

A Review of James Freeman's reissued "Ishi's Journey," 1992, 2006 (second ed.)... Books Editor Frank Wilson's Best Book of the Month Pick in "***The Philadelphia Inquirer***":

"In August 1911, an American Indian was jailed in the town of Oroville, in northern California. Not for any crime he had committed, but for his own protection. He was a Yahi, a member of a Yana tribe already thought to be extinct - and soon to be. He spoke neither English nor Spanish.

His stay in the hoosegow was mercifully brief. An anthropologist from the University of California at Berkeley, Thomas T. Waterman, an associate of Alfred Kroeber - who would go on to become one of the leading figures in American anthropology - arrived quickly to fetch him. Waterman and Kroeber settled the Indian in a room in the university's museum and set about learning as much as they could from him.

One thing they never learned was his name. California Indians' private names were secrets shared only with family and loved ones. So Kroeber named his new friend - and yes, they did become friends - Ishi, which in Yana means "I am of the people" or "I am a person." He was, in fact, the last of his people.

You learn all this in the first couple of pages of James Freeman's novel *Ishi's Journey*. Moreover, Ishi's story has been told before, notably in *Ishi in Two Worlds*, a biography written by Kroeber's second wife, Theodora. What Freeman has done in his book (originally published in 1992) is get inside the facts in much the same way Robert Browning gets inside a character in his dramatic monologues. He imagines Ishi's thoughts and, above all, his dreams (which Ishi and his tribe depended on for guidance), devising a plausible version of the Indian's patterns of speech and thought.

Freeman lives in Bucks County and teaches at Bucks County Community College, but he is a native of northern California, and it shows. His descriptions of the chaparral near Lassen Peak, where Ishi's people lived, are lovingly precise. His book is a lyrical elegy for a man, his people, and a way of life.

The novel is narrated by Saxton Pope Jr., son of the physician who examined Ishi when he was brought to San Francisco and who attended him in his final days. (Pope Sr., who learned a lot about bow hunting from Ishi, is memorialized in the name of the Pope & Young Club, one of the nation's leading bow-hunting and conservation organizations.)

Pope Jr. is an old man of 87 when he recounts the tale as Ishi related it to him, beginning with the time when Ishi and the remnants of his family - and tribe - lived at what was for them the center of the world: the country around Waganupa (Mount Lassen). Seven people were all that remained - himself and his grandfather, uncle and boy cousin; his grandmother, his mother, and Tushi, his girl cousin.

First, the grandparents die. The others, discovered by white settlers, abandon their village and hide in a grizzly's abandoned cave. Later, desperate for food, Ishi and his boy cousin break into a settler's cabin and take some food, which turns out to be poisoned. Ishi's cousin dies from it.

Now there are only four. When they are again discovered by settlers, his uncle and Tushi flee and Ishi hides. One of the settlers keeps the others from molesting Ishi's obviously ill mother, but the settlers take practically all of the food and belongings. Ishi's uncle and Tushi never return. His mother lasts but another winter. And then Ishi is alone, the last of his people.

He thinks to climb Waganupa and hurl himself from it, so he can join his ancestors among the stars. But he encounters a skink lizard, a manifestation of Kaltsuna, one of the two gods who created the world, and has a vision. In the vision he learns that Tushi and his uncle have made their way safely to their ancestors and that he must go to the world of the Saldu (us), and in six years he will join them.

Freeman tells this tale with commendable simplicity and without ever sermonizing. This does honor to Ishi's gentle stoicism. Still, if you can read this book without tears welling up in your eyes from time to time, you may be in need of a heart transplant.

Especially moving is the friendship that develops between Ishi and the younger Pope, who, as he nears his, own end, recalls a particular lesson that he learned: Ishi had one Way, taught to him by his grandfather and uncle when he was a boy. His belief was immutable and unshaken even when he found himself in a completely alien civilization. We, on the other hand, were far less sure of where the world came from and how to proceed sensibly in it, even less sure of what would happen to us when it became our time to die.

This is a wise and beautiful book."

(Frank Wilson, Inquirer Books Editor, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday, January 8, 2006)

