

**THE SILENT SPIRIT: A WIND RIVER MYSTERY**, by Margaret Coel. ( Berkley Prime Crime, \$24.94, Sep 2009). Father John O'Malley, returning from a 6-month assignment in Rome, is pleased to be back on the Wind River Reservation helping his beloved parishioners. . He had hoped that Vicky Holden, an Arapaho attorney and a very close friend, would be there to greet him, but they had agreed earlier that their relationship could cause trouble for both of them. Besides, Father John soon has other problems. One evening, he had picked up hitchhiker Kiki Wallowingbull, an ex-con and alleged drug dealer, just recently released from prison. He told Father John that he intended to find out what happened to his great- grandfather, Charlie Wallowingbull, who had gone to Hollywood in the 1920's with a group of Arapaho and Shoshone Indians to be in a film, *The Covered Wagon*. All of the other Indians came back, but not Charlie. It's obvious Kiki is very angry about his great-grandfather's apparent abandonment and is not thinking clearly about the problems he will face trying to solve a decades old disappearance. Disturbed by Kiki's blind intensity, Father John decides to talk to Kiki's aging parents. Though many on the reservation think Kiki is a loser, his grandparents insist Kiki is a new man just trying to help his family. But then Father John finds Kiki dead. Why? Drugs? Or has his search for his great-grandfather uncovered dangerous secrets? Father John feels compelled to find answers for Kiki's family. In the meantime, Vicky Holden and her law partner, handsome, ambitious Adam Lone Eagle, who is also her fiancé, are having relationship problems on every level. And Vicky, besides getting creepy anonymous calls, is being followed. Soon, Vicky and Father John find themselves working together again to uncover murders, past and present.

As usual, Coel uses unique Indian history and events to drive her plot. Based on an actual incident, old cowboy actor Tim McCoy came to the reservation in the 1920's to hire 500 Indians to be in a major silent Western epic, *The Covered Wagon*. The Indians desperately needed money for food, and McCoy, whom they trusted, said they would get pay equal to that of the whites. He also promised they could show the true culture of the Arapaho. This plot intertwines with Kiki's background as a drug dealer. Because of the historical details of this film production, the search for the missing Charlie is quite an intriguing story, and the drug subplot furnishes plenty of tension and action. Coel handles the two stories very competently.

Furthermore, the rocky, longtime relationship between Vicky and Father John continues to fascinate Coel's readers. Though they are soul mates, who both want to help the Arapaho, they are mature enough to accept the fact that they cannot acknowledge their love publicly, and they are both too principled to act upon it privately. Still, the longings are there. To sublimate them, Father John gives his heart and love to his parish members. And Vicky has tried to give hers to Adam. But, Vicky and the Father remain very attracted to one another, and, of course, they must cooperate to help the Arapaho, On the other hand, Vicky often finds Adam's emphasis on corporate Indian lawsuits boring. And, to Adam's horror, Vicky is always willing to risk her life to help a down-and-out, often guilty fellow Arapaho.

In addition to Vicky and Father John, Coel always draws marvelous portraits of a variety of Arapaho. There is Elena, the cynical housekeeper who thinks Father John is a bit

gullible. Lucy, a young Indian dropout, is intelligent and strong-minded, but Father John eventually tricks her into getting back in school. Most of all, though Arapaho men sometimes turn to drink and drugs, Coel creates wonderfully strong Indian women, who often keep the family together in spite of problems. After all, they produce the fry bread, the stew, and the coffee that is featured at every gathering. And, in the film community, petite, blonde, spoiled Missy Markham appears to be a wonderful villainess, or is she an innocent victim?

Coel also does a good job of recreating the desolateness of the desert and the isolation of the scattered Arapaho homes. The setup for the massive film production amidst sand and heat, with 500 untutored Indians trying to work in the white man's world, is quite unique.

Empathetic characters, colorful settings, and a well-plotted story make this a solid entry in Coel's long running series. Definitely recommended.