

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Autobiography, Memoir & Creative Nonfiction Winner - 19th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

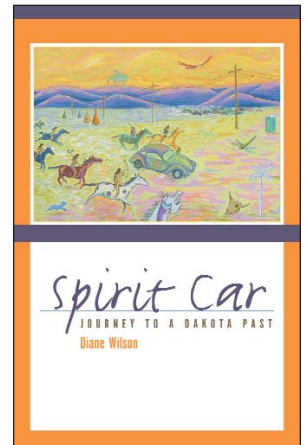
***Spirit Car: Journey to a Dakota Past* by Diane Wilson**

Borealis Books (an imprint of the Minnesota Historical Society Press), 2006

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SUMMARY:

Growing up in the 1950s in a suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota, Diane Wilson experienced her family life as being like everybody else's. When she reached her thirties, however, Wilson began wondering why her mother so rarely spoke about her past. Her unanswered questions took her to South Dakota and Nebraska, where she searched out information on her maternal relatives through five generations. *Spirit Car* is the result of Wilson's quest for discovery, a book of vignettes she created in her desire to honor the lives of her Dakota Indian family. The story of Wilson's family begins with a vivid account of the 1862 Dakota War in Minnesota, and then follows the family's nomadic travels across South Dakota and Nebraska in their struggle to survive.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Compare what you learned in school about the 1862 Dakota War to the way this story unfolds. What, if anything, has changed in your understanding of this event?
2. How might the author's life have been different if she had had a strong sense of her Dakota heritage as a child?
3. Whose story is the author telling? For whom is she writing the story?
4. What impact is achieved by the Dakota Indian history being told through personal family stories? How is the effect different from reading about the same events in a history book?
5. Would Lucille's life likely have been better or more difficult without her boarding school experiences? What do you think the boarding schools represented to the Dakota Indian families?
6. Talk about what the author means when she talks about riding in her spirit car. Have you ever had a similar experience in connecting with the past?
7. Give examples of when the author uses humor in the book. What role does humor play?
8. What is the biggest loss the author is writing about? Discuss the various losses documented in the book.
9. The last sentence of the book is the author's response to her mother, Lucille: "Yes, I think things are changing for the better." What do the author and Lucille mean by this statement?
10. In thinking about your own family, do you know how and why they came to America (if non-Native)? Do you know of any significant history your family members lived through, such as wars or depressions or world-changing inventions like the telephone?
11. What is the value of understanding and having connection to one's family over several generations? How might learning about something significant and troubling in your family's history change you?
12. The book jacket describes the book as a counterpoint of memoir and carefully researched fiction. What is your understanding of the term "carefully researched fiction", and do you think this technique adds or detracts from the cohesiveness of the book? Do the stories we tell about our own lives incorporate some degree of fiction?

A CONVERSATION WITH DIANE WILSON:

Q. What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

My inspiration was a story my mother told me about being left by her family at the Holy Rosary mission school on the Pine Ridge reservation. I grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis, which is a long way from the Pine Ridge reservation. As I was raising my own daughter, I started wondering about my mother's story. I followed my family's trail back four generations and discovered a much larger story—that of the Dakota people—which became the framework for the book. It's also a story of rediscovering cultural identity, and how this search changed my family.

Q. What research did you undertake in writing *Spirit Car*?

With support from the Minnesota Historical Society and the Jerome Foundation, I spent weeks in South Dakota traveling between research sites and reservations, visiting mission schools, and digging up shirttail relatives. I interviewed everyone I could find and absorbed the details of the land, especially the colors and the horizon line. I also interviewed my mother and three aunts about growing up in reservation boarding schools.

Q. What do you hope your readers take away from reading this book?

People have told me that reading a family story has helped them understand Native history because they can relate to events on a personal level rather than at a state or national level, as history is often written. I hope they see how the past lives on in the present, how an event like the 1862 Dakota War in Minnesota is very much a part of our contemporary lives. I also hope they see the beauty and wonder of their own family stories and how much we're shaped by the generations who came before us.

Q. How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

I've always loved reading, devouring hundreds and hundreds of comic books when I was a kid. When a 7th grade teacher read my humor assignment out loud to the class as an example of how not to write the essay, it very nearly ended my writing career for good. Eventually I found my way back to writing because it's my way of understanding the world. Reading good books, taking occasional classes, and working with mentor Cheri Register helped me learn how to write – as did lots and lots of rewriting.

Q. What are you currently writing?

The next book will be a progression of some of the themes in *Spirit Car*, although it won't be a family memoir. I found myself wondering, when a person/community has done the work of reclaiming cultural identity, what's next? How do you restore what was lost, how do you heal the traumas of the past, how do you assume responsibility for the knowledge that was given? I believe the answer to those questions is closely tied to our relationship to the land, to the earth.

Q. How do you most enjoy spending your time when you're not writing?

Tending the garden, reading, walking the dog, listening to the birds and the wind, kayaking.

ABOUT DIANE WILSON:

Diane Wilson is a creative nonfiction writer whose essays and memoir use personal experience to illustrate broader social and historical context. Her work has been published in many local publications including *The American Indian Quarterly*, *Minnesota Women's Press*, and the *Pioneer Press*. *Spirit Car* is her first book. In addition to her writing, Wilson works as an arts administrator in Shafer, Minnesota, the community where she lives with her artist husband, Jim Denomie. She is a master gardener who maintains a large butterfly garden filled with native plants. Wilson also helps organize the biennial Dakota Commemorative March on the Lower Sioux reservation. For more information about the author, visit www.wilsonwords.com.



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