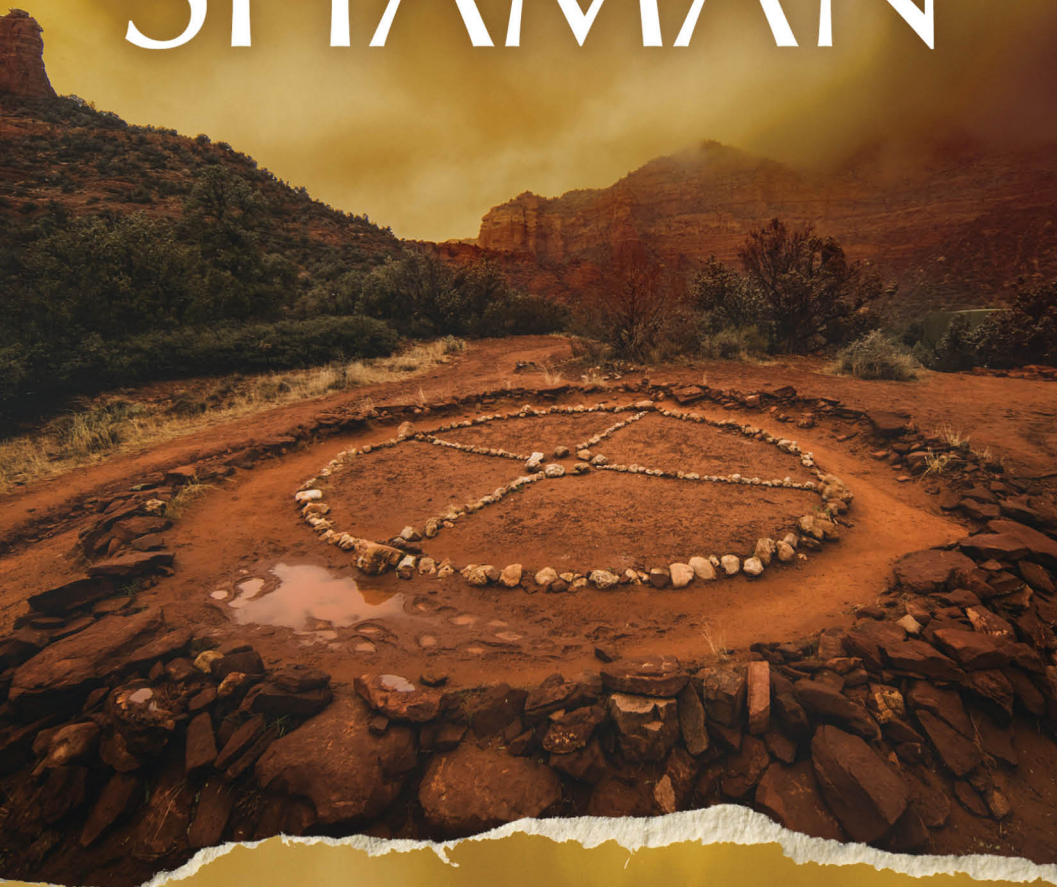


THE TRUE STORY OF A DEADLY SELF-HELP RETREAT
AND AMERICA'S MISGUIDED QUEST FOR WELLNESS

PLASTIC SHAMAN



"A fascinating, deeply personal investigation."
—JON KRAKAUER, *Under the Banner of Heaven*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

*P*lastic Shaman is a true crime story. But it is also much more than that. I thought I had hit the jackpot in summer 2018 when the Yavapai County Sheriff's office responded to my Freedom of Information Act request and turned over hundreds of files related to the case of self-help celebrity James Arthur Ray. It was, indeed, a journalist's motherload with witness testimonies, police investigation interviews, and other previously unreported details about Ray's 2009 Spiritual Warrior retreat where three people died and more than nineteen others ended up in the hospital.

I had long been drawn to the Ray case, so when I received the FOIA files nearly a decade after the incident happened, I thought I was finally on a glide path to writing a book that pulled back the curtain on the tragedy. At that time, my vision for *Plastic Shaman* was narrowly focused on exploring what drew self-help followers to Ray and why, against all common sense, some people stayed in Ray's fake Native American sweat lodge until they died. But I soon realized that getting satisfying answers to those questions would not come from the criminal investigation files alone. And even though I was able to interview the families of Ray's victims, what they shared would only take me so far.

Like a camera drone that keeps rising higher above the ground, I zoomed out farther and farther from the tragic incident itself as I explored the history of the self-help and wellness industry. I also sought to understand the longing among white people (including myself) for connection with North America's Indigenous cultures and the natural world that comprises the continent's Indigenous homelands.

I began examining American history and the very founding principles of the United States, which embrace a self-help philosophy that everyone is entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” a concept enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. Yet, these ideals have not been available to everyone, especially African Americans and Native Americans. What role, if any, does this foundational language play in the evolution of America’s affinity for wellness, I wondered.

I found that the topography of the self-help industry as well as its connections to Indigenous cultures looks different when viewed from a thousand feet above the ground. From this perspective, a twenty-first-century true crime story expands to encompass everything from violent chapters in the United States’ colonial history to an examination of the identity crisis currently engulfing many white Americans.

Over the course of my six-year reporting journey, I found that piecing together a myriad of evidence about the deaths of Ray’s clients also required exploring a web of seemingly disparate connections that all eventually led me to the same place. Even L. Frank Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* makes an appearance in a surprising way. And that is the point. The truth—and authentic wellness—lies behind the curtain. If nothing else, *Plastic Shaman* offers a mountain of proof that we are not in Kansas anymore.

One matter of housekeeping: In order to avoid confusion, James Arthur Ray is referred to throughout the book using his full name, or as James Ray, or Ray. Meanwhile, James Shore, one of the people who died in the sweat lodge and a hero of this story, is referred to throughout by his full name or as James. In short, James Arthur Ray is never called James in the text.

PROLOGUE

A faint purple light slowly brightened atop the dark, jagged cliff face of Boynton Canyon. It was just before sunrise as one hundred or so Apache and Yavapai tribal members gathered in a circle on the canyon's red dirt floor. Many were wrapped in Native patterned wool blankets to ward off the winter chill. The women wore traditional beaded collars and deerskin moccasins, and the men wore cowboy boots and hats. Some held gourd rattles and eagle feathers in their hands.

Before the arrival of European colonizers into their homeland, the Yavapai and Tonto Apache people lived throughout central Arizona. Here in Boynton Canyon, according to their origin stories, the first woman produced a child after a great flood. The canyon is their birthplace; the surrounding Earth is their mother. Every year in late February, Apache and Yavapai people have long come here to thank the canyon and perform a blessing ceremony.

The annual ritual honors the return to their homeland—or at least a very small portion of it—after being exiled for three decades by the United States government during the late nineteenth century to the San Carlos Apache Indian Reservation in eastern Arizona. When the government released detainees from the open-air prison of San Carlos around 1902, the Yavapai and Apache found that the Sedona area, along with Boynton Canyon and other sacred sites, had since been claimed by white ranchers and farmers.

Determined to stay close to the land that spiritually sustained them, Yavapai and Apache communities set up camps around Sedona. Business

owners and residents complained that the squalid living conditions of the Native Americans created a public nuisance, so the federal government established an eighteen-acre reservation that was out of view of the town. Eventually the Yavapai-Apache Nation (combining the two peoples) would encompass 642 acres, but they would remain dispossessed of many of their sacred places.

On that morning in February 2020, not far from where the tribal members gathered for the ceremony in Boynton, resort employees wearing white waiters' jackets were setting up a cloth draped table on the manicured lawn next to the canyon. They placed carafes of coffee and hot chocolate on the table along with platters of croissants. It was the kind of thing you would expect to see in a hotel conference room.

Perplexed, I turned to my friend Sylvia Wilson, a Yavapai elder. "Is that for the gathering?" I asked.

I had come to know Sylvia while doing research and she had invited me to the ceremony, which I assumed would be attended only by tribal members and their guests.

"Well, we can have some, but it is mostly for the people from the resort," she said, looking back toward the lawn.

That's because in addition to having Forest Service trails and archaeological sites, Boynton Canyon is the site of a five-hundred-dollar-per-night spa called Enchantment Resort. The Indigenous land of the Yavapai and Apache people is now a luxury playscape for golfers, hikers, mountain bikers, and New Age seekers. And headed our way, some still in pajama pants, were about a dozen Enchantment guests here to observe the ceremony from a distance. This was the deal the Tribe had struck with the resort in order to gain access to their origin place for the annual ceremony.

On its website in 2020, Enchantment boasted that it was in a "sacred Yavapai-Apache canyon" and offered, among other pseudo-Indigenous rituals, a spa treatment "inspired by Native American tradition that supports a heightened awareness, a new perspective, or reconnection with your inner self." In another "Native American inspired" spa treatment, "sweetgrass is burned and the Circle of Life Blanket is used to create the warmth of a sweat lodge and to honor tribal elders."

This mashup of Indigenous wisdom with first world pampering has been a highly profitable trademark of the Sedona tourism industry for de-

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cedes. But few, if any, Yavapai or Apache people are involved in providing these services, because as the Yavapai cultural director once told me, “We don’t sell our prayers.”

The tribal members whispered as a medicine man in a black jean jacket stepped into the middle of the circle. Two women in ceremonial dress stood next to him holding eagle feathers to their chest as they faced the east and awaited the dawn. The medicine man was doing something, but it was so dark I had a hard time making it out.

“He is throwing the yellow powder,” Sylvia whispered.

The medicine man tossed cattail pollen in each of the four directions. He softly chanted prayers in Apache, although I couldn’t hear him over the talking of the Enchantment guests. Cradling Styrofoam cups, they had ventured closer. They didn’t seem to realize the ceremony was underway, perhaps because it was not the dramatic Hollywood rendition to which they had become accustomed.

Sedona’s booming New Age wellness business thrives on a fantasy version of Native America that presents the continent’s original inhabitants as existing only in the past or as headdress-wearing stereotypes who have conveniently trained enlightened Anglos to pass on ancient wisdom. This opens the door for all manner of cons, as well as devastating impacts to Native people. In Sedona’s fantasy version of Native America, you can pay a self-styled “shaman” to lead you in meditation at power spots called vortexes, go on a vision quest, participate in a sweat lodge ceremony, or have poison frog venom shot in your arm. Most customers only lose money. But, as happened with the followers of New Age guru James Arthur Ray, some lose their lives.

Ray was found guilty in 2011 of negligent homicide for the deaths of three clients who died after a fake Native American sweat lodge ceremony held in Sedona in 2009. Ray falsely claimed he had been trained by a Lakota medicine man on how to properly perform the ancient Indigenous ritual.

After serving two years in prison and completing two years of parole, Ray began rebuilding his self-improvement business in 2014. There was nothing to stop him from going right back to leading seminars since the self-improvement industry is unregulated and has no licensing requirements. In the United States, anyone can be what Native Americans call a “plastic shaman.”

While Yavapai and Apache leaders were performing the blessing ceremony in Boynton Canyon on February 29, 2020, Ray was holding a “Mental Mastery” weekend retreat in Las Vegas coaching participants on “how to get your power back.” A few weeks earlier, he had released his new book, *The Business of Redemption*, where he wrote about his time in prison and how it made him a more resilient person. He was using the deaths of his former clients as a marketing tool.

After the prayers were uttered during the ceremony in Boynton Canyon, young men pounded a steady beat on deer-hide drums as the two women with eagle feathers danced to welcome the sun, which was now turning the sky indigo and the top of the canyon a fiery orange. The volume of drumming increased with the light, and tribal members joined in the chants. These were songs their ancestors had sung for a thousand years.

As the sun rose above the canyon rim, they shook rattles and danced in a slow jog, periodically turning clockwise to honor the four directions and their connection to the Earth. None of the tribal members seemed to care about the onlookers, but I had a hard time not being distracted by the Enchantment guests, particularly one white woman who had made her way toward the dancing circle. She was perched on a rock, a few feet above the red dirt; she wore floral print tights and a purple fleece jacket. Facing the medicine man, she stood motionless like a statue with her eyes closed and palms out. She breathed deeply and pointed her chin up, soaking it all in, as if standing under a warm shower.

Once the dancing stopped, the medicine man talked about the meaning of this day. Meanwhile some of the Enchantment guests went to get another pastry and refill their coffee.

“We are still here. We still have our culture,” he said. “They tried to kill our people and many were slaughtered.”

The medicine man described how many of their ancestors were buried in mass graves near the San Carlos Indian Reservation and never made it back home. Place names in central Arizona around Sedona are a testament to the violent military campaigns waged against Yavapai and Apache communities: Massacre Grounds, Skeleton Cave, Bloody Basin, Skull Valley.

“We cannot forget our ancestors’ sacrifice,” he said. “This is a hard life, but we still have our medicine, our prayers, and we must pass these

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songs on to our children.” He motioned to the young drummers. “They have been working very hard to learn these songs. If we don’t have our traditions, then we don’t know who we are and we have nothing.”

The medicine man warned that the world was about to go through “a big change, a very tough time.” He implored his fellow tribal members to “pray every day.”

The number of COVID-19 cases reported across the country and the rest of the world had been rising rapidly in the previous weeks. The Centers for Disease Control would report on that day, February 29, 2020, the first confirmed death from the virus in the United States.

There were, indeed, great challenges on the horizon that most of us could never have imagined at that time—a deadly pandemic, a painful reckoning over racism in the United States, and an attempt to upend a presidential election. Like so many other white people who viewed themselves as politically progressive and culturally sensitive back then, I began to question not only the underpinnings of American society, but also my own carefully constructed identity. I had adopted Arizona as my home two decades earlier and had eagerly adapted to be like those in my social circle: a Southwest outdoor adventurer, a New Age spiritual seeker, and a wellness wonk. My tidy view of the world and my place in it was a shiny white bubble that was about to burst.

As the sun climbed above the canyon rim, the tribal members chanted and let out whoops in cadence with the drumbeats. Sylvia danced in place, rotating clockwise while shaking a rattle. At age seventy-eight, she had celebrated this day many times.

The woman in the floral tights remained motionless on the rock, breathing deeply, eyes closed and smiling.

I wondered what it was about her presence that irritated me. Sylvia did not seem bothered in the least. I considered asking the woman why she was standing there—uninvited—amid the Yavapai and Apache people. But, deep down, I already knew the answer. She was from my “tribe,” after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Annette McGivney is an award-winning author and journalist who has been writing about Southwest environmental and social justice topics for more than two decades. She is a longtime contributor to *The Guardian*, *Outside*, *Arizona Highways*, and *Backpacker*. *Plastic Shaman* is McGivney's sixth book. Her previous book, *Pure Land*, won the National Outdoor Book Award in 2018. McGivney lives in Cortez, Colorado.

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