



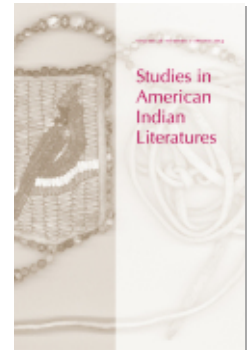
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The Salt Companion to Jim Barnes edited by A. Robert Lee
(review)

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Piatote argues forcefully for understanding the implications of federal Indian policy on both Native families and Native representation. She rightly notes that Native American citizenship deserves more attention in American studies scholarship. The concluding chapter extends the analysis to contemporary Native communities and the ways in which contemporary Native literature continues to seek alternative visions that defy the colonial imaginary.

A. Robert Lee, ed. *The Salt Companion to Jim Barnes*. London: Salt, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-84471-718-7. 186 pp.

Ingrid Wendt, *Eugene, Oregon*

One of the hazards of sustaining a long, productive writing career is that readers seeking insights into that lifetime of work may be able to find reviews and studies of individual books but little *overview*. For prolific and well-established poet, essayist, critic, translator, and fiction writer Jim Barnes (1933–), A. Robert Lee's collection of eight critical essays, by a wide range of scholars, plus Lee's own comprehensive introduction, essay, and lively interview with Barnes, begins to fill that need and makes a well-informed, long-overdue, and valuable beginning toward a rightful placing of Barnes within the canon of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American literature.

To fully appreciate the need for Lee's collection, a short Barnes biography is in order. Born in Oklahoma, where he served as state poet laureate from 2009 to 2011, Barnes can rightly be called a citizen of the world. Recipient of numerous awards—among them a Rockefeller Bellagio residency, a residency at the Villa Waldberta, from Munich's *Kulturreferat*, two residencies (each) from Stuttgart's Schloss Solitude and France's Camargo Foundation, the Columbia University Translation Center Prize, the Oklahoma Book Award, the American Book Award, and an NEA fellowship—Barnes has spent substantial periods of time working, teaching at universities in the United States and abroad, and writing in France, Italy, Germany, and Switzerland, as well as in Missouri, Utah, Oregon, New Mexico, and elsewhere in the American West.

Drawing from his complex Anglo-Welsh-Choctaw lineage, plus his deep knowledge of ancient Greek literature, Dante, Calderón, British late-Augustan and Romantic poets, as well as French, Italian, Spanish,

and German history and literature, Barnes has produced a dozen highly acclaimed volumes of poetry; the autobiography *On Native Ground: Memoir and Impressions*; two book-length translations, from the German, of the poetry of Dagmar Nick; an important critical study on Malcolm Lowry and Thomas Mann; and dozens of poems, short stories, essays, and translations in literary magazines and anthologies. Indeed, Barnes's bibliography, at the end of the *Companion*, fills an impressive seven pages. His contributions to the world of letters furthermore include more than thirty years as editor of the *Chariton Review* and a long stint as poetry editor of Truman State University Press.

One of the themes most constant in Jim Barnes's body of work—a theme touched on throughout the *Companion*—is his keen sense of the rich interconnectedness of time, place, and self: of being, as Lee suggests, “shaped by location,” by the “pull of the past-within-present” (4), and by his complex lineage. Furthermore, as Kenneth Lincoln posits in his contribution to the *Companion* titled “Jim Barnes from the Heart of the Heart of Things,” Barnes bridges “Euro-American traditions and Native American ceremonial cultures,” connecting “classical and modernist through-lines of mainstream art with deeply rooted aesthetics and tribal intelligence of Native peoples” (28), becoming a modern-day Odysseus in his quest for understanding the uniqueness, as well as the complexly layered and linked histories and geographies of places he's lived, visited, or known through scholarship.

In his essay “Oklahoma International: Jim Barnes, Poetry, and the Sites of Imagination,” Lee finds throughout Barnes's collections a “life-and-imagination linkage of Europe and America,” in which firsthand experiences of new locations are made over into his own “energy of image” (54). Citing passages from Barnes's *On Native Ground: Memoirs and Impressions* and from eight books of poems, primarily *The Sawdust War*, *La Plata Cantata*, *The American Book of the Dead*, and *A Season of Loss*, Lee points to recurring metaphors and image patterns that 1) establish “the land” as central to Barnes's identity, with land as “the tribal repository of both body and spirit” (43); 2) declare the importance of “naming”; and 3) manifest Barnes's tribal sense of the sacred as found in markers of past habitation (knife, bones, ghosts) as well as in unfolding time. “Choctaw ancestry,” notes Lincoln, “flows through his Oklahoma up-bringing the way streams flow down to the great river into the sea” (27).

Critics Lance Larsen and Samuel Maio focus on Barnes's early and middle periods. Larsen finds in the early work a "collage of various types of battle"—from the Trojan War to wars between American Indians and settlers, from contemporary military campaigns to "ongoing struggles with implacable nature" (62)—a collage manifesting another theme that echoes throughout Barnes's work: the ubiquity of violence throughout human history and his condemnation of it. Maio examines Barnes's lifelong search for "literal, spiritual, metaphysical" (77) identity—as well as Barnes's cosmopolitan concerns with European art, politics, and history—and joins other *Companion* authors in discussing Barnes's various stylistic trademarks, among them his signature juxtaposition of widely divergent images within the same poem (e.g., the art of Pablo Picasso and fishing for carp).

Authors Robin Riley Fast, Paul Beekman Taylor, and Patricia Clark Smith concentrate on Barnes's collection of essays and poems *On Native Ground*, in which Barnes the storyteller affirms his "loyalty to his Oklahoma place of origin" (Fast 131) and to all parts of his mixed ethnicity. Categorized at times as a Native American poet, because he writes from his Choctaw heritage, Barnes has stated: "I am proud of the Choctaw blood I carry. . . . Equally proud of the Welsh blood in my veins. But I object to the term *regional writer* or *ethnic writer* or even the term *Native American writer*" (Barnes, qtd. in Fast 135).

Linda Lizut Helstern and James Mackay pay specific attention to Barnes as both a master formalist and a stylistic innovator, adept at infusing traditional poetic forms with his own, contemporary voice and at borrowing their reins to give direction to other poems written in free verse. Helstern offers Barnes's "postcard poems" in *The Sawdust Wars* as examples of his sonnet transformations, while Mackay, exploring Barnes's "claim to Welsh as his primary familial inheritance" (111), traces the stylistic and thematic influences of poet Dylan Thomas.

The Salt Companion to Jim Barnes is a fitting tribute to a superb writer. It should enrich readers' understanding of Barnes's work and also lead to further scholarship about this prolific writer.