

NEELK BOOK OF THE MONTH

***The Night Wanderer: a Native Gothic Novel* by Drew Hayden Taylor
Review by Ivaylo Shmilev - February 2008**

Tiffany is a 16-year-old Native coping with the seemingly ordinary difficulties of her life in Otter Lake. Unexpectedly, her father decides to host a strange lodger. What will she learn from her encounter with the mysterious, sinister traveller?

Drew Hayden Taylor (b. 1962), the outstanding Canadian First Nations playwright/journalist/filmmaker, says he encountered this and many other questions some 15 years after the idea of a Native Gothic story was first born. *The Night Wanderer* began as a play sometime in the beginning of the 1990s; however, it seemed not to have reached maturity at that time. Thus, it lay in his creative archive for more than a decade, biding its time. An interested publisher incited Taylor's writing spirit to action, which finally brought *The Night Wanderer* to the light of day (pun intended) in August 2007. This is the playwright's very first novel and, for reasons stated below, we hope that the second will not be long coming.

One of the essential merits of Taylor's writing is his ability to both convey serious messages to the readers and entertain them at the very same time. This talent manifests itself prominently in his novel. Some readers may be slightly bored by the first, let us say, 15 to 20 pages of the book, while the author sets up the main points of entanglement between the characters. However, even those readers will be in danger of falling out of their cosy chairs once Taylor's witty comparisons and uncannily comic dialogues gather momentum. Social commentary is the writer's agenda most of the time: he explores themes like the everyday life on a reserve, or the malfunctioning relationships resulting from a failed marriage. He intersperses these "furious" observations with a surprising number of deep psychological insights. For example, he mentions that Granny Ruth, Tiffany's grandmother, is often engaged in "the construction of a sweater or a pair of socks". This phrase is both a winking jab at Granny Ruth's constant knitting and a strikingly precise depiction of the skill and effort required for the creation of the much needed warm clothes.

Given these considerations, many readers will certainly be surprised that Taylor's book is sometimes billed as a "novel for young readers". What is more, the writer's unorthodox approach to history openly questions such a definition. The mysterious (and monstrous) lodger, Pierre L'Errant, swims in the immense ocean of vivid memories from his long past. In one of many significant flashbacks, he makes the bitingly symbolic observation that vampires originally come from Europe. His remembrances reveal more and more about his personal story – as well as about Native history. Tiffany's destiny interweaves with his while exhilarating suspense chases excruciating laughs through the Otter Lake woods. The grand finale of this amazing book is a special spiritual ceremony not only for Pierre, but also for the readers. Meanwhile, Taylor's next novel is already eagerly awaited.

Taylor, Drew Hayden. 2007. *The Night Wanderer: a Native Gothic Novel*. Toronto, New York, Vancouver: Annick Press (224 pp.).

Selected Plays by Drew Hayden Taylor:

Toronto at Dreamer's Rock; The Bootlegger Blues; Someday; Only Drunks and Children Tell the Truth; alternatives; 400 Kilometres; In a World Created by a Drunken God; The Berlin Blues