

★★★★★ **A memorably rich, moving work of historical fiction**, March 5, 2006
Reviewer: Daniel Jolley "*darkgenius*" (Shelby, North Carolina USA)

If you're like me, you might need a little bit of background on the title of Cyndie M. Styles' second novel, *Snakes in Paha Sapa*. Paha Sapa is the Lakota name for the Black Hills (located in South Dakota and Wyoming), which probably clues you in on the identity of the referenced snakes - they are of the white snake variety that spread westward across America in great numbers during the middle and late 19th century. The novel follows the rather extraordinary life of a Lakota warrior whose fight to reclaim the sacred lands of his people takes on new dimensions as his worldview is shifted by a remarkable white woman rancher.

Snake-Catcher was a great warrior, second only to his older brother. When that brother is ambushed and killed - and great numbers of Lakota tribesmen slaughtered - at the hands of white men, Snake-Catcher's world changes forever. Confined to a reservation, he watches helplessly as the American government reneges on its promises and allows prospectors to settle in Paha Sapa in pursuit of the gold discovered there. Having lost his entire family and his people's cherished lands, he has nothing left but the promise he made to his dying brother - to take a book belonging to that beloved brother to a lady named Susan Paradise in Sundance. When he is finally able to get permission to leave the reservation temporarily, he heads westward to Paradise Valley Ranch as fast as he can. Not surprisingly, he encounters trouble along the way, but the circumstances end up giving him a most enlightening perspective on white society in the wake of his arrival at Susan's ranch. He learns things he never knew about his brother, and he finds unexpected allies in Susan and her band of ranch hands and helpers (a mix of white, Indian, and Mexican cultures). Susan vows to join his campaign to reclaim Paha Sapa for his people, a legal campaign aided by another Lakota educated among the whites.

Susan has her own problems as an independent woman running her own ranch, and Snake-Catcher joins her battles just as she joined his. As you might expect, romance enters the picture eventually, which proves unsettling to both the Lakota warrior as well as the white woman, but theirs is a formidable teamship seemingly ordained by fate to work together for the good of others. Over the course of the novel, many years pass, ushering in a number of brand new elements to the lives of all those at Paradise Valley Ranch. It gives the novel something of an epic quality. Several times, I expected a plot point to be worked out in the end, only to see it resolved much earlier to make way for further turning points in the story. It all comes together beautifully to tell a most endearing tale of human drama.

Snakes in Paha Sapa is a most impressive second novel. In terms of subject matter, it is much different from Styles' earlier *Crossing Burning Bridges*, yet it retains the author's wonderfully flowing writing style, truly proves her standing as a natural storyteller, and amplifies the bedrock of very real emotions she manages to instill in virtually all of her characters. This is also a very educational novel for those of us who have never really explored the plight of Native Americans deprived of their land by a treacherous and sometimes exceedingly harsh American government. With its formidable mix of historical fiction, Western, and romance, *Snakes in Paha Sapa* makes for a wonderful, genre-crossing read.