From the Bookshelf

The Julian J. Rothbaum Prize recognizes the author of the University of Oklahoma Press' outstanding publication of the year. The endowed $1,000 prize is funded by one of the Press' most ardent admirers, Tulsa oilman Julian J. Rothbaum, a former regent and long-time supporter of the University.

The two most recent winners of the Rothbaum Prize are reviewed on this page. The reviewers are Paul F. Sharp, president emeritus and Regents Professor emeritus of history and education, and Clara Sue Kidwell, director of the OU Native American Studies Program. The first prize recipient was Eugen Strouhal for *Life of the Ancient Egyptians*.

*Elizabeth Bacon Custer and the Making of a Myth* by Shirley A. Leckie

University of Oklahoma Press.

419 pages. $27.95 hardcover.

This award-winning biography of Elizabeth Bacon Custer, rich in anecdote and detail, traces the career of a remarkable and talented woman. Before the death of her husband at the Battle of The Little Big Horn in 1876, she devoted her energies, attractive personality and social skills to uniting efforts to advance George Armstrong Custer's career. Her unfailing support, her qualities of Victorian middle class values and her strong character won the loyalty of admiring friends whose assistance furthered the flamboyant young officer's career.

Widowed in 1876, "Libbie" Custer turned her talents to embellishing her husband's reputation. Angered by President U.S. Grant's charge that her husband's disobedience was responsible for the defeat of the Seventh Cavalry, "Libbie" Custer devoted her life to clearing her husband's name and to making him an American hero.

She met with astonishing success in her lifelong crusade. She was so successful that she helped create a mythic figure, larger than life. She was revered as a model army officer's wife and widow, and her books extolling his virtues were widely read and believed. So powerful was her influence that not until after her death in 1933 did serious criticism of the myth appear when in 1934 Frederic Van der Water's *The Glory Hunter* attacked the sturdy myth of the boy general's life and career.

Ms. Leckie concludes her well-written and carefully researched biography with the judgment that "Elizabeth Bacon Custer wrote her works so well and lived with such fidelity, that even today, there are those who still cherish and venerate Libbie's General Custer."

—Paul F. Sharp

*Bone Game* by Louis Owens

University of Oklahoma Press.

243 pages. $19.95 hardcover, $11.95 paperback.

*Bone Game* is a novel whose protagonist, a college professor of mixed Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish heritage who specializes in studies of American Indian literature, bears a strong resemblance to its author. Owens writes with a sense of the mystical aspects of Native American cultures, but the story is not autobiographical.

The characters that Owens creates are richly complex—a Navajo man who wears dresses, the full-blood Choctaw great uncle who communicates with ghosts, an enormous mastiff named Custer whose ultimate demise mixes horror and hilarity. The story ranges from the peaceful college town of Santa Cruz, California, (Owens previously taught at Santa Cruz) to the remote reaches of the Navajo Reservation to the deep pine woods of Mississippi. The various landscapes become an integral part of the story.

A gigantic bear appears from the woods of Santa Cruz, and Cole McCurtain, the professor, is plagued by dreams of a mysterious naked figure, a gambler whose body is painted black and white and who holds out painted bones. The novel has elements of mystery in both the literal and the figurative senses.

Dismembered body parts of young women begin to wash up on local beaches, and McCurtain begins to fear for his daughter Abby, who has suddenly reentered his life after growing up with her mother. Cole's dreams imply that the deaths are the work of spiritual forces. His great-uncle Luther and the old Chocow woman named Onatima are drawn from their homes in Mississippi by the sense that Cole is in danger, and Cole feels a sense of disconnectedness from his Indian identity that only they can heal.

Owens spins a spell-binding tale, combining psychological and physical suspense as Cole McCurtain struggles to understand the meaning of his dreams and to find the killer who threatens his daughter.

—Clara Sue Kidwell