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LESLIE MARMON SILKO

by Per Seyersted



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Leslie Marmon Silko

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In 1978 when Leslie Marmon Silko was lecturing in Norway and one day happened to see the figures on the iron plates in my fireplace, she immediately exclaimed: "Oh there you have the three goats from that Norwegian fairytale!" As she then told me, twenty years earlier her fifth grade teacher had read to the class from a large volume of Scandinavian tales, whereupon she had asked for the book and read them all herself, including the one she now saw illustrated in front of her.

This little incident shows how, at an early age, she was already actively interested in stories and how they remain vivid with her. Raised in Old Laguna in New Mexico, herself partly Laguna Pueblo (and partly white and Mexican), she was spurred in this interest by the love of storytelling and the strong oral tradition of her tribe: for centuries they have kept alive and renewed a rich store of tales about mythical, historical, and current figures and events.

Laguna material forms the basis for nearly all of Silko's work, including her first piece to see print, the story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" (1969). With this widely anthologized tale and her other published short writings—most of which will be made available in the collection *Storyteller* (due to appear in 1981)—she put Laguna on the literary map and placed herself in the forefront of Native American authors. She early won prestigious literary prizes, and in the novel *Ceremony* (1977) she demonstrated such artistry in her transformation of local material into general significance that the

enthusiastic reviewers welcomed her as an important American writer.

I

When Columbus mistakenly called the inhabitants of the western hemisphere Indians, he unwittingly had a point: As we now believe, those people—who of course are the *real* Americans—were descendants of tribes from the continent he sought, only they had emigrated to the Americas via the Bering Straits some 30,000 years earlier.

Of the various cultures which developed in the area which today forms the United States, one of the most distinctive is that of the so-called Pueblo Indians. For at least 12,000 years they have lived in more or less the same locations in the Southwest, most of them in the northwestern part of present-day New Mexico.

This is a beautiful but arid part of the country. It is filled with massive mountain ranges, wide mesas (plateaus) of solid rock, sandstone cliffs, lavabeds, and sandy plains, and the whole is cut through by deep canyons and smaller arroyos (ravines). Most of the few river beds are dry except during the season of summer torrents. Even though no part of the area is less than a mile above sea level, summers can be very hot, and winters can be equally destructive with snowstorms and early and late frosts. The mountain slopes are here and there forested, and the streams and creeks are lined with willows and cottonwood, but for the rest, there is mostly nothing but a sparse vegetation of grass and shrubs. Existence was precarious already for the early inhabitants who lived by hunting and the gathering of wild plants, and in time, the climate became even drier. The people then had to stay close to whatever water they could find, and for the last

2,000 years those who have lived here have built villages and grown corn, devising ingenious techniques for making the plants use all available moisture. No wonder the Pueblo ceremonies are centered on the need for rain.

Scholars have for some time been aware of the fact that the Pueblo Indians had already reached a high level of civilization in their early development. As Joe S. Sando states in his book on *The Pueblo Indians* (p. 208), the period from 1150 to 1350 A.D. was the "classic" or "Golden Age" of Pueblo development when an advanced form of government and a formalized religion evolved and when the oral tradition reached its full bloom. When the Spaniards came in 1540 with the Coronado expedition, they were no doubt impressed by the fact that these tribes were housed in adobe villages ("pueblo" is Spanish for village), that they lived not so much on wild game as on what they got from a highly organized agriculture (which in addition to corn yielded beans and squash, cotton and tobacco), and that they were peaceful and well governed. Nevertheless, the newcomers could only see the Pueblos as subjects to be ruled and, perhaps even more important, as "uncivilized heathens" to be won for Christianity; and even had the Spaniards wanted to, they would have had a hard time understanding the Pueblo culture.

More than half a century ago, non-Indian anthropologists like Franz Boas and Elsie Clew Parsons began to record the myths and social organization of the Pueblos, and more recently such Pueblo scholars as Edward P. Dozier, Alfonso Ortiz, Joe S. Sando, and Paula Gunn Allen have given us insiders' information. After Ts'its'ni'ako or Thoughtwoman (in some myths she is identical with Spiderwoman) had created the cosmos by thinking everything into existence, E-yet-e-co or the Allmother, who is perhaps the central deity, together with Badger made a hole in the earth's crust big enough so that people could come up to the surface from Shibapu, the

Underworld (one of the four worlds down there) or Place of Emergence. After a trek to the south, the people settled at their present pueblo locations. E-yet-e-co gave them her heart in the form of corn and instructed some of them to dance for rain and others to help make the maize grow. The Pueblo Indians call the sun Father, while the corn, the sky with its rain, and the earth with its soil are referred to as Mother. As Ortiz notes (in his *New Perspectives on the Pueblos*, p. 297), "The sun father and the earth mother continuously interact, [. . . and] new individuals are 'born' from the underworld." The death of humans is seen as just as natural as that of plants, and when people die, they all go back to E-yet-e-co in the earth; some of them, meanwhile, return to the villages in the form of clouds to act as Rainmakers.

Sando observes (pp. 17, 22f) that "The tradition of religious beliefs permeates every aspect of the people's life; it determines man's relation with the natural world and with his fellow man. Its basic concern is continuity of a harmonious relationship with the world in which man lives." The religious practices themselves have remained unchanged for centuries. The Pueblos of today memorize the same age-old oratories, prayers, and songs, which are their "requests for an orderly life, rain, good crops, plentiful game." Apart from this, they do not desire to "develop" their country. Their ethos dictates that the earth should be allowed to recreate whatever grows on it, and Ortiz notes that in no tribe has he found anything resembling the idea of progress.

When the invaders came in strength and in 1598 made the pueblos swear allegiance to the King of Spain, missionaries were forced on most of the tribes. The pueblo people were made to worship in the Catholic way, but they managed to keep up their traditional religious practices, and though a secular leadership, headed by a governor, was created for each pueblo, the old religious hierarchy remained the

real power. But the Spanish rule was harsh enough to result in the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, which some pueblos today commemorate as the first American Revolution. Thanks to cooperation among the various tribes, they managed to get rid of the Spaniards and to keep them away for twelve years, and when the foreigners came back, they wisely began to rule a little more leniently.

It was in 1706 that the Spaniards founded a mission and built a church at Laguna, a village situated fifty miles west of Albuquerque and then having as neighbor a lake ("laguna" is Spanish for shallow lake), formed by a small river which the new rulers renamed Rio San Jose after the patron saint of the pueblo. Together with the inhabitants of Acoma (fifteen miles southwest of Laguna) and a few other pueblos, the Laguna speak the so-called Keresan language.

Old Laguna had been formed a few centuries earlier by people coming from the north, and during the Pueblo Revolt it was strengthened by immigrants from other pueblos. The Lagunas were an energetic people who established a number of outlying settlements. Today there are seven of them: Encinal, Paraje, Seama, Casa Blanca, New Laguna, Pagate, and Mesita, with a population of 5,500, of whom 800 live in Old Laguna. They kept large herds of cattle, and they were active in fending off the raids of the nomadic Navajos and Apaches. The Spaniards and later the Americans took a major part of the land the Lagunas considered their own, so that today only 417,000 acres are included in the tribally owned Laguna Reservation.

The most important social structure at Laguna is the clan. The clans are matrilineal, and as noted by Dozier (*The Pueblo Indians of North America*, p. 137), the Pueblo women enjoy a high status: besides being responsible for the household, they own the house, they make the important decisions, and especially the oldest in the group are looked to by all for advice. The men do the farming and are

responsible for most of the ceremonial activities. Of these, the most important celebrations are held in connection with Christmas and New Year's, when they pray for rain, and the name day of the patron saint (for San Jose, this is September 19, Laguna Feast day, when the Harvest Dance gathers all Laguna Pueblos). The festivities include Mass in the Catholic church, dances in front of it and in the plaza, and a procession with the statue of the saint.

As long as the pueblos had only Catholicism to contend with, they were able to achieve a fairly comfortable "compartmentalization" (in the term of Ortiz) of the two religions, but the advent of Protestant missionaries caused complications. These proselytizers were particularly active in Laguna, where for ten years just before the Civil War, Samuel C. Gorman ran a mission church and school for the Baptists, and from 1875 to 1887 Dr. John Menaul did the same for the Presbyterians. Meanwhile, just after the war, a number of other white Protestants arrived who worked as surveyors, married Laguna women, and settled permanently in the area. The group included John Gunn and George Pratt, and Walter G. (for Gunn) Marmon, a Civil War Colonel from Ohio, who came in 1868, briefly taught school, and then became a trader there, like his younger brother, Robert G. Marmon (Leslie Marmon Silko's great-grandfather), who came in 1872.

In a report of 1881 to the Presbytery of Santa Fe, Menaul complained about the "idolatry and heathenism" of these "Indian sun worshipers" and termed them "remnants of a nation dying out by reason of their immoral and debasing customs." But he added that "the Pueblo Indians are, of all people, the most religious," their whole inner and outer life being "one of perfect devotion to religious Custom, or obedience to [their] faith. What a lesson for Christians!" He also observed that the Catholics had not really Christianized them—all they had achieved was that the Lagunas had "received the

rites of Romanism as an addition to their own." Apparently this did not satisfy him: for himself, he was "looking to the Lord for an abundant harvest of Indian souls," and to be effective, he printed a *Children's Catechism* in Keresan and worked to get young Lagunas sent to Indian School at Albuquerque or Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

At about this time, the whites got Robert Marmon elected to serve a year's term as Laguna governor, and through a vote of the people, many of the old customs were prohibited. Anti-American "conservatives" now turned against "progressive" adherents of the new sects, and in 1879, the leaders of the medicine societies closed the kivas (i.e., their religious centers) and moved to Mesita and later to the Rio Grande. Silko notes in *Storyteller* that a good deal of controversy surrounds the Marmon brothers. Ethnologists blame them for causing factions and trouble at Laguna, and though neither of the brothers was a practising Presbyterian, Silko believes that many of the charges are true. Yet the exodus from Old Laguna to the outlying settlements evidently started before the Marmons arrived, possibly as a result of the work of Gorman. A decade into our century, Laguna conservatives managed to re-establish something of the old religious system, and Parson's prediction that Laguna was a lost cause (she found no kivas there) seems to have been ill-founded.

There have been some further notable events in recent Laguna history. The changes just mentioned also brought with them a new constitution for the pueblo, largely modeled on that of the U.S., and in part authored by the Marmons. In the 1880s, the so-called Laguna Regulars served as Indian Scouts for the federal troops looking for Geronimo. In the two World Wars, many Lagunas eagerly signed up. After the Manhattan Project was started in 1943 at nearby Los Alamos, uranium was being mined at well-guarded sites on the Laguna Reservation, and on July 16, 1945, early-rising Lagunas thought the sun had suddenly risen when they saw what they later

learned was the atomic blast at Trinity Site 150 miles away.

Today, northwestern New Mexico is the largest uranium producing region in the world; it has the largest open pit uranium mine in existence, the Jackpile Mine, near Pagate on Laguna land, and the deepest uranium mine shaft, sunk into Mt. Taylor, a mountain northwest of Laguna, which is sacred to the Pueblo and Navajo people. Grants, a city upstream on the Rio San Jose where the uranium is processed in milling plants, calls itself "The Uranium Capital of the World." When the Jackpile Mine was opened in the 1950s, it was opposed by the older people who felt that Pueblo values are to be found in areas other than sophisticated technology, but the mine was welcomed by the young because it offered jobs. Today at Laguna Pueblo, one fourth of the labor force works at the mine. Their progressive tribal government has invested the considerable royalty from the leases or used it to provide jobs and education. At Laguna there is no unemployment and people are materially fairly well off. Even so, the Lagunas, and the other Pueblos, are worried.

On the one hand, they fear the day when their deposits of uranium ore will be gone and they will lose their jobs. On the other, they now realize the dangers involved in the mining and milling of it. Cancer is spreading; the rate of children born with birth defects at Laguna is alarming; with mill tailings retaining 85% of the original radioactivity of the uranium, the ecosystem is contaminated, to the degree that the Environmental Protection Agency in surveys of drinking water has found radiation levels 200 times those allowed. And it will probably get worse: the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which is still sole custodian of all Pueblo land, expects the number of mines in the area to be more than doubled by the year 2000.

Life among the Pueblos, too, is changing. Traditionally, they have economically had a communal system, encouraging cooperation and group good and toning down individualism. They lived so closely

together that it was everybody's business how others were doing, and problems were dealt with at town meetings. There was little violence and no need for law enforcement. But twenty years ago Laguna had to introduce tribal police, and more recently they also got a jail. The suicide rate is very high, and violence is increasing. Some of the young now feel that all this may well have been caused in part by the new ways and that the old people were right.

II

Born in 1948, Leslie Marmon lived through these developments from old to new as she grew up at Old Laguna. Her first contact with the traditional was that her mother, a mixed blood Plains Indian, kept her on the customary cradle board until she was a year old. Her home reflected all her three backgrounds: Laguna, Mexican, and white. The family lived in one of the Marmon houses, which were situated below the village, close to the river. "They put us in this place," Silko has said; "I always thought there was something symbolic about that, sort of putting us on the fringe of things" (*Sun Tracks*, Fall 1976, p. 29). This in-between position was also seen in such facts as that the family was included in clan activities, but not to the same extent as full bloods, and that the young Leslie helped out at ceremonial dances, but did not dance herself.

With her mother away at work, she saw much of her grandmother Lillie, who had been a Model A mechanic, and her great-grandmother Marie or "A'mooh," a full blood from Paguate who had married Robert and become a strong Presbyterian, had gone to Indian School at Carlisle as soon as her many children were grown, and who washed her hair in yucca roots and told the child about old days. Another especially important influence on the young girl was

her grandfather Hank Marmon's sister-in-law Susie, wife of Walter K. Marmon. She, too, had been to Carlisle where she even went through college, and Silko describes "Aunt Susie" in *Storyteller* as a "brilliant woman, a scholar of her own making who has cherished the Laguna stories all her life." Silko has also said of herself that she comes from a long line of tough old Laguna ladies: Aunt Susie is today 106. In a sense, she trained the young girl: she told her a wealth of the Laguna stories and helped her to love them and learn them.

From her great-grandmother she also learned some Keresan, but at the local BIA school she was punished if she used it. At eight, she got her own horse and began to help gather cattle at the family ranch, and at thirteen she began to take part in the deer hunts with her own rifle. Meanwhile, starting with the fifth grade, she commuted to Albuquerque where she attended Catholic schools. Whereas Hank Marmon had been refused admittance to a restaurant in that city, Leslie Marmon did not feel insecure, only a little strange, among the Anglos at school. After a B.A. in English in 1969 at the University of New Mexico, she began law school in a program intended to help Native Americans get their own lawyers, but then gave it up for writing and teaching. In 1974 she published *Laguna Woman*, a collection of poems, while several of her prose works were included in Kenneth Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians*. She taught two years at Navajo Community College at Tsale, then spent two years writing *Ceremony*, in Ketchikan, Alaska, and then returned to teach at her old university. In 1978 she moved to Tucson, where she is now a professor at the University of Arizona.

Leslie Marmon eagerly absorbed the abundance of stories she heard from a number of people around her, and she became an avid reader. At the age of twelve, she particularly liked Poe, Steinbeck, Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor, and at college, Shakespeare and

Milton. In a sense she started to write in the fifth grade: "A teacher gave us a list of words to make sentences out of, and I just made it into a story automatically" (interview in Dexter Fisher, ed., *The Third Woman*, p. 19). But it was only at college in 1967 when she was forced to write a story in a creative writing course and found again that what was difficult for others came naturally to her, that she realized she was a writer. Back at Laguna she had just heard in headline form that an old man had been found dead at a sheep camp and had been given a traditional burial and that the priest had resented the fact that he was not called in. Unable to think of anything else, she decided to write about this incident and to try to imagine the scene and how the people had felt. The result was "The Man to Send Rain Clouds," which was quickly published in *New Mexico Quarterly* and also earned for her a "Discovery Grant."

In Rosen's 1974 anthology, Silko wrote about herself: "I am of mixed-breed ancestry, but what I know is Laguna. This place I am from is everything I am as a writer and human being." And she has also said (in *Laguna Woman*): "I suppose at the core of my writing is the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed or mixed blooded person; what it is to grow up neither white nor fully traditional Indian." It is as if she is saying that she is wholly a Laguna Pueblo and will write about the place where she grew up, but that at the same time she is a mixed-blood and therefore has been given the ability and the freedom to see Laguna also from the outside. Her first story exemplifies this double vision.

When Ken and Leon in their pickup come looking for old Teofilo, they already have with them what is needed to perform the preliminaries for a traditional burial, such as painting his face. When they have completed these tasks, Leon smiles and says, "Send us rain clouds, Grandfather." Returning to the pueblo with the body under a tarpaulin, they meet Father Paul, who is led to

believe that Teofilo is alive and well at camp. Later at home, the funeral is performed with clanspeople and old men with medicine bags attending. While the others go to the graveyard, Leon acts upon Louise's suggestion that he ask the priest to sprinkle "holy water for Grandpa. So he won't be thirsty." Father Paul protests that a Christian burial would require the Last Rites and a Mass, but in the end he reluctantly comes along, and when the besprinkled body is lowered, Leon is happy: "now the old man could send them big thunderclouds for sure."

Silko's interest in this story does not lie in the descriptions of the rituals themselves. She has said that while she has looked at anthropologists' reports on Laguna, she does not consult them. For one thing, she doubts that the informants (among whom were some of her own ancestors) always gave the scholars the true story, and more important, their reports are dead to her compared to the living reality of what she has heard and seen and felt herself. Also, she is an artist who wants to apply her imagination to the telling of tales, and to her, the essence of this particular incident is the story of this instance of cultural clash with the feelings and ideas involved.

To be sure, she does want us to see that these are Laguna rituals and attitudes. For example, she gives us such local details as that Leon ties a gray feather in Teofilo's hair and that he paints the old man's face with stripes of certain colors. But she does not tell us what the medicine men do at the important event of the funeral in Teofilo's home. Thus we have to guess that some of the things they all do, such as Leon's application of paints, may be part of the task of making "him so that he may be recognized" in Shibapu, and that others, such as Louise's sprinkling of corn meal and her concern that her Grandpa shall not be thirsty, are intended to make sure that he has "water . . . and also food for his traveling provisions" (Boas, *Keresan Texts*, 1928; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1974, pp. 203 f).

What we have in the story are two different ideas of death, or rather, of our whole existence. The Indian, as Vine Deloria has reminded us, is wedded to place rather than time and to group rather than individual. On the one hand, as Ortiz has written, "Indian traditions exist in, and are primarily to be understood in relation to, space; they belong to the place where the people exist or originated," their existence being likened metaphorically to that of a plant. And he adds: "time in its linear, historical dimension . . . is unimportant" compared to "cyclical, rhythmic time, time viewed as a series of endlessly repeating cycles, on the model of the seasons or, again, plants" (*Indian Historian*, Winter 1977, pp. 18 f). And on the other hand, as already suggested, pueblo societies see the survival of the group as more important than the existence of the individual. That is, man is a minute part of an immense natural cycle, and his death has nothing threatening in it because, after a life which contained both the good and the bad that all Pueblos brought with them from Shibapu, he simply goes back to where he came from, and in line with the communal thinking, it is hoped that his spirit will help the group he leaves behind by returning with rain clouds. This is of course wholly alien to Catholic thinking, which sees death in terms of the individual rather than the group and which looks at it as one sinful mortal's final, critical meeting with his Maker, in which it is hoped that the blessing symbolized by the holy water will help.

It is part of the mastery of this short story that Silko only lightly suggests all this in her spare, highly controlled narrative, in which she hardly enters into the protagonists' minds. Furthermore, as an objective writer, she does not take sides, but gives a balanced, sensitive presentation of the characters. In her depiction of the Pueblos she makes us feel what David B. Espey has termed "the mood of peace and simplicity, the quiet assurance with which [they] react to death," accepting from Catholicism only what they can use; and in

her sympathetic picture of the priest we sense both his good will and his bewilderment. In the one riddle she leaves us with—Father Paul is reminded of something, but does not know what, when the water immediately disappears into the sand—she seems to suggest that he is on the verge of understanding the impossibility of Christianizing this proud, independent, “foreign” people who look to Mt. Taylor, looming up behind the graveyard, as a holy shrine and who have decorated most of the walls of the church in which he works with signs of thunder, clouds, and rainbows. In the quiet dignity of the telling of this moving tale, Silko makes it clear that she is an intelligent writer and a born storyteller.

Joseph Bruchac reports that Silko said to him once, “‘My writing is a gift to the Earth.’ And she meant this with great humility” (Dick Lourie, ed., *Come to Power*, p. 6). That is, it is her way of saying Thank You to the earth for providing for her and giving her an identity through the place of Laguna with its rich store of narrative material. Using this material, she sometimes (as in parts of *Storyteller*) simply records what she has heard, but mostly she transforms it through her own imagination. Clearly she addresses not only Native Americans, but all readers, and her aim with her writing seems in part to be the same as with her lecture in Oslo: “to familiarize the audience with the origins of contemporary Indian writing, i.e., the links in the oral tradition—both the ‘classical’ oral tradition and the ‘contemporary’ oral tradition, which continues even now.” This “sense of continuing—that the Native American communities and their arts/religious systems continue on,” as she phrased it, is demonstrated in her next important work, “Yellow Woman,” which Martha Foley included in her *200 Years of Great American Short Stories*, put out in 1976 to commemorate the Bicentennial.

Yellow Woman, a generic term for many Laguna heroines, is

found in a great number of stories. While filling her water jar at the river, she is abducted (after first refusing to be taken away because she does not know what to do with the jar) by a ka'tsina, a supernatural being who usually lives in Mt. Taylor. Eventually she returns to her husband, in some versions bringing a pair of twins. Silko tells us that girls meet boyfriends and lovers at the river and that she used to wander around down there herself "and try to imagine walking around the bend and just happening to stumble upon some beautiful man. Later on I realized that these kinds of things that I was doing when I was fifteen are exactly the kinds of things out of which stories like the Yellow Woman story [came]. I finally put the two together: the adolescent longings and the old stories, that plus the stories around Laguna at the time about people who did, in fact, just in recent times, use the river as a meeting place" (*Sun Tracks*, Fall 1976, p. 29).

These layers are perfectly fused in this tale of a nameless female who is the only one in the pueblo to credit and love her dead grandfather's stories about Yellow Woman. Half believing herself to be such a character when she sleeps at the river with a stranger she wants to see as a ka'tsina, she goes with him to the mountains where he rustles cattle; when one day they are confronted by a rancher, she is ordered to go to his cabin with a beef carcass, but instead she returns to her husband and child. Back in the pueblo she decides to tell them she had been kidnapped by a Navajo, at the same time regretting that her grandfather is not there to appreciate her story, and hoping the man will come for her again.

As we read the woman's tale with its sensuous description of physical contact, we understand how she is ruled by an overpowering sexual attraction and why she does not use earlier opportunities to escape, and Silko's artistry lies in the subtlety with which she shows us how the woman is confused as she tries to mask and excuse the fact of

her adultery by seeing it through the haze of the old story, thereby lifting a somewhat everyday occurrence into the realm of the supernatural. In this warmly vibrant tale the author tells us just enough of the old myth itself so that we can follow the delicate shifts in this profound psychological study, which constitutes a remarkable achievement in the way it shows how the traditional and the contemporary can unite into a living reality.

While "Yellow Woman" seems to say that white influence has made most Pueblos forget the old myths, "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" indicates that the Lagunas have remained rather uninfluenced by Christianity. Before Silko started *Ceremony*, she wrote some further notable tales in which she demonstrates other variations on this theme of Anglo-Indian interplay.

"Tony's Story" was also suggested by a local occurrence. When Leslie Marmon was four, an Acoma man killed a state policeman. One day at college, she sat down to write about the incident as seen from Tony's point of view, making him commit the murder because he sees the man as a witch. The story opens as follows: "It happened one summer when the sky was wide and hot and the summer rains did not come; the sheep were thin, and the tumbleweeds turned brown and died. Leon came back from the army. . . . He grabbed my hand and held it tight like a white man."

Here, as so often, Silko with ease and vigor immediately arouses our interest, with a few words evoking the scene and suggesting what later becomes evident, in this instance that Leon has acquired non-Indian ways, whereas Tony has remained fully a traditional Pueblo. When Leon is spotted drinking out of bounds by a non-Indian state policeman and viciously beaten by him without provocation, he complains to the pueblo meeting and vows he will "kill the big bastard" if he does it again. Tony, meanwhile, sees the men back from the army as troublemakers when they stand up for their rights, and when he

has a dream with the cop appearing in the form of a traditional witch, he knows why it has come and why they have a drought. Unlike Leon, he remembers the old stories about witchcraft; usually provoked when the Pueblos deviate from the old ways, it manifests itself through the misuse of power, and if necessary, it must be destroyed.

This is a painfully gripping story, partly because we empathize with the timelessly persecuted Native Americans, and partly because it prepares us step by step for the ironic conclusion: Leon, the modern Pueblo who sees the cop as a representative of the white oppressors, does not use the gun; instead, the shot is fired by the traditional Tony, who would not dream of attacking the whites, but who knows he must annihilate what he sees as a terribly destructive spiritual force coming out of their own Pueblo existence. As his horrified companion watches, Tony completes the purification by burning the body in the car. "Don't worry, everything is O.K. now, Leon. It's killed," he says, adding, "They sometimes take on strange forms." And he feels that with "it" gone, the rains can come again.

"A Geronimo Story" is Silko's artistic version of the Laguna Regulars' participation in the search for the Apache chief. These men, who included several of her ancestors, joined in this search because it meant "good money," she has said, adding that she would like to think that when they did not find Geronimo, it was because they did not want to. In Silko's tale, which is told by a boy who accompanies Siteye, his uncle, the Lagunas—led by Captain Pratt—know that Geronimo cannot possibly be where the Federal Major insists he is, and they try to tell him so. But in vain, and the point of the story is not so much that the Pueblos (and even the Captain, who is married to one) are looked down upon by the whites, but rather that it is *they*—the Lagunas—who feel superior. The more leisurely pace of this tale allows the author not only to show how they

make the trip into an enjoyable outing, which for the boy marks a step in his becoming a real Laguna as he watches nature and eats fresh deer liver, but, equally important, to give us many instances of the subtle Pueblo humor and irony. "Siteye shook his head gently. 'You know,' he said, 'that was a long way to go for deer hunting.' "

In "Lullaby," a story which Martha Foley included in *The Best American Short Stories of 1975*, Silko moves closer to our times, focusing on an old Navajo couple living just north of Laguna Reservation. "The sun had gone down, but the snow in the wind gave off its own light. It came in thick tufts like new wool — washed before the weaver spins it. Ayah reached out for it like her own babies had, and she smiled when she remembered how she had laughed at them." In this opening, the author suggests how Ayah, sitting against a tree waiting for Chato to come back from Azzie's Bar after having spent most of the monthly government check, is thinking of the two really important elements in her life: her childhood in the hogan with her mother weaving, and her two small children whom the white doctors had come for and "weaned from these lava hills and from this sky" so that, already at their second visit back home, they hardly recognized her.

Even though the story is seen through Ayah's eyes and painfully illustrates her loss, it does not condemn the whites, but presents a balanced picture. To be sure, we see examples of how the Navajos are shabbily treated, but when the doctors come for the children, it is to save them from the tuberculosis which has killed their siblings, and when Ayah signs the papers, it is because Chato has taught her to sign her name, but not to understand English. When she realizes what she has done and wants to call in a medicine man, Chato tells her it is too late, and from then on she no longer sleeps at his side, thinking of how "the old ones always told her about learning their language or any of their ways: it endangered you," and hating him

for introducing her to the new. The author effectively suggests this gap by having Ayah sit under her dead son's tattered army blanket and think of her mother's warm, beautiful Navajo rugs.

This deeply moving story ends with Ayah letting the decrepit and senile Chato sleep in the snow, knowing "He would not feel it." Overwhelmed by a "rush so big inside her heart for the babies," she sings the lullaby which her grandmother had sung for her: "The earth is your mother, / she holds you. / The Sky is your father, / he protects you. / . . . / We are together always / We are together always / There never was a time / where this / was not so." While ministering over the (in one sense) merciful end of her husband, she is thus singing a song for babies, thereby joining death and life, suggesting that time is one and endless, and that life, when rooted in the familiar soil, is perpetual.

All the stories dealt with above are outstanding. It is not surprising that this little body of works soon established Silko as an important writer. Some of these stories—especially "Lullaby" and "The Man to Send Rain Clouds"—may well become classics in American literature.

While still at Chinle, Silko wrote a piece "done for anti-Nixon people, of about 50 pages, aimed at sixth graders, about young people being against strip mining, relocated at Jemez Pueblo." (Here, and in other passages that give Silko's views, I am referring to what she has told me in conversation.) All she wished to publish from this "Humaweepee, the Warrior Priest" is found in Rosen's anthology, which gives us Humaweepee speaking at two stages in his life. Aged nineteen in the first excerpt, he has lived half his life outside the pueblo with his uncle, a medicine man, and has been trained—through the old man's way of life and his stories (rather than through magic)—in what A. LaVonne Ruoff calls "the gradual process of becoming one with nature," with the result that he is now

ready for the final initiation. Once this is completed, he, in turn, is able to transmit the wisdom of his pueblo's religion to the next generation, which is what he seems to be doing in the second excerpt.

When Silko in the unpublished parts has "the protagonist saying: 'If you dynamite the steamshovel, it won't help you,' " it suggests that what she wanted to say to the young readers was, on the one hand, that the white civilization cannot be stopped, and on the other, that just because of this, the continuation of the oral tradition is more important than ever.

Another thing Silko did before starting on *Ceremony* was to write a "Foreword" to *Border Towns of the Navajo Nation*, a book of drawings by Aaron Yava, mostly depicting drunks on the streets of Gallup, the "Indian Capital," 150 miles west of Albuquerque. Here she writes: I "saw some of these same scenes with my own relatives, and it still hurts me when I look at Aaron's drawings." She can understand, she says, that many people are shocked by them, but adds that "Aaron and I care as much as any Indian people, about the 'Indian self-image' and 'Indian Pride.' But we have been taught to value truth above all else; and these scenes are true, and they must not be hidden. To hide them, is in a sense, denying that these Indian people exist, denying that our cousins and uncles exist because they could be my cousins and uncles. Denial of ourselves and our own origins is one of the most devastating psychological weapons the Whites have ever found to use against us."

Silko continues: "I think Aaron says with his drawings what I attempt to say with my stories—that Indian life today is full of terror and death and great suffering, but despite these tremendous odds against us for two hundred of years—the racism, the poverty, the alcoholism—we go on living. We live to celebrate the beauty of the Earth and Sky because the beauty and vitality of life, like the rainbow colored horses leaping, has never been lost. The world remains

for us as it has always been. One with itself and us, death and laughter existing side by side as it does in Aaron's drawings. . . . Aaron's vision comes down to him from the old ones who knew no boundaries between man and the Earth, between the beautiful and the ugly. They knew only the truth."

As we see in "Humaweepi" and this "Foreword," there is no question that Silko is involved and feels deeply about these matters. Yet she has written few further such items. "I am political, but I am political in my stories," she has stated (*The Third Woman*, p. 22). And, as cannot surprise us in this intelligent, balanced writer, she wants subtlety: "I am bored with the oversimplification," she has said in connection with some writings about Native Americans, and she feels that "writing a story like 'Lullaby' [is more effective] than to rant and rave." When she is eager to have her writings published, one reason is undoubtedly that she feels she has something to say, and on the basis of the two pieces above, we can sum up her basic ideas or concerns as of 1973—the year she started *Ceremony*—in this way: It is important to Native Americans that they keep open all lifelines to their roots; by building on the strength contained in their traditions and in their closeness to nature, they are better prepared to withstand the white influence and to find the strength to face the realities of their existence in modern, Anglo America.

III

Silko has said that in Alaska, far away from her own Southwest, she was depressed, and that for a time, writing was therapy for her, a way to stay sane with "the one thing that I had that was like a familiar friend" (*Persona*, 1980, p. 31). One day she started a short story which in time grew into *Ceremony*, a book about a Laguna

World War II veteran's quest for sanity, and she makes him achieve it through reopening the lifeline to the constructive elements in his roots.

When the book was published, the dustjacket was provided with this statement by Silko: "This novel is essentially about the powers inherent in the process of storytelling. . . . The chanting or telling of ancient stories to effect certain cures or protect from illness and harm have always been part of the Pueblo's curing ceremonies. I feel the power that the stories still have to bring us together, especially when there is loss and grief. My book tells the story of an Indian family, but it is also involved with the search for a ceremony to deal with despair, the most virulent of all diseases—the despair which accounts for the suicide, the alcoholism, and the violence which occur in so many Indian communities today."

These dark aspects of modern Indian life are certainly seen in this book, especially in the younger reservation people who are most exposed to the outside influence. Silko does not soften the bitterness they feel at having been robbed by the whites of their land and at being treated in general as second-class citizens, and she makes us very much aware of the suffering among Navajos and other Indians who end up as alcoholics or prostitutes in the bars and back alleys of Gallup.

Worst off in a sense are those who for a time had been in a way integrated into the main society, the veterans who had been praised as patriotic Americans, only to be demoted to their previous status. Trying to drown their bitterness, they use their disability checks to get drunk in the bars just outside the reservation line on Route 66. Harley, Leroy, and Emo—all with Purple Hearts from Wake Island—sit in Dixie Tavern, bragging of the white women they had had; telling themselves that they had been the best soldiers in the US Army, they curse the Anglos whose war they had fought and who had

"taken everything," while acting out this rage in violence among themselves.

When Tayo, the main character, is also filled with despair, the reason is not so much that he hates the whites as that he cannot accept himself. Born of an unknown white father and a mother with whom he had lived for some years among the Gallup prostitutes, he had been given by her to her sister in Laguna, and she had made it clear to him that his mother's lightfootedness was a disgrace to the family and that he is inferior to her son Rocky. Auntie encourages Rocky's plans to become a football star in the white world, whereas Tayo's duty is to help his uncle Josiah with his cattle.

However, flattered when Rocky calls him "brother" and wants him with him in the Army, he enlists, too, whereupon Auntie gives him the task of looking after his cousin. But he cannot prevent Rocky from being killed beside him in the Pacific, and when they are ordered to fire on some Japanese prisoners, he believes that one of them is Josiah and that he is responsible for his death as well, even though he did not pull the trigger. This extreme self-condemnation causes him to break down, and during a long stay in a veterans' hospital he survived by withdrawing from himself into what he believes is invisibility. Finally returning to his pueblo after six years, he blames himself for having survived, and also for the drought which has plagued Laguna since his uncle died and for the loss of the cattle which had run away. No longer caring whether he lives or dies, he one day nearly kills Emo. When the Laguna medicine man Ku'oosh, called in by old Grandma, unsuccessfully has given him the Scalp Ceremony, he is sent on to another medicine man, the Navajo Betonie who lives near Gallup.

The position of a medicine man is a very respected one. As Geary Hobson notes (*The Remembered Earth*, p. 108), not only does it take decades to become a medicine maker, but "He or she must have con-

firmation of the community, a great sense of the community, a profound knowledge of animals and plants, a knowledge of pain and suffering, and a sense of power that can be found only in adherence to the old things." While tradition is important, this does not mean that the medicine of, for example, the Navajo holy men is one and static: at Chinle, Silko found that it is manifold and developing. She reflects this in Betonie, who is even more "progressive" than others in that, having traveled and gone to school in the white world, he adjusts to the changes around him and keeps samples of white culture in his hogan alongside the traditional paraphernalia.

Given the fact that in Native American thought, the natural state of existence is seen as whole, we can understand that, as Allen has reminded us (*Literature of the American Indians*, p. 117) "healing chants and ceremonies emphasize restoration of wholeness, for disease is a condition of division and separation from the harmony of the whole. Beauty is wholeness. Health is wholeness. Goodness is wholeness. A witch—a person who uses the powers of the universe in a perverse or inharmonious way—is called a two-hearts: one who is not whole but split in two at the center of being." No wonder that the circle or the hoop is an important symbol with Indians.

While Betonie does give Tayo traditional ceremonies, he wins his confidence by encouraging him to speak of his Pacific experiences, suggesting that the reason he saw Josiah in one of the Japanese was that 30,000 years ago they were no strangers. Tayo also talks about the fact of his origin, which Betonie can sympathize with since he is a mixed breed himself. What he is giving Tayo is less a cure than a recipe for a self-cure: while the white doctors' medicine had drained memory out of him, Betonie tells him to accept the fact that things are complicated and look into himself and remember everything.

This approach to healing does not imply a modern emphasis on the individual, however: "There was something large and terrifying

in the old man's words. He wanted to yell at the medicine man, to yell the things the white doctors had yelled at him—that he had to think only of himself, and not about the others, that he would never get well as he used words like 'we' and 'us.' But he had known the answer all along, even while the white doctors were telling him he could get well and he was trying to believe them: medicine didn't work that way, because the world didn't work that way. His sickness was only part of something larger, and his cure would be found only in something great and inclusive of everything" (p. 132, Signet edition).

This means that he is beginning to grasp what Betonie is suggesting to him: that he is part of an unending history, of a pueblo community now influenced by another, greater community, of a set of constructive and destructive forces, and that in order to achieve wholeness, he has to accept the fact that things are complex and not static. As Betonie says, "There are balances and harmonies always shifting, always necessary to maintain. . . . It is a matter of transitions, you see; the changing, the becoming must be cared for closely. You would do as much for the seedlings as they become plants in the field" (p. 137).

Betonie also says that in order to achieve a balance the Indians should not look upon themselves as helpless, blaming all witchery—the destructive forces—on the whites: " 'Nothing is that simple,' he said, 'you don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians' " (p. 135). And to bring home to him the idea that they *can* master their own fates and "deal with white people, with their machines and their beliefs" (p. 139), he presents Tayo with a serio-comic story or chant relating how the Indians had *invented* the whites. While most of the many other interspersed mythic chants are Laguna originals, this one is more or less made up by Silko. With this song Betonie sends Tayo on his way to look for the

cattle, telling him to keep in mind the constellation of the stars which had appeared in a sandpainting made for him.

Tayo's search for the cattle is a way of showing his worth by repaying Josiah, and the encounters it leads him to with a woman and a mountain both mark steps in his cure. The meeting with Ts'eh is meaningful not only because she loves him, but especially because he is able to love her. He who had been kept at a distance by Auntie and who believed it had to be that way, now experiences a warm, almost wordless closeness which opens him emotionally and makes him realize that he *was* indeed loved by his mother and uncle, just as he loves them. When Tayo later meets Ts'eh at the spring, she leads him further towards the natural when she shows him the marvels of things that grow.

Tayo's encounters with Ts'eh (and her companion, the hunter) are both real and unreal. There is a dreamlike quality about their tender meetings: she seems to know about him without asking; she has the paraphernalia of a medicine woman; and in short, she has many of the qualities of Spiderwoman, the Mother who also created the land. When they make love at the spring she seems to be merged with it: "he felt her body, and it was warm as the sand, and he couldn't feel where her body ended and the sand began" (p. 232).

This re-opening of Tayo's lifeline to nature is further advanced on Pa'to'ch, the high mesa where he finally finds the cattle. When his horse stumbles and he lies on the ground, he knows that "the dark earth loved him" and that it is up to him to join it: "The magnetism of the center spread over him . . . It was pulling him back, close to the earth, . . . and even with the noise and pain in his head he knew how it would be: a returning rather than a separation" (pp. 210 f). The mountain becomes a metaphor for love and also for the land. When Ts'eh looks at Pa'to'ch, Tayo "could feel where she had come from, and he understood where she would always be" (p. 241).

After the final encounter with Ts'eh, Tayo knows he has to enter the normal world. He is aware that his friends are after him (they cannot accept a half-breed who will not join in their self-deceiving bragging), and he realizes he has to face them. Before doing so, he watches the sunrise at Enchanted Mesa, the famous landmark between Acoma and Laguna: "All things seemed to converge there: roads and wagon trails, canyons with springs, cliff paintings and shrines, the memory of Josiah with his cattle; . . . it was all so beautiful, everything, from all directions, evenly perfectly, balancing day with night, summer months with winter. The valley was enclosing this totality, like the mind holding all thoughts together in a single moment. The strength came from here, from this feeling. It had always been there" (pp. 248 f).

Given the fact of Silko's extensive use of Pueblo myths, including the one of Creation, one might guess that when it is Enchanted Mesa she lets Tayo see as a center where all things converge, this is related to the near-religious significance of this gigantic rock and the meaning of its Keresan name (Katsi'ma), which is "he who stands in the door" (John M. Gunn, *Schat-Chen*, p. 17): she may well see this door as the one leading from our fifth world to the worlds of origin below. In any case, there is a remarkable juxtaposition in the book of this Pueblo sanctuary (and that of Mt. Taylor) and the opening-place for the white man's new technological era, Trinity Site, with its Christian connotations.

Indeed, as can hardly surprise, central in the novel is the opposition between traditional Pueblo ways and beliefs and those of Christianity, or rather, the influence of the new on the old. While the ancients "had known, with the simple certainty of the world they saw, how everything should be," the world had become entangled with the advent of the Europeans. "Christianity separated the people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each

person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul; Jesus Christ was not like the Mother who loved and cared for them as her children, as her family" (p. 70). The clearest example here is Auntie, a "devout Christian" who wants to prove that, "above all else, she was a Christian woman" (pp. 31 and 80); that is, because she is ruled by narrow Christian moral norms, she is inordinately upset by the disgrace reflected upon her by her relatives and forgets the clan idea of keeping the group together and helping everyone.

It is significant that Auntie (in connection with Rocky) thinks in terms of "success" (p. 53), a concept which focuses on what is happening to the world of the Pueblos: whereas their emphasis had been on cultivation and conservation, on making things grow, the whites—ruled by their ideas of "progress" and "development"—carried out an exploitation of the land and its resources, leaving dumps behind them when other places became more profitable.

This development is also upsetting for the whites: if witches are defined as destroyers and witchery as de- rather than constructive forces, then the whites certainly demonstrate such powers, to the point that they can now destroy the world. Silko's emphasis, however, is more on what they are doing to the Pueblos: some blame the Anglos for their ills, and others blame themselves for not being whites, and in both instances, it leads to dissatisfaction and isolation, also among the Indians themselves. Another fact is also crucial to the author: Pueblos should remember that at the emergence from Shibapu, all were given both positive and negative qualities. That is, there is some good in the whites and some bad in themselves. In other words, they should return to the balanced views they have always had, and in general remember all their old wisdom, which also included the knowledge that as things grow, they also change. In this way, they can regain the old wholeness and "the feeling people have

for each other" (p. 240) and get rid of some of the witches, at least those now intending to kill Tayo.

When his friends have taken him to an abandoned uranium mine, he manages to hide behind some boulders, but when they torture the one he thought was his real friend, he is tempted to come forward and attack them. Just in time he recalls Ts'eh's warning that "they"—presumably all not possessing Pueblo wisdom—want to end his story, and he has the strength not to join in this Indian self-destruction. He has reached the end of his ceremony, and he can tell the holy men in the kiva what he has learned: "He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not crazy; he had never been crazy. He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time" (p. 258).

The last to speak in the book is old Grandma: " 'I guess I must be getting old, ' she said, 'because these goings-on around Laguna don't get me excited any more. . . . It seems like I already heard these stories before . . . only thing is, the names sound different' " (p. 273). This passage suggests the author's rationale for including the many myths in the book. The old stories contain the truth, the old verities about universal emotions and experiences. In other words, the message to all of us is that there are no boundaries, in the sense that life is repetition of what has gone before. Furthermore, you should treasure the store of traditional material handed down to you, partly because it is an integral element of your identity, partly because it ties you more intimately to the land that is yours. In this sense, stories insure survival.

Ceremony, then, is a very ambitious book: like the 4,000-year-old *Gilgamesh* or the Biblical myths, it in a sense wants to cover all men

and all time. It is very rich in themes and imagery. It is complicated in that the author repeatedly goes back and forth in time. She also splits up some of the stories, especially the central myth of the Ck'o'yo medicine man. At the same time, spread over the whole book, this myth of a witch fooling with magic significantly contributes to the structure of the novel, just as it perfectly suggests an important theme: looking at this newcomer's tricks, the locals become "so busy / playing around with that / Ck'o'yo magic / they neglected the mother corn altar," with the result that "Our mother / Nau'ts'ity'i / was very angry" and "took the / rainclouds with her" (pp. 49 f). At the end of the novel, Tayo has learned enough about nuclear tricks to know that his road is to go and gather pollen, the source of growth.

Not everything is equally good in the book, but this was perhaps inevitable in such a complex first novel. Occasionally there are passages or scenes which seem contrived, and in certain descriptions of what the whites have done, Silko's expression comes closer to that of the activist than we would expect. But on the whole, it is a very successful book. In most cases her characterizations are excellent, and she is just as good with men as with women. She is a master in evoking the landscape and describing animals. In most parts of the novel there is an impressive verve and drive. She clearly masters the old lore and interweaves it very effectively with the main story. As Robert Sayre has said (*ASAIL Newsletter*, Spring 1978, p. 12), to the three elements of the Indian experience—myth, history, and realism—Silko has added the "world of romance, . . . the necessary fourth world where the other three could be mixed and transfigured, transcended," showing "a willingness to accept it, not as real but as a unifying ideal." In sum, the book is a remarkable achievement.

IV

While in Alaska, Silko wrote a tale she called "Storyteller," a name

she has now also used for her forthcoming book, which contains nearly all her short fiction, and also most of her poems. When the manuscript was completed, she said: "I see *Storyteller* as a statement about storytelling and the relationship of the people, my family and my background to the storytelling — a personal statement done in the style of the storytelling tradition, i.e., using stories themselves to explain the dimensions of the process."

When she here uses the words "personal" and "family," we might perhaps expect the book to resemble N. Scott Momaday's *The Names*, which is a very personal memoir focusing on the author himself and his family. There are indeed certain similarities: like him, she includes photographs of family scenes, and also descriptions of her ancestors. However, the photographs, as she says in the manuscript, "are here because they are part of many of the stories," and the information on family members comes in the form of brief vignettes given not for themselves, but to introduce or tie together the poems and tales; this is what she does, for example, when she lets the title story be preceded by a description of how her grandfather Hank had experienced discrimination, one of the themes found in that tale.

Largely leaving herself out of the book, Silko concentrates on the function of the oral tradition in her pueblo. Dedicating it to "the storytellers / as far back as memory goes and to the telling / which continues and through which they all live / and we with them," she pays tribute to Aunt Susie, one of the last Laguna Pueblos to pass "down an entire culture / by word of mouth / an entire history / an entire vision of the world," one of "the tellers who had / in all the past generations / told the children / an entire culture, an entire identity of a people." And she adds: "I remember only small parts here and there. / But this is what I remember."

Storytelling, thus, is essential to the Pueblos: it anchors them in

their mythical and historical past as well as their present; it gives them an identity—they know who they are and can be proud of it; and besides conveying a sum of knowledge about the land and about animals, it gives essential wisdom concerning human qualities and conditions.

We find Silko going far back in time in "Prayer to the Pacific," which is based on a story from Aunt Susie: standing on the shore, "swallowing raindrops / clear from China," the speaker thinks of how "Thirty thousand years ago / Indians came riding across the ocean / carried by giant sea turtles." And she combines this old voice with those of history and the present when in a sequence of further items she first speaks of climbing a mountain, smelling "the wind for my ancestors" and looking for the place where she "descended / a thousand years ago," and then gives us Laguna experiences with the Navajo in both her own time and that of her grandparents.

There are many animals in the book. We find a story about a goat as well as poems about horses. The author lets us sense the tenderness which both hunter and prey feel for each other at deerhunting, and she shows us how a young boy joins the bears in the canyon. The animals have the right of the land: "watch out / don't step on the spotted yellow snake / he lives here. / The mountain is his."

"Yellow Woman" is of course included, in the version mentioned earlier and in several others. We have the traditional one of Kochininako-Yellow Woman having a tryst with Sun Man: "It was under the cottonwood tree / in a sandy wash of the big canyon / under the tree you can find / even now / among all the others / this tree / where she came to wait for him. / 'You will know,' / he said / 'you will know by the colors.' " There is also the version where she runs away with Buffalo Man, whereupon Ishtoyehmuut-Arrowboy comes for her and kills her, too, when he learns she would rather have stayed with the seducer. To show that the tradition lives, the

author adds current stories, for instance one about a man who is caught in the act and laughed at: "They were talking now / what a fool he was / because that woman had a younger boyfriend / and it was only afternoons that she"

The book also contains witch stories, those found in *Ceremony* and others. Central among them is the classical one of Estoyehmuut and the Kunideeyah, or Arrowboy and the Destroyers. In this fascinating story, Estoyehmuut learns how Kochinakoa leaves him at night for meetings of the Kunideeyah witches where they assume animal forms and plan their misdeeds. Even though Grandmother Spiderwoman helps him, he is left to die on a cliff, but he is saved by Grandmother Squirrel who plants four pinon seeds so that after four days he can climb down, and after four more days Spiderwoman gives him the means to kill his wife. Adding notes on local presumed sorcery, Silko throws further light on the significance of this witch motif.

Among the animals, coyote is in many ways the one closest to us. This trickster is found in endless stories, an archetypal figure exemplifying human slyness and stupidity. In "Coyotes and the Stro'ro'ka Dancers," Silko gives us a story which is found in similar form around the world: from the rim of the mesa, the coyotes see dancers below who have brought tempting food, and the leader says: "If we just bite / one another's tail / and in that way / we'll go down / in a long string." But, smelling a fart, one of them opens his mouth, and they all fall down and die. To this delightful tale, the author adds her excellent poem "Toe'osh: A Laguna Coyote Story," in which she shows how coyote is modern man: "One year / the politicians got fancy / at Laguna. / They went door to door with hams and turkeys / and they gave them to anyone who promised / to vote for them. / On election day all the people / stayed home and ate turkey / and laughed." Silko's most recent story, "Coyote Holds a Full House in His Hand," is a further vivid illustration of this engag-

ing figure.

The title story in this book, the first in which the author steps outside the Pueblo area, is in many respects the most important in the volume. Set in Inuit country on the Kuskokwim River in Alaska, near Bethel where Silko spent a month, it tells of three Eskimos living in a shack, an old couple and a girl. When the old woman dies, the younger one has sex with Gussucks (whites) in the village where the oildrillers live, and one day she tempts the storeman, who had been responsible for her parents' death but never taken to court, to run after her to the river where she lets him drown.

This rich and compact tale shows certain similarities with some of Silko's previous ones: there is an ineffectual priest as in "The Man to Send Rain Clouds"; the protagonist has something of Yellow Woman and also of smart Coyote; and there is the same painful, moving treatment of discrimination and loss as in "Tony's Story" and "Lullaby." In the context of *Storyteller*, however, the central achievement of this outstanding tale is how it explains "the dimensions of the process," as the author said.

The Gussucks had believed the storeman's lies, and the old woman's "joints are swollen with anger." The old man, meanwhile, "talked all winter, softly and incessantly about the giant polar bear stalking a lone man across Bering Sea ice." Later, the woman's spirit speaks to her: " 'It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies.' . . . She thought her grandmother was talking about the old man's bear story; she did not know about the other story then." This other story is the one she is to act out. Reared on the oral tradition, convinced of the truth and importance of the tales, she lives out the story she creates, she *is* her story, and in this way her life becomes inextricably linked with storytelling.

With this book, Silko accomplishes several things: she performs an invaluable service in preserving these versions of some of the oral

material handed down to her; she shows us how stories are life and life is stories; and she makes evident the fact that the storytelling tradition is indeed alive. As she has said (*Sun Tracks*, Fall 1976, p. 33), "we're going stronger than ever." Her book is not only a telling, but also a highly satisfying, demonstration of this.

V

When Silko once said that her aim is to be a good storyteller, she significantly added: "Implicit in that is the whole idea that all of my heritage, my background, was gathered, is a part of being a storyteller." Having long been interested in film-making, she is now also using that medium to give expression to this heritage. With NEH funding, she is—with Dennis W. Carr—presently making the first in a series of four videotapes, each to be given to a Laguna oral narrative ("Estoy-eh-Muut and the Kunideeyahs," "Coyote," "Yellow Woman," and "Creation"), with the texts written and read by her. In her view, color video can provide "the 'feeling' and the sense of the place," "the 'context' or 'placing' of these stories which are, after all, so much identified with specific locations around the pueblo."

Again we see how important the sense of the place is to Silko. We are reminded of the fact that in modern history, the Pueblos were one of the few groups of Indians who were able to stay with their land. Can the whites ever really understand how the Indians view time as not linear and how they feel that they "belong to the land, that the earth possesses" them? In a review of Dee Brown's *Creek Mary's Blood*, a novel dealing with the recent history of the Creek tribe, Silko does not say that they can't, but she finds that while this book "attempts to evoke what the Indian people felt for the land, . . . no attention is paid to [this] powerful kinship," and she regrets that

"the reader is led to believe that the Indian characters depicted therein express authentic Creek . . . feelings and views of the world," while what we are offered "is a non-Indian view of the world" which Brown identifies as Indian (*New York Times Book Review*, May 25, 1980).

This view ties in with what she had written in an earlier essay, "An Old-Time Indian Attack Conducted in Two Parts" (*Yardbird Reader*, Vol. 5, pp. 77-84), in which she speaks of two "implicit racist assumptions about Native American culture and literature": that the white man "has the ability to perceive and master the essential beliefs, values and emotions of persons from Native American communities," and that "prayers, chants, and stories weaseled out by the early white ethnographers which are now collected in ethnological journals, are public property." Quoting Louis Simpson who had said that in "the new poems we were writing in the sixties, . . . we were trying to use the Indian as a means of expressing our feeling about the repressed side of America," she remarks that this is to reduce "Native American people to the grossest stereotype of all: the literary device." She relates how her Navajo students had found Oliver LaFarge's *Laughing Boy* a failure "as an expression of . . . Navajo emotions and behavior," and in another connection she has mentioned how they laughed when they read Jerome Rothenberg's versions of "Traditional Poetry" and compared them with their own original chants. In other words, what the whites produce is hardly the real thing, a view which is also held by James Welch, who has said: "I have seen works written about Indians by whites . . . but only an Indian knows who he is."

One conclusion to be drawn from this is that Indians must be more active in presenting their own story. It is therefore not surprising that when Silko had completed *Ceremony*, she was anxious to get it out in time for the Bicentennial: as she said, "I just want to make sure that

. . . Americans can be reminded that there are different ways to look at the past 200 years." This attitude was probably behind the fact that she let herself be persuaded to work "Lullaby" into a play, even though she does not feel drama to be her medium. She also accepted a commission from Marlon Brando and Jack Beck to write a film script (which still has not been used) depicting the arrival of the first Europeans at Zuni Pueblo in 1540, as seen from a Pueblo perspective.

In fiction, meanwhile, Silko has said that her "next novel is going to be about the function of humor. I got to thinking about funny stories. Whatever just happened, it would be related to other things that had happened," that is, people around you would tell of similar or even worse occurrences so that "pretty soon, after the whole thing is over with, things are back in perspective. The function of humor is very serious and very complex" (*The Third Woman*, p. 23). And she has also indicated that she intends to write a novel about Geronimo, probably the Geronimo who traveled around the country selling his hat as well as buttons cut off from his coat as expensive souvenirs at each place his train stopped to people who did not suspect that he had provided himself with a large stock of them.

There is undoubtedly a great store of material in the Indian experience, and it is hardly surprising that the renaissance of Native American literature now also includes novels. To be sure, Indians have used this form before, most notably D'Arcy McNickle in 1936 with *The Surrounded*, which in certain respects foreshadowed the outstanding trio we now have: Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974), and Silko's *Ceremony*.

The three parts of the Indian experience—the mythical, historical, and current elements—are not equally represented in these novels. While Welch has set his book on a Montana Reservation, just as Momaday has turned to Jemez Pueblo and Silko to

Laguna, he deals much less than the others with the traditions and the history of his tribe, concentrating instead on the everyday life of the present. At the same time, they all deal with Indians who, more than whites, suffer from the problems of acculturation. Living with violence, and being unsure about their roots, they have to learn to face the reality of their situation, to discover that things are not just black and white, to accept the past and their origins, and to come to terms with the problems of human nature, such as the existence of evil; only then can they get rid of the winter in their blood and gain some sort of emotional wholeness. While Silko joins Momaday in letting the protagonist go through ceremonies with a medicine man, and even sets her whole story in the framework of her tribe's mythology, she is closer to Welch in the sense that, like him, she clearly speaks for Everyman. *Ceremony* is a very rich book, and many agree with Frank MacShane, who said in his review of the novel that it not only confirmed that she is exceptionally gifted, but also established her "without question as the most accomplished Indian writer of her generation."

Since Leslie Marmon was introduced to Scandinavian myths and stories in the fifth grade, she has written many tales herself, and undoubtedly she has further stories to tell. Having given us lasting pictures of her tribe and her locality, she is—in the best sense of the word—a regional writer; she is a Native American storyteller in that she reflects many aspects of the Indian's situation; and she is an American writer in that in *Ceremony* she has raised the life and problems of a minority to the level of general significance.

What made the deepest impression upon her in the Scandinavian book was "Twilight of the Gods," a description from Norse

mythology of how the gods would die in a holocaust and time would end. This was tragic and upsetting to her, because in Laguna, "we believe that those times did not truly end, but that things change." And in the years since then she has come to the conclusion that a chief reason the Lagunas have this belief is that their oral tradition constitutes a living presence. Silko has demonstrated this vital presence to all of us. Feeling entirely secure in her Laguna heritage, blessed with a wider vision, this natural storyteller has made significant contributions to American literature.

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