

Legend Days Short Guide

Legend Days by Jamake Highwater

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Characters

The central character in *Legend Days*, the first novel in Highwater's ghost Horse Cycle, is Amana, a Northern Plains Indian girl. In the tenth winter of her life, Amana sees the white owl, the sign of death. Escaping the epidemic that seems to take the life of everyone in her family and tribe, Amana is rescued from the owl by the old fox. Before she leaves the fox's home, he gives her the medicine bundle of a warrior and cautions her that it is to be used only if she hears the sacred song of the fox. Returning to her people, Amana finds only two old women who survived from her Blood band. They finally join a band of Gros Ventres who offer them a home. In the band, Amana finds her sister SoodaWa and her sister's elderly husband Far Away Son. Although SoodaWa recovered from smallpox, she is weak and withdrawn. In keeping with tradition, Far Away Son weds Amana, but it is a marriage in name only. Amana assumes a nurturing role and cares for the old women, SoodaWa, and Far Away Son.

In the character of Amana, Highwater places the memory, songs, tales, and legends of the Native Americans. But she also has within her a constant conflict. She is female, a nurturer and care giver. However, she also has the role given her by the sacred medicine bundle — a role that makes her male, a warrior and a hunter. Amana's male/female role goes against many of the traditional Native American societal conventions for the way people should act and the roles they should play.

Highwater wrote in *The Primal Mind* (1981) that "it is taboo among primal people like Indians for someone to depart from communal mentality.

Traditional Indians reject this kind of behavior as antisocial and treasonous."

Yet, even as Amana clings to traditional values, in her desire to be the hunter/warrior, she breaks them.

As Amana struggles with her conflicting personal roles, she also struggles against the forces of the white man and what those forces are doing to the traditions, culture, and life of her people. It is the white man who has brought the smallpox that killed so many people. And it is the white man and his hunting that is destroying the buffalo that the native people depend on for food. Although Amana knows this, even with her sacred medicine bundle, she is helpless to prevent it.

While she seeks to preserve her heritage, she finds that there is a major difference between the white man and Native American over the land and the animals. The white man sees animals as a commodity; the Native American sees them as a sacred trust. Native Americans traditionally roamed vast areas of land; the white man wants to confine them to a small area. The white man is the unwanted intruder who is forcing the breakup of the Native American world. The Native American, as seen in Amana and her people, appears to have lost the physical and spiritual will to survive.

Social Concerns

The Ghost Horse Cycle, of which *Legend Days* is the first novel, is Highwater's attempt to define his own history and cultural past and to link it to the history and culture of Native Americans in the Great Plains. Amana, the central character of the novel, is a Blackfeet Indian of the Blood Band. The reader meets her as a smallpox epidemic is about to come to her village and, through her eyes, sees the decline of the Northern Plains Native American tribes as the white man slowly pushes across the western territories and becomes more powerful than the native peoples.

In an interview given to *Publisher's Weekly*, Highwater stated that he is interested in the things that happen when "barriers are crossed and cultures interact." Thus, in *Legend Days*, he tells two parallel stories. One is the story of the adventures of Amana after she receives the gifts from the old fox and secretly becomes a warrior. The other is the story of the loss of an entire culture when it fails to adjust after coming into contact with a more powerful culture.

Techniques

This story is written as if it were a legend that is being passed on through the oral tradition. Highwater uses the rhythm, sound patterns, and repetition of words to create the feeling of the traditional storyteller. Just as in Native American mythology, he uses dreams and visions as a metaphor for reality and stresses the importance of identification with the natural world.

Within the novel are layers of symbolism and myth. On a physical level, there is a factual portrayal of the life of a Northern Plains tribe in the late 1800s. The yearly cycle of festivals, and tribal movements; traditional social customs; and the daily life of traveling, setting up tipis, hunting, and cooking are detailed. There are the vivid descriptions of the buffalo hunt, the winter of starvation, the Sun Dance camp, and the visits to a trading post. In the incident of Yellow Bird, Highwater even shows what happens to a woman who disobeys her husband and the tribal law.

On a spiritual level, there is a portrayal of a culture faced with certain death. One of the symbols of traditional life that Highwater uses is the minor character of Crow Woman. A survivor of the deadly smallpox, she teaches the young Amana the things that a Native American woman needs to know. She tells Amana, "it is our duty to teach you all that we know, and it is your duty to listen to us."

However, by the end of the novel, she realizes that the old ways have died.

As she tells Amana, "everything is full of sorrow. The children speak to the elders without courtesy . . . The young men just sit in the shade all day, drinking whiskey and doing nothing . . . I have lived to see the old ways forgotten." As the novel nears a close, the spirit of Crow Woman slips away and she dies; a victim of tuberculosis.

Overall there is a feeling of a people and a culture trying desperately to survive and failing. Yet, there is the hope that somehow the "legend days" will live on. As Yellow Bird Woman says, "Within you, Amana, the spirit of our people lives and through the legends of your life all of us will be remembered . . . So do not forget me, Amana . . . It is only through you that I will be remembered!"

Highwater uses traditional Native American symbols throughout the novel in a mixture of reality and dreams. Nature is very important in this and other novels by Highwater.

The white owl, sun dogs, and a ring around the moon all predict events to come. Animals talk and have supernatural powers. Even Amana's development into a woman is described in terms of the seasons. While most of this relationship of men and women to animals is lost in other books of the Ghost Horse Cycle, through them all, the fox is seen as a voice of courage and hope.

Yet, even with his use of traditional Native American motifs, Highwater has received some criticism. Writing in *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin*, Number 8, 1985, Doris

Seale states that "none of his books 'feels' very Indian to me." Comparing them to the writings of Leslie Marmon Silko or Simon J. Ortiz, she finds something missing in their pattern of thought.



Themes

The title Legend Days is Highwater's synonym for Native American culture and beliefs. At the beginning of this novel, the "legend days" and the traditions that they represent are held in sacred trust by the Native Americans.

Amana and her people believe in the omens, stories, animals, visions, songs, and signs of nature. All of these are important to the traditional cycle of life on the plains.

Then the white man comes and brings death in the form of smallpox and tuberculosis. He kills the buffalo and this brings death in the form of starvation. In his religion, the white man sees something that is better than the myths held by the native peoples and he replaces the traditional beliefs with his own. Finally, in his "welfare" system on the reservation, the white man believes that he is taking care of the native peoples in a way that is good for them and, more important, good for himself.

Unfortunately, the things that the white man brings are seen a different way by Amana and her people. The land and the animals are devastated; there is sickness, starvation, and sorrow. With the loss of the buffalo and the death of many people by disease, there is a disintegration of the traditional culture. As the story unfolds, the "legend days" and the Native American way of life begin to die.

In addition to the cultural conflict, there is also a male-female role conflict in the novel. After escaping from the death that comes to her village and being rescued from the white owl by the old fox, Amana is given a special gift which is to be used only when she hears the song of the fox. In her secret medicine bundle, she has the clothes which will give her the strength and courage of a great warrior and hunter.

Yet the traditional society that she honors places only men in that role.

When she returns to her people and finds that only crippled Crow Woman and blind Weasel Woman are left, she must use her woman's nurturing skills, not the male hunting skills, to save them. However, when starvation seems eminent, she hears the song of the fox, becomes a warrior, takes a rifle, and kills a deer. Having saved herself and her two friends, Amana again hides her sacred bundle but she does not forget the power that she felt as a warrior.

As the story progresses, it is plain that Amana is both a woman and a warrior and that she loves the role of the hunter more than the nurturer. Yet, even though she is able to save the tribe during a period of starvation, her people do not accept her in what they see as a male role. Amana tries to cling to the old ways, the "legend days," while at the same time, she tries to change the traditional role of a woman in the tribe. Soon she is acting like a warrior even when she does not hear the song of the fox. Then, in pride, she forces her husband Far Away Son to go with the tribe on a buffalo hunt so that she too may go. When Far Away Son is killed by a charging buffalo, Amana is abandoned by

her people and is truly alone in the world. She is afraid that she has failed her people and that the "legend days" are gone forever.



Key Questions

As the beginning book in Highwater's Ghost Horse Cycle, *Legend Days* introduces Amana, who with her grandson Sitko, is a major character of the Cycle. In addition to presenting the story of Amana and her family, this work details the decline of the Native American way of life on the Great Plains of North America. One general area of discussion centers around the changes that the white man brought, how those changes affected the Native Americans, and what might have been done to blunt the force of those changes. A deeper discussion centers on Amana and her conflicting female/ male role.

1. Why did Highwater create the conflict within Amana by having the old fox give her the medicine bundle with the warrior's clothes? Did she truly live up to her promise to honor the vision?
2. Chart the historical events in the novel that changed the life of the Native Americans. What might the white man have done to cushion the impact that his coming had on Native American lives? How does the concept of Manifest Destiny relate to this novel?
3. If Amana is to be charged with remembering the "legends" and keeping the traditions, what are some of the traditions that she must keep? Why are they so important to the Native Americans?
4. Using examples from the novel, discuss the ways in which omens, visions, and animals become symbols for characters and events.
5. Both Yellow Bird Woman and Amana are unconventional women.

Why do very different fates befall the two of them? What about their fates is similar?

6. In the quote which opens the book, Elizabeth Wilson, widow of Chief Joseph, Nez Perce, states that there will not be and cannot be any more "legend days." What are these "legend days"? With the recent interest in Native American traditions, can the "legend days" return?
7. Has the culture of the white man had its own "legend days"? If not, why not? If so, what has happened to them?
8. Amana's male/female role goes against many of the social conventions for Native Americans. Why, when he was writing about traditional values, did Highwater use this source of conflict in his novel? Why did he not make a male the main character of the novel?

How would this have changed the novel?

9. The fox is very important to Amana. Why then did Highwater make a fox the animal that she killed in the winter of starvation?



10. Why does Highwater surround Amana with people who are either old (Crow Woman, Far Away Son) or crippled in some way (SoodaWa, Weasel Woman, Yellow Bird Woman)?

Literary Precedents

While there are really no precedents in Native American literature for the character of Amana, there are other Native Americans who shared her dream of saving the traditions and keeping the Native American culture alive. Prime among them were the followers of the Ghost Dance movement in the late 1800s. This movement was crushed at the massacre at Wounded Knee, South Dakota. A survivor of this movement was a medicine man named Black Elk who had a vision when a child. In this vision, he saw the Great Hoop of Life broken and the end of Native American life. However, he also saw a rebirth of the traditions at a time in the future. In 1932, John G. Heihardt published the thoughts of Black Elk in the book *Black Elk Speaks*.

Highwater is not alone in writing about the problems faced by Native Americans as the white man spread his influence across the continent. Other Native American writers such as John Rollin Ridge in *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854), D'Arcy McNickle in *The Surrounded* (1936), Zitkala-Sa or Red Bird in *Soft-Hearted Sioux* (1901), Simon Pokagon in *Queen of the Woods* (1899), and John Joseph Mathews in *Sundown* (1934) have written about the effects of the white man's intrusion into the Native American world. These authors have many of the same themes as the early novels in *Highwater's* Ghost Horse Cycle.

In earlier novels, *Highwater* also explores the concept of Manifest Destiny from the Native American point of view and vividly to show its impact on a society's traditions and culture.

While *Legend Days* is set on the Great Plains, *The Son He Dies* (1980) traces the end of the Aztec civilization in Mexico using myths and legends as well as historical fact. In a similar manner, Native American mythology and legends play an important role in *Anpao* (1977). In all three works, the strong relationship between nature and the beliefs and traditions of the Native American peoples is shown against the backdrop of the coming of the white man.

Related Titles

As the first book in Highwater's Ghost Horse Cycle, *Legend Days* introduces the characters and sets the stage for the events which will follow.

Amana remains the strong central character in *The Ceremony of Innocence* (1985). In *I Wear the Morning Star* (1986), Sitko, her grandson becomes the narrator and continues through *Kill Hole* (1992), the final book in the cycle.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994