Crazy Horse: Great Warrior of the Sioux Short Guide

Crazy Horse: Great Warrior of the Sioux by Doris Shannon Garst

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Overview

presents the conflict between the Native Americans and the white settlers from the Native American's point of view.

Garst provides interesting insights into the Sioux's way of life, customs, and heritage. She depicts Crazy Horse and the Sioux as people who defend themselves and their way of life when threatened. For the most part, the Sioux and the other Native Americans were unjustly and viciously treated by the white settlers and the U.S. government, and Garst's exploration of these injustices makes for thought-provoking reading.

Tracing Crazy Horse's life from adolescence to adulthood, Garst also deals with some of the problems and conflicts that comprise every young person's life.

Crazy Horse learns the importance of making his own judgments; he learns about responsibility when he tames Strongheart, his raven-black stallion; and he learns from those who are older and wiser when he accepts the teachings of his shaman father and of Hump, his adopted father. The lessons Crazy Horse learns about the world are not only part of the maturation process; they also give him the sense of worth, dignity, and humility that makes him a great man, warrior, and leader.

Garst's narrative is also interesting in that it describes the Sioux way of life:

how the Sioux cooked, how they tamed and rode horses, how they hunted buffalo, and how they fought. The young boys' games, wrestling and riding contests, mock battles, and first steps into the brave's world of war are also exciting parts of the plot. These elements make reading Crazy Horse an adventure in itself.

About the Author

Doris Shannon Garst was born on July 24, 1899, in Ironwood, Michigan, to Julius Jensen and Zenta Shannon Jensen. When she was four years old, her family moved west to Denver, Colorado. She attended Denver's public schools until her senior year of high school, when her family moved to Hood River, Oregon, where they had purchased a fruit orchard. After teaching for four years at an Oregon country school, she moved to Wyoming to accept a civil service job. In Wyoming she married Joseph Garst, an attorney whose family once owned the building that eventually became the county museum that housed the Annie Oakley memorabilia. The couple had three children.

Garst co-authored three books with her son Warren: Wild Bill Hickok, Cowboys and Cattle Trails, and Ernest Thompson Seton: Naturalist.

Concerning her prolific writing career, Garst says that she was born with the urge to write and often wrote stories during her childhood. She wrote her later stories to entertain her own children. Busy with her responsibilities as a wife and mother, Garst admits that she may not have had any time to write if her daughter Barbara had not contracted scarlet fever. Victims of scarlet fever were quarantined in those days, and Garst wrote her first book while staying home with her daughter.

Steeped in the lore of the American West throughout her childhood, she naturally became interested in the region's legendary, but real, people. Her biographical novels about heroes result from her own desire for adventures, and she says that historical events provide much more exciting stories than the fiction dreamed up by writers of western fiction or the producers of western movies.

She has received numerous awards, including the Young Reader's Choice Award of the Pacific Northwest Library Association and the Boys' Club of America Junior Book Award, both for Cowboy Boots. She also received awards in 1953, 1954, 1955, and 1957 from the National Federation of Press Women; Red Eagle was chosen as a Junior Literary Guild selection in 1959; and she won the Wyoming State Historical Award for Broken-Hand Fitzpatrick in 1961.

Setting

Crazy Horse takes place between 1844 and 1877 and includes such historical events as the 1849 gold rush, a major cause for the Sioux uprising; the 1854 Grattan Massacre; the inauguration of the Pony Express; the Civil War; the battles over the Bozeman Trail; the Custer Massacre; Crazy Horse's murder; and the Nez Perce war in 1877. Generally, the novel's setting is the American Great Plains, and the Sioux nation spreads from northern Nebraska into western Wyoming's Big Horn Mountains and north into the Black Hills and badlands of South Dakota. In a universal and symbolic sense, the setting is the American West, and the defeat of the Sioux and Crazy Horse's murde r forebode the fate of the Nez Perce in 1877 and Geronimo and the Apaches in 1886. Ironically, General George Custer's last stand also became the Sioux's last stand, for after defeating Custer, they split into separate bands and thus were easily defeated and forced onto reservations. Finally, the action and setting also symbolize the final taming of the West and the encroachment of white civilization that would change the land forever.

Social Sensitivity

Because the U.S. government and the white settlers treated Native Americans so unjustly, any book dealing with Native Americans contains socially sensitive elements. When the red and white worlds collided, a typical chain of events occurred: councils were held and treaties signed; Native American lands were ceded and inviolable boundaries marked; peaceful years followed while more and more white settlers encroached on Native American lands, breaking treaties; Native Americans protested in vain, then fought, and the white victories inevitably followed. A history of the numerous broken treaties between the U.S. government and Native American tribes is available in Helen Hunt Jackson's A Century of Dishonor (1881). Or, as Red Cloud, an Oglala Sioux, said about the white man and his promises: 'They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land and they took it."

In Crazy Horse, Garst deals with the whites' unjust and often vicious acts against the Sioux. In one instance, as a pioneer wagon train travels the Laramie Trail, young Native Americans in a horse race unintentionally chase a "skinny, footsore cow" into a Brule camp. When no one claims the cow, Straight Foretop, a visiting Miniconjou, slaughters it, only to find that the meat was tough and smelled bad. The pioneers, however, complain to the army, and the army threatens the Brules, who agree to pay "five good horses for one no-good cow."

When the army marches against the peaceful Brule camp and fires first, the Grattan Massacre follows. In retaliation, the army attacks the Sioux camp at Blue Water and kills men, women, and children. Throughout the narrative the U.S. government never lets the Sioux live in peace, and refuses to honor treaties as more and more white settlers and prospectors invade the Black Hills in search of gold.

Swindled, mistreated, and hounded, the Native Americans were driven finally onto reservations to supposedly reap the benefits from white civilization. But these arrangements often proved disastrous because of broken promises and petty and greedy officials. As Civil War general Philip Sheridan said, "We took away their country and their means of support, broke up their mode of living, their habits of life, introduced disease and decay among them, and it was for this and against this that they made war. Could anyone expect less?"

Topics for Discussion * 1. In terms of Crazy Horse's boyhood and adult life, what is the significance of the following events: the war with the wasps, taming and training his own horse, the scenes involving the grizzly bear and the buffalo, his ability to stare down No Water, and his desire to remain quiet and alone?

2. Point out specific scenes and details that show what Crazy Horse learns from Hump. What important lesson does Hump teach Crazy Horse about being a leader? Note especially the advice Hump gives him in chapters 4 and 7. Is such advice pertinent today?

3. How does Crazy Horse get his new name and how is this name symbolic?

Explain how the name Crazy Horse also applies to his skills as a warrior.

4. Explain how Crazy Horse changed the Sioux ideas about fighting. What was the old method and what was its purpose? What new method does Crazy Horse implement? Is it successful?

5. Relate the details about Crazy Horse and Hopa: discuss what happens to Hopa early in the narrative, the circumstances under which she reappears, and what Crazy Horse finally decides to do about her. Does his decision reveal his leadership qualities?

6. Based on details provided in the narrative, explain the Sioux god, Wakan Tanka.

7. Cite at least three instances of the whites' unfair treatment of the Sioux as related in the plot. Can you justify any of the white settlers' or army's actions in the novel? Can you justify the actions of the Sioux?

8. Chapter 21 is about Custer's last stand, and chapter 22 is entitled "No Place to Stay." How significant is Custer's last stand to the details in chapter 22?

9. Is Crazy Horse planning to escape from the reservation once he takes HerBlack-Robe to the Spotted Tail Agency at the end of the novel?

Literary Qualities

In Crazy Horse, Garst takes what is known about the Sioux warrior and then fills in the outlines with scenes based on what her research indicates might have happened. This technique brings events to life and gives the reader a sense of history. Other fictionalized works of history that incorporate this method include Cornelius Ryan's The Longest Day, about the day on which the Allied forces invaded France during World War II, and Walter Lord's A Night to Remember, about the sinking of the Titanic.

Crazy Horse also belongs to the class of novels that explore the rites-ofpassage or the rites-to-maturity.

Generally, this technique traces the protagonist's development from childhood to adulthood and sometimes even to old age and death; classic examples include Charles Dickens's Dauid Copperfield and Great Expectations.

In Crazy Horse, young Haska experiences many episodes that shape him into what he becomes. These experiences include fighting with the wasps and the grizzly bear, selecting and taming his own horse, and longing to achieve recognition through some brave feat. These events are part of his learning process. In the fight with the wasps, for example, he is stung badly and cries out, thereby initiating the conflict between himself and No Water. From this rivalry, Crazy Horse learns to stoically endure insults because they cannot harm his integrity. Another part of Crazy Horse's rites-of-passage involves his various experiences with the white settlers and army. After learning that the white way of life is not good for Native Americans and that white justice is unfair, he champions his people's cause against these forces. From these ritesof-passage, Crazy Horse becomes the great Sioux warrior and leader.

Themes and Characters

The narrative focuses on Crazy Horse, whose childhood name was Haska, meaning "curly." His light complexion and brown wavy hair set him apart as a young boy. As the novel's subtitle indicates, Garst emphasizes Crazy Horse's skill as a Sioux warrior. As a young boy, he becomes a great horseman who rides from the side of his horse with only one heel showing over the horse's neck, a trick the Sioux used in battle because they know their Native American foes would rather capture a valuable horse than kill it just to get their enemy.

Crazy Horse becomes the first Sioux leader to insist that his warriors fight as a unit instead of fighting for individual glory, and this revolutionary tactic wins many victories for the Sioux. In addition to his skill in battle, Crazy Horse's concern for his people—especially the aged, the women, and the children—contributes to his leadership abilities.

During his youth he invites the hungry old people into his family's tent to eat.

Later, when he experiences his vision quest, he realizes that the power he has gained from the quest must be used to serve and protect his people from the white settlers and the U.S. government.

Unable to watch his people suffer, he finally surrenders and leads his people to the Red Cloud Agency.

No Water, who is somewhat older, plays an important role in Crazy Horse's maturation. The two develop a boyhood rivalry that continues into adulthood.

No Water represents the peer pressure and rivalry that every adolescent experiences and from which mature knowledge springs. For example, when Crazy Horse finally realizes that No Water taunts him out of jealousy, he gains insight and strength. Moreover, when No Water and his friends taunt Crazy Horse, especially about the fight with the wasps. Crazy Horse begins to develop the stoical dignity that becomes his trademark. Loudly boasting about his deeds during campfire celebrations, No Water also is a foil for Crazy Horse, who never boasts or joins in the celebrations.

High Backbone, also called Hump, is the wise warrior who adopts Crazy Horse and teaches him the way of the warrior.

From Hump, Crazy Horse learns not only how to hunt and fight, but more importantly, how to be a great leader.

Hump teaches Crazy Horse that a great leader fights not for personal gain but for his people, and that a great leader gives away his wealth and spoils rather than showing them off.

The white characters remain secondary. They include Chivington, who leads the soldiers during the Sand Creek Massacre; Fetterman, who boasts that he needs only eighty men to ride through the entire Sioux nation; General Harney, who is called "Squaw Killer Harney"; and Custer, who dies in the Battle of the Little Big Horn. These characters and the other whites symbolize the encroachment of civilization and the final defeat of all Native Americans.

Within the Crazy Horse narrative, the white settlers and armies are the antagonists who finally defeat Crazy Horse.

Two themes dominate the plot of Garst's biographical novel. The first is the rites-of-passage theme, a universal literary theme dealing with the experiences and trials that a young person must go through before gaining wisdom and maturity. The other theme concerns the tragic fate of both Crazy Horse and the Sioux nation: the cultural clash between the white and the Nativ e American worlds. The U.S. government and its army force the Sioux onto the reservations while Crazy Horse and his fellow warriors fight to keep their lands and preserve their way of life. Inevitably and tragically, one culture must give way to the other, resulting in a great and irretrievable loss.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. In Famous Indian Chiefs, Charles L. Johnston writes that Sitting Bull was the Sioux general and Crazy Horse was the "able lieutenant." Consult either a history or an encyclopedia and report on these two chiefs, comparing their achievements.

2. Read either Garst's Sitting Bull: Champion of His People or her Red Cloud and compare it with Crazy Horse: Great Warrior of the Sioux. You might consider narrative details and the characters' rites-of-passage, leadership qualities, and fates.

3. Research and write about the clash between the white settlers and one of the following: Chief Osceola and the Seminoles. Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce, or Chief Geronimo and the Apache.

Compare the plight of the chief you choose to Crazy Horse's plight.

4. Report on the 1849 California gold rush and the Black Hills gold rush. Explain how the prospectors traveled, their immediate effects on Native Americans and the frontier, and the ultimate outcome of these rushes.

5. In Garst's Crazy Horse, the narrator refers to the effect that the white encroachment had on the wild game that the Native Americans depended on for food. Report on the slaughter of the buffalo, the reasons behind it, and its effect on Native Americans.

6. In her narrative about Crazy Horse, Garst refers to the Laramie and Bozeman Trails. Report on one of these trails by pointing out its origin and ending, its length, its dangers, and its characteristics today.

7. At the end of Crazy Horse, the narrator says that the Sioux were being moved to the "South Country." Describe the "South Country" location and what happened to the Sioux who went there.

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New York: Harper and Row, 1913.

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Sandoz, Mari. Cheyenne Autumn. New York: Avon Books, 1953. This book is a readable and moving history of the Cheyenne, their flight from a reservation to their home on the Yellowstone River, and their alliance with the Sioux and Crazy Horse.

Standing Bear, Luther. My People the Sioux. Edited by E. A. Brininstool. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975. Claiming that "no one is able to understand the Indian race like an Indian," Chief Standing Bear writes about the Sioux and their relations with the U.S. government and also provides insights into the Sioux culture.

Related Titles

Garst has written novels about many real but legendary Americans who left their mark on American history and life, including Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Chief Joseph, Kit Carson, Wild Bill Hickok, Jim Bridger, Will Rogers, and Amelia Earhart. As she does in Crazy Horse: Great Warrior of the Sioux, Garst invariably details the character's life from birth to death. But despite similar plots and literary techniques, each of Garst's novels is different because each focuses on the individuality of its subject.

Garst's Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce closely parallels Crazy Horse. In both novels, the protagonists prove their mettle by taming and riding their own horses. In addition, both novels deal with the boys as they experience their first coups, buffalo hunts, encounters with white settlers, and killings. Both Crazy Horse and Chief Joseph eventually become great leaders, receive unfair treatment at the hands of the U.S. government, and inevitably die as a result.

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