

# The Ceremony of Innocence Short Guide

## The Ceremony of Innocence by Jamake Highwater

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# Characters

Central to this novel, the second in Highwater's ghost Horse cycle, is Amana, the solitary figure who tries to hold together the lives of the people around her. But even with her strength, "things fall apart; the center cannot hold." As Amana's life disintegrates, so does the traditional life of Native American tribes. She goes from being a woman warrior and a legend to being the mistress of a trader, a beggar, and finally a dish washer at a restaurant.

In a total break with her past, Amana leaves her native people on the reservation to live in the town of Fort Benton. Later she finds that her request for land on the Blackfeet reservation is denied because there is no record of her on the tribal register. When she visits the tribal office on the Blood reservation, she finds "all the legends had been forgotten . . . They looked at her as if she did not belong among them anymore, as if she did not exist."

As Highwater notes in his book *The Primal Mind*, "In tribal religions there is no salvation apart from the continuation of the tribe itself, because the existence of the individual presupposes the existence of the community." By leaving her people on the reservation, Amana has become a lost soul.

A second strong character in this novel is Amalia, a French-Cree halfbreed. In the beginning of the novel, Amalia finds Amana begging at Fort Benton after the death of Far Away Son, when Amana is abandoned by her tribe. The two become "inseparables" until Amana falls in love with JeanPierre Bonneville. It is the hardened Amalia who understands the real JeanPierre and warns Amana not to go with him. But Amana sees in Bonneville a reason for living and goes with him, leaving Amalia behind. Later after Bonneville returns to his Canadian wife and children, Amalia rescues Amana and her daughter from starvation.

Jemina, the daughter of Amana and Jean-Pierre Bonneville, represents a lost generation. As a half-breed, she is not accepted by the white society, but she refuses to become part of the Native American one. As a result, her total loss of cultural identity causes internal conflict and cultural alienation. Even Amana's sending her to a white boarding school cannot save Jemina.

Later in the novel, Amalia and Amana try to reunite Jemina with her Native American heritage by pushing her to marry Jamie Ghost Horse, a Cherokee circus performer. Unfortunately, as he grows older, Jamie seems to fit the stereotype of the "no good drunk Indian." Unable to make their fortune in the circus and faced with the Depression, Jamie and Jemina return to the reservation. Jemina tells Amana that "when I look at Jamie, I see my own failure Mama, and I can't bear looking at the way things have turned out!" Then Jemina and Jamie leave their son Reno with Amana while Jamie follows the rodeo circuit. When Jamie is given a chance to redeem himself by working as a stunt man for Mr. Milas, an old friend, he soon relapses into his old habits. Both Jemina and Jamie find their life full of broken promises and unfulfilled dreams.



While Jemina's marriage is not what Amana hoped, it does produce two children. Reno, like his mother, rejects his past. The younger brother, Sitko, however, is the child that Amana has been waiting for. He listens intently to Amana as she tells the old stories and legends. When Sitko attends the Beaver Ceremony, he is told by the Beaver Chief that he will have a vision in his fingertips. At the end of the novel, before Jemina takes the children to boarding school, Amana tells Sitko the story of her transformation by Grandfather Fox and that she is now giving the legends to Sitko to preserve.

Highwater addresses such problems of the Native American as poverty, intermarriage, rejection of heritage, and alcoholism. But he does so without resorting to cardboard stereotypes.

Rather than deny the existence of these problems, he presents them as the outgrowths of cultural conflict and forces his characters to deal with them.

Jemina denies her heritage, Jamie becomes an alcoholic, and Amana holds on to the old traditions. While Amana sees her grandsons Reno and Sitko as the only hope for the future, it is only Sitko who is willing to learn the legends and traditions.



## Social Concerns

Through the eyes of Amana, the main character of *Legend Days* (1984) and *The Ceremony of Innocence*, Highwater looks at the treatment of Native Americans by the white man. In establishing the reservations, the politicians and civil servants ignored the Native American culture, picked the best lands for themselves, and resettled the native peoples on land that was "a place of terrible poverty. Nowhere was there the track of an animal." Amana finds that life on the reservation is a stark contrast to the life she formerly lived on the Great Plains. Tied to one piece of land, there are the problems of survival as the buffalo and deer vanish and the Native Americans become dependent on the supplies from the trading post. These supplies include bad whiskey and the sugar that rots their teeth. No longer is the Native American in harmony with self and nature. Instead of honoring the land, Amana sees her people making a junkyard out of the reservation.

Some people such as Amana's friend Amelia adjust in the best way that they can. For Amelia, that adjustment is to become a prostitute and later to run a brothel. Some people cannot adjust to the change and retreat into the world created by the whiskey. Others, like Amana, try to hang on to the old ways but become lost in a world that they do not understand.

Time does not seem to ease the problems. As the railroad moves across the plains, it brings more and more people with white faces who establish towns.

While Amana watches the Native Americans give up their own culture, she finds that they cannot gain acceptance in the white man's world. Not only are Native American women who married white men scorned by the white society, but even a white man who married the daughter of a tribal chief is rejected by his own people.

Although Native Americans go to fight for their new country in the First World War, they do not win acceptance.

As the two cultures mix, additional problems are created. Half-breeds, the products of Native American and white intermarriages, live in a land between both cultures. Amana finds that her daughter Jemina, the product of her relationship with Jean-Pierre Bonneville, totally rejects anything that is associated with the traditional Native American life. However, white society wants nothing to do with half-breeds.

Even an education at Miss Wells' Girls' School, a Canadian finishing school, cannot bring Jemina acceptance in the white society.

# Techniques

Many of the later events in this book are autobiographical, with the incidents paralleling those that Highwater can remember from his early years.

Like Jamie Ghost Horse, Highwater's father followed the rodeos, worked as a movie stuntman and told many stories about his life. At one point, characterizing his father, Highwater said: "I am not even certain both of his parents were Native people. He was a renegade and an alcoholic — a marvelous, energetic man . . . He came from Virginia, Tennessee, or North Carolina, depending on his memory and his mood."

The Amana of the novel seems to represent Highwater's mother, for he has stated that his mother "retained much of the special mentality of her tribal background. She taught me something of the language and customs of both her French and Blackfeet parents . . .

She was a marvelous storyteller; and it was undoubtedly from her that I attained my gifts of the imagination."

Amana's problems in not being registered on the Blackfeet reservation compare to some of the problems that Highwater has had with his own credentials as a Native American. However, it is in the character of Sitko that Highwater places most of his own experiences, since, as a child, he, like Sitko, watched the breakup of the Highwater/Ghost Horse family. *I Wear the Morning Star* (1986), the next novel in the Ghost Horse Cycle, is written in the first person and is even more autobiographical.

As in many of his other novels, Highwater blends legends and history into his writing in *The Ceremony of Innocence*. Amana participates in the Dance of the Mountain Spirits and takes Sitko to the Beaver Ceremony.

However, she has moved off the reservation and there is less reliance on Native American myths and beliefs than in *Legend Days* or *Anpao* (1977).

There are some exceptions including the white owl who visits Amana when Amalia dies and the vision of the fox who flees from her body when JeanPierre leaves her.

Certainly, as the myths which bound the people into a tribe have left the every day life, the society and the family has begun to come apart. It is this "coming apart" which is noted in the poetry of William Butler Yeats that is used to introduce the novel. Highwater uses Yeats's thoughts that "things fall apart; the center cannot hold" to foreshadow the collapse of the Native American traditions. The young generation, represented by Jemina, is lost and without a sense of her Native American heritage. Like Yeats's falcon, Jemina can no longer hear the words that she needs to guide her. Amana knows that Jemina "was born into a dead land. There is no center. The world in which we once lived and into which we brought our children is gone."



While some critics have called the style of writing "overwrought," others, such as Susan Marcus in the April 1985 issue of *School Library Journal*, have praised it as a "moving study of human nature" and "a spellbinding blend of reality and legend by a master storyteller." In a Booklist review for May 15, 1985, Hazel Rochman notes that the book is "more realistic and more accessible than *Legend Days*" and that it has the "same lucid and lyrical prose and vital characterizations."

Highwater's writing in this novel has been called "spare and lyrical" by several critics who note Highwater's expertise in presenting the inner thoughts, feelings, and moods of the characters. Others praise his ability to make the reader feel the pain and suffering of the characters and to see the bleak land around them. As the white man settles on the land, the air becomes "dark with ash," and the land is the "brown debris of a leafless plain."

After Red Crow and his band are forced to march to the reservation, Amana finds her baby "faint and pale and groaning from hunger" and "everyone she had loved loomed around her as she gazed into the little fire where the kettle was filled with a terrible broth of grass and mud." Later, in a fever, she is "stung by the words" of Jean-Pierre, "trying to escape them, as if they were the stones of an immense avalanche toppling down upon her."



# Themes

As in many of his other works, Highwater addresses the theme of cultural conflict and the problems that result. Through the eyes of Amana, Highwater shows the basic differences concerning nature and the land that existed between the white man and the Native American. The sensitivity of the Native American to the environment contrasts sharply with the senseless destruction of the white man. When the two cultures meet, only one can remain dominant. And, although Highwater rails against the white man's attempt to apply inappropriate European standards to judge the native American life, there is no question which culture will survive.

Following the cycle of the year, Amana and her people had moved across the Great Plains, tying their lives to the wanderings of the buffalo.

As white men killed the buffalo for pleasure or for leather, and confined Amana and her people to reservations, the traditional way of life had to change. Amana sees her people abandoning their traditional values and beliefs. Losing her own extended family, she too turns away from her people when she leaves Amelia to go with the French Canadian trapper, Jean Pierre Bonneville. After Bonneville abandons her and their unborn child, Amana is barely able to survive. Faced with starvation, she again becomes part of an extended family or tribe. This time, however, the traditional tribe is replaced by a group of "girls" in a brothel.

Highwater also presents a theme of rejection as part of the demise of the traditional Native American culture. In the new world created by the white man, the old traditions are no longer important to most people. Although they remain strong in people like Amana, the songs, dances, and festivals are not relevant to people like her daughter Jemina. Jemina's life becomes a cycle of high hopes followed by despair. Chasing a dream of a better life, she rejects anything Native American, even her mother. She finds, however, that again and again her dreams crash and, each time, she returns to Amana.

Amana herself is caught between the old and the new Native American ways of life. She finds that the power of her medicine bundle is gone. "The voices of the storytellers became silent. Their tales of destiny fell like leaves in an endless autumn. The powerful animals withdrew into the distant land where white men had not found their way, taking with them the wisdom they had once shared with Indians." Amana seems lost. As she says, "I am not an Indian anymore . . . and I have not learned how to be anyone else. I have not learned how to fight and yet I have not learned how to give up." Her inability to pass on the traditions of her people to Jemina also frustrates her.

"Inside me was a river of history that flowed like a torrent from my grandmothers and their grandmothers before them. Now the river does not flow . . .

And you, Jemina, you are a land without memory . . . you do not know who it is you wish to be."



## Key Questions

In this second book in the Ghost Horse Cycle, Highwater follows the life of Amana and explores the changes brought by the white man. While it is not necessary to read *Legend Days* before reading *The Ceremony of Innocence*, reading the first novel in the cycle will enhance discussions of the second novel by providing background information including many of the traditions and legends that Amana is now trying to save.

Depending on how much history the members of the group know, one area of discussion can center on the accuracy of Highwater's portrayal of the treatment and the living conditions of the Native American peoples. Most people will be able to contrast Highwater's views to those presented in movies and television dramas. However, a more in-depth discussion might be possible if the group has had some exposure to works such as *Black Elk Speaks* by John G. Neihardt or *Cheyenne Memories* by John Stands-in-Timber.

Good discussions can also center around the traditions and beliefs of the Native Americans. As in other novels by Highwater, the mythological and historical sources of his symbols can be explored. For example, the idea of "family" and the role that the tribe played as an extended family can be discussed in light of the disintegration of Amana's family and her decision not to live on the reservation.

1. In what ways did the traditions honored by Amana act as a glue which held the Native American society together? How do they compare to a modern religion?

2. While traveling with Jamie and Jemina on the rodeo circuit, Amana attends the Dance of the Mountain Spirits. At that time, she thinks she sees a fox. What is the significance of her vision?

3. Compare and contrast Jean-Pierre Bonneville and Hugh Monroe. Why did Monroe treat Amana the way he did when she was living with Bonneville?

What did Monroe mean when he said "I've been working with . . . [Bonneville] for a long time and I can't figure" out who he is? If Monroe loved her, why did he not marry her or take care of her after Bonneville left?

4. What meaning can be given to the "feast of the axes" that crosses Amana's mind as she dreams about Jemina, far away at Miss Wells' Girls' School? Why does this vision occur at this time?

5. In what ways is Jemina's struggle for acceptance similar to the earlier struggles of Amana?

6. In the poem which introduces the novel, Yeats wrote that "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." What does this mean? Who are the best and the worst in Highwater's novel?



7. When Amana finds the young woman weeping by the trail because her white husband has abandoned her for someone else, Amana tries to help but is unable to do so. As Amana backs away, "a glistening red shadow clung motionlessly over the crouching figure by the trail." What does this shadow represent? Of what significance is Amana's encounter with this woman?

8. In what ways do Amana and Amalia complement each other? In what ways do they represent a conflict between cultures? How can the brothel be compared to a tribe?

9. The Ceremony of Innocence is both the title of the book and part of the poem by Yeats that introduces the novel. What is the "ceremony of innocence" to which each refers? How do both of these relate to the "river of blood" over which Amana holds Sitko at the end of the novel?

10. How often does Amana see the white owl in this novel? What is the significance of each visit? What predictions about the next novel in the Cycle can be made based on this information?

## Literary Precedents

As Native American literature, *The Ceremony of Innocence* is similar in theme to the novels of contemporary Native American writers. Like Abel in *House Made of Dawn* (1968) by N. Scott Momaday, Tayo in *Ceremony* (1978) by Leslie Marmon Silko, and Loney in *The Death of Jim Loney* (1970) by James Welch, Jemina is caught between the life of the white man and the life of the Native American and belongs to neither. In all three novels, there is a feeling of loss, loneliness, and alienation.

Like other contemporary Native American writers, Highwater shifts from reality to dream and uses the myths and legends of the Native American as an important factor in his writings.

In a larger context, *The Ceremony of Innocence* can be compared to non-Native American works. In a review in *Voice of Youth Advocates* (August 1985), Evie Wilson compares the book to *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker. Both novels, she feels, are a powerful expression of the role of women in their respective cultures in the early twentieth century.

## Related Titles

The Ceremony of Innocence is second book in the Ghost Horse Cycle. The others are Legend Days (1984), I Wear the Morning Star (1986) and Kill Hole (1992).

Many of the themes found in The Ceremony of Innocence, such the problems of the Native American's acceptance in the white man's world and the search for individual identity, are continued in I Wear the Morning Star. Although there is much of Highwater's personal history in all of the novels of the Ghost Horse Cycle, I Wear the Morning Star and Kill Hole seem the most autobiographical. These books look more closely at the urbanized Native American and his/her isolation from the traditional culture with an emphasis on the decline of the family, and the alienation of people from their past.

Unlike the other books in the Cycle, I Wear the Morning Star is told in firstperson narrative through the eyes of Amana's grandson Sitko. Sitko's life seems to parallel the life that Highwater once described as his own. In the novel, Highwater introduces the idea of the artist, in the form of Sitko, preserving the traditions and culture of a people. At the end, Amana dies and the burden of keeping the traditions alive falls to Sitko whose story continues in Kill Hole.

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