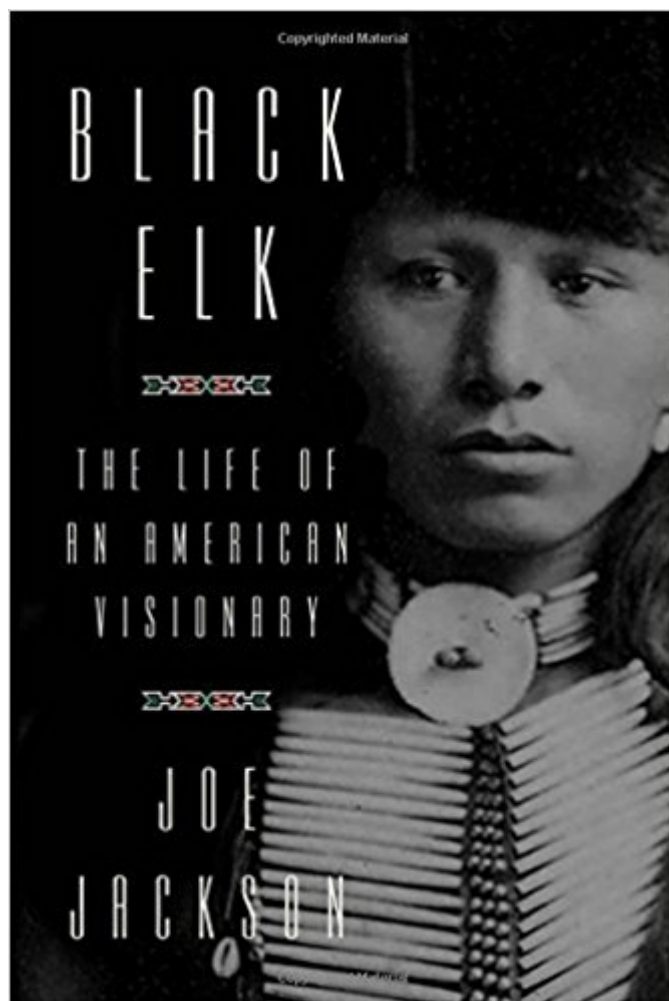


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Black Elk: The Life Of An American Visionary



Synopsis

Winner of the Society of American Historians' Francis Parkman Prize Winner of the PEN / Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography Best Biography of 2016, True West magazine Winner of the Western Writers of America 2017 Spur Award, Best Western Biography Finalist, National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography One of the Best Books of 2016, The Boston Globe The epic life story of the Native American holy man who has inspired millions around the world Black Elk, the Native American holy man, is known to millions of readers around the world from his 1932 testimonial Black Elk Speaks. Adapted by the poet John G. Neihardt from a series of interviews with Black Elk and other elders at the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, Black Elk Speaks is one of the most widely read and admired works of American Indian literature. Cryptic and deeply personal, it has been read as a spiritual guide, a philosophical manifesto, and a text to be deconstructed. While the historical Black Elk has faded from view. In this sweeping book, Joe Jackson provides the definitive biographical account of a figure whose dramatic life converged with some of the most momentous events in the history of the American West. Born in an era of rising violence between the Sioux, white settlers, and U.S. government troops, Black Elk killed his first man at the Little Bighorn, witnessed the death of his second cousin Crazy Horse, and traveled to Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. Upon his return, he was swept up in the traditionalist Ghost Dance movement and shaken by the Massacre at Wounded Knee. But Black Elk was not a warrior, instead accepting the path of a healer and holy man, motivated by a powerful prophetic vision that he struggled to understand. Although Black Elk embraced Catholicism in his later years, he continued to practice the old ways clandestinely and never refrained from seeking meaning in the visions that both haunted and inspired him. In Black Elk, Jackson has crafted a true American epic, restoring to its subject the richness of his times and gorgeously portraying a life of heroism and tragedy, adaptation and endurance, in an era of permanent crisis on the Great Plains.

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Customer Reviews

"A comprehensive new biography of the fabled Sioux medicine man . . . [It] rattled me . . . [Black Elk's] fate was to survive a rolling catastrophe with eyes wide open, his luck also his curse."
Walter Kirn, Harper's Magazine "Joe Jackson has expertly taken Black Elk's life as narrated by himself in the transcripts of his interviews with Neihardt and woven that together with other records and histories of him and his times. The result is that Jackson has firmly situated Black Elk in the context of Indian struggles on the plains from 1850 through 1950. He uses Black Elk to bring home the radical changes that confronted most Indians during this time and, in doing so, creates a deeply felt and personal story of loss and change on the plains . . . the long set piece concerning the Battle of the Little Bighorn is among the very best I've ever read."
David Treuer, The Washington Post "Remarkably thorough . . . Jackson's deep research shows on every page, and his narrative skill makes this long biography a gripping, even thrilling read . . . In this book, he helps bring back a crucial American voice."
Kate Tuttle, The Boston Globe "Black Elk stands out for its comprehensiveness, wide-ranging historical context, and the author's deftly apposite quotation from contemporary sources . . . In addition to seating Black Elk in his time and in the events he witnessed, Jackson gives a genuine sense of the inner man, the conflict in his soul between his Indian heritage and identity and his clear-sighted, hardnosed understanding of the compromises and capitulations necessary for his and the Lakota's survival . . . Drawing on immense research, Joe Jackson has given us the story of a man and a people whose land, way of life, and culture were the target of a concentrated project of extermination by the United States Government. This is a heart-wrenching book and a powerful, highly readable contribution to Native American history. It is a history that as recent events at Standing Rock and the refusal of clemency to Leonard Peltier show is just as pertinent today as it was during the 86-year span of Black Elk's life."
Katherine A. Powers, Critical Mass, the blog of the National Book Critics Circle Board of Directors "Remarkably researched and beautifully told . . . Jackson gives us a modern man working his way through the obstacles of the 20th century . . . his research has rewards, shifting in subtle ways the stories we thought we knew."

“An astonishingly rich saga . . . Jackson’s biography works to represent ‘the flesh-and-blood wicasa wakan’ (holy man) . . . We see Black Elk balancing tradition and modernity, with fleeting but vivid scenes of him on a ferris wheel and in a movie house. We hear of struggles within subsequent generations over his legacy and Lakota identity more generally. Jackson succeeds in interweaving the secular and the spiritual to the point that the non-native reader can experience Harney Peak in the Black Hills . . . as what [Black Elk] knew it to be: the centre of the world.”

Christine Bold, *The Times Literary Supplement*

“With access to family members of Lakota spiritual leader Black Elk, investigative journalist-historian Joe Jackson’s talents as a writer, interviewer and historian are all on full-display in *Black Elk*, the most evocative, empathetic and comprehensive biography ever written about the Sioux holy man.”

True West magazine, “The Best of the West”

“Joe Jackson’s important biography of the visionary Black Elk is much more than the story of one man’s life. It is a sweeping, comprehensive, elegantly written history of white and Indian relations; bloody, deadly battles; and the steady, deliberate destruction by the U.S. government of the native culture, language, traditions and way of life . . . *Black Elk* is a crucial book. It is a rich, engrossing read that will educate, surprise and infuriate.”

Laurie Hertz, *The Star Tribune* (Minneapolis)

“An exhaustively researched and meticulously detailed biography of Black Elk . . . Drawing on new material culled from interviews with members of Black Elk’s family, Jackson presents the Native American mystic’s life as a story rather than as a dry historical record, offering vivid accounts of historical events at which Black Elk was present . . . Jackson’s account of the great medicine man’s life, legacy, and spiritual journey is especially timely.”

Spirituality and Health magazine

“Joe Jackson argues convincingly that Black Elk’s life offers rare, substantial evidence of accurate Native American history as opposed to popular mythology and deserves ongoing attention as such . . . It’s a colorful story, too . . . *Black Elk* displays a Gump-like tendency to rub shoulders with the famous, most notably when he joins Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show and finds himself in England performing for Queen Victoria.”

Jeff Guinn, *The Dallas Morning News*

“[A] stirring, wide-ranging biography of the Sioux elder whose testimonials underlay one of the twentieth century’s most important documents on Native American culture . . . Jackson surveys a broad swath of world history to place the Lakota spiritual leader in that terribly eventful context, and he does excellent work in doing so . . . [*Black Elk* is] of much literary and historical merit and a fine addition to the shelves of anyone interested in this part of America’s unhappy past.”

Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

“Jackson’s enlightening account of this influential Sioux leader, whose life encompassed many landmark

events of the tumultuous years of U.S. western expansion, leaves the reader in awe of Black Elk's struggle to help his people preserve their culture as their traditions, religion, and education were under constant and brutal attack." [Deborah Donovan, Booklist \(starred review\)](#)"Jackson panoramically renders a narrative as majestic as the American West in this fine account of the life of Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota holy man. With compassion and clarity, Jackson portrays Black Elk as a man haunted by his inability to make sense of the 'Great Vision' that came to him as a child . . . He brilliantly frames it with an incisive discussion of the creation of John Neihardt's 1932 as-told-to-book, *Black Elk Speaks*. Jackson digs into Native American culture and what it meant for Black Elk to be a holy man, especially in light of his 1904 conversion to Catholicism. He has produced a major contribution to Native American history." [Publishers Weekly](#) "Now readers can rediscover the real Black Elk and the wise, haunted book that bears his name. Jackson's biography . . . brings long-lost events into sharp focus, both before and after the birth of what Jackson calls 'one of the twentieth century's most important documents on Native American culture . . . A timely addition to a rich and troubled history.'" [Gregory McNamee, Kirkus Reviews "Interviews and Profiles"](#)"Sweeping in scope . . . Joe Jackson does a magnificent job of relating, explaining and commenting on [Black Elk's] life in what is by far the most comprehensive biography of its subject to date. Jackson portrays Native Americans with a clear-eyed sympathy that avoids sentimentality, bringing historical figures such as Crazy Horse, Red Cloud and Sitting Bull to life and providing fascinating insights into Indian life, culture and, most notably, religion." [Timothy J. Lockhart, The Virginian-Pilot](#)"A masterpiece of American biographical reconstruction . . . *Black Elk* is an unapologetically sympathetic biography, for all its wide-ranging source-work. But even sinners need some sympathy, especially when it's as smart as the sympathy offered here." [Steve Donoghue, Open Letters Monthly](#)"The holy man reconstructed in this nuanced, revisionist story was . . . one of American history's great voices for social justice . . . Jackson's prodigiously researched narrative excels at parsing . . . controversies." [Ann Neumann, The Baffler](#)"Thorough and engrossing . . . Jackson's storytelling is nuanced and exciting, and readers will gain a deeper understanding of Black Elk's life and the mark he left on history." [Elizabeth Rowe, Bookish](#)"Jackson's fascinating biography tells the true story of this American holy man." [Tom Beer, Newsday](#) "Joe Jackson has penned an extraordinary history of Lakota warfare with the United States wrapped around a thorough biography of the legendary Black Elk. Outstanding." [Robert M. Utley, author of The Lance and the Shield: The Life and Times of Sitting Bull](#)"In *Black Elk*, Joe Jackson paints a vivid portrait of a figure that has often been shrouded

in shadows. This extraordinary book will transform the way readers think about the history of the United States and its indigenous peoples." —Ari Kelman, author of *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek*, winner of the Bancroft Prize

Joe Jackson is the author of one novel and six works of nonfiction, including, most recently, *Atlantic Fever: Lindbergh, His Competitors, and the Race to Cross the Atlantic* (FSG, 2012). His book *The Thief at the End of the World: Rubber, Power, and the Seeds of Empire* was one of *Time*'s Top 10 Nonfiction Books of 2008. He is the Mina Hohenberg Darden Endowed Professor of Creative Writing in the M.F.A. creative writing program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

Truth is told from front to back one can only hope God will forgive us for what we did to the people. Wonderful read.

Joe Jackson has written an outstanding study of a subject worthy of such treatment. American history is full of people like people--influential, important, significant, and interesting; however, they are neglected or under-valued by scholars fixated on generals, presidents, and "titans" of business.

Along with being good for those interested in Black Elk individually, it is also a great introduction for those, like myself, who previously knew nothing about the history of US - Plains Indians interactions throughout the latter half of the 19th century.

Jackson's biography of Black Elk is detailed and fascinating. His writing has this way of providing context for the events surrounding Black Elk's life without being tedious. We not only learn the history of one man, but we also learn the history of Lakota native Americans as a whole. Jackson's portrait of Black Elk is sympathetic yet unflinching. Most striking about Black Elk was his life-long quest to save the Lakota people. This sense of duty was spawned by his Visions in which the Great Grandfathers of the Lakota tribe bestowed upon him the obligation of saving his people. He led the rest of his life in honor of these Visions, leading him all the way to Europe with Buffalo Bill's Wild West tour and back to the plains of America. This book has all the drama, adventure, and action of a novel while still providing the historical insight you'd expect from a biography. Do not miss this important piece of American history.

I have read most books about Black Elk and the Lakota People. This is a marvelous book.. I highly recommend it and have bought it and will buy more copies for friends. Pidamaya Wopila Tanka

This is an outstanding book! Black Elk participated in many events that are part of the mythos of the American West and the "idea" of America. He had a long life with some great moments, tragedy, hardship, and poverty through which he passed informed by his own visions, strong spirit and concern for the Lakota people in the modern world. I was impressed by Joe Jackson's research and his ability to tell the story, reveal little known and important elements, while not getting lost in extraneous sidelines.

Native American spirituality and eye witness to history.

An incredibly nuanced, detailed, well-documented, balanced and beautifully written biography of an extraordinary human being.

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