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# Review:

## *The Sound of Strings*

BY ALVENA BIERI

Norman writer Harold Keith, author of the new book *The Sound of Strings* is an Oklahoma treasure. A long-time sports publicist at the University of Oklahoma, now retired, he has spent many years using the rich resources of Oklahoma history in books like *Rifles for Watie*. Not only is Keith steeped in knowledge of our past, but he is a master of superb storytelling skills. He is sometimes called a children's writer, but his themes and style appeal to all ages.

In the mid 1960's his "Komantcia" told the story of a young Spanish guitarrista, Pedro Pavon, who lived in northern Mexico with his family. Here at age fifteen Pedro's life turned tragic when his mother was killed in a Comanche raid, and he himself was kidnapped to live among the Comanches. But Pedro adjusted to the strange new life and even grew to like its "wild, sweet freedom" as he put it. The action in this sequel to the earlier book opens in the late 1870's somewhere in western Oklahoma soon after the twenty-three-year old Pedro has married Willow Girl, daughter of a Yamparika peace chief. Keith has a way of perfectly blending his language and his subject. He

describes Pedro's feelings about his happy wedding in words appropriate to the setting, writing "Pedro's heart began to sing like a thousand meadowlarks splitting their throats."

Yet despite Pedro's happiness with wife and later his adoration of their little daughter Keeche ("Little Prairie Dog"), he still feels torn between his Christian, Andalusian background and the culture of the Comanches. He has a European, romantic, one-person-only attitude about love in a civilization where polygamy is practiced. And Comanches are guarded about expressing their feelings, almost stoic. Even the young are matter-of-fact and pragmatic. In one passage Pedro observes the Indian philosophy which is so different from his own. "Unlike Spanish children," he reflects, "these little Comanches did not like happy endings. They expected natural results from just causes, whether good or bad."

But *The Sound of Strings* is much more than a book about a culture clash. Keith is concerned with the happiness of his characters, and we too are captivated by their plight. And like any good writer of fiction, he deals ultimately with the universal themes of longing, love, suffering, and death. The artistic unity is made just about perfect by the central part that Pedro's guitar

playing plays in the story. Guitar music, long a Spanish tradition, powerfully stirs Pedro's soul and becomes a redeeming center to his life. Even the impassive Comanches can be brought to the verge of tears by his poignant melodies. In one scene Pedro's old enemy, a real meany named Belt Whip, slinks away puzzled and defeated after hearing the guitar. And again in a touchingly sweet part near the end of the action, Keith writes in his own appropriate style of alliteration, "A feeling of tenderness came over him and he began to play the lullaby he had fashioned from the go-to-sleep song Willow Girl had sung to Keeche scores of times, the strange, soothing song of the wind soughing through the sage."

Despite the tragedy of the story, Harold Keith makes Oklahoma plains-Indian history alive for us in a positive way. And he is good at creating people we really care about to people his broad western Oklahoma landscape.

*The Sound of Strings* was published in 1992 by Levite of Apache, 1005 N. Flood, Suite 111, Norman, OK, 73069.

(Editor's note: Mr. Keith was recently honored at the 1993 Oklahoma Book Awards as the 1993 Lifetime Achievement Award winner.) ■