

Scribblings: Paul Chaat Smith

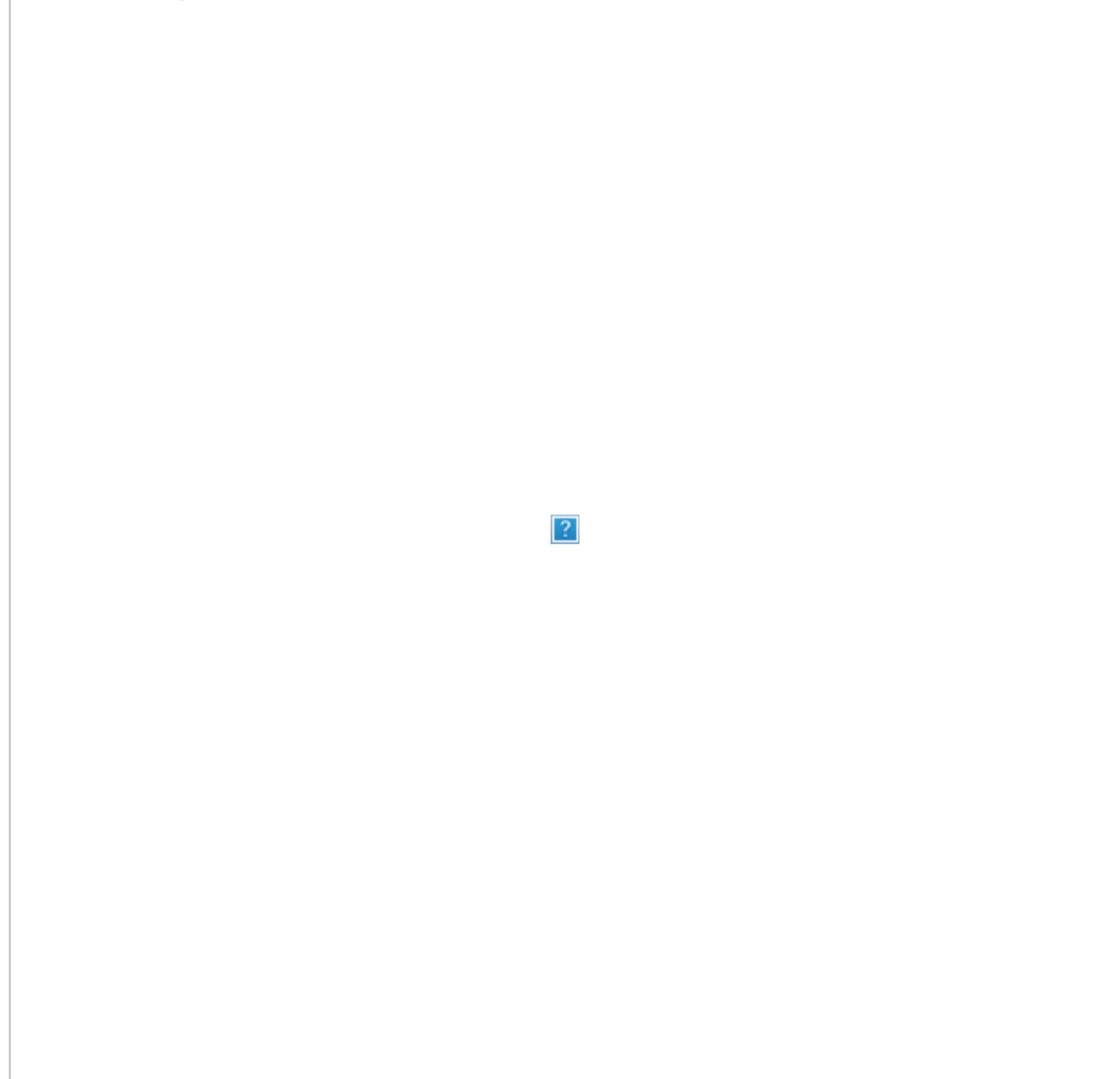


On one of the first springtime Saturdays in April, I managed to slip down to the Smithsonian's [National Museum of the American Indian](#) to catch its associate curator, Paul Chaat Smith, read from his latest book *Everything You Know about Indians Is Wrong*. Not exactly an event to herald the death of a wet, extended winter, but the book title and press release had my attention. I wanted to know more about the book – and the man behind it. Spring, for the moment, could wait.

I wasn't disappointed.

To understand the author is to understand the book that much more. It's less a cohesive treatise on any particular point – and if you're looking for a "top ten" list based on the title, you'll be sorely disappointed. As Paul stated, "It's a book title, folks, not to be taken literally. Of course I don't mean everything, just most things. And 'you' really means we, as in all of us."

Photo courtesy of [AlaskanLibrarian](#)



Occupation of Wounded Knee – Y4.In 8/13:W 91, courtesy of [AlaskanLibrarian](#)

Much of Paul's journey in writing the essays within the book coalesced during the political radicalism of the 1970's – he joined the American Indian Movement right after the national spotlight focused on the group during their [Siege of Wounded Knee](#) in 1973. While the Siege ended up being the group's pinnacle, Paul stuck with AIM through its decline and breakdown in later years from dysfunction and infighting. He moved to New York, "the city of choice for political exiles," and then eventually to DC, working as a temp and writing on the side about art and politics. And whenever an Indian museum asked him to write, he always accepted.

This exposure led to a phone call ten years ago, when the NMAI approached him about writing one of their books. At that time, the NMAI museum was in New York and Paul thought he knew a lot about it and what it stood for.

Through his journey with the NMAI (something he, at one time, called "a bad idea whose time has come"), he admits he discovered two things: "There is no one true representation, no one voice that speaks for the American Indian experience. And secondly, even the best of intentions sometimes ends in catastrophe." His critical look at AIM in [Like a Hurricane](#), for example, seeks to dispel the "modern myth" of the movement, seen today as a "spiritual movement," rather than the political one it was.

In a way, his latest book seeks to force the reader to confront the "modern mythology" slowly coming to form about Native Americans. Public understanding gravitates to what popular culture says, while the variety of Indian voices are slowly drowned out in the static. It's a duality that is hard to wrestle with, but one that Paul embraces with his work at the NMAI. "We try to show the collection of voices here," he said, "which is not an easy road, and we fail as often as we succeed. But I think in the end as long as the visitor walks away questioning what they thought they knew, then I think we've made a start."

Everything You Know... attempts to do that, through Paul's own voice. It's a very entertaining read; while it does critique at times the (often) disputed role Indians have had in the U.S., it also explores with dry wit and humor how today's media portrays "the noble savage." The book walks the line between skepticism and empathy, and at the end the reader has to admit that the book title is indeed, accurate.

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked Paul what he thought his biggest contribution to the museum was. It took him aback for a few moments; "I've never really looked at that for myself," was his honest reply. After some more discussion, he admitted that the current [Fritz Scholder](#) exhibit was, so far, a successful representation of his own contribution. "It's not what people think of as 'Indian art' yet, in many ways, it visually conveys what we're trying to say about the breadth of the Native voice." A statement that can also describe Paul's book.

The NMAI strives continually to not only educate, but *express*. Native Americans are indeed part of this country's past – but also in many ways, a key part of its future as well. Taking the time to listen to the voices that make up the patina of the Native experience is something that helps us not only remember history, but *make* it.

You can catch Paul Chaat Smith at *Politics & Prose on Saturday, May 2nd at 6 pm* as he reads some selections from his new book. He also wanted me to let everyone know of a new exhibit coming this fall, where the NMAI will be showcasing [Brian Jungen's Strange Comfort](#) exhibit, opening October 16.



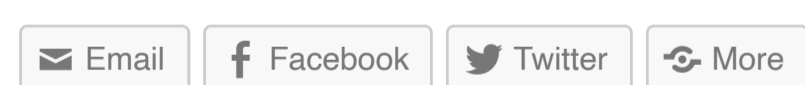
Ben H. Rome

Having lived in the DC area for ten years, Ben still loves to wander the city with his wife, [shooting lots of photos](#) and exploring all the latest exhibits and galleries. A certified hockey fanatic, he spends some time debating the Washington Capitals club with friends – but everyone knows of his three decade love affair with the Pittsburgh Penguins.

A professional writer, gamer, photographer, and Lego enthusiast, [Ben remains captivated by DC](#) and doesn't plan on leaving any time soon.



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5 thoughts on "Scribblings: Paul Chaat Smith"



Chester on April 28, 2009 at 2:12 pm said:

I have only been to the museum once, but hearing this makes me want to go back again!



Elizabeth on April 28, 2009 at 2:19 pm said:

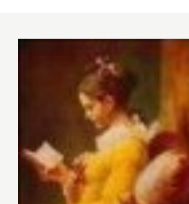
I love the title, the book is engaging!



Anna on April 28, 2009 at 11:04 pm said:

I bought the book after the talk and read it. It's good! There are some really witty essays. And I can't wait for the Brian Jungen exhibit. Jungen did this amazing piece of a whale's skeleton out of white plastic chairs. And masks made out of Nike Air Jordans?!?! Sooo brilliant.

<http://www.cbc.ca/arts/artdesign/jungen.html>



Becky on April 30, 2009 at 1:08 am said:

Sounds fascinating- wish I could have been there to listen to it! I am a huge history buff and find the American Indians to be extremely interesting!

I just finished reading [George Feldman's](#) latest book titled, "Cannibalism, Headhunting and Human Sacrifice in North America: A History Forgotten," that also taught me a lot about the history of various North American tribes, which I found to be intriguing. This is a book about terror, but it is about terror with a purpose, whether performed by indigenous peoples, or their invaders. I loved it!

Pingback: [The Strange Comfort of Brian Jungen](#) » [We Love DC](#)



BY BEN H. ROME

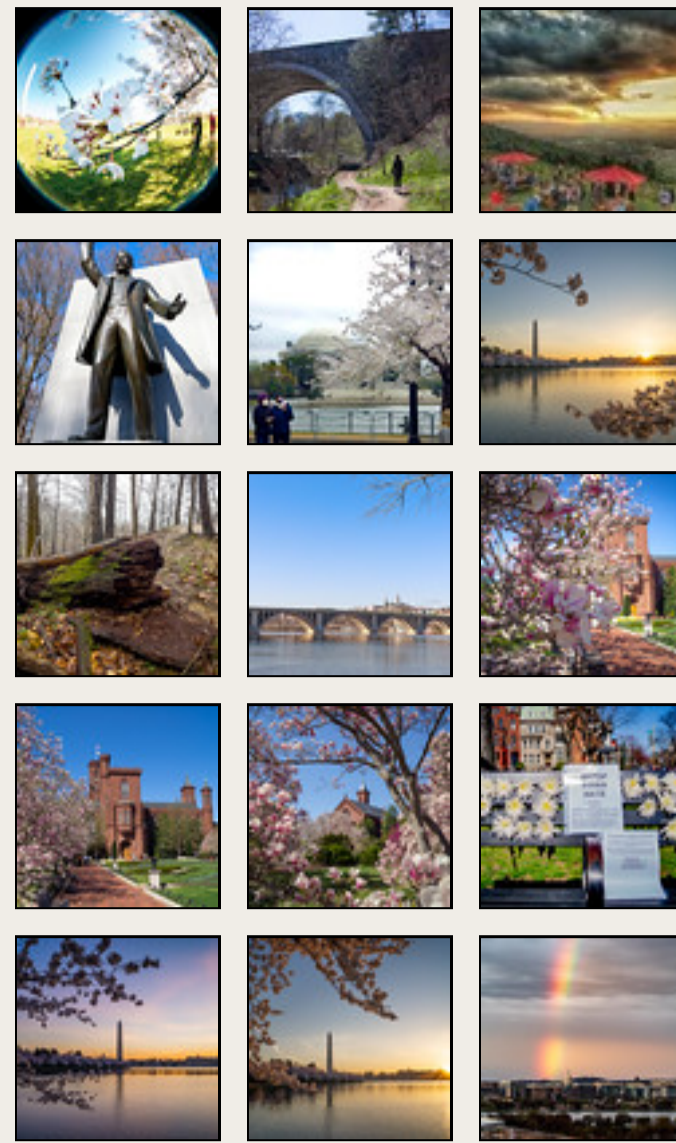
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