



Author Spotlight with

Frank N. McMillan III

In your dedication for *The Young Healer*, you state your respect for the First Americans and their cultures. Can you remember when you first became interested in Native American culture?

What about it captivated your imagination?

My respect and interest in Native American life has been with me as long as I can remember . . . literally! I don't know that one oftentimes has rational explanations for such strong affinities, such "captivated imaginations." They just happen, rather like a kind of happy magic. I loved everything about Native American stories, myths and legends, and the beauty and handiwork that went into their material culture such as their traditional artwork, their drums, tipis, bows and arrows, canoes, long houses, and personal possessions. Most of all, I was intrigued by their spiritual wisdom, sense of honor, their bravery against all odds, and their respect for the earth and all her creatures. It still makes me feel proud to be a human being to know that people like the First Americans exist. I hope that my book encourages outreach and dialogue with contemporary Native Americans. They are not just some sort of living romantic embodiment of America's past; they're very much an important and integral part of its present.

While *The Young Healer* is about a family of Lakota heritage, did you bring any other Native American traditions from different tribes into the story?

The vast majority of the traditional material depicted in the story—virtually all the ceremonies and the tale of White Buffalo Calf Girl—is taken directly from the heritage of the Lakota people. I depicted the Lakota tales and traditions as accurately as possible according to historical source material and with no private, sacred material being revealed, with a couple of minor exceptions. The story that Feather's grandfather used to tell her when she was little, "How Rabbit Stole Fire from the Sun," is a tale taken from the eastern woodlands peoples. The term "Turtle Island" used by Mrs. Chen is one borrowed from the Iroquois nation, another eastern woodlands people. As a wise elder and teacher, I tend to think Feather's grandfather would have been comfortable using terms taken from other First Americans, not just his Lakota background.

To what extent is *The Young Healer* about overcoming modern day troubles in a mixed-race family?

The family issues that Feather deals with on a daily basis are fairly similar to many that young people face today. Parental separation, family budget stresses, illness, school work, peer pressures, and other assorted troubles are not unique to any segment of society. I think seeing Feather work through these issues successfully despite her understandable and very normal anxieties will encourage young readers to positively deal with these situations in their own lives. Feather's mixed-ethnicity background is

a more common occurrence these days, too. To me, diversity is a real plus. It still presents unique challenges, particularly when one is confronted by bigoted or uninformed individuals, like the guard at the zoo and the grumpy taxi driver Feather encounters during her vision quest. From her mother's experience, Feather also sees how difficult it can be to blend a minority background with the values and viewpoints of a dominant and not always welcoming majority culture. How can you be true to both while maintaining your personal integrity? That's a tough one. Feather's mother ultimately succeeds in this journey and I would like to think Feather's and her Mother's examples of growing into personalities that honor all the traditions in their lives will encourage readers to be true to their own one-of-a-kind inner and outer selves as they travel down that unique path to who they're meant to be. What an adventure!

Where does Feather's respect for her grandfather, Spotted Eagle, stem from? How did you create Spotted Eagle?

How could you not respect and love Spotted Eagle? I think everyone would like to have a grandfather like him! Feather adores him and would do anything for him and she knows he feels the same way about her. The thread binding this whole story together is love. I think you see that in the relationship Feather has with her grandfather. She trusts him and loves him without limit. That makes the whole story work. She also carries tremendous love in her heart for the rest of her family, too, and I think it is this awesome compassion that heals not just her little brother, Peter, but also her Mom and Dad and their broken relationship in many ways, too. Spotted Eagle recognizes this powerful gift within her and that's what drives the story.

Spotted Eagle is a bit of a composite character for me. He incorporates the strengths of several elderly people that have been vitally important in my own life, both male and female, along with a bundle of traditional Native American cultural characteristics. His patient wisdom, personal integrity, physical courage and compassion for all living beings reflect what I find in Native American history. I think I love him almost as much as Feather does.

Since you are not of Native American descent, how did you go about researching the tales and history of the Lakota people? Why did you choose Feather to be of Lakota descent instead of another tribe?

As a teacher and cultural geographer by training, I am very sensitive to issues surrounding dealing with other peoples' culturo-spiritual traditions. Putting my academic training to good use, I did a lot of research for this manuscript. Some of it also came from personal experience in the field. In the summer of 1993, I spent some very special time on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana—home to the Gros Ventre (Arapaho relatives) and Assiniboine (Lakota relatives) peoples—with "Touch the Earth." This program was started by board members of The WILD Foundation to help keep traditional Native American beliefs and knowledge about the natural world alive. It was this profoundly moving experience that directly inspired *The Young Healer*. When I left the reservation for the last time, a young Assiniboine mother said in parting, "Don't forget us." I never have and I never will, and I pray that *The Young Healer* going out into the world will be a part of keeping that trust.

Throughout *The Young Healer's* creation, I read many books about Native American history and traditions, being very careful to be respectful and accurate while drafting the manuscript. In *The Young Healer*, I want readers to learn about and share my love for the profoundly meaningful stories of the First Americans. However, I have been careful to only depict things that have already been made purposefully public, like the basic aspects of the pipe ceremony and the *inipi* (sweat lodge) ceremony, while still bringing as much appreciation and respect as I could to the telling.

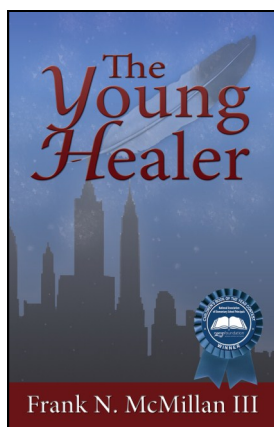
I chose Feather and her grandfather to be of Lakota descent based on what I would think to be the average reader's greater familiarity with the Plains peoples' way of life. I think their historically high profile in literature and film makes the story a little bit more accessible for everyone, especially younger readers. One of my very favorite Americans and a personal hero of mine is Crazy Horse, the Lakota warrior and visionary. His intelligence, moral integrity, physical bravery, and compassionate concern for "the helpless ones" in his life were simply monumental. Human beings don't come any finer.

What was your favorite part about writing *The Young Healer*? Did you have a particular goal in mind?

My favorite part about writing *The Young Healer* was getting to spend time every day with Feather and her grandfather and all the other wonderful people in her life. They all became very real to me, and still are. Grandfather, Mrs. Chen, Feather, Peter, Feather's mom and dad, nervous BFF Emily with the bouncy perm; they're all very close to my heart and always will be. The character of Mrs. Silverman is based on and in blessed memory of my very beloved great-aunt, Adele Silverman, and Mrs. Green reminds me of someone I met at a local homeless shelter. I hope my story honors them and brings readers as much joy as these characters have ushered into my own life.

I wanted to bring as much joy, love, peace, light, and respect for the earth and all her living creatures as I could to the table. I wanted to do this through a story honoring the traditions of the Native Americans as embodied in the timeless wisdom of the Lakota people. All the characters in *The Young Healer* are in service to them: the First Americans. In a very real way, they inspired the birth of this literary journey, which is in their honor. If *The Young Healer* entertains its readers and kindles an interest in their hearts to go deeper and learn more about Native Americans and their many nations and traditions, then it will have more than accomplished its goal. I'm just along for the ride and blessed to be a small part of its story.

By Frank N. McMillan III



Chapter Book Winner of the 2012 National Association of Elementary School Principals Children's Book Competition

What starts out as just another day becomes anything but that for Feather Anderson. Her beloved grandfather, a traditional Lakota healer, pulls her out of class one snowy morning and takes her on a traditional vision quest in the heart of New York City in hopes of finding the perfect Lakota medicine. It becomes the most magical day of Feather's life as she saves her little brother's life and earns her newly-given secret Lakota name.

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