

Eddie Chuculate. *Cheyenne Madonna*. Boston: Black Sparrow Press, 2010. 160 pp. Paper, \$17.95.

Esther Belin, Fort Lewis College

The debut collection of short stories by Eddie Chuculate, a Creek and Cherokee Indian, begins as a quest experienced from Old Bull and his party of three other Cheyenne to see this much-heard-of “Great Lake.” A series of fantastical events leaves Old Bull as the sole survivor, warranting “all that had happened” with a single piece of evidence, a shark-tooth necklace. This opening story marks the starting point to a sinuous journey that eventually intertwines with another sole survivor, Jordan Coolwater, over a century later. Although not as memorable as other characters in the collection, Coolwater is likeable purely through the pathos of his situation. He is essentially an orphan raised by his grandparents. This orphan status is quite comparable to the labeling of federally recognized tribes as wards of the state when Chief Justice John Marshall deemed them “domestic dependent nations” in 1831. Consequently, Chuculate focuses on this centralized theme throughout the collection, and as each story unfolds, the audience is provided with more illustrative evidence, ever confirming the conflict between Indigenous sovereignty and colonial paradigms—still battling as strongly as Shorty, the most crafted character, fiercely manifests his “pimp walk.”

If the audience is looking for answers to this challenging theme, they will find none. What the audience will find is a deeper point of view of contemporary Indigenous life, unfortunately stemming from archetypical characters. The thread of movement consistent with all the characters, through both physical and mental desertion, is indicative of U.S. Federal Indian Policy, specifically the allotment, relocation, and termination eras. The three stories that focus on Coolwater as a preteen remain the most compelling. The lithe and speculative approach of a youthful narrator is heartening in his observations dealing with the adults wandering in and out of his life and his African American neighbors and friends. Chuculate openly discusses the brazen displays of racial slurs—directly connected to the numbing effects of internalized colonialism, as Coolwater laments, “I felt that was my chance to apologize for my uncle, right some sort of wrong, to say he really didn’t mean it, but of course he had meant it.” This tepid ambivalence is the intersection where Chuculate may lose his audience. Although the collection ends with a slight glimmer of transformation in Coolwater’s character, that does not satisfy the audience’s desire for more than the implied change from a tousled preteen boy into an adult, at least mildly reflective of his past—both immediate and ancestral. Without that consideration, the series unravels and tentatively manifests simply as a glimpse of unique dialogue and details conveyed by Indigenous characters. However, the collection is noted for its stark revealing glare, a microscopic lens exposing the human soul, unveiling the mythic and fabricated constructs within.