



The Second Narrative of John Tanner

By J. Todd Gillette

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Kidnapped by Saginaw Ojibwa at the age of nine, John Tanner lived thirty years as an Indian; it was not until middle age, compelled by racial repudiation, ruined health, and a vestigial sense of place and destiny, that he sought to reclaim his white heritage. Yet every effort to fit in, to be accepted in his original though now all but incomprehensible world, came to tragedy; white society, in the end, would not reclaim John Tanner. Fate drew him into the orbits of famed explorer-scholars Edwin James and Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, who would, in their turns, manipulate and exploit Tanner's history, abilities, and abject innocence to their individual ends. Robbed of income and family, driven mad with rage and grief, Tanner withdrew, became legend, a name invoked to bring children running in after dark. When in 1846 Schoolcraft's brother James was found murdered, suspicion fell instantly on Tanner. But Tanner had, as quickly, disappeared. "The Second Narrative of John Tanner," penned in the summer of 1846 by a young teacher bound in audience to Tanner's nightly monologues first by force, then by idealism, sympathy, and a growing, if wary, affection—is the story, in (nearly) his own words, of a man lost between worlds and homes, a child of nature turned fuming, retributive monster. It is as well a story of isolated personalities at odds with mankind and themselves, engaged in a dueling search for justification, humanness, and grace.

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The Second Narrative of John Tanner By J. Todd Gillette Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #2980102 in Books
- Published on: 2014-04-26
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.50" h x .81" w x 5.50" l, .90 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 322 pages

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About the Author

J. Todd Gillette was born in Niles, Michigan. A prize-winning author and former member of the editorial staff of TheKing'sEnglish.org, he lives in Montana.

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