

Books by the Stack



Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

On a New Mexico reservation, one Navajo family—including Tayo, a veteran deeply scarred by his experiences as a Japanese POW and by the rejection of his own people—struggle to survive in a world no longer theirs in the years just before and after World War II..

Why you'll like it: *Historical fiction. Nonlinear. Haunting. Lyrical.*

About the Author: Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Growing up on a reservation, she went to Bureau of Indian Affairs schools before attending the University of New Mexico. She taught at the Navajo Community College in Arizona and is a professor of English at the University of Arizona, Tucson. Marmon has written short stories, poetry, plays and novels. Her books include *Laguna Woman*, *Ceremony* and *Yellow Woman*. (Bowker Author Biography)

Questions for Discussion

1. Readers sometimes find the reading of *Ceremony* a disorienting experience, in part because Silko frequently shifts scenes and time frames without warning. How does this technique help the reader to participate in Tayo's thoughts, emotions, and experiences? Is its influence on the narrative consistently the same, and is it always effective?
2. How does Tayo's status as a half-breed influence his choices, his thinking, and the way he is perceived by other characters in the novel? What tensions and conflicts does his mixed ancestry contribute to Silko's story?
3. For what reasons do Tayo and his cousin Rocky join the Army? In what ways do they and the other young Native American men benefit from their armed service, and why do these benefits evaporate once the war is over?
4. *Ceremony* has been described as a story of struggle between two cosmic forces, one basically masculine and one essentially feminine. Assuming this to be true, what are the images of masculinity and femininity that Silko presents? Is this gendered analysis an adequate way of understanding the novel? Are there important ideas that it leaves out?
5. *Ceremony* offers the suggestion that the European settlers of America were created by the "witchery" of a nameless witch doctor. What is the effect of this assertion? Does it make white people demonic by intimating that they are agents of evil, incapable of doing good? Or, to the contrary, does it somehow absolve them from blame because they are merely tools of the "Destroyers" and are not really responsible for their actions?
6. How do the poems and legends that are interspersed in Silko's text influence your reading of the novel? Why do you think Silko centers Emo's tale of debauchery (pp.57-59) on the page in the same way that she centers the older, sacred stories?

7. One aspect of white culture that Tayo especially resents is the way in which its educational practices, particularly instruction in the sciences, dismiss Native beliefs as “superstitions.” What are the similarities and differences between the way Tayo feels about the treatment of his ancestral beliefs and the way in which a believer in the creation stories of Genesis might respond to Darwinism? To what extent is the novel a story of the struggle between technology and belief?
8. Silko’s use of symbolic imagery often makes use of contrasting opposites: dryness and wetness; mountains and canyons; city and country; sunrise and darkness. Choose one of these contrasts (or another one that you have observed); what values does each of the two terms represent? Do their meanings remain constant?
9. Blindness and invisibility are recurring motifs in *Ceremony*. What does Silko suggest through her repeated uses of inabilities or refusals to see?
10. How do the cattle and other animal presences in the novel function to illustrate the traditional values of the Laguna tribe and their conflicts with the principles and desires of white Americans?
11. Tayo believes that Emo is “wrong, all wrong” in his attitudes toward Indian identity and other aspects of life. What is the nature and what are the causes of Emo’s wrongness?
12. Because Silko presents a number of Native American characters with drinking problems, her novel has been accused of playing into a negative stereotype. Do you think this charge has merit? Why or why not?
13. Silko, who has suffered headaches, depression, and nausea similar to those the plague Tayo in her novel, has said, “I wrote this novel to save my life.” How is *Ceremony* a novel of salvation, for Tayo, for its author, and for its readers? What are the limits to the salvation that it appears to offer?

(Questions provided by the publisher)



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