

# NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE: REMEMBRANCE, RENEWAL

By Geary Hobson

---

In 1969, the fiction committee for the prestigious Pulitzer Prizes in literature awarded its annual honor to N. Scott Momaday, a young professor of English at Stanford University in California, for a book entitled *House Made of Dawn*.

The fact that Momaday's novel dealt almost entirely with Native Americans did not escape the attention of the news media or of readers and scholars of contemporary literature. Neither did the author's Kiowa Indian background. As news articles pointed out, not since Oliver LaFarge received the same honor for *Laughing Boy*, exactly 40 years earlier, had a so-called "Indian" novel been so honored. But whereas LaFarge was a white man writing about Indians, Momaday was an Indian -- the first Native American Pulitzer laureate.

That same year, 1969, another young writer, a Sioux attorney named Vine Deloria, Jr., published *Custer Died For Your Sins*, subtitled "an Indian Manifesto." It examined, incisively, U.S. attitudes at the time towards Native American matters, and appeared almost simultaneously with *The American Indian Speaks*, an anthology of writings by various promising young American Indians -- among them Simon J. Ortiz, James Welch, Phil George, Janet Campbell and Grey Coho, all of whom had been only fitfully published at that point.

These developments that spurred renewed -- or new -- interest in contemporary Native American writing were accompanied by the appearance around that time of two works of general scholarship on the subject, Peter Farb's *Man's Rise to Civilization* (1968) and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee* (1970). Each struck a responsive chord in U.S. popular taste, and statistics show that even today, some 30 years later, their popularity has not abated.

Steadily, other volumes, and other writers, surfaced. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Welch's *A Winter in the Blood*, Gerald Vizenor's postmodern fictions, and the poetry of Paula Gunn Allen, Simon J. Ortiz and Linda Hogan have led in turn, over the years, to newer writers like novelists Sherman Alexie, Greg Sarris and Thomas King, and poets Kimberly Blaeser, Janice Gould and Janet McAdams.

## ***Profile: LINDA HOGAN -- WATCHING OVER THE WORLD***

"I have considered my writing to come from close observation of the life around me," Native American poet Linda Hogan suggests, "a spoken connection with the earth and with the histories of the earth."

There is rarely a discussion of Native American writing -- and never an anthology -- that does not include the expansive, and forceful creativity of this writer of Chickasaw descent whose life has been totally encompassed by the goings and comings of the natural elements of her native Colorado, where she was born in 1947, and its surrounding regions and denizens, both human and animal.

"More and more I find that my writing comes from a sense of traditional indigenous relationship with the land and its peoples, from the animals and plants of tribal histories, stories and knowledge," she has said. "I am trying to speak this connection, stating its spirit, adding to it the old stories that have come to a new language."

Writing gracefully in free verse (a 1985 poetry collection, *Seeing Through the Sun*, won the American Book Award), she has also written fiction of note, focusing on the clash between nature and contemporaneity, in novels such as *Mean Spirit* (1990) -- which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize -- and two subsequent books, *Storms* (1995) and *Power* (1998). She has also written a lilting volume of nonfiction, *Dwellings* (1995), a study of the idea of what constitutes home, be it a residence or the earth itself. For her, once more, it was about "a coming together of traditional systems, of ways of seeing the world, of years thinking about where our systems of belief have led us," she said at the time of its publication.

"Writing is how I process life," she told an interviewer in 1994. "It gives you access to a part of yourself you can't usually get to. Writing shows me what's going on inside." But, she added, she tries not to be too esoteric. "I want my work to be accessible, but I want it to have layers beneath the story. I want people to feel it."

Hogan is the child of working-class parents. Her father, a carpenter, is descended from Indians who traveled from Mississippi to Oklahoma in the 1830s as part of a torturous journey known as the Trail of Tears, and her mother is white, or, as Hogan wryly terms it, "pink." Shy as a child, young Linda left home at 17 to begin what was to be a peripatetic lifestyle, working first as a teacher's aide with handicapped children, then in a nursing home, then as a clerk. She enrolled in the University of Colorado at 26, continuing her education at the University of Maryland, where she began writing in earnest. Eventually, her writing enabled her to learn more about her heritage, as she elicited stories from relatives and friends. Her first collection, *Calling Myself Home*, was published in 1978.

Over time, she has worked as a teacher, as a specialist in wildlife rehabilitation, and in various capacities with her own tribe and others. She hasn't worked in a classroom in years, though, and misses it sorely. "There was such satisfaction," she reflected in a

recent conversation. "When someone would learn a word, or when somebody's writing would take off through the use of words, it's the happiest thing -- incredible! There's nothing better for a teacher than to see a student 'get it,' to be able to expand."

She is spending most of her time these days working with her own tribe, commuting regularly from her Colorado home to the tribal land in Oklahoma, taking on the editorship of its quarterly magazine, *The Journal of Chickasaw History*. She has just completed her latest book, a family memoir she has titled *The Woman Who Watches Over the World*.

Writing this personal history is not distracting her from her fundamental goal. "I love the earth and everything on it," she says firmly. "And everywhere I can, I am trying to have that feeling reinforced by writing about it."

-- **Michael J. Bandler**

In 1992, a group of Native American scholars and activists created an international writers' festival, bringing together 360 artists from nine countries, chiefly the United States. Nearly half their number already had published at least one volume -- fiction, drama, memoirs, even cookbooks. Out of that convocation came two organizations -- the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas, and a mentoring group, Wordcraft Circle, bringing established Native American writers together with apprentice talents.

Each year since 1992, the Native Writers' Circle has presented awards for "first books" in poetry and fiction. For anyone wondering about the future of Native American writing, these prize-winning volumes offer an ample, positive response. Look, for example, to a young artist like Chippewa poet Blaeser - whose evocative debut collection of verse, *Trailing You* (1995), was followed by a well-regarded piece of scholarship, a study of the complex, even puzzling prose of fellow Native American writer, postmodernist satirist Gerald Vizenor.

Indeed, the expansion of creativity and interest in Native American literature is much more than a "boom." It represents, collectively, a renaissance. More than a generation after it began, it is a part of American literature as a renewal, a continuance. It is remembering.

One can best illustrate the phenomenon of renaissance through a classroom experience going back many years. My students had been reading copies of poems by Mohawk Indians from the upper sector of New York State, and the subject turned to the various Native American writers in other parts of the country. One student, probably reflecting the thinking of many in the room, marveled, "Isn't it amazing how Native American literature has just burst so suddenly upon the scene?"

The question was stunning at the time -- and remains so in my memory. For Native American literature did not merely "spring up." Like the life and culture of which it is a part, it is centuries old. Its roots are deep in the land -- too deep for a mere five centuries of influence by other civilizations to upturn in any lasting, complete and irrevocable way.

Remembering, continuance, renewal. Native Americans have been accustomed to recounting their histories and their ways of life through intricate time-proven processes of storytelling. It is only during recent decades that scholars have identified these ways of storytelling as "oral tradition." For millennia,

Native Americans carried on their traditions in that fashion. Never more than a generation from extinction, as Momaday has written, it is all the more to be cherished by the people because of that tenuous link. In remembering, there has been strength and continuance and renewal throughout the generations.

In the words of Acoma Pueblo poet Simon J. Ortiz, "Indians are everywhere." From Refugio Savala of Sonora, Mexico, to Mary Tall Mountain of the Alaska Koyukon tribe; from the Navajo country of Geraldine Keams and Larry Emerson to the northeastern Maine of Joseph Bruchac, Native Americans are writing about themselves and their people. Their writings are based on firm ground, nurtured by strong roots, and are growing indomitable flowers.

It is interesting to note that even in written form, in English, Native American literature is quite venerable within the framework of U.S. literature itself, going back to the early 19th century, when early writers -- among them William Apess of the Pequot tribe, George Copway (Ojibway) and Chief Elias Johnson (Tuscarora) -- published books relating to their tribal cultures. There is evidence, too, that many tribes had variants of written language long before Sequoyah made his Cherokee nation literate virtually overnight. Even if the books of the Delaware Indians and Iroquois Confederacy were handed down orally for many generations, at an early date they were reproduced in various written ways. Ironically, even when U.S. writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow presented the American Indian from their perspectives, Native Americans were writing their own books and in the process, developing a literature.

If, in early periods, Native American writing consisted of storytelling -- or, as we would term it, fiction -- a sea change took place in the second half of the 19th century, chiefly with the development of the Indian reservations system in the 1870s and 1880s. Autobiography and biography became the most popular form, and continued to dominate well into the 20th century.

These memoirs were often written by others -- anthropologists or poets recording and editing the life stories of Native Americans who were standing at the crossroads of the 19th and 20th centuries. Perhaps the most famous of these is John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks* (1932). According to Neihardt, Black Elk told his story to his son in the Oglala Lakota language. The son then translated it into English for Neihardt, who then rewrote it. This was a common practice, with many examples in the middle years of the past century, ranging among the tribes, from Crows and Cheyenne of the northern tier of the United States to the Apaches and Navajos in the Southwest.

Of course, not every personal account was "told to" someone else. Some individual authors appeared, among them Charles A. Eastman, a Santee Sioux and university-trained medical doctor who wrote such books as *Indian Boyhood* (1902) and *The Soul of the Indian* (1911) -- and Chief Luther Standing Bear, author of *My People The Sioux* (1928) and *Land of the Spotted Eagle* (1933). Momaday's 1975 volume, *The Names*, was part of this tradition.

As the 20th century progressed, Native American literature broadened beyond memoir and biography into fiction, journalism and even playwriting. D'Arcy McNickle was the best writer of fiction of the period from the 1930s to 1970s, with books such as *The Surrounded* (1936) and *Runner in the Sun* (1954). He was also extremely active as a proponent of Indian Affairs. Will Rogers, the beloved U.S. newspaper columnist turned humorist whose heyday was the 1920s and 1930s, was a Cherokee Indian, as was playwright Lynn Riggs, whose most famous drama, *Green Grow the Lilacs* (1931), was transformed into the classic Broadway musical of the 1940s, *Oklahoma!*

In the early decades of the century's second half, chiefly from the 1960s on, Native American literature's blossoming was indebted to a variety of periodicals -- more established publications such as the *South Dakota Review* and *Cimarron Review*, and several smaller presses and magazines and publishing houses, among them Sun Tracks, Blue Cloud Quarterly and Strawberry Press. The poems of Hogan, Joy Harjo, William Oandasan and many others first appeared in these and other journals.

Many Native American writers and scholars first made their marks writing about non-Indian subjects. Momaday's first venture was a collection of the works of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, a lesser-known poet of the Emersonian circle in mid-19th-century Massachusetts. Louis Owens, who has expansively reconsidered and affirmed his Choctaw-Cherokee heritage in his later writings, started out with scholarship on the works of John Steinbeck. (As an aside, I began my career in education, poetry and writing as a specialist in Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Herman Melville.)

Who are Native American writers? This question has preoccupied me for years, even before I compiled my 1979 anthology, *The Remembered Earth*. For that volume, I decided to maintain as broad a spectrum of definition as possible. For instance, I included Dana Naone, a young and gifted native-born Hawaiian writer, because we "mainland" Native Americans are becoming increasingly aware that while Hawaiians are not, properly speaking, American Indians, they are, nonetheless, Native Americans, in a real sense. Unsurprisingly, Naone's verse contains themes and concerns similar to those of Allen and Silko.

Anthropologists and historians have postulated that inclusion as Native Americans depends on three essential criteria: genetic, cultural and social. The genetic distinction is "full-blood," "half-blood," "one-fourths" and so on. Culturally, a person is characterized in terms of where he or she emanates, and their distinctive ways of life, religion and language. Socially, someone is adjudged to be Native American because of how he or she views the world, land, home, family and other aspects of life.

But as the years progress, identity has become less of a motivating factor among literary themes than sovereignty, and as part of it, reclaiming the past. Native Americans are concerned about who they are as a people, and write from the community's perspective -- whether the setting is urban or rural -- and that sense of community reaffirms and bolsters sovereignty.

Novelists Louise Erdrich and Sherman Alexie and poets Linda Hogan and Ray Young Bear are examples of writers who, truly, are doing what Charles Dickens did in London more than a century ago. That is, they are creating a sense of place. Literature, invariably, emerges from that, and even though the best writers strive to be universal, it is the sense of place with which they are deeply imbued. Erdrich, a poet and writer of fiction, is best known for her Native American tetralogy -- *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988) and *The Bingo Palace* (1994). She recently brought her Ojibwa roots to the foreground in *The Antelope Wife* (1999), a portrait of two contemporary urban Native American families against a tapestry of 100 years of history. Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan's verse -- bonded to south central Oklahoma -- has focused on the landscape and on history. More recently, though, as she has grown and developed, she has dealt with such issues as animal preservation and feminism.

Alexie, one of the finer young writers who blends realism and sardonic humor with a strong lyricism in writing fiction, poetry and screenplays, is most noted for *Indian Killer* (1996), a dark novel about the search for a serial killer against a contemporary urban setting. Greg Sarris, a native-born Californian writer of Miwok and Pomo extraction, found a wide readership for his first volume, *Grand Avenue*

(1994), a collection of short stories set within his native multicultural neighborhood in urban Santa Rosa, California -- populated by generations of Pomo Indians as well as Portuguese, Mexican and African Americans. His first novel, *Watermelon Nights* (1998), is an urgent glimpse of tradition, crisis and renewal within a Native American family. Lately, he has moved into playwriting as well.

In the final analysis, though, the most important concern is not whether one is more or less Indian than his or her fellow American Indian. It is much more imperative that both recognize their common heritage, and strive together for the betterment of Native Americans as an entity. After all, in the end, the writing we leave behind us will be there for the people who come after us. And yet, it is the individual writer's duty to comment on things he or she feels to be important, regardless of whether the subject of the writing deals exclusively with Native American concerns. If we didn't have Momaday's writings on Russia, Aaron Carr's short poems about outer space or Russell Bates' science fiction tales and television scripts, Native American literature would be poorer for their absence.

(As Indians write about subjects other than their community, a wealth of non-native authors -- before and after Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy* -- have probed Native American life, some quite successfully. More than a half-century ago, Frank Waters fashioned what may be the finest such novel, *The Man Who Killed The Deer* (1942), a study of cultural conflicts among the Taos Indians of northern New Mexico. These days, in writing his series of best-selling novels centered on Navajo tribal police, Tony Hillerman has taken pains to learn the culture and lore as he creates his stories.)

Ultimately, then, Native American writers are those of Native American blood and background who affirm their heritage in individual ways -- as do writers of any culture. Some write of reservation life, others depict urban surroundings. Some delve into history, others are fiercely contemporary. Joseph Bruchac, who has had an enormous influence on a generation of younger writers as a mentor and enabler, is noted today as a writer of children's stories, such as *Between Earth and Sky* (1996) and *The Arrow Over the Door* (1998), presenting tribal legends in a modern context for new audiences.

"Literature is a facet of a culture," Paula Gunn Allen writes, and as such, gives something of value back to the people of which she is a part.

Heritage is people. People are the earth. Earth is heritage. In remembering these relationships -- to the people, the past, the land -- we renew in strength our continuance as a people. Literature, in all its forms, is our most durable way of carrying on this continuance. By making literature, like the singers and storytellers of earlier times, we serve the people as well as ourselves in an abiding sense of remembrance.

We must never forget these relationships. Our land is our strength, and our people the land -- one and the same -- as it always has been and always will be.

Remembering is all.

-----

**Geary Hobson, a poet and essayist of Cherokee-Quapaw heritage, is a member of the faculty of the Department of English at the University of Oklahoma. This article is an expansion of Professor Hobson's introduction to an anthology, *The Remembered Earth*, originally published by Red Earth Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1979, and reprinted by the University of New Mexico Press, 1981. It has been used by permission of the author.**

## OTHER NATIVE AMERICAN WRITERS

### *Sherman Alexie*

"One of the better new novelists, Indian or otherwise," is *Time* magazine's description of Sherman Alexie. His work as a novelist, poet and screenwriter is distinguished by the blending of magic realism and sardonic humor with a lyrical gift.

Born in 1966, he draws heavily upon his life as a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene, raised on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. One of his earliest works, a short story collection entitled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), was greeted by *The New York Times Book Review* as "sparse, disturbing stories [that] trace with stark, lyric power the experience of American Indians in the modern world."

He adapted one of the stories into a film, *Smoke Signals* (1998), an award-winning movie that was the first commercial feature film written, directed and acted by Native Americans. His most popular book, *Indian Killer* (1996), actually is a departure from his usual atmosphere -- a dark portrait of a serial killer and the racial tension he incites.

---

### *Joy Harjo*

Joy Harjo, born in 1951, is of Muskogee Creek heritage. She is at the forefront of a group of Native American writers and artists who have gained national and international prominence over the past two decades. She is a screenwriter, teacher, and musician -- but she is most widely

### *Simon J. Ortiz*

A noted poet and writer with an international following, Simon J. Ortiz has his heritage among the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, where he was born and primarily raised. While his upbringing offered him a strong sense of his roots, it also offered him the opportunity to experience alienation and isolation from mainstream American culture, and led to an awareness of the need to "know the system" to be able to fight back.

One of his best-known works is *Fight Back: For the People, for the Land* (1980). His use of stark, lucid language very much indebted to the Indian oral tradition reflects the struggles, sufferings and triumphs of his people.

His many collections of poetry include *Going for the Rain* (1976); *A Good Journey* (1977); *From Sand Creek: Rising in This Heart Which is Our America* (1981), *Woven Stone* (1992) and *After and Before the Lightning* (1994).

In addition to poetry and prose, Ortiz has written stories for children and other works for Native American cultural enrichment.. His short stories are collected in *Howbah Indians* (1978) and *Fightin'* (1983).

---

### *Greg Sarris*

Greg Sarris, whose heritage is a blend of American Indian, Filipino and Jewish roots, was born in 1952, grew up in

acclaimed for her poetry, which has earned her many prestigious awards.

Her first full-length volume of poetry, *What Moon Drove Me to This* (1980), demonstrated her ability to voice the deep spiritual truths behind everyday experiences. Known for her outspokenness on political and feminist themes, she is also a poet of myth and the subconscious whose imagery is as beholden to the hidden mind as to her native southwestern United States.

In addition to her writing, Harjo has endeavored to popularize the work of other Native American Women writers.

---

### ***N. Scott Momaday***

The poetry and prose of N. Scott Momaday reflect his Kiowa Indian heritage. He has said that his verse, in particular, grows from and sustains the Indian oral tradition. When Momaday's first novel, *House Made of Dawn* (1968), received the 1969 Pulitzer prize for fiction, it was the first major recognition of a work of Native American literature and a landmark for those seeking to understand "Indian identity."

The themes of the healing force of nature and of the Indian caught between two worlds appear in that book and also in his second novel, *The Ancient Child* (1989), whose main character, a Kiowa artist living in San Francisco, seeks to discover his lost Indian identity. In *The Names: A Memoir* (1976), Momaday explores his heritage through tribal tales and boyhood memories.

In addition to his fiction, Momaday is also an accomplished poet and painter. In *The Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems*,

poetry in Santa Rosa, California, and was raised in foster homes. He learned only later in life that his father -- whom he never knew -- was Native American, part Coast Miwok, part Pomo.

Ultimately, he went to live with his father's people, where he experienced the difficulty of living between two worlds. Today, besides being a writer of fiction and a professor of English at the University of California at Los Angeles, he is the elected chairman, or chief, of the Federated Coast Miwok Tribe.

His first work of fiction, *Grand Avenue* (1994), is an interweaving of the lives of nine people in a multiethnic neighborhood in Santa Rosa, California. It allowed him, for the first time, to incorporate his personal experience and observations in his writings, to show the pain and the hope that Native Americans experience as a culture.

His most recent novel, *Watermelon Nights* (1998), is a series of three novellas about the love and forgiveness that keep a modern American Indian family together -- told from the perspectives of a 20-year-old Pomo Indian, his mother and his grandmother.

---

### ***Leslie Marmon Silko***

Leslie Marmon Silko is the author of, among other books, *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), a sprawling five-century saga about the struggles between Native Americans and Europeans. Born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, she was raised on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in that state.

Her first book of poems, *Laguna Woman* (1974), soon brought her attention, and she

*1961-1991* (1992) brings together numerous poems from his early years along with newer poems and stories, and 60 drawings by the author. Momaday explains much of his perspective as a writer and as a Native American in *Ancestral Voice: Conversations with N. Scott Momaday* (1989).

---

was becoming known for her talent in short fiction when her first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), the story of Pueblo veterans of World War II, was published. Her second major novel, *Storyteller* (1981), recreate stories about her own family based on native lore.

It took her a decade thereafter to complete *Almanac of the Dead*. Her latest novel, *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999), set around 1900, describes a clash of cultures as seen through a young girl caught between her Indian heritage and the aristocratic Victorian society in which she finds herself, through circumstances.

---

-- S.D.

---

[Back to top](#) | [U.S. Society & Values](#), [February 2000](#) | [IIP E-Journals](#) | [IIP Home](#)

The Native American Renaissance is a term originally coined by critic Kenneth Lincoln in the 1983 book *Native American Renaissance* to categorise the significant increase in production of literary works by Native Americans in the United States in the late 1960s and onwards. A. Robert Lee and Alan Velie note that the book's title "quickly gained currency as a term to describe the efflorescence on literary works that followed the publication of N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1968". Momaday's *Adobe Pueblos* Native Americans for Kids. The Pueblo were cliff dwellers. They built homes of adobe brick on cliffs and on mesas in the southwest. Native Americans of the Far North: What trick did the Kutchin people use to catch their enemies? How did these early people stop ghosts from entering their homes? Why was the shaman so powerful? *Native American Literature--selected bibliography*, compiled by K.L. MacKay. *A Brief History of Native American Written Literature*. The first native American literary texts were offered orally, and they link the earth-surface people with the plants and animals, the rivers and rocks, and all things believed significant in the life of America's first people. The texts tie Indian people to the earth and its life through a spiritual kinship with the living and dead relatives of Native Americans. The history of literature written in English by American Indians parallels the history of white migration across the continent. White exploration and settlement were followed by the arrival of missionaries who converted Indians to Christianity and educated them in religious schools.