

## A CONVERSATION WITH KENT NERBURN

### What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

For many years I had been haunted by the sadness that I had seen on the faces of Indian elders when discussing their boarding school experiences. A chance encounter with a Native man in North Dakota set the book in motion when, speaking of his boarding school experience, he said, "I learned good English. I learned about being a good Christian. But I am no longer myself, I am someone else." I knew then that I had to tell the boarding school story, but with a light touch and an absolute fidelity to Native experience as I have experienced it.

### What research did you undertake in writing *The Wolf at Twilight*?

I researched boarding school experiences in the U.S. and Canada in archives and libraries. I traveled throughout Minnesota and the Dakotas visiting boarding school sites, speaking to people, and listening to stories. Much of my research is related to direct experiences of people, weather, and the land.

### What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

The biggest literary challenge was going back and finding the same voice that I had used

in the book's predecessor, *Neither Wolf Nor Dog*, which won the Minnesota Book Award in 1995. That's a big gap to bridge in picking up a story. As to the narrative, the great challenge was to be absolutely faithful to the facts of the boarding school experience while bringing to life real people and placing them in a story that would captivate and educate readers, take them deep into reservation life, and show them both the darkness of the past and the humor and insight of the Native way of living and learning.

### What was your journey to becoming a published author?

I was trained as a sculptor and still think as a sculptor, understanding everything visually rather than conceptually. I wrote all through college and graduate school as a way to make a meager living. I ran a community newspaper, wrote sports columns, and did art reviews and free-lance articles, all as ways to support my sculpting life. When an opportunity to direct an oral history project on the Red Lake Ojibwe reservation came along, I took it, and found that writing was a powerful artistic medium that I could use to express spiritual values. So I traded the chisel for the pen, and have never looked back.

### How does being a native Minnesotan inform your writing?

I live in northern Minnesota, where the pines meet the prairies and the water changes course from south to north. Living in a land of transitions makes me alive to possibilities and multiple points of view. I am always aware of the turning of the seasons and feel the drumbeat of nature in all that I write. Most of my writings take place under open skies, not in rooms. And being in Bemidji, between three reservations, makes me acutely aware of the presence and possibility of the Native peoples of our state.

### How do you most enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I love to travel, listen, and watch. I will always stop to have a conversation with a dog. I sit a lot, think a lot, listen to music a lot, and take great pleasure in having long conversations with my wife, my children, and strangers I meet on the street. I like to help other people.



325 Cedar Street  
Suite 555  
Saint Paul, MN 55101  
651-222-3242

[www.thefriends.org](http://www.thefriends.org)

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Children's Literature  
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Memoir & Creative Nonfiction  
Minnesota  
Novel & Short Story  
Poetry  
Young People's Literature

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A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/ The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

22ND ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

## Memoir & Creative Nonfiction Winner

"Kent Nerburn's creative and compassionate book [is] humorous, heartwarming, and at times very sad. Thank you, Kent, for a good book to read."  
— LEONARD FEETEN, author, artist, and activist

the Wolf  
at Twilight  
An Indian Elder's Journey through  
a Land of Ghosts and Shadows

Kent Nerburn

Author of *Neither Wolf nor Dog*  
and *Chief Joseph and the Flight of the Nez Perce*

*The Wolf at Twilight: An Indian Elder's Journey through a Land of Ghosts and Shadows*

by Kent Nerburn

NEW WORLD LIBRARY

# The Wolf at Twilight



## SUMMARY:

Suspenseful, touching, humorous, tragic, and powerful are just some of the words that can be used to describe Kent Nerburn's captivating story of his journey to help an elderly Native American man discover what happened to his long-lost sister. Nerburn brings light to the complicated friendship between a white American and a Lakota Indian, and the reader is allowed a private and extraordinary glimpse into the life and wisdom of a tribal elder.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. What did you learn from Dan's

thoughts about the Native way of teaching and seeing the world? Do those thoughts have application to our contemporary society?

3. What was the most interesting or disturbing thing you learned about Native American history and experiences in the Midwest?
4. The author is a non-Native. What is it about this book and its narrative technique that makes it acceptable for a non-Native writer to be writing about a Native American experience?
5. What role does the dog, Charles Bronson, play in the book and what lessons can be learned from this scruffy little dog?
6. How does humor play a role in the book, and how would your experience in reading it be different without the interjection of humor?
7. The author says that as the book's narrator, he has been accused, at various times, of being "whiney" as well as too docile and too easily pushed around. Do you share this feeling?
8. When asked, "Is this book true?" the author usually answers, "Are Van Gogh's paintings true? Are the Gospels true?" Is this a fair answer, and what does it mean?
9. Depending on the source, *The Wolf at Twilight* is

categorized as either creative nonfiction or fiction. In what category do you believe the book belongs? What distinguishes a memoir or biography from creative nonfiction, and what distinguishes creative nonfiction from fiction?

10. When it comes to documenting experiences, is there such thing as truth?

## ABOUT KENT NERBURN

*Kent Nerburn is the author of several books on spirituality and Native themes, including Chief Joseph and the Flight of the Nez Perce, which was featured on The History Channel. He has a Ph.D in Religious Studies and Art, and worked for many years as a sculptor before he switched to writing, a medium through which he realized he could reach more people. Kent was born and raised near Minneapolis and now lives in Bemidji with his wife.*

Visit [www.kentnerburn.com](http://www.kentnerburn.com) to learn more about the author and his work.



Photo by Scott Strebile



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