

Laughing Boy Short Guide

Laughing Boy by Oliver La Farge

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Overview

Laughing Boy is an idyllic account of the love and marriage of two Navajo Native Americans, Laughing Boy and Slim Girl. It is one of many novels depicting a romantic love that overcomes numerous obstacles, only to end with the heroine's early death. The novel is a memorable account of an ill-fated, but deep and poignant, romantic love.

In a larger sense, the book chronicles the cultural conflict of whites and Native Americans found in the areas where Native Americans remain a significant percentage of the population. It was perhaps the first novel to treat Native Americans not as villainous savages or idealized noble primitives, but as a people with their own mores, culture, and religion that can be appreciated even by outsiders. La Farge sought to celebrate a way of life that was passing out of existence, the life of Native Americans living on a reservation relatively unaffected by the dominant American culture. His novel reveals much about Navajo life and tradition, as La Farge portrays Native American culture on its own terms, without measuring it against his own.

The Navajo taboos, chants, dances, and religious rites portrayed in the novel have a dignity and power of their own.

At its best, the ideal of Navajo life is described as the "beautiful path," an aesthetic concept that links humans with forces of nature. The social system enables individuals to live and develop their personalities in harmony with themselves and with nature.



About the Author

Oliver Hazard Perry La Farge was born in New York City on December 19, 1901, the second of four children of Christopher Grant and Florence Bayard La Farge. La Farge's father, a prominent New York architect whose firm drafted the first plan for the Cathedral of St.

John the Divine, had a strong interest in Native American culture. On his mother's side, La Farge counted the American naval hero Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry among his ancestors. Born into affluence, he spent his childhood summers at the family home on the Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island, and his winters in New York City, where he received his early schooling. After graduating from the Groton School, he enrolled in Harvard as an undergraduate, majoring in anthropology.

His highly literate mother advised him that a young man should live for a while in a culture different from his own so that he might gain a new perspective on his familiar locale. Considering his interest in anthropology and his strong aptitude for learning Native American languages, it was almost inevitable that La Farge would turn to the study of Native Americans. His first opportunity came in 1922, when he went on a summer expedition to Arizona with a Harvard group. He later traveled to Central America as part of a research team from Tulane University studying Mayan culture. He received his bachelor's degree from Harvard in 1924 and his master's degree in 1929. He published numerous titles on anthropology, including works sufficiently impressive to attract the attention of famed anthropologist Franz Boas. Yet his career as a fiction writer brought him the widest recognition.

Beginning at Harvard, where he wrote for the *Advocate* and the *Lampoon*, La Farge published an astonishing variety of works: novels, biographies, short stories, articles, and, later in life, newspaper columns. The inspiration for *Laughing Boy*, his most acclaimed novel, was his Arizona expedition of 1922, when he learned firsthand about Native Americans. *Laughing Boy* won the Pulitzer Prize, launching La Farge on a writing career, but he divided his efforts and never again matched the success of *Laughing Boy*. Gradually, his interest in anthropology gave way to his advocacy of Native American interests. In 1930 he became a director of the small Eastern Association of Indian Affairs, later to become the Association on American Indian Affairs, and then served as its president for twenty-five years. La Farge knew that the romantic outlook he presented on primitive Native American society in *Laughing Boy* was not a viable model. Yet he considered the official effort to assimilate Native Americans into white American society as destructive to Native Americans, who were unable to adjust to the modern competitive environment. He sought to enable Native Americans to retain their tribal units, lands, and customs and to give the Native Americans themselves a decisive role in planning their future.

Throughout his adult life, La Farge retained his dual commitment to Native American interests and to writing, producing more than twenty books. He often found that professional commitments interfered with his personal life.

Until 1947, when he settled in Santa Fe, he did not live in one place for very long, and despite his prominence and success as a writer, his unsteady income from writing often created financial difficulty.

His first marriage ended in divorce in 1937; a second, to Consuelo de Baca in 1939, lasted until his death on August 2, 1963, in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

La Farge will be remembered for placing Native American interests above his own and developing his craft despite personal difficulties.

Setting

In his preface, La Farge explains that he chose to set the novel in an earlier time, before the first automobiles came to the Navajo reservation in 1915. In this way, he seeks to recapture an era when Native Americans had more of a choice between following the white man's way of life and their traditional way, passed from generation to generation. The Navajo way, called the "beautiful path" or hozoji, features an aesthetic and religious response to nature and reverence for the past. The Native Americans nurture this sense of beauty in their ceremonies—dances, prayers, and other religious observances—and incorporate it into their daily lives. To Laughing Boy, the novel's protagonist, hozoji means the creation of beauty in the silver and turquoise jewelry he makes, a skill he learned from his father, Two Bows.

Renouncing the white customs she has been taught, Slim Girl resolves to follow the beautiful path and recapture the Navajo way of life for herself. She learns to weave beautiful rugs with intricate designs that illuminate the artist's creative spirit.

The locale is the Navajo reservation that extends over portions of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado.

The novel gives a sound representation of the white settlements along the reservation's southern boundary and the misfortunes of the Navajo who try to adopt white ways and live there. These small, rundown settlements are built on a precarious agricultural economy, largely ranching, that provides little leisure or space for anyone. By contrast, the reservation is vast and largely barren, dotted with small groups of people who rely primarily on shepherding for their livelihood. The reservation offers solitude and a refuge from encroaching civilization. Before their marriage, Laughing Boy takes Slim Girl to the remote interior to visit his family. The reservation holds sacred places linking past and present—including cliffs and rock formations with ancient religious associations. As they ride to their destination, Slim Girl and Laughing Boy see the cliff dwellings of the ancient Anasazi.

After they arrive at the hogan, or earthcovered Navajo dwelling, of Two Bows, Slim Girl learns about Navajo life, discovering both its pleasant and unpleasant facets. She begins to grasp the significance of family relationships and traditional ways. The intimate setting of the hogan and the small community are described in detail, revealing much about Navajo culture.



Social Sensitivity

Written in 1929, *Laughing Boy* in many ways foreshadowed the change in social consciousness about Native Americans that has occurred since. It may have been the first novel about Native Americans that did not assume white culture to be superior. This sympathetic account presents Navajo culture on its own terms and portrays the destructive influence of white culture on the Native American way of life. But La Farge skirts some issues by setting the story in an earlier time, before the widespread use of the automobile made the survival of Native American culture impossible.

The novel deals frankly with the problems of Native Americans in white society. Yet its heroine, Slim Girl, remains strong enough to escape from its corrupting influence and return to a simpler life. The novel presents prostitution, the dangers of alcoholism, and a few violent episodes, which La Farge handles with considerable tact.

Literary Qualities

The novel develops chronologically from the omniscient narrator's point of view, shifting easily to a character's inner thoughts. In a few episodes, the author uses flashback and exposition.

Except for a smattering of Native American words and western dialect, the diction is simple. The book features numerous descriptions of nature and liberal use of similes.

The most remarkable stylistic passages are the translations of Native American poetry and chants, used largely in ceremonies and rituals. Through repetition and balance, these passages achieve a tone of incantation. They represent an effort to capture the Navajo outlook on life and often demonstrate the way that Native Americans deal with crises.



Themes and Characters

Beyond celebrating the Navajo ideal of hozojl the novel depicts a cultural conflict that takes a heavy toll on the Native Americans. La Farge offers little by way of a solution except the hope of returning to the reservation, as Slim Girl and Laughing Boy attempt to do, excluding white society entirely. Because their culture has not prepared them for the competitive and materialistic nature of the white world, the Navajo who attempt to live within white society suffer a degeneration of character through temptations such as alcohol. The Navajo who have little contact with the outside fare the best.

Slim Girl has never known reservation life, having been taken as a child to a white school. Laughing Boy, on the other hand, knows little about the society outside the reservation: he is a "blanket Indian," essentially content with his craftsmanship and his talent for raising horses. Slim Girl's solution to the cultural conflict is for Laughing Boy to teach her about Native American life and return her to the reservation.

Laughing Boy is often referred to as an idyll because of the natural setting and the theme of romantic love. La Farge creates the illusion that the love of Laughing Boy and Slim Girl will last, despite the crisis that almost severs the bond between them. This romantic theme derives from European conventions, not from Navajo culture, and La Farge later realized that he had cast a romantic aura over the subject in his treatment of the love theme. Among the Navajo characters, the concept of a developed romantic love is limited to the hero and heroine; Slim Girl's separation from her culture in childhood accounts for her conception of love. In later fiction, particularly *The Enemy Gods* (1937), La Farge presents a more realistic account of this theme.

The novel features few fully developed characters. Those that are developed reflect La Farge's efforts to present the theme of cultural conflict and its effect upon Native Americans. Laughing Boy, ceremonially named "Sings Before Spears," represents the unspoiled and uninhibited young Navajo from the reservation. His sense of Native American culture and ceremony enforces his aesthetic approach to his craft. He is high-spirited and competitive in sports such as wrestling and horse racing, and at times aggressive against tribal enemies, such as the Utes and white traders. Essentially a simple personality, Laughing Boy is a man of action rather than thought.

Two Bows, his father, is a skilled craftsman who lives on the reservation.

Though he seldom appears in the novel, he demonstrates the dignity and reserve that La Farge found among Native Americans. Laughing Boy's young friend, Jestig Squaw's Son, shares his youthful exuberance and his dedication to the trail of beauty.

Native Americans who live on the edge of white society or within it usually display badly flawed characters. Red Man, the vengeful antagonist, is a shadowy figure, little developed beyond the stock figure of the malcontent villain. Yellow Singer, an older man who performs the marriage ceremony of Laughing Boy and Slim Girl, attempts to live in both cultures. While he retains knowledge of Navajo rituals, he has adopted many of the



ways of white culture. With his changed identity comes alcoholism and character disintegration.

Slim Girl, ceremonially named "Came with War," is like Yellow Singer in that she lives a divided life rife with conflict.

Sent to boarding school as a young girl to become Americanized, she has unsuccessfully sought assimilation into the dominant culture. The most complex character in the novel, she is intelligent, witty, vivacious, and cheerful, and her ability to adjust to different situations helps her contend with difficulties. She is also the most ambitious character, setting her goals and initiating a rational plan for achieving them. Although she reveals vulnerability beneath a tough exterior, she manages a kind of triumph over severe disadvantages.



Topics for Discussion

1. Laughing Boy's narrative of the Utes in chapter 8 explains how he got his name. Discuss what it clarifies about his character and about conflicts among tribes.
2. The episode in chapter 13 involving Laughing Boy and the trading post operator Narrow Nose reflects the attitudes of Native Americans toward white settlers. Explain the facets of this conflict.
3. The phrase "Enemy Gods" is used throughout the novel. Who are the enemy gods? How do they relate to the hero and heroine?
4. Both Laughing Boy and Slim Girl idealize the Navajo way, as do other Native Americans, when they disapprovingly discuss Laughing Boy's way of life in Los Palos. The novel, however, reveals that life on the reservation has its less pleasant sides. What are they?
5. Laughing Boy adopts some ways of the white society without degenerating as other Native Americans do. What role does Slim Girl play in both the acceptance and control of such habits as drinking?
6. Slim Girl marries Laughing Boy in hope that he will restore her to Navajo tribal life. Why does she delay her return to the reservation?
7. The most complex character in the novel, Slim Girl is inclined to manipulate others. Explore this facet of her character, showing how it leads to her death.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Analyze the aesthetic qualities in Navajo life as they are revealed in the characters' speech and activities.
2. Compare the attitudes and values of Laughing Boy with those of Myron Begay, hero of La Farge's later novel *The Enemy Gods*.
3. Analyze the purpose of Navajo songs, chants, and prayers in *Laughing Boy*.
4. Discuss the various Native American taboos that the narrative reveals.
5. By having Slim Girl and Laughing Boy live on the edge of American society, La Farge is able to give a detached view of both Navajo and white American culture. Point out several examples of this element in the novel. Discuss La Farge's representation of the two cultures.

For Further Reference

Gillis, Everett A. *Oliver La Farge*. Southwest Writers Series. Austin: SteckVaughan, 1967. This pamphlet places La Farge in his milieu and devotes significant space to an analysis of his major fiction.

McNickle, D'Arcy. *Indian Man: A Life of Oliver La Farge*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971. This critical biography relates *Laughing Boy* to La Farge's other writings.

Pearce, T. M. *Oliver La Farge*. New York: Twayne, 1972. This balanced critical introduction provides an account of La Farge's life and literary career.

Related Titles

The Enemy Gods covers much of the same ground as Laughing Boy. Like Slim Girl, the Navajo hero Myron Begay has been removed from the reservation and sent to a white school. He renounces the values taught there and resolves to return to the reservation. This novel is more realistic and objective, with less emphasis on romantic love.



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