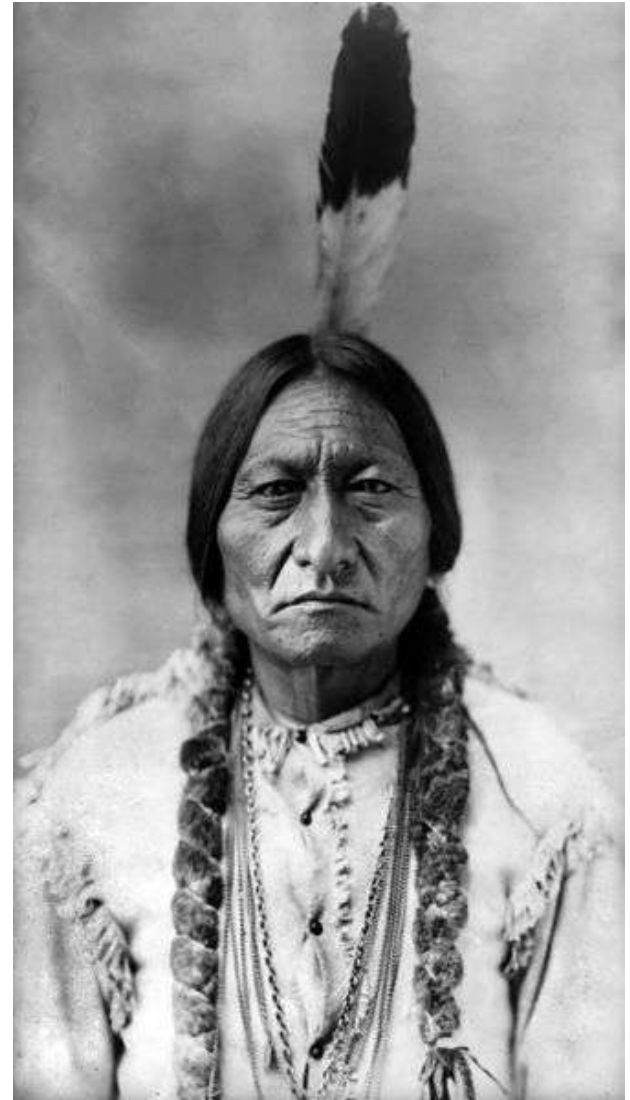



Native American Literature



Native American Literature: Cultural Diversity

At time of Columbus,
350 distinct
languages existed in
North America



Thousands of
distinct cultural
groups existed
as well.

No single Native
American culture
or literature.



so

Native American Tribes

Published by
Cherokee Publications
Cherokee, North Carolina



1989 *Joseph V. Smith*

Native Americans came to be isolated both geographically and culturally (ghetto-ized).

Geographically:
reservations on
remote and
least
productive land

So

Few
opportunities
to demonstrate
aspects of
their culture.



So how did Native American Literature become known?

1856: First widely known written N.A. literature by John Rollin Ridge (Cherokee, encompassed Far West in his writing).

Late 19th century: many anthropologists began to write down stories and languages they heard while examining N.A. culture.

N.A. Literature not considered “valid” literature before this time due to western notions of literature.

Early American history:

- **described by Europeans**
- **judged by European sensibilities**
- **N.A. stories and culture not recognized as “good” settlers. If it wasn’t a book, it wasn’t literature.**

1960s-70s: Native American literature given a place in American literary canon.

What are the characteristics of Native American Literature? (Remember, it is difficult to generalize the diverse cultures.)

Oral history:

- Good speakers valued in many tribes because of tradition of participatory democracy
- Stories handed down through the oral tradition



Lost in Translation

European invasion brought linguistic tools for written records; however:

- No English words for some native terms
- Poetry dependent on rhythm and repetition; translation is really new work
- Caucasians rarely given full tales and/or translations shaped to fit audiences' prejudices

Characteristics of Native American Literature

```
graph TD; A[Characteristics of Native American Literature] --> B[Oral Tradition<br/>Storytelling: primary means of communicating and teaching about the physical world, social order, appropriate behavior, human nature, and the problem of good vs. evil.]; B --> C[Repetition is a common characteristic]; B --> D[Ritual beginnings and endings]; B --> E[Use of archaic language]; B --> F[Terse writing style];
```

Oral Tradition

Storytelling: primary means of communicating and teaching about the physical world, social order, appropriate behavior, human nature, and the problem of good vs. evil.

Repetition is a common characteristic

Ritual beginnings and endings

Use of archaic language

Terse writing style

Additional Characteristics of Native American Literature

Explains beliefs about the nature of the physical world. Example: how did the world come to be?

Takes place in primal world or pre-civilization.

Beings are animal spirits in more or less human form: monsters, confusions of nature, etc.

Mythic age flows into age of transformation (legends), which flows into historical time (real heroes)

Cultural Heroes

- Dramatize prototypical events and behaviors
- Show how to do what is right and how we become the people we are
- Shape the world and gives it its character by theft of sun, fire, or water
- Often of divine birth

Trickster

- Mischievous or roguish figure who typically makes up for physical weakness with cunning and subversive humor
- Provides for disorder and change
- Enables us to see the seamy underside of life
- May get their comeuppance!

Motifs in N.A. Myths and Legends

- Formation of the world through struggle
- Movements from a sky world to a water world by means of a fall
- Earth-diver myth:
 - flood that occurred after the creation of the universe
 - creation of the present world out of mud brought up from under the water by the earth-diver (muskrat or turtle)
- Theft of fire
- Emergence myths: ascent of beings from under the surface of the earth to its surface; ascent from a series of underworlds

Today



A Few Native American Authors

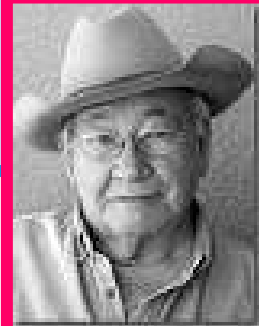
Louise Erdrich: well-known Native American author from Minnesota; has Native American bookstore



Sherman Alexie: much of his writing stems from his experience as a Native American



Paula Gunn Allen is a contemporary Native American author who also writes through a Feminist lens.



N.Scott Momaday: contemporary Native American author; *The House Made of Dawn* is an American classic.

Motifs of Contemporary N.A. Literature

- Role of Native Americans in modern society
- Marginalization
- Paternalism
- Discrimination
- Rite of passage (coming of age)
- Options: assimilation, annihilation, or...
- Celebration of native values
 - Shared ownership
 - Inclusive family
 - Nature

Sources:

Campbell. Early Native American Literature: Brief Outline
Guide. 8/30/06.