

Books and Poems from the Literary Tradition of Indigenous Peoples

Much of Native American literature springs from a tradition rich in oral phrasing, pace, and imagery. When reading one of these books, see if you can detect how that oral tradition has informed the writings of these authors and poets. Discover how customs, rituals, and, above all, nature and the natural world, creates metaphors and guides their narratives.

The Seed Keeper

Diane Wilson

Discover a Dakota family's struggles to preserve their way of life and the integral role that seeds play in those challenges. *The New Yorker* writes about this book: "In chapters that shift among the perspectives of four Dakhóta women—including Rosalie's great-aunt, who grew plants because the seeds in her pocket were 'all that's left of my family'—Wilson tracks Rosalie's attempts to understand her family and her roots, and considers how memory cultivates a sense of connection to the land."

Diane Wilson: Wilson is a Mdewakanton descendent enrolled on the Rosebud Reservation and lives in Shafer, Minnesota. Wilson has served as the executive director for Dream of Wild Health and the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance, working to help rebuild sovereign food systems for Indigenous peoples.

The Seed Keeper: Diane Wilson, Milkweed Editions, 2021.

Book cover design by Mary Austin Speaker, beadwork by Holly Young.

Photo credit: <https://milkweed.org>

Braiding Sweetgrass

Robin Wall Kimmerer

Tapping into her experience as a scientist, Kimmerer has produced a book that argues that humankind needs to rethink its relationship to the natural world, a refocusing on Native American traditions of sharing, reciprocity, and gratitude rather than exploitation. *Braiding Sweetgrass* seeks to show us the value of looking at the natural world anew. She illuminates how other living beings—asters and goldenrod, strawberries and squash, salamanders, algae, and sweetgrass—offer us gifts and lessons, even if we've forgotten how to hear their voices. Beautifully written, she drives her narrative toward this central argument: that the awakening of ecological consciousness requires the acknowledgment and celebration of our reciprocal relationship with the rest of the living world.

Robin Wall Kimmerer. Kimmerer is Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental Biology and a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. She embraces Indigenous teachings that consider plants and animals to be our oldest teachers.

Braiding Sweetgrass: Robin Wall Kimmerer, Milkweed Editions, 2013.

Author photo: Dale Kakkak

Gardens in the Dunes

Leslie Marmon Silko

This is an epic tale of a young Native American girl, Indigo, who is taken from her tribe, the Sand Lizard people, by white soldiers who destroy her home and family. She is subsequently placed in a government school where the objective is to remake her in the image of the white culture's idea of a 'proper' young woman. But while the goal is to remake this spirited young woman into the mold of a white woman, Indigo, never letting go of her cherished Native American traditions, impacts those around her in and seeks to reconcile the two worlds that, in so many ways, are diametrically opposed. Silko is especially good in her word imagery which captures the beauty and sense of the southwest: "The Rain smelled heavenly. All over the sand dunes, datura blossoms round and white as moons breathed their fragrance of magic"

Leslie Marmon Silko. Throughout her career as a writer and teacher, she has remained grounded in the history-filled landscape of the Laguna Pueblo. Her experiences in the culture have fueled an interest to preserve cultural traditions and understand the impact of the past on contemporary life. Silko has won prizes, fellowships, and grants from such sources as the National Endowment for the Arts and Boston Globe. She was the youngest writer to be included in the Norton Anthology of Women's Literature for her short story "*Lullaby*".

Gardens in the Dunes: Simon Schuster, April 2000

Photo retrieved at: <https://www.wbur.org>

Book cover designed by Jeanette Olender

The Painted Drum

Louise Erdrich

How does a mystical drum carved out of a cedar tree and stretched with a massive moose skin transform the lives of those it crosses? This is the central question posed this former National Book Award Winner. While appraising the estate of a New Hampshire family descended from a North Dakota, Indian agent, Faye Travers is startled to discover a rare moose skin and cedar drum fashioned long ago by an Ojibwe artisan. This discovery, in turn, launches a sweeping saga, a journey both backward and forward in time, following the strange passage of a powerful yet delicate instrument, carved from nature, and how this gift from nature illuminates the lives encounters and touches.

Louise Erdrich. Erdrich is widely acclaimed as one of the most significant writers of what is often described as the "second wave" of the Native American Renaissance. She has written 28 books as well as volumes of poetry and children's books. Her novel *Love Medicine* won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

The Painted Drum: Louise Erdrich, Harper Collins, 2005

Author photo, image from LA Times, photo credit: Hilary Abe

Earth Keeper, Reflections on the American Land

N. Scott Momaday

Momaday, one of the most distinguished voices in American literature, is particularly good at capturing the rich oral tradition of storytelling of Native Americans. In doing so, he also illuminates how the earth is a sacred gift, a place of wonder and abundance and how our modern world threatens that gift. In this beautifully written book Momaday recalls stories of his childhood, stories that have been passed down through generations, stories that reveal a profound and sacred connection to the American landscape and a reverence for the natural world. For more on Momaday and this fascinating book, see this PBS interview with Momaday. <https://www.pbs.org/video/n-scott-momaday-word-from-a-bear-odljy7/>

N. Scott Momaday. Momaday is an internationally renowned poet, novelist, artist, teacher and storyteller. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *House of Dawn*. He is the recipient of numerous awards and honors including the Academy of American Poets Prize, the National Medal of Arts, the Ken Burns American Heritage Prize, among others. He is a member of the Kiowa tribe and lives in New Mexico.

Earth Keeper: Reflections on the American Land, N. Scott Momaday, Harper, 2020

Photo retrieved at: <https://cityclub.org>

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