



# Native Cultures in Fiction

BY LYNN METZGER

**F**rom the romantic depiction of the noble American Indian living in harmony with nature to the depiction of the savage Indian warrior in need of enlightenment, we have long idealized or condemned indigenous peoples in literature, film, and other forms of popular culture. Throughout history, these depictions of indigenous peoples, favorable or not, systematically justified their conquest, displacement, subjugation, and even genocide, and they paved the way for Western-style progress and civilization. Indeed, one of the great ironies is that if one of the major controversies in the conquest of “new” geographies as independent nations concerned the existence of people who were already there, it also entailed those cultures’ decimation.

Today, although the indigenous populations of a few countries, such as Iceland or Papua New Guinea, are still dominant, the majority of native populations around the world have encountered untold obstacles when faced with invasion or colonization. Yet native communities survive. They preserve their unique languages, traditions, myths, and religious beliefs in spite of the pressures of the modern world. The following selection of books presents native peoples across the globe and the many techniques they’ve developed to coexist with competing cultures and preserve

their way of life. We’ve drawn from a few representative regions and genres to portray a small sampling of the diversity of native cultures, although some areas, such as Australia, are richer in literature on this topic than others, such as Asia. (English language literature on the Ainu in Japan, the Miao in China, and the Adivasi in India are scarce, for example.) We’ve also omitted literary heavyweights we’ve discussed in recent articles, including African writers.

## AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND, & OCEANIA

### Literary Fiction

#### The Bone People

By Keri Hulme (1984)

◆ BOOKER PRIZE

Late one blustery night, a strange, mute seven-year-old boy turns up at the home of reclusive artist Kerewin Holmes, of both Maori and European heritage, who lives in a tower

on the New Zealand coast. The boy's foster father, a Maori named Joe, comes looking for him the next morning, and Kerewin learns that Joe and his late wife found Simon years earlier washed up on the beach after a storm. Kerewin is soon drawn into the lives of this volatile, but earnest, man and of his troubled child. Gracefully interwoven with Maori mythology, this rich and complex stream-of-consciousness tale, New Zealand poet Keri Hulme's only novel, explores love, loneliness, violence, death, grief, and the possibility of redemption in the space where the ancient and the modern meet and profoundly change each other.

## Carpentaria

By Alexis Wright (2006)

◆ MILES FRANKLIN AWARD

The white inhabitants of Desperance, a town in Queensland, Australia, on the Gulf of Carpentaria, have made a lucrative deal with an international mining company looking to establish operations on land sacred to the local Aborigine population. While some members of the Pricklebush clan are outraged, others, penniless and desperate, opt for the payouts offered in exchange for their support. The conflict divides families, pits neighbor against neighbor, and results in brawls, vandalism, and even murder. Aborigine and land-rights activist Alexis Wright won Australia's highest literary honor for this sprawling and brutal novel, steeped in indigenous myths and legends. The international best-selling *Carpentaria* is not an easy read, requiring both concentration and a strong stomach, but Wright's graceful prose, vivid descriptions, and rich characters make it well worth the effort.

## Leaves of the Banyan Tree

By Albert Wendt (1979)

◆ NEW ZEALAND BOOK AWARD

In this powerful novel, Samoan author Albert Wendt strips Western Samoa, this South Pacific paradise, of its enchantment and follows three generations of a Western Samoan family caught between traditional values and modern ways before and after the island's independence from New Zealand. An unscrupulous chieftain, Tauliopepe, beats the Europeans at their own game by razing the bush and building a great plantation, but his wealth and influence come at the expense of his people. When tragedy befalls his rebellious son Pepe after he is sentenced to hard labor for setting a Christian church on fire, Tauliopepe sends Pepe's own son Lalolagi to a boarding school in New Zealand, far from his heritage. Wendt affords readers striking insights into Western Samoa's unique island culture and the daily lives of its people as he examines the corrosive nature of power and materialism.

## Crime

### Pago Pago Tango

By John Enright (2012)

After seven years with the San Francisco police department, Detective Apelu Soifua returns to his native American Sa-

moa, but solving crimes on a tropical island where everyone knows everyone else's business requires some delicacy, as well as the ability to straddle two cultures. When the home of an American businessman is burglarized, Soifua is puzzled by the family's conflicting statements. The seemingly unimportant case soon develops into something much bigger—and deadlier. American author John Enright spent 26 years teaching and traveling through the Pacific islands, and this thoughtful, entertaining debut, the first in the *Jungle Beat* series, will charm readers with its grasp of American Samoan culture and its wonderful sense of place.

## The Bone Is Pointed

By Arthur W. Upfield (1947)

Early one morning in 1940s Australia, hot-tempered ranch hand Jeffrey Anderson disappears into Queensland's outback to inspect a cattle station for his employer. When his horse returns without its rider later that evening, a halfhearted search is organized, but no one finds Anderson—or mourns his absence. Five months later, Detective Inspector Napoleon “Bony” Bonaparte, the son of a white man and an Aboriginal woman, is on the case. Australian crime writer Arthur Upfield, cited by Tony Hillerman as his inspiration for the Joe Leaphorn/Jim Chee series (see below), penned dozens of mysteries flavored with Aboriginal customs, culture, and religion in racially charged, mid-20th-century Australia. Although many of his books are currently out of print, they are worth seeking out.

## Further Reading

POTIKI | PATRICIA GRACE (1995)

DEADLY, UNNA? | PHILLIP GWYNNE (1998)

MISTER PIP | LLOYD JONES (HHJ NOV/DEC 2007)

## AFRICA

### Literary Fiction

### Things Fall Apart

By Chinua Achebe (1958)

Okonkwo, a hardworking and powerful leader in the 19th-century Igbo village of Umuofia in Nigeria, is secretly haunted by the legacy of his father, a lazy, spineless man who died in disgrace. Okonkwo's fears of weakness and failure, the driving forces of his life, provoke him to intransigence and severity in his daily life and lead to a disastrous showdown when European missionaries arrive with their message of peace and turning the other cheek. Chinua Achebe's incisive, unsentimental debut novel, widely considered a masterpiece and a milestone of African literature, “genuinely succeeds in presenting tribal life from the inside” (*Times Literary Supplement*, 6/20/58) as it plots the intersec-



tion of traditional African culture and European colonialism.

## Crime

### Wife of the Gods

By Kwei Quartey (2009)

Talented but temperamental Ghanaian Detective Inspector Darko Dawson balks when he is assigned to a case in the distant town of Ketanu, Ghana, the site of his mother's disappearance 25 years earlier. His knowledge of the local language makes him indispensable, so he leaves his wife and son behind in Accra to investigate the suspicious death of an outspoken young medical student. He soon finds that his modern views clash with superstitions and ancient customs, particularly *trokosi*, the practice of offering young girls as wives to local priests to curry favor with the gods. With an evocative setting and richly drawn characters, this captivating debut by Ghanaian-American medical doctor Kwei Quartey contrasts modern and ancient worlds and immerses readers in the culture and traditions of Western Africa.

### Further Reading

**THE JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD** | BUCHI EMECHETA (1979)

**DEATH OF THE MANTIS: A DETECTIVE KUBU MYSTERY** | MICHAEL STANLEY (2011)

## NORTH AMERICA

## Literary Fiction

### Love Medicine

By Louise Erdrich (1984)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD

In 1981, June Kashpaw freezes to death in a snowstorm as she is walking home from a bar in Williston, North Dakota. Moving back and forth through time, Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwa Indians, recounts the twisting, intertwining lives of three generations of two Ojibwa families—the Kashpaws and the Lamartines—and the profound effect of June's sudden death. Each chapter features a different narrator, and Erdrich's tone and narrative style reflect Ojibwa myths and storytelling methods. By turns humorous, disturbing, and sad, this sparkling debut—the first in Erdrich's Native American series—persuasively portrays the austerity of life on a reservation and surveys the loss of cultural identity and spirituality with which many modern-day American Indians struggle.

## Science Fiction, Speculative Fiction, and Fantasy

### AFRICA

### Who Fears Death

By Nnedi Okorafor (2010)

- ♦ WORLD FANTASY AWARD FOR BEST NOVEL
- ♦ LOCUS FANTASY AWARD NOMINEE
- ♦ NEBULA AWARD NOMINEE

In postapocalyptic North Africa, the light-skinned Nuru subjugate their darker brethren, the Okeke. When an Okeke woman is brutally raped by a Nuru sorcerer after she witnesses the obliteration of her village, she manages to escape into the desert, where she gives birth to a daughter she names Onyesonwu, "Who Fears Death?" An Ewu—half Nuru, half Okeke—and therefore an outcast among her mother's people, Onyesonwu is raised by a shaman who discovers her extraordinary abilities and prepares her for a quest that determines the fate of the Okeke. Nigerian-American writer Nnedi Okorafor, best known for her African-themed young adult and children's books, takes on race, gender, bigotry, and ethnic identity in her first adult novel, a dark dystopian fantasy rich in tribal culture, characterization, and world building.

### EUROPE

### Druids

By Morgan Llewelyn (1991)

Centuries before King Arthur and his knights take their places at the Round Table, Ainvar, a precocious young orphan boy, attracts the attention of the chief druid of the Carnutes in Gaul (modern-day France). Under the priest's wing, Ainvar flourishes and grows in the magical ways of his people. When Caesar and his legions begin to make inroads into Western Europe, Ainvar and his friend, the young warrior-king Prince Vercingetorix, must try to unite the splintered Celtic tribes, repel the invaders, and preserve their way of life. Celtic scholar and American-born Irish novelist Morgan Llewelyn is well known for her meticulously crafted historical fiction and fantasy, and this grand adventure persuasively depicts daily life among the pre-Roman, European Celts.



## Fools Crow

By James Welch (1986)

- ◆ AMERICAN BOOK AWARD
- ◆ LOS ANGELES TIMES BOOK PRIZE
- ◆ PACIFIC NORTHWEST BOOKSELLERS ASSOCIATION AWARD

In 1870, the Lone Eaters, a tribe of Blackfoot Indians, live in harmony with nature. They hunt buffalo, communicate with animals and the spirit world, and conduct the centuries-old rituals that mark the passage of time on the Great Plains. One young Lone Eater on the threshold of manhood, White Man's Dog, desperately seeks the approval of his tribe and is willing to take on neighboring tribes—and the detestable White Man—to earn it. But the slow encroachment of white settlers is inescapable and proves to be the natives' undoing. Considered one of the founding authors of the Native American Renaissance, James Welch paints a stunningly evocative portrait of a lost way of life in this eloquent and beautifully wrought novel.

## Crime

### The Blessing Way

By Tony Hillerman (1970)

Though the central mystery in this first installment of the award-winning, 18-volume Joe Leaphorn/Jim Chee series

may not be terribly complex, Tony Hillerman seamlessly weaves details of Navajo culture, religion, and folklore into his debut novel and captivates readers with evocative descriptions of the bleak, but stunning, landscapes of New Mexico and Arizona. In the novel, a Navajo man is found dead, his mouth full of sand, in a lonely corner of the Navajo reservation. Subsequent sightings of a strange creature and the discovery of several mutilated sheep terrify the locals, who believe that a skin walker is on the loose. It is up to veteran Tribal Police Lieutenant Joe Leaphorn to get to the bottom of it.

## Further Reading

**GREEN GRASS, RUNNING WATER** | THOMAS KING (1993)

**THE VISITANT: BOOK 1 OF THE ANASAZI MYSTERIES** | KATHLEEN O'NEAL GEAR AND W. MICHAEL GEAR (1999)

**THE WOMAN WHO MARRIED A BEAR** | JOHN STRALEY

**THE ABSOLUTELY TRUE DIARY OF A PART-TIME INDIAN** | SHERMAN ALEXIE (2007)

**THE EDUCATION OF LITTLE TREE** | FORREST CARTER

**THE LESSER BLESSED** | RICHARD VAN CAMP (1996)

**SHARK DIALOGUES** | KIANA DAVENPORT (1994)

**THE SIGN OF THE BEAVER** | ELIZABETH GEORGE SPEARE (1983)

## CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

### Literary Fiction

#### Aztec

By Gary Jennings (1980)

This lush, sweeping epistolary novel ambitiously charts the proud rise and shocking fall of one of the greatest of the ancient civilizations as witnessed by its people. When King Carlos I of Spain takes an interest in Aztec culture, the Bishop of New Spain, considering the crude Aztec people unworthy of his monarch's curiosity, reluctantly obliges and orders his monks to transcribe the life story of Mixtli, an elderly Aztec man who had served as a trusted advisor to Moctezuma II. American author Gary Jennings has as faithfully as possible recreated a mesmerizing culture, describing its religion, principles, customs, and rituals in vivid detail. Though scenes depicting human sacrifice may not be for the squeamish, this epic adventure is storytelling at its best.

#### The Storyteller

By Mario Vargas Llosa (1989)

When Mario, a Peruvian writer and academic, attends an art exhibit featuring photographs of the Machiguenga, an indigenous tribe of hunter-gatherers in the Amazon jungle, he becomes intrigued by a picture of a storyteller, who bears a resemblance to a man Mario knew while they were students at San Marcos University. In alternating chapters, Mario recalls those exhilarating days and his friendship with headstrong Saul Zuratas, while Saul describes his rejection of modern civilization and his new life among the

Machiguenga. This sophisticated novel by the Nobel Prize winner, by turns a mystery, a character study, a travelogue, and a cultural inquiry, transports readers to the dream-like world of the Machiguenga, while it raises important questions about ethnological preservation, the importance of storytelling, and the problems inherent in cross-cultural understanding.

## ASIA

### Literary Fiction

#### Fieldwork

By Mischa Berlinski (2007)

Mischa Berlinski, an American freelance journalist living in Thailand, meets with an old friend and hears the fascinating story of Martiya van der Leun. A renowned American anthropologist who lived with the primitive Dyalo tribe in a remote mountain village near the Thai-Burmese border, Martiya committed suicide while serving a life sentence for murder in the Chiang Mai Central Prison. Her victim was David Walker, the youngest member of a family of missionaries also living with the Dyalo. Sensing a story, Mischa tracks down Martiya's friends and family, studies her work, and visits the surviving Walkers in an attempt to piece together Martiya's past and comprehend her motive for murder. (★★★★ **SELECTION** Mar/Apr 2008) ■





# Young Adult

## CENTRAL AND SOUTH AMERICA

### What the Moon Saw

By Laura Resau (2006)

Suburban Maryland teen Clara Luna knows little about her father's Mexican childhood—only that he crossed the border illegally as a boy—when she receives a letter from his parents inviting her to stay with them in Oaxaca for the summer. When she arrives in the remote mountain village of Yucuyoo, she is initially shocked by their simple lives—subsistence in small huts without electricity or indoor plumbing—but she soon awakens to the magic of this open and welcoming community (including a handsome young goatherd named Pedro) and to her grandmother Abuelita's wonderful stories of growing up as a healer. A rare glimpse into the indigenous Mixtec culture of Mexico, American author Laura Resau's lyrical debut novel poses thought-provoking questions about cultural bias, acceptance, and love.

## AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND, & OCEANIA

### The Whale Rider

By Witi Ihimaera (1987)

Even if you've already seen the award-winning movie, don't pass on this moving, magically written book. On the eastern coast of New Zealand, eight-year-old Kahu Apirana is desperate to win the approval of her great-grandfather, but as chief of the great Maori tribe descended from the legendary "whale rider," aging Koro Apirana is far too busy searching for a promising young successor. But Kahu has a secret: She, like her heroic ancestor, can communicate with animals. When a pod of whales beaches nearby, she may finally have the chance to prove her worth. Considered the first Maori novelist, Witi Ihimaera blends Maori culture with wry humor, breathtaking imagery, and a convincing portrayal of a modern girl's pluck.

## EUROPE

### The Clan of the Cave Bear

By Jean M. Auel (1980)

When a tribe of Neanderthals, the Clan of the Cave Bear, comes across an injured and starving Cro-Magnon girl, they plan to keep going and let the puny and unsightly blond-haired, blue-eyed child die, but the clan's medicine woman,

Iza, takes pity on her. Iza's decision to heal little Ayla and raise her as her own, however, has lasting consequences for the clan and its way of life. Although some readers have complained that, as a character, Ayla seems almost *too* clever and resourceful, this complaint was considered a minor grievance in an otherwise captivating novel. This first installment in the *Earth's Children* series, the result of extensive archaeological research, immerses readers in a colorful and imaginative prehistoric culture with its own belief systems, morals, ceremonies, traditions, and religion.

## NORTH AMERICA

### The Birchbark House

By Louise Erdrich (1999)

♦ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST

Seven-year-old Omakayas, "Little Frog," embraces the centuries-old rhythms of her Ojibwa clan's daily life on an island in Lake Superior in the mid-19th century. She picks berries, chases crows from the cornfields, and listens intently as the storytellers weave magical fireside tales of ghosts and gods. When her community is struck with a devastating smallpox epidemic, Omakayas doesn't fall ill and soon learns the secret to her seemingly miraculous immunity. In this exquisite and lyrical novel, the first in the *Birchbark* series, American Indian author Louise Erdrich immerses readers young and old in the daily life of a young Ojibwa girl. Though scenes of tragedy and violence may be too much for the youngest readers, *The Birchbark House* is richly imagined and hugely entertaining.

### Island of the Blue Dolphins

By Scott O'Dell (1960)

♦ NEWBERY MEDAL

As her tribe is evacuated from their homes on San Nicolas Island off the coast of California, 12-year-old Karana suspects that her younger brother has not yet boarded the ship. When a storm approaches and the captain refuses to wait, she jumps off and swims to shore while the ship sails away. Utterly alone, Karana must survive storms, scarcity, and savage wild dogs with nothing but her determination and memories of her people and culture to sustain her. This beloved classic is based on the true story of Juana Maria, a 19th-century Nicoleño Indian woman who lived alone on San Nicolas Island between 1835 and 1853, when she was rescued and brought to a mission in Santa Barbara. ■