

The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the  
Feminine in American Indian Trad  
Paula Gunn Allen (1986)



## Whose Dream Is This Anyway? Remythologizing and Self-definition in Contemporary American Indian Fiction

Indian narrative, old and new, portrays living history, an angle of truth, a belief in people telling their lives directly, with pride and beauty. To tell a story the Indian way, no less to write, means not so much to fictionalize as to inflect the truth of the old ways still with us . . . The Indian storyteller enters the narrative less a point-of-view, detached on the crosshairs of art, more as a human presence, attended by an audience taking part in the narrative.

—Kenneth Lincoln,  
*Native American Renaissance*

There are various kinds of American Indian novels. Some of them, though written by American Indians, have little or nothing to say about Indian life. The first novel published by a Native American, the Cherokee breed John Rollin Ridge's *Joaquin Murietta: The Celebrated California Bandit* (1854), and the three novels written in the 1920s by another Cherokee breed John Milton Oskison are largely of this category, though each in its way takes up themes that pervade later Native American fiction proper. Ridge's novel, while not about Indians, is about native response to invasion and conquest. Joaquin Murietta is a California Mexican who avenges the murders of his people that occur as a result of the gold rush, the Mexican-American War, and the takeover of California by the United States. The novel contributed to Chicano/Latino protest lore more than a hundred years after its writing. Oskison's three novels do not treat identifiably Indian themes, but

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they are each set in Indian Territory and include Indians as minor characters. In his last novel, *Brothers Three*, Indians (breeds like himself) appear as major characters, and the futile struggle to function in the white world is that book's major theme. In *Brothers Three*, Oskison is the first Native American writer to take as a theme the prejudice experienced by breeds. In various guises, that theme would pervade Native American novels throughout the twentieth century.

Some Indian novels, such as James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking series, James Raftery's *Okla Hannali*, Frank Waters's *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, and Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy*, are about Native Americans but are written by non-Indians. Many novels by white, Black, and Hispanic novelists have Indian characters or themes. These treatments are generally historic, centering around cultural conflict. Some, such as Lynn Andrews's or Carlos Castaneda's mystic series, incorporate ritual themes as a basis of their plot, but by far the most favored theme in novels about Indians by non-Indians is the plight of the noble Indian who is the hapless victim of civilized forces beyond his control. In a way, these are novels that underscore (General Sherman's observation that "the only good Indians are dead") or that reflect America's view of the Indian "as a noble red man, either safely dead or dying as fast as could reasonably be expected," as A. LaVonne Knoff succinctly summarizes it.<sup>1</sup>

The dying savage is the major theme of Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy*, Frank Waters's *The Man Who Killed the Deer*, and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*. Basically, the plotline is that a tribal person, usually a traditional, tries to adopt or adapt to white ways or values and comes to grief as a result. It is about the impact of conflicting cultures on an Indian. These writers view that impact as necessarily destructive to the protagonists and any others caught between two worlds with them. Similar to the morality tales of an older tradition in western literature and perhaps in an attempt to make contemporary the myth of the dying god, these novels tell of the innocent victim who must be sacrificed for reasons that are putatively historical and political but that are tightly allied with ancient western ritual literature at its source.

These novels seem to warn Indians against trying to make it in the white man's world. They often reinforce the belief common among both Indians and whites that Indians who attempt to adapt to white ways in any sense are doomed to death. Novels that portray the Indian as primitive, earth-loving guru and those that portray the Indian as