

Book Review

Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask

By Anton Treuer (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2023)

Reviewed by Scott Fulton, October 14, 2024

If you are just beginning a journey of learning about Native American history, culture, and contemporary issues, this book is an excellent starting place. The author's purpose is to help non-Indians understand more about the reality of Indian life rather than what we imagine it to be. He succeeds quite admirably with this objective.

The book takes the form of short but thoughtful and thought-provoking answers to a very wide range of questions about Indians we might have. The questions are grouped in several major areas: Terminology; History; Culture, Identity, and Religion; the Powwow; Tribal Languages; Politics, Law, and Government Relations; Economics; Education; Social Activism; Coming to Terms and Future Directions; and Finding Ways to Make a Difference. A very well-organized recommended reading list is also provided, which is an excellent starting point for future studies. The book was originally published in 2012 but was thoroughly revised and updated in 2023 to reflect the many changes and developments that have occurred even in this single decade.

As an example, the very first question in the book is "What terms are most appropriate for talking about North America's first people?" I personally was quite concerned and confused about this question when I first began my own serious studies of Native Americans, wanting to be both correct and non-offensive. The answer given is that this is very much an unsettled debate, at least in the United States. Canadians have had an inclusive national discussion on this topic, and a clear and acceptable set of terms has been widely adopted there. Here, however, we are very far from even beginning such a discussion, and so there is no agreement.

The author suggests that a few terms (*Native*, *Native American*, and *Indigenous*) are always politically correct, but may be confusing in some situations. The term *Indian* is widely understood and has been adopted by many Native American organizations. However, this term originated with Columbus's mistaken belief that North America was in fact India and is quite objectionable to some. For organizations, this ambiguity is an opening for important discussions with local Native Americans. Perhaps more important in many ways is the second question in the book – "What terms are *not* appropriate for talking about North America's first people?"

The author, Dr. Anton Treuer, is professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University in north central Minnesota, located in a small city surrounded by the three largest and most populous reservations in the state. He is a highly gifted storyteller, writer, author, and public speaker on Ojibwe history, language and culture, and has written or contributed to many children's books in the Ojibwe language. Treuer's mother was an enrolled Ojibwe member who became Minnesota's first Native American woman lawyer and later an eminent federal magistrate and tribal court judge. His father was a Jewish Holocaust survivor from Austria, who became a beloved educator on the Leech Lake Reservation and worked for the tribal government. Treuer has spent all his life in what he calls the "borderland" between the Indian and non-Indian worlds and has fully embraced the role of ambassador between them, as well as a passionate advocate for Native American languages and cultures. His recent book, *The Cultural Toolbox* (Minnesota Historical Society Press. 2021), is a fascinating personal account of how traditional Ojibwe values and practices have had great value for both Treuer and his family in the context of the today's world.

Whether you read it straight through as an overview of this large and complex topic or use it as a reference for answering specific questions as they come up, *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask* will be quite useful for anyone interested in the realities of Native American history, culture, modern life, and current social concerns. I highly recommend it.