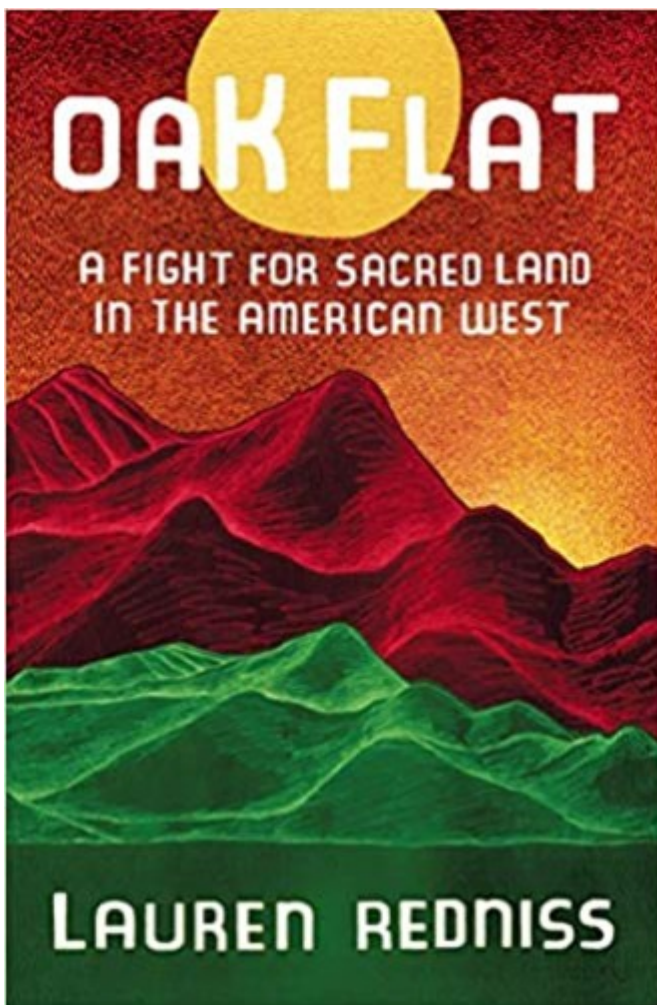


Lauren Redniss's *Oak Flat* is about the conflict over sacred Apache land in Arizona

It's also about a conflict within the order of the universe.

by [Annelisa Burns](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Oak Flat

A Fight for Sacred Land in the American West

By Lauren Redniss

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This compelling work of visual nonfiction describes the controversy over the potential building of a copper mine on a piece of federally owned land, Oak Flat, that is sacred to the San Carlos Apache people. Lauren Redniss traces the stories of the San Carlos Apache, the Nosie family who belong to that tribe, the nearby Arizona mining town of Superior, the Gorham family of miners who live there, and the history of conflicts over land use between the US government and Indigenous peoples. She supplements her prose with her own beautifully hand-drawn illustrations. *Oak Flat* plays with space, illustration, and style to challenge what it means to be a book, just as, for many Christians, studying Indigenous cultures challenges our definition of religion.

The most compelling part of the book is the story of the Sunrise Dance, the coming-of-age ceremony for Apache girls, which takes place on Oak Flat. The Sunrise Dance is a “four-day ritual central to Apache community and culture during which a girl who has recently begun menstruating reenacts the Apache creation myth.” Redniss introduces the Sunrise Dance early on and later spends an entire chapter walking through every step of the dance with the women of the Nosie family.

During the dance, the girl “needs to endure the heat, the fatigue, and the hunger without complaint.” The girl transforms into the White Painted Woman from the creation story, gaining “heightened powers.” By attending to the story of the Sunrise Dance, Redniss effectively adds another layer to an already intersectional conflict. Taking Oak Flat away from the Apache is not just an attack on the environment or on Indigenous peoples. Robbing them of their dance is specifically an attack on Indigenous women and girls, proving that environmental, Indigenous, and feminist issues are inherently intersectional.

Although *Oak Flat* focuses on the Apache, Redniss respectfully complicates the story by examining other sides. Paralleling her interviews with the Nosies, she interviews the Gorhams, who make their living as miners in the nearby town of Superior. In this way, she humanizes the mining towns. Mining, “by definition, an enterprise with diminishing returns,” turns towns into “tiny enclaves full of abandoned buildings and ‘For Rent’ signs.” It leaves poverty and environmental damage in its wake—not to mention the physical dangers to the miners. Redniss doesn’t try to force her readers to empathize with the Gorhams; she lets them draw their own conclusions by

presenting an accurate picture of the vulnerability that exists on both sides. It's clear that both the Apache and miners like the Gorhams are at the mercy of the mining industry.

Redniss reveals that the environmental issues at Oak Flat are similarly complicated. Even after describing all of the environmental degradation that the mine could cause, she notes that "clean technologies generally require more copper than traditional technologies. . . . Mitigating planetary warming will almost certainly cause a further surge in demand for copper." This detail—and the fact that it's likely to catch many readers off guard—exemplifies how the environmental movement typically excludes Indigenous voices. The problems caused by the climate crisis are inherently intersectional; thus, the solution needs to be intersectional as well. Clean energy at the expense of Indigenous peoples is not a viable solution.

Oak Flat also touches on the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples—particularly with respect to Christianity. "Coerced conversions to Christianity became commonplace" throughout Apache history, as assimilation policies made Apache religion illegal and boarding schools took Apache children from their families. The Catholic Church had its own conflict with the Apache over another sacred space, Mount Graham, in the 1980s. Today, there are Mormon, Pentecostal, Baptist, and Roman Catholic churches on the San Carlos reservations, according to Redniss. How are those parishes involved in the struggle for Oak Flat? These details may prompt Christians to examine their role in the suffering of the Apache.

Oak Flat's illustrations, which form their own story, complement the multiple threads Redniss weaves through the book. For example, early in the book, she writes, "The contested copper under Oak Flat was created by stars that were born and died billions of years ago. The copper is older than Earth itself. A mine here would operate for about 40 years." The only words on the page, these three sentences appear on a black background alongside a large, colorful drawing of an exploding star. Through the temporal contrast between billions and 40 and the spatial contrast between words and images, Redniss plays with space and time to contextualize the Oak Flat controversy. The point isn't that the mine controversy is small and petty compared to the universe; it's that the mine is important because it is part of an infinite cosmos.

Oak Flat is not just about a conflict over a mine in Arizona, this page tells readers. It's about a conflict within the order of the universe. The facing page is also black, with stars speckling the background. The five short sentences here are broken up and spaced in such a way that the prose takes on the visual appearance of a poem. Similarly, the book ends with solid black pages that have minimal text in the form of a poem, creating the effect that the story of Oak Flat is bookended by expansiveness.

Redniss also challenges style norms in the way she uses interviews. Instead of integrating quotations into her own prose, often she simply states the speaker's name, followed by a colon and the quote itself. This formatting choice lets the interviewees speak for themselves, which is especially important for Indigenous voices.

Redniss challenges traditional book formats in a fashion that is particularly effective for her subject matter. Both the book's content and its form make *Oak Flat* a stimulating and poignant read.