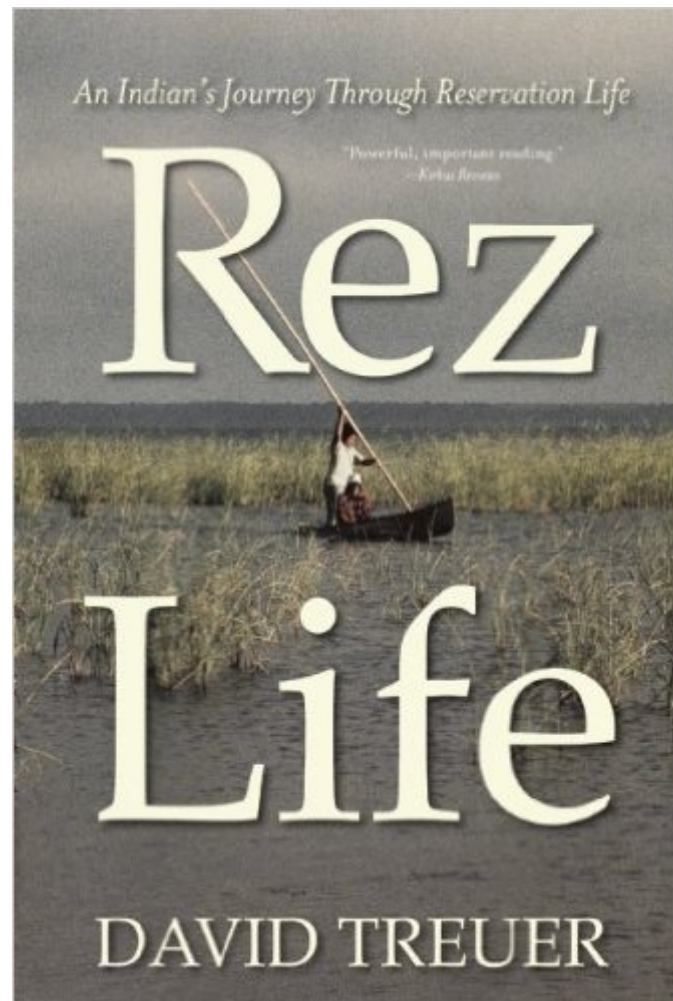


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# Rez Life: An Indian's Journey Through Reservation Life



## Synopsis

Celebrated novelist David Treuer has gained a reputation for writing fiction that expands the horizons of Native American literature. In *Rez Life*, his first full-length work of nonfiction, Treuer brings a novelist's storytelling skill and an eye for detail to a complex and subtle examination of Native American reservation life, past and present. With authoritative research and reportage, Treuer illuminates misunderstood contemporary issues like sovereignty, treaty rights, and natural-resource conservation. He traces the convoluted waves of public policy that have deracinated, disenfranchised, and exploited Native Americans, exposing the tension and conflict that has marked the historical relationship between the United States government and the Native American population. Through the eyes of students, teachers, government administrators, lawyers, and tribal court judges, he shows how casinos, tribal government, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs have transformed the landscape of Native American life. A member of the Ojibwe of northern Minnesota, Treuer grew up on the Leech Lake Reservation, but was educated in "mainstream" America. Treuer traverses the boundaries of American and Indian identity as he explores crime and poverty, casinos and wealth, and the preservation of his native language and culture. *Rez Life* is a strikingly original work of history and reportage, a must read for anyone interested in the Native American story.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

David Treuer's book *Rez Life*, is a very readable "hybrid...of journalism, history, and memoir." The style is journalistic, in which specific aspects of "rez life" are illustrated through interviews and

accounts of individuals, with bits of history thrown in to illustrate how specific conflicts and situations arose. The pieces of memoir arise because much of the book is about the reservations of the author's own tribe, the Ojibwe, and the body of the book is bracketed by the suicide of his maternal grandfather at the beginning of the book, and the burial at the conclusion. Often in the journalism, and invariably in the history, the reaction of the reader is likely to be outrage, though the telling is straightforward. It is hard to construe the actions of the U.S. Government (and the inaction/inertia of the Bureau of Indian Affairs) in a positive light. Or indeed, as anything other than disgraceful. It's also hard to avoid the conclusion that, when Congress passed laws to ostensibly help the Indian, the effect was generally to make things worse. However, the author seems hopeful, as if the bottom has been reached and that the Native Americans now have the potential to climb out of the hole of 200 years of history. Those looking for a more authoritative history of US-Indian relations should probably look to the sources that the author mentions in the end-notes. This book seems to be trying to capture, with obvious love and affection, the good and the bad of modern reservation life. On those grounds, it succeeds. The book does not raise this issue, but my lasting thought was one of morality: how should a government "make things right" after literally hundreds of years of doing the wrong thing at nearly every turn?

This is one of those gems of a book that on occasion seems to spring up out of nowhere. I wasn't expecting much when I first picked it up: perhaps a few new wrinkles and a lot of old hat. But much to my surprise, I found it to be exactly the opposite. There is some old hat, or at least old hat if you are already familiar with the U.S. government/native American treaty making experience, but even this is related in a refreshing manner. For instance, I did not know that the Delaware, when they were still residing in western Pennsylvania, were apparently offered the opportunity to be admitted into the Union as the 14th state. As the author points out, this was probably not an entirely above-board and legitimate offer, but even so, just that the offer was made points to the complexity of the treaty making process. But the real value of this book is how he relates the history of the treaty making process to life on contemporary reservations, most notably on his own native Ojibwe reservations of northern Minnesota and Wisconsin. He presents us with everyday Indians leading their everyday Indian existence, and shows how so much of their experience is still defined by those musty treaties from the past. What I particularly found impressive was that, although he does take his expected shots at the U.S. government and white civilization, he does not pull punches in regard to his own people either. Also, it is the first book I have read that deals with reservation life following the casino boom, and how some tribes have been affected favorably by it while many others have

not. All in all, this is a good read - a pleasant surprise.

This is about as far as one can get from a rose-colored view of Indian lives. David Treuer holds back none of the social pathologies that beset many reservations that he has known and studied. Yet he manages through an engaging style (which almost makes one forget the scholarly research that informs the chapters) to let the reader understand the chaotic chains of events that set the stage for the present conditions. The story literally comes alive as the author tells of his own family and friends. A special delight are lyrical descriptions of the Minnesota lake country. The book also educates us on the casino culture and some of the different ways that is playing out.

This is one of the most readable and touching accounts of important facets of American Indian history and contemporary reality I've ever come across. It took me back to my years on various "reservations" and underscored my respect for the resilience of which it speaks. One modern story struck me with particular force, that of Helen Bryan, who took to the Supreme Court a claim for her right not to have to pay \$147 in state taxes on property situated on her native land--and won, with the eventual result, combined with another legal battle, that casinos now dot reservations and some have resulted in wealth for the locals. One passage, in the form of an appeal from the author, is worthy of national attention: "Life hasn't changed for me much,' she [Helen] says. 'I'm still poor!' But because Helen Bryan stuck up for herself and her family, a lot of Indians and a lot of tribes aren't. 'The papers picked up the story and said that the ruling affected ten thousand Indians in Minnesota. I told Russell [her husband] at the time,' says Helen, 'if we did so much maybe if every Indian in Minnesota sent us a dollar, we'd be rich!' In my opinion, everyone should. Send your dollars to Helen (Bryan) Johnson, 60876 County Road 149, Squaw Lake, MN 56681" (Treuer, 2012, p. 238). Read this book!

The first half of the book has a lot of stuff on the legal disputes between natives and state, federal, and local governments. The last part has a lot on the economics of Indian casinos. While I can see the necessity of including these topics in a book on reservations, a little of that stuff goes a long, long way. What is worse is how all this crowded out any real look at the day to day life of people on the reservation. There is only the most perfunctory look at things like religion, culture, family, food, work etc. A better book on rez life waits to be written.

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