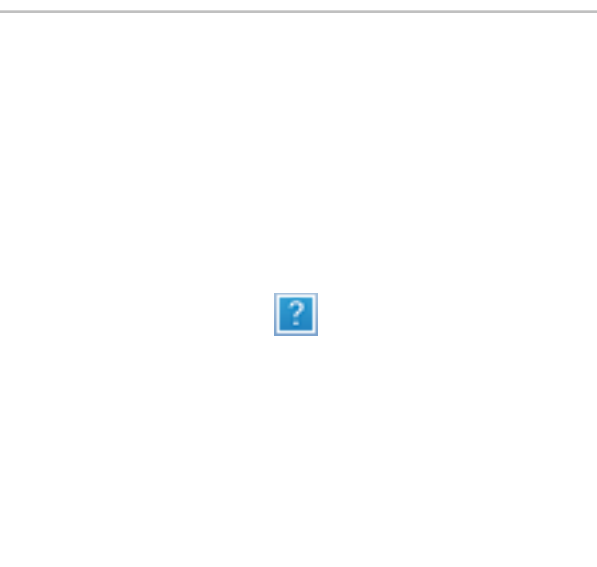
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Reader Spotlight: Author Paul Chaat Smith, National Museum of the American Indian

Non-natives charmed by [The Education of Little Tree](#), [Dances with Wolves](#), [The Last of the Mohicans](#), and [Thunderheart](#), for starters, might find in Paul Chaat Smith's **Everything You Know About Indians Is Wrong**, a bracing wake-up call.

In this rigorously insightful collection of essays written between 1992 to 2008, Smith, a wry, sharp-edged cultural critic, and associate curator for the [National Museum of the American Indian](#), addresses the myriad ironic complexities of American Indian reality. Some samples: "I despise the whole concept of tribal certification, but I have to admit I felt all warm inside when I picked up my own Comanche ID card." "I'm not oblivious to the fact that my career in the Indian business began with AIM and I am now a curator for the Smithsonian: a government employee." "U.S. history teaches us that some of the most catastrophic forces visited upon Indians were created by our most enlightened and progressive friends. Good intentions aren't enough; our circumstances require more critical thinking and less passion, guilt, and victimization."

Smith, who as a child attended Cherokee Lane Elementary School in Adelphi, Maryland, has also lived in Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, California, New York and Virginia, and has spoken extensively on native culture in North and South America, and Europe.



(Photo by Cynthia Frankenburg)

Within **Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong**—the newest addition to the Indigenous Americas Series of the University of Minnesota Press—is a call to native artists to refuse to play the invented romantic, mythological and other cliched roles assigned to them by others, and to demand "honesty in their own work and that of others that truly honors the outrageous story of our continued existence." For these artists, Smith says, a great project awaits that is "nothing less than a reclamation of our common history of surviving the unparalleled disaster of European contact and the creation of something new and dynamic from the ashes."

It is also important, Smith believes, for American Indian voices to be a contributive presence on the global stage. At the 2005 [International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennial](#), he said, "It isn't about us talking and you listening; it's about an engagement that moves our collective understanding forward." What really matters is "whether we can build new understandings of what it means to be human in the twenty-first century."

Book World was pleased to catch up with Paul Chaat Smith to ask a few questions about his relationship with books:

As a child, what was your experience with portrayals of American Indians in books, e.g., the First Thanksgiving, Pocahontas and John Smith, the Battle of Little Big Horn, Sacajawea and Lewis and Clark, etc.
Don't remember reading about these events in school, so I think I must have pretty much ignored them.

Were you positively influenced by any non-native books?
Lots. Robert Caro's [The Power Broker](#), Hunter Thompson's [Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72](#), and [One Hundred Years of Solitude](#), by Gabriel García Márquez, to name a few.

What are some of your all-time favorite books?
[Parting the Waters : America in the King Years 1954-63](#), by Taylor Branch
[Memory of Fire](#), by Eduardo Galeano
[Waking the Dead](#), by Scott Spencer
[The Making of Black Revolutionaries](#), by James Forman

What are you currently reading?
[All Art is Propaganda](#), by George Orwell.
[The Education of Henry Adams](#), by Henry Adams.
[Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi](#), by Geoff Dyer

Are you a parent? What books or authors on native culture do you think our children should be exposed to?

Not a parent. I push back against the tendency to find the "right" reading list ... I think it's more important to develop critical thinking skills, to ask questions, and to challenge conventional wisdom.

How are your audiences reacting to your efforts to dispel people's illusions about American Indian culture, past and present?
It's both depressing and encouraging. Myths about Indians are tied up in myths about America itself, so undoing them is difficult, perhaps even impossible. At the same time, I think most Americans understand they've been lied to, that the [Pocahontas](#) story they know is a fairy tale, and are open to alternative ways of understanding our collective history.

I'm not really interested in teaching anyone about Indians. I'm interested in being part of a broad conversation about how events five centuries ago created the world we live in today. The Indian experience is at the center of that narrative, but the story is about all of us, not just Indians.

Besides your own book, what books do you recommend as essential reading for people who want a correct view of American Indian history and modern American Indian culture?

Not sure what you mean "besides your own book." Is that some kind of joke?! People should start with **Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong**, then read my first book, [Like a Hurricane: The Indian Movement from Alcatraz to Wounded Knee](#) (1996, with Robert Warrior). After that, stand by and wait for further instructions.

What books by native writers need to be written?
Most urgent: a multi-volume biography of Eartha Kitt. In fact, that might be my next project!

By Mary Ishimoto Morris | June 2, 2009; 11:55 AM ET [Mary Morris](#)
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This is refreshing. I'm looking forward to reading Mr. Smith's book. I hope it addresses issues of cultural appropriation, and how that only further reinforces romantic myths about the inherent spirituality of "exotic" peoples.

Posted by: Novanova | June 2, 2009 5:12 PM

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