



Mark Anthony Rolo

## Unearthing Memories

**M**ark Anthony Rolo (B.S. '91) had no intention of writing about his mother. For over three decades after her death, it hurt too much even to remember her. He was only a boy when she died, giving him just 10 short years to know her. And he was reluctant to dredge up his family's dysfunctional history, which would need to play a part in telling her story. But in 2009, after an epiphany gave him new perspective on his loss, he found

himself reconstructing his memories of the woman who raised him and his six siblings while coping with poverty, an alcoholic husband, and the isolation of life on a northern Minnesota farm.

The result is *My Mother Is Now Earth*, a memoir that focuses exclusively on the last three years of Corrine Rolo's life—from the spring of 1971, when her husband uprooted the family from their home in Milwaukee, through the fall of 1973, when she died at the age of 46.

Knowing from the beginning that the story will end in her death casts a dark shadow over an already bleak picture of family life in Big Falls, Minnesota. Though the children manage to keep themselves entertained, relishing shared comic books and making a few friends, their mother's profound loneliness and depression are clear to Mark Anthony even at the tender age of 8. Trapped in a broken marriage and living far from the Ojibwe community where she grew up, Corrine spends hours writing and rewriting letters to her sisters and looking longingly through the farmhouse's kitchen window.

Her Ojibwe heritage continually surfaces in daily life, but only as a ghost. She insists on traditional medicine, for example, distrusting modern doctors, yet doesn't pass on the culture to her children. When Mark Anthony's older brother tells him about *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, the historic book on the injustices suffered by Native Americans, he is resistant: "I've never heard of that book, but I know I wouldn't want to read it because of that word 'wounded.' It makes me feel bad about how hard it is for my mother, makes me feel ashamed about living poor like we are, how we have to put up with a drunk white father." But when he hears about the Lakota women and children massacred at Wounded Knee, he begins to under-

stand the importance of Native American history. He vows never to play cowboys and Indians again.

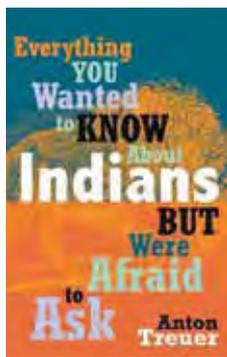
The lack of cultural teachings aside, Corrine does her best to keep the crumbling family united. A devoted mother who once ran into a burning house to rescue her children—leaving her with distinctive, snake-like scars, a lifelong source of both shame and pride—she makes the most of what she has and conducts herself

with “more dignity than despair,” as Mark Anthony writes in the afterword. Glimpses of her resolve and intelligence reinforce the sense that her potential has been stifled, but those qualities are also a light in the storm.

*My Mother Is Now Earth* is a beautiful, if tragic, portrait of a tumultuous time in the lives of its author and his mother. Mark Anthony writes convincingly as his boyhood self, forced to deal with very adult situations at a young age, and deftly weaves in a number of details (such as copies of letters) that he gathered later in life. The book is a love song to Corrine, not only as his mother, but as an Ojibwe woman who responded to hardship with ferocity and grace.

Now residing in California, Rolo is a journalist, novelist, and playwright. He is a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa and the former editor of the Minneapolis monthly newspaper *The Circle*.

—Madeleine Vasaly



Anton Treuer

## Left Wanting to Know More

Anyone who has attended a powwow has likely seen a “traditional Indian fry bread taco” booth. But none of those terms “have any business even being in the same sentence,” writes Ojibwe scholar Anton Treuer (M.A. ’94, Ph.D. ’97) in *Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*. Treuer, a professor at Bemidji

State University, explains that fry bread was created by resourceful Indians subsisting on government rations of flour and lard. Calling fry bread “traditional” is a misnomer, he says—and harmful, given that this racial group has the highest diabetes rate in the world.

Everything You Wanted to Know about Indians but Were Afraid to Ask  
Anton Treuer (M.A. ’94, Ph.D. ’97)  
Borealis Books, 2012

In 180 pages, Treuer provides plainspoken answers to more than 120 questions—about gaming, long hair, poverty, Leonard Peltier, mascots, tribal attitudes about homosexuality, Indian cars, boarding schools, and more—that he’s been asked during his lectures and presentations. He addresses them with the hope that his insights will help advance understanding of Indians for all people.

He also offers an important disclaimer. “Just as no white person can speak for all white people,” he writes in the introduction, “I cannot speak for all Indians.” Treuer adds that his book might not be everything one wants to know and that he hopes readers will seek out more opinions from native people.

—Shelly Fling

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