

Book Review

Anitsalagi Elohi Anehi. Cherokee Earth Dwellers. Stories and Teachings of the Natural World

Authored by Christopher B. Teuton and Hastings Shade, with Loretta Shade and Larry Shade (text). Marybeth Timothy (illustrations). 2023. University of Washington Press. Seattle, Washington, USA. 383 pp.

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To those who are teaching me about
the fascinating cultural diversity beyond what I imagined.

Decades ago, I had the privilege of doing research on lands that belong to Native American nations. The process of requesting and getting permission was interesting and more personal than what I am used to. As so often happens, the serendipitous events of life threw me in the direction of a completely different project: the names and uses that Native American peoples have given to redbuds, *Cercis* (Fabaceae). In the last few months, I have read numerous papers and spoken with experts, the result being that many new ideas have sprung in my head. It is wonderful to have so many wholesome and intellectually stimulating exchanges!

In one of those, colleagues from Western Carolina University (Cullowhee, North Carolina) referred me to the book, *Cherokee Earth Dwellers*. I devoured the book. Dr. Christopher B. Teuton, Professor and Chair of the American Indian Studies Department at the University of Washington in Seattle, and his coauthors have written a delightful book that describes natural history from a Cherokee perspective. Naturally, I gravitated to *Cercis canadensis* and how the Cherokees know it as *gagogi*, or liar, because this plant, one of the early flowering trees, falsely announces the arrival of the spring (p. 191). With a smile in my heart, I was delighted to learn about the names given to different insects. For example, *talisugi* is the name given to click beetles (Elateridae) and it means “the one that snaps his head” (p. 236). *Digulidisgi* is the name given to mud daubers, wasps in the families Sphecidae or Crabronidae, and it means “the insect that taught us how to build out homes using mud”.

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But from it all, the part of the book that I found most interesting was the story of why the bat is sometimes considered a bird in Cherokee culture. This was such an enthralling story that I retold it in the style of *The Moth Radio Hour* and with the gusto of Paul Harvey in *The Rest of the Story* to members of the Botany Club in attendance at our weekly meeting in Penn State York. So, imagine a stickball – in my narration, I said baseball – between the bird and the mammals. As the lowly bat tried to join its fellow mammals, it found itself rejected. However, seeing that the bat has appendages that look like the wings of birds, the feathered animals accepted the bat onto their team. Because the bat did so well, helping the birds defeat the mammals, the lore developed that such a game decided why the bat is considered a bird. Just imagine the sense of humor in these stories, and how happy I was learning about them!

Thereafter, I had the opportunity to exchange a few emails with Dr. Teuton who generously referred me to another Cherokee scholar and my understanding was further broadened.

I recommend this book strongly as it teaches us, with gentleness, to see the world from another perspective. I am grateful to be exploring this path certainly less taken by me.



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