



# **All My Sins Are Relatives (North American Indian Prose Award)**

*William S. Penn*

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The customary cant about being an American Indian goes like this: Indians must live in wide open spaces; they must define their spirituality by chant, dance, and drum; they must pass down their traditions with reverent care; and they must offer tourists Indian art and Indian experiences to take home. On one side of commercial Indianness there is sloppy sentimentality, and on the other, speechless hatred.

But what of those born between, like W. S. Penn, with an Anglo parent demanding that Indianness be abandoned and an Indian parent clinging to all that can be held? What of those who grew up in the cities? Can they express more than confusion, frustration, and rage? Are there alternatives to assimilation, submission, or revolt?

In *All My Sins Are Relatives* Penn finds in his own family three generations trying to come to terms with their differences and their Indianness. Within its pages, Penn describes learning the depths of his love for his grandfather, to whom he dedicated this book. "As arrogant as youth can be, I was often too busy silently grading his grammar to pay real attention and see what he was giving me." Among the gifts was an awareness of what a story could tell, what it could conceal, and what it could never tell. His grandfather inhabited a different sense of time, and it was a long while before Penn lived there too.

When he did, he was back again with a story, working on how Indian writers wrote poetry and prose. In the work of other Indian writers and in his own Penn found that although white and Indian cultures cannot mingle, they can be bridged. *All My Sins Are Relatives* is a bridge.

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