



The Surrounded

D'Arcy McNickle

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As *The Surrounded* opens, Archilde Le'n has just returned from the big city to his father's ranch on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana. The story that unfolds captures the intense and varied conflict that already characterized reservation life in 1936, when this remarkable novel was first published.

Educated at a federal Indian boarding school, Archilde is torn not only between white and Indian cultures but also between love for his Spanish father and his Indian mother, who in her old age is rejecting white culture and religion to return to the ways of her people. Archilde's young contemporaries, meanwhile, are succumbing to the destructive influence of reservation life, growing increasingly uprooted, dissolute, and hopeless. Although Archilde plans to leave the reservation after a brief visit, his entanglements delay his departure until he faces destruction by the white man's law.

In an early review of *The Surrounded*, Oliver La Farge praised it as "simple, clear, direct, devoid of affectations, and fast-moving." He included it in his "small list of creditable modern novels using the first Americans as theme." Several decades later, long out of print but not forgotten, *The Surrounded* is still considered one of the best works of fiction by or about Native Americans.

The Surrounded Details

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Author : D'Arcy McNickle

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From Reader Review *The Surrounded* for online ebook

Mark says

I started reading *The Surrounded* in May of 2009 and have not gone back to it since about page 27 or so. My first impressions are extremely favorable. I will not get back to it, though, until closer to November when we discuss it for the Branigan BookClub.

This is one of the books for the Branigan Book Club in November 2010. The other one is *The Big Sky* by A.B.Guthrie

It's now February 2012 and I finished the book a long time ago. What follows is not shouting, but enthusiasm. This book was OUTSTANDING!!!!

It transporterd me back in time to 1930s Idaho and yet was as timeless as a Greek tragedy. Comparisons with Steinbeck and Hemingway come to mind and in both cases, McNickle is fully their equal. If you like reading about western (USA) history, you absolutely do not want to miss this one!

Brooke McCallum says

What would you do if one of your family members committed murder? This is a question that looms over the entire text of *The Surrounded* by D'Arcy McNickle. This book is both sad and thrilling because of the family dynamics within the Leon family along with a rollercoaster of events that unfold on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana in 1936. There are many themes in this read, but some important ones to remember are death and family. The book focuses around the life of Archilde Leon who comes back home after being away working as a musician for quite some time to his distant family. Father Max Leon, and mother Catherine Leon hold a grudge over their children for not living with them on the reservation. Louis, Archilde's brother gets into trouble which ends up creating bigger problems for the family as a whole. As the chapters continue Archilde starts making efforts to mend relationships between his father and mother. Due to the aftermath of Louis's actions, Archilde and his mother end up in a series of events that make things even more difficult, leaving them both with dark secrets. With this guilt, Archilde and his mother have a hard time coming to terms with their realities. Things seem to be looking better when Archilde meets a girl named Elise, who he falls deeply in love with. This couple runs off together which ends in a way that makes the title of the book finally make sense. Anyone can read this and understand the thoughts Archilde had with his family, making it very relatable. For anyone who hasn't read this book, I highly recommend reading this to gain a better understanding and perspective on reservation life and how lack of sovereignty on the reservation affected Native peoples during this time. With this book, it gives readers clarity to what the Native culture all entails and for anyone who has experienced a death in their family this is a interesting read to be able to connect in a different way with how this culture deals with it.

Riki says

I read this book as a requirement for class this semester and have to admit that it was difficult to get into. Even after the story began to pick up midway through, I just couldn't get past how utterly depressing the novel is. *The Surrounded* begins with Archilde Leon returning to his home reservation in Montana after

being away in the city of Portland for some time. He returns to his family with a skewed outlook on his heritage and struggles to find meaning in the lives of his family. As he spends more time in his homeland, he becomes increasingly attached once again to old ways and finds himself entangled in the affairs of those he loves.

The novel is full of murder, fear, suspicion, and death. Without giving away the ending, I will say that the novel ends in the most hopeless and disheartening manner and has left me feeling listless and sad. Although I understand the historical and social significance, I wouldn't recommend this book.

Paul says

I hesitate to write a review of this book because anything I say will fall short of its impact. The surrounded is seen as a core work in Native American literature and rightly so. The book is well-written with characters who are both somehow flawed, and yet remarkably sympathetic. In other words, the characters are as real as the people we live with everyday. That may be their appeal. Yet, at the same time, McNickle manages to infuse so much of the culture of his characters, both NatAm and not, that reading this works becomes an exercise in sociology. You can read this book as a straight-forward narrative, and it is a good story at that level, but the deeper you dig into the text, the richer your find. Still saying what I have leaves so much unsaid that all I can really do is recommend you just read this book.

Katie says

This book was assigned for the Native American Studies class I was assisting this term. As a teaching tool for understanding many of the issues related to Native American history, I would say this book is excellent. It brings together a lot of important themes related to federal Indian policy, racism, religion, identity and assimilation. Illustrating some of these concepts through story always makes the abstract more concrete and easier for students to make sense of.

As a pleasure read, it was less exciting for me. The book is very subtle. There's a lot of metaphor and detailed description. It's not exactly a quick read. The characters are interesting though and it was written in the 1930s which makes it quite a bold book for its time. I was glad to have some class discussions about what was going on because I think that kept me invested enough to finish it out.

Christy says

Like John Joseph Mathews' *Sundown*, D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* is, as Louis Owens puts it, "the story of a mixedblood living both in and out of his tribal culture," a story imbued with fatalism and pain at the loss of a culture. Where *Sundown* is primarily about the attempts of its protagonist to fit into the larger American culture, however, *The Surrounded* focuses on its protagonist's return to his hometown and the links he forges with his Native American heritage.

The book begins as Archilde Leon returns to his hometown after living and working in Portland as a musician. He intends this return to be a last visit to the land of his childhood before leaving it forever, but things don't work out that way as one complication after another arises, keeping him from leaving. He stays

to take music lessons and to try to, for the first time, bond with his father, who has always been distant; he stays to take care of his father's estate after his death; and when he finally makes concrete plans to leave, first his mother's death and then legal troubles surrounding a death in the mountains hold him there.

Just as in *Sundown*, where Chal Windzer is seen (by his father at least) as a new hope for the future, a challenge to white culture, Archilde is here presented as a potential savior for his people throughout *The Surrounded*. The old ways are dying or dead and the older people of the community can do little more than mourn that loss. In the words of Father Grepilloux, as he addresses Max, Archilde's Spanish father, "You lose your sons, but these people have lost a way of life, and with it their pride, their dignity, their strength. Men like Jeff Irving have murdered their fathers and their sons with impunity. Gross-natured officials have despoiled them, they are insulted when they present grievances" (59). In the face of this, Archilde represents hope for a new kind of Native American. Father Grepilloux sees in him "the promise of victory after a long wait. . . . [and] the promise of the new day" (97). He says to Max in a later conversation, "It was inevitable that a new age would come. It is beginning now. And your boy [Archilde] is standing there where the road divides. He belongs to a new time. He may not stay in this valley, and it makes no difference whether he does or not; it is what he makes of himself that will count. It will be felt by all" (108). Not only, then, does Archilde have the opportunity to escape the seemingly hopeless life of his brothers and their children (lives marked by thievery and truancy), but his escape could well mark the promise of salvation for an entire people.

Archilde of course sees no such portentous future for himself. He barely sees himself as Indian at the beginning, barely sees that life and even his family as real: "Actually, in the way he was learning the world, neither Modeste nor his mother was important. They were not real people. Buffaloes were not real to him either, yet he could go and look at buffaloes every day if he wished, behind the wire enclosure of the Biological Survey reserve. He knew that buffaloes had been real things to his mother, and to the old people who had come to eat with her tonight. To him they were just fenced up animals that couldn't be shot, though you could take photographs of them" (62). In fact, his primary emotion toward his family is "impatience, irritation, an uneasy feeling in the stomach" (62). Neither the buffalo nor the old people he sees are real because they are limited, contained, *surrounded* by a foreign culture and its restrictions.

But the longer he remains in this community, the more Archilde sees the value in the old way of life and begins to connect with the community and his Native American heritage. After many experiences during which he feels separate from the other Native Americans around him, he finally feels, while in his mother's tepee during the midsummer dance, an "unaccountable security. It was all quite near, quite a part of him; it was his necessity, for the first time" (222). And he begins to reach out to those living in poverty around him (an old woman, an old mare, poor family and tribe members who come to his mother's death) as he begins to feel a part of the community. He reflects, at his mother's bedside, "People grew into each other, became intertwined, and life was no mere matter of existence, no mere flash of time. . . . People grew together like creeping vines. The root of beginning was hard to find in the many that had come together and spread their foliage in one mass" (258).

But as Archilde's life is more and more closely intertwined with the lives of his mother, his nephews, his lover, his potential as savior diminishes and he loses his chance to escape the same fate that meets the "bad Indians" he is surrounded by. As Mr. Parker, the Agent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs, says to him in the end, "You had everything, every chance, and this is the best you could do with it! A man gets pretty tired of you and all your kind. . . . It's too damn bad you people never learn that you can't run away. It's pathetic--" (296-97).

So although *The Surrounded* introduces hope for a new beginning, one that will allow a way for someone

like Archilde to move into the broader culture without necessarily completely rejecting his heritage, a way to connect with both American and Native American cultures, the novel ultimately rejects this possibility. The circumstances of law, religion, education, and economics surrounding Native Americans at this time neither allow for a full expression of the old ways nor provide an escape that is other than an absolute rejection of those old ways. To respect and value both simultaneously is an impossibility. After all, in the end, even the hardworking, honest Archilde is just one of "you people," destined for jail or execution.

Matthew says

I really liked *The Surrounded*. It's very lit-heavy, and it fits quite nicely with other "required reading" of the time. Except this one has somehow filtered out of scholarly concious. McNickle gives a raw impression of Salish life ... and while I'm quick to question the authenticity of some of the portrayals, I believe that there is a real passion in this novel.

There is a lot going on here as well. From criticism of Christianity to a preservation of the old traditions to murder, the Leon family deals with a lot. But it never felt muddled or rushed in any way. Usually plotlines this rich make me wish the author would have focused in on one or two points, but McNickle is able to dance skillfully between his storylines without tripping. Even characters that are introduced late in the game feel fully realized and worth the pages dedicated to them.

Overall, I think it a shame that *The Surrounded* isn't as scholarly prevelant as it once was. As a country, America tends to forget about its Native inhabitants. So do yourself a favor and pick this one up. It's well worth the time.

Myth says

I was encouraged to give this book a read by my friend who's doing her thesis on it. I thought it would be interesting to compare and contrast with Alexie Sherman's book. I was able to find some vague similarities. I bought this book pre-owned. The condition of the book was a bit worse than I expected. The previous owner marked it up with underlines and notes, so it kind of interrupted the reading experience.

I guess it looks like something only a college student could read, because I was asked if I was a college student several times. I understand how people could make that mistake; this isn't exactly today's style.

This book is filled with meaning and symbolism. It's blatant, yet it's hard to understand and digest it all. I got what I could from it. Some of the style is due to the books age; some of the starkness of it is the author's style. The biggest message behind this book is constantly in the reader's face. It's in the title and last lines.

McNickle left readers with an uncomfortable and unpleasant end. It was perfect and fitting. This isn't the sort of book you need to like; it's the sort you need to understand. That's how literature stands apart from other fiction and genres. It was a nice change of pace from what I usually read. I'll probably be mulling over the

meaning and Archilde's journey for a while.

There isn't much more for me to say about it. I know this is the sort of book that essays are written about and details are scrutinized. I suppose that's to say I'd rather see what has been written about it.

Lyndon says

Note: What follows is an extensive analysis of *The Surrounded*, and a portion of an essay I wrote for my college class on multicultural lit. I got an A on this paper, but can not be responsible for your grade if you plagiarize! ;)

Written in 1936 this novel tells the story of Archilde, a young Native American man caught in the clash of cultures typical of early reservation life. Although I read it in a college literature course, the reading level and content are appropriate for any high school language arts class.

Quick impression: Recommended read, 7 out of 10.

In D'Arcy McNickle's novel *The Surrounded* the protagonist Archilde Leon is a conflicted character. Through a series of events – some predictable in their consequences, and some a result of unforeseen circumstances – Archilde finds himself in a terrible place by novel's end.

His problems throughout the story stem largely from his reactions to the real and perceived expectations of his family and friends, cultural norms, and the authority figures he interacts with and how Archilde attempts to deny or fulfill them. What I think we'll discover as we examine a few of these expectations is that our protagonist, like the reader of McNickle's insightful novel, is at times both hero and victim; he both rises above his circumstances as well as succumbs to them.

Archilde Leon is the son of a Spanish rancher and an American Indian mother who reside on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Montana. This sets the stage for plenty of family conflict since the father, Max Leon, is a hard man and impatient with his Indian wife and children whom he perceives to be lazy and ungrateful. So from his birth Archilde is a product of a conflicted heritage.

Set (and written) in the 1930s, the location and era also evokes a time of prejudice and paternalism against Native Americans by the ruling 'white man,' represented by the Bureau of Indian Affairs which oversees reservation life. Archilde is a product of this conflict of cultures as well. After his education at a federal Indian boarding school, he leaves the reservation and his family, presumably to find himself and develop his own identity.

The story opens as Archilde returns from Portland, Oregon, where he made a passable living playing his fiddle in a show house. While he admits some success out there in the real world, something is evidently missing in his soul and he returns home to get a taste of his former life.

He looked toward the mountains in the east, and then upward to the fleckless sky. Nowhere in the world, he imagined, was there a sky of such depth and freshness. He wanted never to forget it, wherever he might be in times to come. Yes, wherever he might be! (McNickle 5)

But he realizes immediately that his life had changed. The narrator reminds us, “When you came home to your Indian mother you had to remember that it was a different world.” (McNickle 3) It seems, like many of us who have been away from home yet long for a connection with our past, Archilde wanted to renew his familial and cultural ties. Ultimately, however, he desired to leave the reservation for bigger things.

Yet upon his return, his mother, Catharine, expected him to remain at home. For, “An Indian boy, she thought, belonged with his people.” (McNickle 2) So Archilde decides to extend his stay a few weeks – which turns into months – since Catharine seems to be of ill health and lonely. At first this is a laudable decision but he slowly loses sight of a driving vision for his life.

Which is the complaint of his father. Max Leon is bitter that none of his sons – “Seven sons, they might have been seven dogs!” (McNickle 26) – made anything of themselves. Or more accurately, they didn’t join him in running the ranch. Instead, they all left to go “back to the blanket” (McNickle 25) - a derisive racial slur. In Max’s mind it’s either the lazy reservation Indian or the hardworking ranching Spaniard. And while Archilde is neither lazy nor ungrateful, he does not want to take up the yoke of running the ranch. He responds to his father’s dual expectations in anger and frustration.

Eventually Max is sensitized to Archilde’s conflicted emotions by his old friend Father Grepilloux. So Max encourages his son to talk to the priest about using his musical talent within the context of reservation life. After meeting with Archilde, Father Grepilloux is ecstatic. He believes he has found an Indian of sufficient talent and motivation to serve as a kind of saving representative of the Indian people. Here at last is a shining product of the religious and cultural assimilative process (that had failed when applied to previous generations, but never mind that)!

One can imagine the pressure that Archilde felt to fulfill such a role, even though much of Father Grepilloux’s hopes remained unspoken. So for the sort term, since he is interested in music Archilde does accept the priest’s offer to continue his training. This seems to be a worthy response, but again, Archilde soon loses steam as it’s not a decision that flows out of a life purpose but is rather a reaction to someone else’s expectations.

And so the story proceeds. It’s a well written narrative, moves fairly quickly, and has a number of intriguing and fascinating characters, customs, and history to it, but it doesn’t seem to get bogged down or lost in its central purpose of showing the internal conflict of the characters being worked out on the external stage.

From these limited examples we’ve seen in Archilde a person much like ourselves. We have interests, hopes, goals, and aspirations. And we often gravitate toward experiences that foster our dreams, as did Archilde. When responding to these various expectations, Archilde considered his life interests, responded in a way that seemed to move that direction, but then ultimately let the circumstances of life dictate his destiny. This is often our story as well.

But in this novel, Archilde’s pattern of timidity and uncertainty eventually result in a desperate situation. I won’t spoil the plot, but there is murder involved. And, although innocent of the crime he is accused of, Archilde has so often let others’ expectations decide his fate that unless he takes control of his destiny when the novel ends, he will pay for those expectations with his life.

Brooke Stellman says

McNickle is phenomenal at using perspective. He is great at seamlessly transitioning through different third person perspectives. By using this technique, you get to know the characters in an interesting way. I read this for my class on Native American literature, and while the novel does translate the issues of the Indians into a story, it is also a great fiction piece on the coming of age and family.

Tori says

2.5 Stars

This was assigned for my Racial and Ethnic Themes in Lit class and I enjoyed it for what it was. Definitely an interesting peek into Native American culture and the damage that forced assimilation has caused Native Americans. But the characters were a bit bland for me and the plot was so-so. If you're super interested in NA literature then give it a try, but if not then I think you'll probably find it to be a bit of a dry read, as I did.

Lydia Presley says

The Surrounded by D'Arcy McNickle is a heartaching story of the Salish Indians who were forced into a place of "in-between" through the conversion of the tribe to the Catholic faith and the loss of their reservation land, through sale, to the white man.

The narrative follows Archilde, the second to youngest son of Max Leon, a Spaniard, and Catharine, a Salish woman. Archilde is one of seven sons - each of whom has chosen to live in a sort of disregard for the traditions and desires of Max.

Every character in this book has layers of layers of complexity. Archilde is viewed by his mother as one person, his father another, and the people surrounding him as yet another. Max Leon surprises again and again with his choices, Catharine's character is a beautiful portrayal in the heartbreak that can occur when tradition is squashed beneath the ideas of "civilization," and the supporting cast provide the necessary surroundings for the story to evolve in a way that was representative of the time and history of the Salish people in Montana.

I loved this book for it's honest, relevant message. It was written in the 1930s, but continues to be a treasure of a book. The Salish live in these pages - not in their original lifestyle, but rather as a reminder of what happens when one culture pressures another into a life and set of beliefs which are not their own.

Michelle Boyer says

To begin, this book is marketed as one of if not *the* best piece of American Indian literature ever written. While it was certainly among the first, and paved the way for contemporary AI authors, I humbly disagree that this is one of the best pieces of AI lit ever written. Unfortunately, the plot is slow, boring, and really hard to engage with (and this is coming from an American Indian literature Ph.D. student).

Clearly, this is one of the novels you have to trudge through in order to understand the authors that shaped American Indian canon, literature, paved the way for contemporary authors, etc. -- but I would highly

suggest if you're allowed to pick and choose your D'Arcy McNickle novels, read *Wind from an Enemy Sky* instead.

Two stars for its historic merit. But as a read, definitely would not have finished it if it was not on my comps list!

Virginia Myers says

I really do not want to "rate" this book. I am a fan of historical fiction and books that are about American history really make a hit with me. I hardly ever find one that I do not enjoy in some fashion although some leave a more lasting pleasure. When I saw a summary of this book, I was sure I would enjoy reading it. Now for me to "enjoy" a book - I would not have previously believed it needed to provide me with a sense of well being or happiness. I have contended before that all it takes for me to like a story is an interesting plot that teaches me something about history. Well - I guess this book did teach me something - about myself.

I read about 2/3 of the book and then felt it dragging a bit and decided to scan ahead before going back to continue reading it. Well - as I scanned the pages I kept seeing things that made me want to know the end. And I read all of the last couple of chapters. The ending was so depressing that I do not want to read the pages I had skipped over. I will keep it on the shelf and see if my curiosity makes me change my mind.

Now with that said - the book was originally written in 1936. I feel confident that it probably reveals a lot of the true history of the problems that Native Americans had when we white folks forced them off of their lands and destroyed their way of life and left them with no opportunity to continue to live in accordance with their centuries old traditions. The author did not sugar coat the problems and probably those Indians living on the reservations today have even less motivation or positive outlook on life.

I was so wound up in the history and social implications of the book that I did not really form an opinion on how well a development of the characters was achieved. What I got out of it was that the whole family suffered from some sort of neurotic behavior that was manifested in different ways. And I think that analysis even applied to the main character whose life was ruined when he stayed at his family home - even though his reason for staying was admirable. I wish he had left when he had his suit case packed.

So for the moment I am off to reading another book.

Weradi says

Accurate portrayal of Native American life in Montana 1930's written by a fellow Kootai Native. Well written slow paced yet rivoting plot.
