Steven Graham Jones’s *The Bird is Gone*: A Surprising Breakthrough In American Indian Literature?

Though some claim “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 3:15), American Indian author Stephen Graham Jones is his new novel, *The Bird is Gone* (2003), may have come close to something very original. Sherman Alexie says Jones has “a whole new aesthetic and moral sense” embodied within a text that “doesn’t sound like any of the rest of us.” If this is true—that the novel is aesthetically and morally new—then Jones has made a breakthrough in American Indian Literature. That can be very important, for literature and for Native Americans, who have much to say about our land, but are often stereotyped, or simply used by white America, usually for profit. On the other hand, is it possible to do something new in literature? What I’d like to do here is to point out ways Jones’s novel may be significantly new, and then, by reference to other Native works, suggest ways in which it is not. What is clear, however, is that the novel is basically a satire and not easy to read. One critic says Jones “keeps meaning out of reach,” that his writing “chases meaning and resolution,” often leaving the reader “cissatisfied and disappointed” (Schabe). It is my thinking that the book is meant not so much to be understood as to be interpreted. What I will try to do, as I grapple with the book’s originality is interpret where I think necessary, and in this way unveil at least a tinge of that “meaning and resolution” so as to avoid any major “disappointment” for the reader.

To begin, I think the novel is new, or at least different, in the way it is written—its genre. The book is comprised of a multiplicity of forms. It starts out in third person omniscient, then switches to a first person narrator, so that it becomes a kind of dramatic monologue. Then there are sections consisting of stream of consciousness, as well as
pieces of drama (little plays) and even a dialogue among animals. Within these larger sections are numerous mythic allusions—historical, political, religious—as well as ironic or paradoxical episodes that could be interpreted in a variety of ways, all contributing to the mix as they do to a great deal of ambiguity. It’s hard to see a plot in all this, though I’ll attempt to show how one may emerge in the end.

My overall view of the manuscript is that it is a fusion of three things—a kind of puzzle, a piece of modern art, and a linguistic maze. First, the reader needs to take the different sections, or elements within the sections, and try to make significant connections between them as one does with a puzzle. Second, it is possible to view the book as a piece of abstract art—a virtual Jackson Pollock. Here the different literary forms, together with colors (there are many telling colors), the texture (often the kind of type varies), and even individual lines (the different chapters often begin with short ironic statements) all work together to form a large, enigmatic visual image. When I speak of texture and color and lines, remember that these are artistic terms and they contribute to a whole that may be beautiful, but at the same time complex, even mystifying. Finally, there is the language. Jones uses terms that are ambiguous, humorous at times, often satiric, but multi-faceted and usually illusive. He even includes a glossary at the end that defies anything in Webster. It too may be humorous, as well as misleading, but at other times it is helpful in putting together the puzzle or shedding light on the text as a piece of art. In short, the novel is a fusion of forms, colors, and terms, all contributing to at least a novel approach to the American Indian scene.

But to be more specific, the theme of the novel seems to focus on a piece of legislation, a so-called Conservation Act, that has returned Native lands to the Indians. It
is now fourteen years in the future. One problem, however, is that the document has been hidden in a pipe that was flushed down a toilet, so the actual transfer has not yet occurred. We know all this from connecting the definition of the Conservation Act in the glossary with various episodes, like those referring to a freak pipe in the text at large. The initial setting of the book is a bowling alley where metaphorically knocking down pins and winning the game may be roughly equivalent to the triumph of Indians over their white land-grabbing opponents (my interpretation). Traditionally they have lost that land. Bowling is not the only game in the book; there’s also a basketball game going on. One of the players is Owen82, a name which obviously points to the Indians’s perennial sense of loss.

In this bowling alley are several Indians. The most telling is LP Deal (a name suggesting a long playing deal) who is confined to the alley; he is writing a manifesto—not a monograph. That word is crossed out in the novel’s title. It is a manifesto about the Conservation Act. LP works for Mary Boy (a man who is an adult), whose daughter Peltdowne (early Native images where “put down” on pelts) devotes much of her time to procuring paper for LP so he can continue to write. Remember, we are dealing with an oral culture so a manifesto is in itself significant. Indeed, the novel itself is a manifesto. Given these ironic names, one can see how language comes into play in solving the puzzle. Or how art comes into play, for these characters all have graphic names that function in relation to each other as well as individually, often suggesting a larger-than-life picture or design. Incidentally, in this original setting, there are roughly ten characters who feature prominently in the book. The first section begins
with the single line "TEN LITTLE INDIANS;" that is roughly the number in the bowling alley, though they are hardly little in the overall scheme.

Now the semblance of a plot. When the novel shifts to a monologue, the narrator identifies himself as an ex-cop. He seems to be addressing (though not in agreement with) the detective Blue Plume. Blue Plume has an assistant, Chassis Jones (does that sound like "chasing Jones"?)). These two are looking for the one responsible for the disappearance of 31 tourists. So the book also becomes a detective story. The main suspect is another of the Indians in the bowling alley, namely Nickel Eye (not the Russian Nicholai, but one whose name suggests the two sides of a nickel—the Indian head and the buffalo) which is a kind of silver. I’ll get to the context of the silver and the buffalo later, but the reality of tourists introduces the subject of popular culture. There is a Miss Dick, an Indian Miss America, who is to be the subject of a sentimental play, Susanna of the Mounties-- another way that Indians are used superficially. But that projected play is preceded by one called "Make Him Dance." This is a mini-play in the novel about the Long Ranger and Tonto, where a girl is questioning Tonto about her hero. In the process he happens to give her the silver bullet (another reference to silver) by which they both seem to overpower the Lone Ranger. He does shout "Hi -ho- Silver," but here the two make him (not Tonto) dance. So in the overall picture, it is not only the tourists, but ironically all they represent that needs to be done in, or shot, so to speak. Later the narrator will do some shooting of his own, so keep in mind the historical notion of a gun and the bullet.

Even though The Bird is Gone addresses the present, as well as future, it is filled
with connections to history, especially as it relates to Indians, or the effects on Indians. Jones go back to the Aztec civilization which was also lost, to Quetzalcoatl whose authority and culture, including some magnificent artifacts, were subsumed by the Pope and “red catholics.” Here they are connected to a sentimental plaster statue of the Madonna—an artifact that hardly makes sense to real Indians. Later there is a historical reference to Columbus, who enslaved Indians. The bowling alley is named “Fools Hip,” no doubt a pejorative reference to Columbus’s ship. Then there is Tecumseh, the 18th century warrior who spoke fruitlessly against the coming of white trade. At one point a whole section is devoted to the Plains Indians in the 1860s, and the effort of the Sioux to survive with the shooting of the buffalo (there’s your buffalo) and the loss of more land. Another reference is to 1907, which is 20 years after the Dawes Act, when Indian lands were destined to be divided up and sold to the white man, and now the Indian is feeling its full effects. These references are mixed in with all kinds of comment and innuendo, and I pick them out simply because it is history that the Conservation Act is designed to reverse.

Now back to the present and the bowling alley where we meet a host of images, really stereotypes of Indians, like “a good day to die,” or “birds of a feather,” or “skin deep.” Here there are anthropologists trying to discover artifacts of the past—like the meaning of old smashed cars—rather than what is essential, the loss of land and the return of a way of life. But most important in the alley is Cat Stand, which sounds like “can’t stand,” suggesting she can’t stand the whole phony scene. She, by the way, is a banner child for lactose intolerance—an indication of how Natives are used by society, indeed objectified, but what Cat Stand probably can’t stand is the sugary scene built
around Indians (again my interpretation). Cat is in love with Denim Horse (an
oxymoron), the handsome Indian who poses like a statue, which intrigues tourists and
anthropologists. You've seen statues like this outside shops that sell Indian
paraphernalia. She is also the mother of a little boy named Naitche, who is preoccupied
with playing video games—another indication of contemporary popular culture. This
child, however, may be a sleeper among the ten little Indians—playing the game, so to
speak, as we shall see. What seems to be in the air is change (again my idea) which is
telegraphed satirically by characters like Back Iron, called Deerboy, a transvestite, or
Bacteen, who cuts hair. In the historical context of the boarding school the hair of
children—that is, dear boys in their teens—was cut and they were dressed in the white
man's clothes. Here the Indian characters have their "back up" as they signal transition
in strange but disarming ways. Truly, in this text one can see how easy it is to play
words.

If the novel is also a piece of visual art, one can also play with line and color.
Three of the most important colors are red, blue and green. Green is positive. One line
precedes a chapter with "keep off the grass," with the subtitle, "no," as though to indicate
that the land is what Indians are about. Blue is more pejorative; that's the name of the
cop looking for who killed the tourists, presumably Indians. Red is more ambiguous.
One chapter begins with ROSES ARE RED, but roses is crossed out, as though that's not
the point. What's "in" is pick eye. Several chapters begin with the line "PINK EYE was
the rage," and several of the characters have it. Pink eye functions as a replacement for
small pox, which killed Indians in another age; today Indians are categorized as a way of
isolating them; "pink eye" serves that purpose. As we come to the last two chapters, the
book moves from “BLUE MOONS” to “RED DAWN” as if to indicate that Indians have entered into a new, brighter era, quite different from the past. The very ending of the novel—which I'll enlarge upon later—reinforces that notion. Though there are many colors strung throughout the text, I mention only a few to show how this aspect of art can function as an indicator of meaning in this Jones's complex novel.

As the book moves toward a climax, really in the last two chapters, it involves the business of Indian history in all its facets connected to the dynamics of a bowling alley where Cat Stand actually knocks down all the pins, perhaps signaling a complete victory of sorts. Then there is the detective story regarding the fate of tourists (really popular culture). Here there is some shooting involved, reminiscent not only of the death of Indians in the past, but of the silver bullet which mythically finishes off the Long Ranger in the present. The only thing here is that nobody is killed, suggesting that history has been reversed, the land returned, the old myths destroyed, and the grass again is fresh and green. Moreover, the theme of birds emerges in a different way. In Jones's historical picture Columbus first sighted birds as an indication of land, which ultimately was lost—and then supposedly regained by the Conservation Act. In the 19th century the character Bird is killed (and so gone). But now a new boy or bird, if you will, Naitche—the child playing the video games—seems to break through a wall equivalent to armor—an important term as we shall see. Paradoxically, that bird and land are now together again. But more on that later.

Initially, I said that this well might be a piece of original literature, and I think you can see by now that it is a very different kind of writing. But is it entirely original? The fact is The Bird is Gone presupposes the works of other Native authors. Actually, the
loss and return of Native land is central to many Native novels. Linda Hogan’s Solar Storms details five generations of women who lose their land—the boundary waters between the U.S. and Canada—to the missionary, the settler, and the trapper. In Tracks Louise Erdrich treats the loss of trees to the lumberjacks in the early 20th century. Winona LaDuke’s novel Last Standing Woman is about land grabbing in Minnesota and the effort of woman warriors to retrieve it through confrontation as well as literally buying it back. Jones more or less takes for granted these kinds of specific contexts in his concern for land loss and recovery with the Conservation Act.

Closely related to the land is the life of the people on it, especially the section on the 1860s, told in stream of consciousness, which Jones details in the context of family life, as well as violent death. But he is not alone. A sociologist as well as novelist, Ella DeLoria, in her early novel Waterlily recaptures the life of women on the great plains and their survival before the coming of the white man. Marie Sandoz in a semi-biography, Crazy Horse, reviews the efforts of the Sioux to resist the white man, including the initial use of the rifle, in an effort to maintain control of the prairie before and after the Civil War. James Welch’s Fools Crow goes beyond family life and even violence into the politics between and among tribes trying to deal with the white trader and military taking over Indian lands toward the end of the Indian Wars. So if Jones is concerned with the life of Natives on the land, he has to presume all kinds of contexts which other Native authors have developed aesthetically and morally.

There are also many overt or implied references in The Bird is Gone to the way American Indians have been dehumanized. The business of hair cutting, cross dressing, or categorizing a whole race with pink eye are clever but not too subtle means of
relegating a whole race to an inferior status. Other authors have done this more directly. Susan Power in a recent short story in *Roofwalker* dramatizes in humorous but satiric letters from Carlyle in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century the fate of children whose whole culture was educated out of them. Mary Crow Dog is more bombastic in her biography *Lakota Woman* where she details the abuse of children by priests and nuns in the 1950s and 60s in South Dakota. Or more recently Debra Magpie Earling in *Perma Red* captures the mistreatment of a young Indian girl in several white schools in Montana before running away to more adult sexual abuse. My favorite picture of how Natives have been alienated by a white culture, however, is Opal Lee Popke’s “Zuma Cowt’s Cave,” where in a clever allegory the author traces the plight of the Indian west in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, only to end in a actual cave outside a white California city where he and his family are ignored as simply less than human. In my view, Jones implies all this in his clever inventing of dehumanized characters and situations.

As to Jones’s juxtaposing of literary forms, the idea is not entirely new. N. Scott Momaday in *Way to Rainy Mountain* puts together bits of history, mythology and actual pieces of art as he retraces the ancestry of the Kiowa back to their origins. And Gerald Vizenor’s *Bearheart* represents a futuristic genre reversing a Puritan world so antithetical to the Indian. But the Native author that I think best anticipates Jones is Thomas King. If Jones makes fun of anthropologists, King in “One Good Story, That One” brilliantly undercuts the task of anthropologists looking for old Indian stories. What they get is the Garden of Eden story in *Genesis* reinterpreted from a Native perspective, including being kicked out of the garden, but not because of original sin. In *Green Grass, Runing Water* King explodes the Judeo Christian creation myth, the Columbus myth, and the
Tonto/Lone Ranger myth, as well as satirizing certain sacred Christian history in terms like ‘the re-immaculate conception.’ Jones deals with all of these too, though in his own way. King, for instance, uses three cars, the Nissan, the Pinto and the Carmen Gia as replicas of Columbus’s three ships—the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa Maria—which go over a dam, symbolizing the recreation of America from an Indian view. In Jones’s account the three ships are used for a type of re-creation too, though more through the symbolic connection of the bird to the ships—and, of course, to Fools Hip.

Speaking of the bird, that term or reality appears in several places in Jones’s novel. In the context of Columbus, birds were first sighted as a sign of land—the very reality later taken from the Indians. Columbus himself took Indians as slaves, so the Indians lost both ways. Later in the novel Bird is an actual character, the son of Gauche, living on the Great Plains. He dies in 1861 because of hardship, so literally “the bird is gone.” Of course, the whole continent is taken from the Indians. But Jones re-mythologies the boy in the person of Naitche, the son of Cat Stand in the bowling alley. In the ROSES (crossed out) ARE RED section naitche is a god (the feathered serpent quetzcoatl) somehow connected to yaqui buoy (which sounds like a boy?) in an “immaculate re-conception.’ His lineage functions in contrast to the red catholics and their notion of the homogenized statue of the madonna. This scenario seems to be Jones’s answer to anthropology, and in the end a boy will burst forth to take part in the new world where Indian lands are once again Indian lands.

Remember this is a detective story where Blue Plume is looking for those lost tourists to the consternation of the I-narrator. There’s a gun involved, as there always has been, though there is an ambiguity around who uses it in the end. Again, detective stories
are not new in the Indian world. Tony Hellerman’s novels, like *Talking God*, are all
detective stories. And Joseph Marshall III has written a revealing novel, *Winter of the
Holy Iron*, about the coming of the rifle to the Indian and his use of it, for better or worse.
Here in Jones’s world—as we move from BLUE MOONS to RED DAWN, there’s a
shot, and supposedly somebody is killed. But nobody dies. The grass remains green.
After the blue moon there is a red dawn. And as Cat Stand knocks down all the pins, her
son Naitchie, who has played “the game” so long, emerges as the young bird who will
regain the land and a culture so long usurped. Indeed, the eagle flies again.

Let me conclude this paper with a few reflections. Remember I initially quoted
Sherman Alexie who says Jones’s novel is aesthetically and morally unique. I also
quoted a critic who says the to read this novel is to “chase meaning and resolution.”
Actually the ending of *The Bird is Gone* reflects Alexie’s own story “This is Why I Like
Phoenix, Arizona” (later expanded in the film *Smoke Signals*). One could argue that
Alexie himself is aesthetically and morally innovative. His story is about a boy, the
subject of a broken family, who follows his lost father to Phoenix as a way of finding
himself. In the second to last chapter of *The Bird*, entitled “BLUE MOONS,” a boy
named Naitchie (subtitle “MY INNER PAPOOSE”) has a runagate father named
CORTEZ and a degenerate mother named VD. He breaks through is father’s armor to
live anew, or give new birth to a people. If this is so, than Alexie and Jones are not too
far apart.

Now to chase a little more meaning, and keep in mind we’re solving a puzzle,
seeing a larger picture, and putting together pieces of language. Naitchez (a name close
to the boy’s) is the name of an Indian nation inhabiting the Mississippi Valley—the
womb of the nation—in the 1700s when they were annihilated by the French. The were a corn people—the title of one of Jones’s chapters is “INDIAN CORN.” Their leader was called “The Great Sun.” Now, in the final chapter of The Bird, entitled “RED DAWN,” Naitche (in my view) is the boy who breaks through to new life. In the chapter “BLUE MOONS,” three words dominate the chapter—whistle, gun, and note. In the final chapter, a whistle may indicate the game (however you interpret it) is over. One of the characters in the bowling alley who also plays basketball is Owen82—suggesting a real loser. But here there is no loss. The gun, the history of which we know, is now used to shoot the Lone Ranger, or Miss Dick, or the anthropologists, or whoever represents a white culture which objectifies Indians. And from the Indian view the shot is a real winner—Owen82 notwithstanding. The note of course, is LP Deal’s manifesto, which captures in writing the whole story, including the return of the land according the Conservation Act and all it represents to its rightful owner. Again, the bird is not gone, and there is resolution—I think—to the puzzle, the picture becomes clear, and the significance emerges of some very puzzling, but colorful, words.
Works Cited


Power, Susan. Roofwalker.


