you can be sure, however, that Oxendine’s work will remain a well-used, well-referenced text within that process.

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Francis La Flesche is best known as a Native American ethnographer. His renditions of Omaha and Osage sacred texts are still among the finest accounts of First Nations ceremonial language available to us. For a time he also wrote fiction and autobiography, but gave it up in favor of ethnography after 1901. His account of his boyhood experience in a Presbyterian mission school, *The Middle Five*, is well known. His short stories, however, remained largely unpublished or out of print until many of them were brought together by James W. Parins and Daniel F. Littlefield Jr. They represent, the editors tell us, “only an interlude in the development of a remarkable Omaha intellect” (p.xxxiv).

Parins and Littlefield suggest that La Flesche “lacked the intensity of literary skill” necessary for a successful literary career (p.xxx). His work, they say, “is full of brilliant beginnings, bright flashes of language, and narrative fits and starts that rarely move to climax or conclusion” (p.xxi). Despite this warning, I found myself reading the stories as successfully interconnected Native American narratives rather than as failed works of Western fiction lacking the expected genre conventions of climax and conclusion. What La Flesche may not have accomplished in any particular story, the editors make possible by presenting a group of them under a single cover. Together, these stories bring the reader close to the “brilliant beginnings [and] bright flashes of language” that characterize Native American oral tradition. They are a circle of interconnected narratives, not a single narrative line leading to denouement.

The collection begins with adaptations of traditional Omaha stories, some of which La Flesche himself translated for James Owen Dorsey between 1870 and 1881. Comparing the Dorsey versions with those of La Flesche is instructive. Dorsey’s free translation of “The Bird Chief” begins:
All the birds were called together. To them was said, "Which-ever one of you can fly furthest in the sky shall be chief." All the birds flew to a great height (Dorsey, 1890:581).

La Flesche introduces the story by setting it in the context of oral narration. His story begins:

Ja-bae-ka came in with a big armful of wood, threw it down with a crash, stamped his feet, and gave his blanket a few vigorous flaps to shake off the snow (p.3).

La Flesche presents the story as a contextualized reading of oral tradition. The old man's narration begins:

of all the living things brought into existence by the breath of Wa-kon'da, none but the birds possess the wonderful power of leaving the earth, lifting themselves into the air, and moving at will in the midst of the restless winds (p.4).

The narrator continues:

Once in the progress of time, so the story tellers say, there came out of the ever silent depths of the blue, far above the reach of earthly sounds, a mysterious voice commanding the feathered creatures of the earth to gather at a certain place, where on an appointed day they were to display their power of flight (p.5).

La Flesche is faithful to the Native American poetic convention of citing sources ("so the story tellers say"). Dorsey's literal interlinear version is true to the same convention, but his free translation is not. The former begins:

The birds - all - they called them, they say. Bird - which one upper world - at the furthest - flying - you reach - you who move leader - you be - shall - said they say. And - all at equal heights - higher in the air - went they say.

Dorsey's free translation is only a synopsis of what in context would have been a richly suggestive oral performance. In Ke-ma-ha, La Flesche successfully breathes life back into these stories and creates new ones out of his own experience.

Other stories in Ke-ma-ha reflect La Flesche's own ambivalence about being an assimilated Indian. The story of Ne-ma-ha is particularly interesting. It describes an Omaha boy who is driven from his camp by an abusive father. There is more than a little resonance with La Flesche's early experience of being expelled with his mother from his father's polygamous family, and later being adopted by Alice Fletcher. Ne-ma-ha sets out on a traditional vision quest and is rewarded with "a mysterious consciousness of the presence near him of some living thing" (p.121). In this case, though,
the “presence turns out to be two White men, one of whom adopts him and raises him in New Orleans. When the educated and assimilated boy, now known as Robert Merriman, returns to administer his step-father’s trading post, he discovers that his father had been blinded by lightning as a punishment for driving him away. Soon after Ne-ma-ha/Robert returns, his Indian father dies. The young man is stricken with the fear that “he might have been to blame for it all” (p.128). La Flesche himself experienced this fear when Omahas said that his father died because Francis took the tribe’s Sacred Pole to the Peabody Museum. He must also have been troubled at having offered to obtain for the Peabody the bones of a person empowered to keep the Sacred Pack of War (La Flesche, 1890). Like Ne-ma-ha’s father, this person had been struck by lightning, but unlike the fictional father, this person had been killed rather than blinded by it.

There is a lot more to these stories than perhaps even Francis intended when he wrote them. Together, they present a view of Omaha life through the genre conventions of Omaha narrative as La Flesche understood them. As Gerald Ramsey points out in his essay on another story, “The Song of Flying Crow” (strangely not included in this volume), La Flesche deserves respect for being an important figure in Native American writing (Ramsey, 1994). The stories collected in Ke-ma-ha bear out his words of praise. The book should be required reading for any course in Native American literature.

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