

# **On the Rez Study Guide**

**On the Rez by Ian Frazier**

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## Summary

"On the Rez" by Ian Frazier is a narrative about the Oglala Sioux Indians who live on the Pine Ridge Reservation in Southwestern South Dakota. Frazier describes the lives of modern-day American Indians, sharing their private world with compassion and respect. Considered one of the most accurate accounts of modern Native Americans, "On the Rez" explores the survival and lifestyle of a culture which has greatly impacted America's identity and concepts of freedom and equality.

The narrative begins with Frazier praising Indians for their sense of freedom and explaining how this idea contributed to America's founding principles of liberty and equality. Seeing Indian reservations as the last area of the U.S. to maintain its original identity and refrain from yielding to the country's "paving mechanism," Frazier admires the Indian's culture, especially their affinity for heroes.

While living in New York, Frazier meets Le War Lance, an Oglala Sioux, and the pair develop a long-lasting friendship. Le often introduces Frazier to his visiting family and friends, such as Floyd John, and they discuss various Indian-related topics, such as Indians' role in Hollywood. After being sentenced to prison on a driving while intoxicated charge, Le seeks refuge in Pine Ridge. Soon after, Frazier relocates his family to Montana, and after settling in, he visits Le on the reservation where Le takes him to the cemetery and tells him about his deceased relatives. Frazier shares many anecdotes about the site-seeing ventures he goes on with Le, paying particular attention to his trip to Wounded Knee, the site of an infamous Indian massacre in 1890 as well as a protest occupation in 1973.

Frazier examines how various tribes were oppressed by European settlers when America was being founded and explains how their affinity for gambling led to the establishment of casinos on many tribes' reservations. Detailing how many Indians choose their tribe by affinity rather than birthright, Frazier proudly claims affinity to the Oglala, and he is also proud that Le identifies him as a brother, not just a friend. When Frazier visits the reservation, Le and Floyd John escort him around, introducing him to members of their tribe, and many of these impromptu interviews are included in the narrative. Frazier also visits neighboring towns and shares their histories which are usually rife with tales of bigotry and violence, especially as it pertains to the negative effect alcohol has had on Indian culture. A conflict arises between Frazier and Le when Le visits his friend's home and family while drunk, but their sense of kinship is restored after Frazier gets into a car accident on his way home from his next visit to Pine Ridge. Frazier attends the August pow-wow, and though he enjoys himself, he imagines how terrified he would be as a young European immigrant visiting the wilderness for the first time in the 19th century.

Frazier learns much about Pine Ridge Reservation through his conversations with its inhabitants, but he is most interested in SuAnne Big Crow, a popular high school basketball player who died in a car wreck during her senior year. Frazier conducts many interviews pertaining to SuAnne, and her story encompasses nearly a quarter of the



narrative as he details examples of her bravery and tribal pride. After SuAnne's death, her mother honors her by establishing a recreation center in her name, ensuring that her daughter's legacy of goodwill continues. In conclusion, Frazier admits that Pine Ridge Reservation remains unchanged, and though he offers no advice to the Indians, he encourages the rest of America to restore the Black Hills to their rightful owners. Bidding adieu to his friends, Frazier heads home to his family in Montana.



# Chapter 1

## Summary

"On the Rez" is a book about the Oglala Sioux Indians who live on the Pine Ridge Reservation in Southwestern South Dakota, a subject that many non-Indians consider to be "bleak", though that is not a word the Oglala use. Some visit the reservation out of curiosity and admiration, but others want to be Indians. The author, Ian Frazier, is a non-Indian, though he wears his hair long in the Indian tradition of the 1970s. His friend on the reservation, Floyd John, greets him as a "wannabe," and while Frazier resents the term, there is some truth to it - "I want to be an uncaught Indian like them" (page 5). In response to those who question why the Oglala do not forget the past and join "normal Americans", Frazier points out that Indians enjoy freedom, a luxury that most of us cannot afford.

Europeans immigrated to the U.S. with the hope of everyone being his own master, and though it is comfortable to believe that the Indians and their culture was destroyed, it is not true; while there were only a quarter million Indians in 1900, there is now more than two million. The story of their destruction leaves out many uncomfortable details, such as massacres and violence that went unrecorded and which continues today. The story also gives the flattering yet incorrect notion that the Europeans mowed down whatever was in their way when, in reality, our culture was impacted by theirs, the original free in the Land of the Free. The Indians' desire for personal freedom led to constant revisions among the tribes, and this internal fighting also contributed to their destruction. Though non-Indians often look down on Indians' divisions, they are at least equally divided by ideas such as race and religion. The European emigrants did not recreate their old culture, instead adapting to the Indians' culture, and their freedom is what led to the revolutionary idea of what a person could be in terms of equality. Americans worry about a loss of freedom and seek solutions, but will that freedom mean anything?

The world feels different as Frazier arrives at the reservation as he visits the original version of America that continues to resist modern America's paving mechanisms; it is the "surviving piece of country where 'the program' has not yet completely taken hold" (page 15). Of course Frazier wants to be an Indian since he has looked up to them his entire life. He looks to Crazy Horse as an example of what a person should be, and he often fantasized about being such a hero in his youth, but those who perform heroic deeds usually reject the idea that they are a hero. This antipathy towards being a hero is not-Indian-like since life in Indian tribes revolved around heroism and produced many heroes. Much of Oglala culture is unchanged since before the reservation was established. They still produce heroes, and one example is SuAnne Big Crow, a female athlete who died shortly before her eighteenth birthday. Though Frazier never met her, he greatly admires her.



## Analysis

The first chapter of Frazier's "On the Rez" serves to introduce the narrator and his topic of Native Americans, though surprisingly, he uses the term "Indians" despite it being politically incorrect. Frazier begins investigating the way that Indians are viewed by others as well as his own personal affinity toward their culture, specifically their sense of freedom. He alludes to Powhatan, Joseph Brant and Red Cloud as examples of Indians who demonstrate the self-possessed sense of freedom he so greatly covets. Frazier also compares and contrasts the version of history that American whites tell about their colonization of America and their defeat of the Indians, eliciting the reminder that history is always written by the winners.

Regardless of what history books claim about the Europeans' subjugation of the Indians, Frazier emphasizes that the U.S. was heavily influenced by Indian culture. The early colonists were advised by the six Iroquois nations, and they followed the Indians' examples of egalitarianism with no titles and skepticism of who is and is not great. Though the settlers often called the Indians proud because of their love of independence and freedom, the whites found the natives' worship of the Great Circle of Being to be compelling since it promotes the idea of connectedness. Indian values contributed greatly to the American idea of equality. In his admiration of Indians, Frazier looks to Crazy Horse as an example of what a person should be, often wondering how the great chief would act in certain situations. While discussing the Indians' fascination with heroism, Frazier alludes to SuAnne Big Crow, foreshadowing his miniature biography of the girl's life.

## Vocabulary

prevailing, inconspicuous, restitution, reimbursing, confederacy, egalitarianism, schism



## Chapter 2

### Summary

Frazier became friends with Le War Lance, an Oglala Sioux he met on the corner in New York who happens to be the grandson of Crazy Horse. During their twenty-year friendship, Le has changed his appearance many times, they argue occasionally, and Le tells crazy stories that Frazier never completely discounts. Le calls to ask for money every few weeks, and though Frazier gets annoyed, he rarely refuses since one time he did not hear from Le for over a year when he objected to sending him money. One Sunday morning, Le invites Frazier to his apartment where he talks about returning to the reservation. After serving stew, Le shows off his scars, explaining how he acquired them, and he also sings a Lakota song. For a while, Frazier sees Le every few weeks and meets a number of his friends and relatives, including his brother, Floyd John, who says very little the first time Frazier meets him. Le tells Frazier that Floyd John is a Vietnam veteran, but all Floyd John says on the matter is that he served in the Army. Usually, Frazier arrives with beer, and his friends still tease him about the time he brought over Moosehead beer that someone had left at his house. When others are around, Le does not tell stories. Instead, they mostly watch television, particularly Westerns which are entertaining since Le and his friends identify the Indians in the film.

These visits cease when Le moves to upstate New York, and though Frazier makes plans to meet Le when he comes to the city, Le rarely shows up. They meet after Le attends a performance of the American Indian Dance Theater, and Le introduces Frazier to his girlfriend, Noelle. The three go out to eat, and the Indians tell Frazier about their recent visit to the Pine Ridge Reservation for the August powwow and honoring ceremony for Le's 90-year-old father, Asa. Another day, Le stops by Frazier's apartment while Frazier is out, and they wait with Frazier's wife. When they visit again several days later, Frazier visits with them in their car since his wife is sick. Le presents Frazier with a gift, a Western saddle, which Frazier refuses since he does not own a horse, and when Le asks for \$500, he agrees to come back tomorrow since Frazier does not have the money on him. Though Frazier does not see Le for quite some time, Le calls to share his misfortunes which include a car accident, eviction from his house and a drunk driving charge. Le has been sentenced to prison because of the latter, but he claims he would rather die than go to prison. On the day Le is supposed to go to prison, he calls Frazier from the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan as he heads back to South Dakota, but Frazier argues that it is a bad idea to become a fugitive. Le agrees to go to jail, so Frazier buys him a ticket, but Le does not take the bus home. Frazier and Noelle exchange a few anxious phone calls until a week later when Le calls from a truck stop near Rapid City to ask for car fare since he is going back to the reservation.



## Analysis

In the second chapter, Frazier introduces the two Indians who play the largest role in his life: Le War Lance and Floyd John. He hints at the many conflicts in his relationship with Le, foreshadowing the disagreements they will be having throughout the book. Le's connection with his heritage through singing Lakota songs foreshadows his relocation from New York back to the reservation, while Le's familial relationship with Crazy Horse provides a sense of irony and a firmer understanding of Frazier's interest in his Oglala friend. While visiting Le, Frazier often watches western movies with the Indians who criticize the inaccuracies in the films. Going off on a tangent, Frazier notes that thousands of Indians have been in films since 1894 with Thomas Edison's documentary about Indian life and the appearance of performers in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show. Though many filmmakers prefer using real Indians in their films, other cast non-Indians in obvious Indian roles. Western television shows became very popular in the 1950s and early 1960s, but despite the vast numbers of Indians appearing in these films since their inception, Hollywood gives them very little credit; only three Indians have been nominated for Academy Awards with Buffy Sainte-Marie being the only winner. Frazier resumes his recollections of his early friendship with Le, and his allusion to the popular August pow-wow on the Pine Ridge Reservation foreshadows his participation in the event. When Le suffers legal troubles in New York, he flees to the reservation, fulfilling earlier foreshadowing and foreshadowing Frazier's visits to the reservation to see his friend.

## Vocabulary

malice, paranoid, intricacies, content, compulsory, tomahawk, suppressed, incompetence





# Chapter 3

## Summary

A while later, Frazier grows restless after finishing a long book and decides to move his family to Montana after six and a half years of living in New York City. The Frazier family takes their time driving west, visiting family and passing through SD near the reservation. Though Frazier wants to visit Le, his family overrules him.

After unpacking at his new home, Frazier buys a 1988 Chevy Blazer and drives 780 miles back to SD to visit Le, leaving at 6:45 AM and reaching Rapid City around dusk. During the drive and each subsequent drive to the reservation, Frazier notes eight markers where fatal accidents occurred, and upon research, he learns about the seven Sioux who were killed by a non-Indian drunk driver. He listened to the Oglala radio station as he drove onto the reservation which has many boundaries since 150 years ago when a treaty set aside land for them, though it has shrunk and been broken up many times since then and the surrounding areas have been settled by non-Indians. Visitors often notice the poor paving of Red Shirt Table Road which makes it difficult to reach Pine Ridge, and this is the result of General William Tecumseh Sherman pushing the boundaries back in 1868 to keep the “savages” away from the railroad being built.

Continuing to the reservation, Frazier finds the home of Sarah Brave who instructs him on how to find Le, and he finds Le in the yard of his one-story home. Le greets Frazier without surprise as though it hasn't been a year and a half since they last saw one another. Le talks about the car accident he was in three weeks prior and how he broke vertebrae in his neck. Noticing the vast amount of stuff in Le's home, the narrator recalls Le telling him that moving is easy because he's nomadic, and now, Le explains that most of it belongs to his sister who lived here until the tribe gave her a new house in Oglala. There was a fire in Le's house in 1983, so he jokes that since there is no insulation, he will find a fat woman to sleep on the windy side when winter comes.

After giving Frazier a tour of the cars in his yard, Le decides to take his friend to see his parents. The pair drive three miles to the cemetery where Le shows his visitor the tomb of his brother, Albert, who was beat to death with a tire iron by three drunk guys while home on leave from the Korean War. He shows the tomb of his mother, Elizebith, born a Blacksmith, who was killed in an accident last summer on Highway 87 by a drunk bootlegger without headlights. His father, Asa Walks Out, died last summer at the age of 91 and was buried on top of his wife but does not have a marker yet. Elda, another brother, had just returned from the Army when he realized he made a terrible mistake by marrying too young since he was now in love with a 15-year-old girl, and when his wife refused to give him a divorce, he shot himself in the head. At the age of 16, Le went crazy for a while, stole a government truck and ended up in jail. Le stops at the unmarked grave of James Walks Out, his grandfather who was a famous medicine man that raised Le and helped smuggle Crazy Horse's bones from Fort Robinson; he never told anyone where he hid them for fear they would dig them up to sell. Frazier and le



leave the cemetery and visit Floyd John who jokes with Frazier about the snakes building a subway to his house.

## Analysis

Frazier's decision to move west with his family further foreshadows his visits to Pine Ridge Reservation, especially in light of his desire to visit Le on his drive to his new home in Montana. Shortly after arriving, Frazier drives to visit Le, fulfilling this foreshadowing for the first time. On this first trip, Frazier notices markers indicating the deaths of seven Sioux killed by a drunk driver. The sight of the markers destroyed his motivation to keep driving, so he stopped to rest for the night before proceeding to the reservation. Frazier explores the difficulty in reaching the reservation, explaining the historical context that caused the Oglala to settle in such a remote area. When he finally reaches Pine Ridge, he locates Le who shares his recent troubles. Le also shows his hospitality and kinship with Frazier by taking him to the cemetery to show him the grave sites of his family members who are gone and to share their stories with his white friend. The story about Le's grandfather hiding Crazy Horse's bones demonstrates the respect the Indians feel they owe to their dead. After the cemetery, Le and Frazier visit Floyd John, foreshadowing his expanding friendship with Frazier and the larger role he will play in the remainder of the story.

## Vocabulary

hovercraft, derisive, palpable, punitive, unilaterally, allotted, negotiators, dilapidation



# Chapter 4

## Summary

After being injured while working on a modular home near the airbase, Floyd John walks with a limp and a cane. He joins Frazier and Le when they drive to the post office which is crowded since that's where most of the reservation picks up their mail. Though he rarely gets mail, Le checks daily, and a few weeks ago, he received a letter from the NY Attorney General who will not prosecute him if he does not return to NY. In Pine Ridge village, Floyd John searches for Wanda while Frazier and Le eat at Big Bat's Texaco, one of the few places on the reservation that looks like paved America. When Wanda and Floyd John join them, the Indian men talk to three guys at the next table about white men dancing at their ceremonies, and only Le believes they should allow people with good hearts to participate in a respectful way. One afternoon spent at Big Bat's like so many others, Le shares stories of ghosts, car accidents, horses and violence. He points out places where Sioux were killed by cars and where shootings occurred, yet he notes that the saddest time was August 1977 when Elvis died.

Like most tourists, Frazier is eager to see Wounded Knee which is famous for two dates: 1890 which was the year of the massacre in which Sitting Bull was killed and 1973 when the American Indian Movement (AIM) occupied the village in protest for 71 days. During the second event, the U.S. government was unable to interfere in tribal politics. As they approach Wounded Knee, Le and Floyd John tell Frazier about the police roadblocks and how Lawrence "Buddy" Lamont, the grandson of a survivor from the original Wounded Knee massacre, was shot on his way to the sweat lodge. Le recalls sneaking past the Federal agents with food, tobacco, ammo and medicine, and Floyd John recounts how the sound of gunfire was so frequent that it became normal. Explaining his involvement at Wounded Knee 2, Le shares that after he was released from prison in 1968, he joined a protest occupation at Alcatraz from 1969-1971 and then participated in several other protests before ending up at a convention of Indian traditionalists where he became depressed and disillusioned. He decided to walk from Los Angeles to San Francisco where he met several celebrities before hitchhiking back to the reservation. Out of curiosity, Frazier reached out to several of the celebrities Le mentioned, and they were all able to confirm the described encounters.

## Analysis

As Frazier settles into reservation life, Floyd John's presence becomes a common fact as evidenced by his accompanying Le and Frazier on all of their adventures. A frequent stop they make is to Big Bat's Texaco which was originally founded by Baptiste Pourier, a trader who married into the Sioux tribe and who served as a translator between the tribe and the U.S. government during the second half of the 19th century. The current Big Bat is a descendent of Pourier, and his establishment is always busy servicing the tribe, truck drivers, teens and tourists. For those that believe the American frontier has



disappeared, Frazier argues that they are wrong; America will always have frontier places which will always resemble Big Bat's. The conversation Le has with several guys about whites invading the reservation's ceremonies becomes a controversy over the next few summers; the Oglala used to dance in secret for fear of the government's ban, but now they fear whites wanting to join in their rituals. Frazier's interest in both travesties at Wounded Knee leads to an exploration of both significant dates, including a reference to how the massacre of 1890 occurred because the white settlers feared the Indians' Ghost Dance. He also explains that in 1973, the American Indian Movement occupied the village of Wounded Knee for 71 days as a protest demonstration, and though they did not accomplish much, it received a lot of press for the main issue of the conflict between progressives and traditionalists on the reservation. While looking at the village, Frazier cannot imagine spending over two months there. As Le explains his involvement with the occupation at Wounded Knee in 1973, he mentions his interactions with several celebrities, and curious since his friend is known for untruthful tales, Frazier manages to confirm the truth in some of them. Kim Novak confirms meeting Le while he lived in Los Angeles after the occupation, Elliott Gould also recalls Le, but David Carradine knows Le the best, even devoting an entire chapter of his autobiography, "Endless Highway," to Le whom he trusted despite his lies. Dennis Banks, a well-known leader of AIM also confirmed knowing Le and was able to verify Le's presence at Wounded Knee in 1973.

## Vocabulary

modular, distinguish, entourage, controversial, abutment, consecutive, vicinity, prominent



# Chapter 5

## Summary

Although Indians reside everywhere in America, most live west of the Mississippi River since the eastern states insisted on their removal in the 19th century. Reservations exist on all four corners of the contiguous U.S., but Indians tend to live on the edges of American society and are much more likely to be poor and suffer from alcoholism. The sad statistics greatly overwhelm the positive ones. Frazier mentions the Kickapoo tribe as an example of what the Indians have done since white settlers arrived in their country, fighting for tribal status until 1983. The most famous travesty against the natives was the Trail of Tears in 1838-1839 which resulted in the deaths of one-third of the Cherokee nation.

The Cherokee were a member of the Iroquois Nation, and the Iroquois helped the English drive the French colonial empire from Canada and the Northeast by 1763, but afterwards, the English neglected the Iroquois, even when the tribe fought with them in the Revolutionary War. When the U.S. won, many Iroquois moved north toward Canada, and the five tribes with reservations in upstate NY were denied U.S. citizenship in 1924 because they belonged to their own nation. The two tribes who fought with the colonists, the Tuscarora and the Oneida, were rewarded by being allowed to choose their own land which remained until 1959 when NY's Power Authority requested reservation land for their reservoir. Though the Tuscarora won the case in Supreme Court, the head of the Power Authority, Robert Moses, distributed a pamphlet claiming they were not using the land and advised them to "join the United States" (page 78). Frazier touches on the myths surrounding the first Thanksgiving before discussing the Navajo, the largest remaining tribe in the U.S. who still follow their traditions, but though they refuse to build casinos on their reservation, they encourage their youth to go to college.

Many reservations build casinos and garner wealth through this means since they are allowed to make their own local laws due to tribal sovereignty. The money generated from these casinos have changed the lives of some tribes, but the distant location of many of reservations make it difficult to attract gamblers, so tribes make money through farming, mining and foresting as well. A lot of Indians can also be found in the military, and military bases are often built near reservations. As a part of most treaties, the U.S. government promised to educate the Indian children, leaving the Bureau of Indian Affairs responsible for public schools on the reservation, though funds have been cut in recent years. Frazier believes that Indian names contribute to the pleasures of reading about these peoples, and as the Indians continue to absorb other groups, there is a reduction in the percentage of full-blooded Indians, meaning that future membership in tribes will likely depend upon family tradition and personal affinity as much as blood. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Indian babies were given up for adoption, and now, some of them seek out their birth parents. The idea of belonging to a tribe by affinity is less strange than it seems as Indians throughout history have preferred another tribe to the one they were born into. In fact, American tribes are so varied that nearly anyone could



find an appropriate one to join. Frazier's affinity veers toward the Oglala Sioux - "by blood and circumstances, I can never be an Oglala; but by long-standing affinity, the Oglala are my tribe" (page 92).

## Analysis

In Chapter 5, Frazier explores the presence of Indians everywhere in the United States, emphasizing that they have been or still are anywhere that can be seen in this country. He also discusses the impoverished living conditions that are prevalent on reservations, noting that Indians are twice as likely to live in mobile homes and over 90,000 Indian families are homeless. They are twice as likely to be murdered as other races in America, and the death rate from alcoholism for Native Americans exceed four times the national average. Discussing the Kickapoo tribe, Frazier describes how they moved from WI in the 1700s to IL and IN, fighting with the British during the Revolutionary War. A treaty in the 1830s sent them to Northeastern Kansas from where many moved to Mexico, losing the remainder of their lands in 1862, and though the Mexico government granted them lands, a drought in the 1940s pushed them north into Texas. Eventually, in 1983, a charitable organization fought to grant them land for a reservation and official tribal status. He also discusses the Trail of Tears.

While other tribes remain in the east of the country, the Wampanoag tribe who was named in the myth surrounding the first Thanksgiving, was nearly wiped out when they rose against the settlers during King Philip's War, but though they seemed to disappear from history for centuries, they continued to dwell in eastern MA, filing a lawsuit for land in the late 1970s; unfortunately, the federal jury ruled against them because they stopped being a tribe since they were inactive for so long. Exploring the impact of gambling on reservation life, Frazier explains how the Indian Gambling Regulatory Act of 1988 gave states some control and share of the revenue generated from Indian casinos. In discussing the many Indians who volunteered to serve in various American wars, Frazier notes that more Indians volunteered for World War I than any other ethnic group, even though they were not considered American citizens at the time. Many also fought in World War II and the Vietnam War. As Frazier explains how transient the Indians are, switching tribes based on affinity and personal beliefs as much as by heritage, he emphasizes that while he can never be an Indian by blood, he belongs to the Oglala Sioux tribe by affinity.

## Vocabulary

embedded, inhabiting, pirogue, predates, unanimity, prosperity, commemorate, parceled



# Chapter 6

## Summary

Since there are no motels on the reservation, Frazier stays in a hotel in Chadron, NE and drives the thirty mile distance each day he visits Pine Ridge. One day when he arrives at Le's home, he finds his friend crying about how he is a dog soldier who fights for his people and takes orders from no one except the spirits. Le talks to Frazier because the white man has a curious mind and an innocent heart, plus Frazier is his brother so Le burns sage and prays for him. As the two men gather more sage, Le sings Lakota songs and teaches the words of his people to Frazier. They visit Floyd John who complains about love since he and Wanda are fighting, and he insists on repaying Frazier's \$20 loan for car parts by gifting him with his fatigues and belt buckle from Vietnam, overcoming Frazier's objections by insisting that they are brothers. Frazier, Le, Floyd John and Wanda decide to go to the rodeo, stopping first for beer, and on the way home, Le and Floyd John argue about Vietnam, though they manage to part peacefully as brothers.

The next day when Frazier returns from Chadron, he finds that Le has been awake for a long time, and after Le expresses his contempt for George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, they visit Edgar High White Man whose mother was a survivor of Wounded Knee 2 and who testified in court for government reparations for the travesty. Another afternoon, Frazier meets Le's sister, Florence Cross Dog, who offers to sell a star quilt, and Frazier enjoys the domestic scene as her granddaughters model their jingle dresses. Frazier also meets Le's other sister, Aurelia Two Crow, who moved back to the reservation after her husband's death and feels better since returning home and cutting back on her alcohol consumption.

That winter was a hard one on the reservation, witnessed when a sunny day is followed by a blizzard during which Frazier drives Le to Rapid City to obtain a doctor's note confirming his disability. They also stop at PTI Propane to refill Le's propane tank, but since his tank is broken, they have to borrow a tank. When they finally return to PTI, which is run by Big Bat's wife Patty Pourier, they are forced to evacuate because of a propane leak. Fortunately, a driver arrives and fixes the problem; but, when Frazier questions the Indians for laughing, Le explains "that's the Indian way. We'd rather laugh about still being alive than moan about how we almost died" (page 110). After taking Le and Floyd John home, Frazier skips dinner with Florence because his nerves are still on edge, so promising to return soon, he heads home on the highway.

## Analysis

The fact that Frazier stays in a motel fairly far from the reservation seems odd given his affinity for the Oglala and his particular friendship with Le, especially as Le claims that Frazier is his brother. Le's actions confirm his affiliation with his Indian identity as he





sings Lakota songs and teaches Lakota words to his white friend. When Frazier returns to the reservation the next day, Le has been reading a biography about Abraham Lincoln who he hates for hanging 38 Sioux in 1862, and he also hates George Washington for being an Indian killer. The pair go to visit Le's sister, Florence Cross Dog, because she wants to meet Frazier, but since she is not at home, they visit Edgar High White Man, learning about his family history, including how they received their name because his great-grandfather was able to talk to a wagon filled with whites and dissuade them from attacking the Indians. While visiting Aurelia Two Crow, Frazier learns that hair spray kills insects, and he notes that he receives a lot of similar advice from various individuals on the reservation. The near-accident at PTI Propane serves to show the comparison between the Indians and Frazier who cannot understand how they manage to laugh at their potential deaths. Thus ends Frazier's visit to the reservation, foreshadowing his future returns.

## Vocabulary

audible, embankment, superimposed, preliminaries, vague, escalated, reparation, beguiling, lubricate





# Chapter 7

## Summary

In November, Frazier returns to the reservation, and when he and Le visit Floyd John in the trailer he purchased with a VA loan, they go out looking for car parts to repair a car they can have if they can get it running today. On the highway, they pass a bearded man picking up trash whom Le says is likely a Jesuit father from the Red Cloud Indian School, so when the car project proves futile, Frazier visits the school and meets Brother C. M. Simon who has run the museum for 18 years, and though he refuses to talk about Wounded Knee 2, he talks about his mission and expresses amazement at how much of their culture the Sioux have retained compared to how little the European emigrants retained. Frazier is eager to meet Charlotte Black Elk who appeared on a Sioux documentary, and when he visits her, she tells him about her astronomy-based theory that supports the Sioux's claim to the Black Hills. She also talks about her family history and how they are deemed "hostiles" because they came to Pine Ridge after the peace treaty was signed in the 1850s, but she is proud to be a hostile and rarely leaves the reservation because this is where she wants to be.

Because Le insists that a medicine man should bless the eagle feather he wants to send to Frazier's son, they look for a medicine man, but unable to find one, they visit Adam to borrow a gun to go hunting on Sunday. With nothing else to do the next day, Frazier visits White Clay, NE, "a Wild West town survived into the present that shows how uncongenial such a place would really be" (page 124). At 4:30 AM on Sunday morning, Frazier picks up Le and Floyd John, learning they hawked the gun to a guy in Oelrichs, thus ending their hunting expedition. Deciding to head home, Frazier says his adieu and picks up his quilt from Florence before driving 800 miles home a few days before Thanksgiving. He notes that bad things seemed to happen on the reservation in those days, and the day after Thanksgiving, Floyd John calls to inform him that Wanda was run over and killed by a car.

## Analysis

By the time Frazier returns to the reservation in November, Le has fixed his propane tank. They visit Floyd John in his trailer that was bought with a VA loan. Frazier talks with Brother Simon for some time, and night has fallen by the time their conversation ends. On his drive back to Chadron, NE, Frazier's car is hit by a beer bottle, but fortunately, it makes contact in an area that does not cause any real damage. When he mentions the incident the next day, Le says it happens all the time. When Frazier meets Charlotte and Gerald Clifford, leaders in the movement to convince Congress to return the Black Hills to the Sioux, Charlotte explains her theory to support their claim which is based on ancient Sioux tradition and astronomy, the Dried Willows constellation. In discussing her great-grandfather's book, she admits she has never read it because she knows so much more than what it covers. Talking about her pride in the reservation,



Charlotte claims she rarely leaves because this is where she wants to be, and she stays busy with her nine kids.

The first Frazier hears of Le's hunting plans is when they borrow the rifle, but the way that those plans fall through indicates Le never had any real intention of hunting. In White Clay, Frazier is surprised by the cleanliness of Arrowhead Inn, and the owner's sobriety makes him think that instead of the devil being wild and out of control like he has always thought, the devil is probably sober if he exists. Frazier is impressed by the quilt he buys from Florence, and he wishes he had a gallery in which to hang it. After returning home and learning of Wanda's death, Frazier wires money for the funeral, and when he visits her grave, he finds it covered with roses.

## Vocabulary

acquired, meandering, transparent, retained, equinoxes, precession, transients, expedition



# Chapter 8

## Summary

Years ago, people would hitchhike to the bars in Rapid City and take a train to Billings, MT. Indians from many tribes used to drink at Casey's Golden Pheasant, but it is now a vacant lot like many other Indian bars which seem to disappear. Still, Frazier meets Ronnie Tarbell in a bar and is told that the Indians will always be here, and some authentic Indian bars still exist. Indians tend to favor Budweiser, and Le claims it is because of their successful advertising. Many fortunes have been made by selling alcohol to the Indians. In the early days of the reservation, drinking was forbidden, and though the ban was lifted, Oglala traditionalists believe alcohol is a bitter curse that has weakened and destroyed the Indians more than anything else.

Frazier visits a bar in Buffalo Gap, SD where an Oglala man, Wesley Bad Heart Bull got into a fight and was killed by David Schmitz after being refused admittance. AIM insisted Schmitz be charged with first degree murder, and 36 Indians were arrested during the riots outside the court, yet Schmitz was acquitted. By then, AIM was occupied with the progress at Wounded Knee which ends in May with over 100 people being arrested, including Dennis Banks who sought sanctuary on the Onondaga Reservation before surrendering to police 11 years later and serving a year in jail. Russell Means stood trial for multiple charges which were dismissed, but when he and a friend killed a guy, Montileaux, in a bar fight several months later, Marlon Brandon bailed Means out. Means was shot several times over the next few months without serious injury, but when he was found guilty of rioting in December 1975, he was sentenced to four years imprisonment. He was allowed to stay free on the reservation, but he was shot at a party a few months later.

Before standing trial for the murder of Montileaux, Means visited Andy Warhol in NY to have his photo taken, and though he planned to kill the judge and prosecutors if he was found guilty, he was acquitted fortunately. After more protests, arrests and even a stabbing, Means traveled to Libya in 1984 and Nicaragua in 1985-1986 where he toured the country to speak on the abuses of the Sandinistas. He lost the vote for presidential nomination in 1987 and proceeded to have a successful career in movies. Thinking of this, Frazier asks the postmistress if she recalls Wesley Bad Heart Bull's death, and she notes that it did not hurt business; what hurt bars the most were DUI laws, but the postmistress insists there has always been a bar in Buffalo Gap and there always will be.

## Analysis

While discussing the trend of vanishing Indian bars, Frazier notes that there used to be a lot of them in Los Angeles and other cities, but as this is no longer the case, he was surprised to see a historical plaque on an Indian bar in Miles City, MT. During his



anecdote about Buffalo Gap, SD, he notes that the town is located 15 miles west of Pine Ridge Reservation and was used by the Indians to enter and leave the Black Hills. Many battles were fought there after the town was established when the train tracks were built, but the completion of the railroad to Rapid City caused a decline in Buffalo Gap. Regarding Dennis Banks' involvement at Wounded Knee, Frazier recounts that Banks was found guilty of rioting with a deadly weapon and aiding a fellow fugitive, but he found sanctuary on the Onondaga Reservation in New York for eleven years, at which point he surrendered to police. After serving a year in jail, Banks began a limo service and promoting an alcohol-free life for Indians. Frazier goes into even more about Russell Means who eventually played roles in "The Last of the Mohicans" in 1991 and provided Chief Powhatan's voice in Disney's "Pocahontas" in 1995. The fact that Wesley Bad Heart Bull's death did not impact the bar's business shows the commonality of violence towards Indians and how easily it is accepted.

## Vocabulary

converge, undetectable, dishearten, subsumed, lithograph, prominent, cosmology, intoxication



## Chapter 9

### Summary

Because the winter after Wanda's death is very snowy, Frazier does not visit the reservation, instead staying home to read the "Lakota-English Dictionary" written by Rev. Eugene Bucchel. After New Year's Eve, Le phones to say he is going to Los Angeles for a CAT scan to qualify for disability and will visit. Several weeks later, Le arrives with Mike Shot and Wendy Cody, but Le is somewhat drunk as he hugs Frazier's children. Wendy sells Frazier a dreamcatcher as she is trying to raise money to buy a car to ferry around the Oglala elders. Le dedicates his services as a dog soldier to Frazier's daughter, Cora. Though Frazier serves lunch to his visitors, he is relieved when they leave, even though he feels guilty about his lack of hospitality compared to Le introducing him to relatives on the reservation. During a cold, clear spell soon after, Frazier visits Pine Ridge but does not talk to many people.

Visiting Florence, Frazier learns that Le is staying with Aurelia, but he is still angry at his lack of hospitality, a fact that he blames on Le. On the snowy drive home, Frazier crashes into a freeway fence and is forced to get his car semi-repaired. Because the snow is still falling heavily, he stops in a motel in Columbus, MT, allowing himself to feel shaken when he reaches his room. Resuming his journey in the morning, Frazier is flagged down by a woman because his rear tire is wobbling, so he is forced to get new tires. The blizzard also hits Pine Ridge, and Le calls Frazier's home to check on him, calling back after his friend's return when he hears of the wreck. Le shares his experiences in multiple car accidents, and somehow, that wreck restores the balance between the two, causing the bad feelings between them to evaporate so they can be friends again.

### Analysis

In his allusion to Reverend Eugene Bucchal's "Lakota-English Dictionary", Frazier describes the book as being very intricate in detailing the various meanings and uses of words, and while visiting various places out west, Frazier often ponders the Indian word. Frazier's lack of hospitality during Le's visit contrasts sharply with Le escorting him around the reservation on each of his visits. This conflict leads to Frazier feeling negatively about his friend, but during his next visit to Pine Ridge, he feels guilty and visits Le briefly, though he still departs in a bad frame of mind. While reading local histories, Frazier is filled with dread, foreshadowing his imminent accident. After the foreshadowing is fulfilled, Frazier alludes to reading Samuel Beckett's "Eleutheria" while waiting for his car to be repaired. Hearing about the wreck, Le calls to check on Frazier, and sharing stories about his own accident somehow restores the sense of kinship between the two men, though their relationship continues to be a bit unsettled still.

## Vocabulary

compiled, sagacious, idiom, coaxed, embrace, intercept, eroded, sentimentality, accumulated



# Chapter 10

## Summary

In the summer, Frazier naps in his car at the picnic area on the west side of town, across the creek from the high school. Many people in town talk about places that are long gone like many businesses in other rural towns over the past 30 years, but though Pine Ridge Reservation has lost businesses, the population has nearly doubled while neighboring towns' populations have dwindled; Frazier ponders if the Indians' population will continue to increase and the settlers will move away. Documentaries and news reports focus on the rundown sections of town to illustrate the poverty that's inevitable on the reservation as only 30% of people on the reservation are employed. As he wanders around town that summer, Frazier keeps his eyes on the ground, examining the trash as if it is interesting.

Pine Ridge summers really open in August when people arrive for the big pow-wow, and the village seems larger as new arrivals set up camp. A lot of foreign languages are spoken on the reservation during this time of year, and the Indians are just as curious about the visitors as vice versa. During pow-wow season, Floyd John is away, and no one has seen Le, but Florence assures Frazier that Le will be at the first night of the pow-wow. The day before, Frazier runs into Le who has just been released from jail for a drunk and disorderly charge along with his niece, Verna, and he gives them a ride home. By Wednesday afternoon, Pine Ridge is busy with the rodeo open, and Frazier enters the pow-wow grounds, but he does not know what's going on; there are no program notes, and the events seem to be spontaneous like with most pow-wows. The grounds are lined with booths selling Indian foods and crafts, and wandering off, Frazier misses the Grand Entry parade. As the singing and drumming begins, Frazier searches for Le and Florence as he watches the elaborately feathered dancers entering the pow-wow circle for the men's Traditional Dance Competition. Deciding that he wants to be someplace quiet and empty, he walks downtown to the open path near the hospital, and listening to the noise from the pow-wow, he thinks of how he would feel if he were a young European immigrant in the prairie wilderness for the first time in 1843, and "I knew it would have scared and thrilled me to within an inch of my life" (page 183).

## Analysis

Talking about the places on the reservation, Frazier notes he usually has no idea what they mean since there are no street signs on the reservation. In noting the poverty that is prevalent on Indian reservations, the author compares them to the richest area of the country, the suburbs of Washington, DC, and he points out that both the poorest and richest areas receive their money from the same place: the federal government. The continuing narrative foreshadows the imminence of the August pow-wow when many tourists visit Pine Ridge Reservation. Frazier often eats breakfast at Big Bat's, and when he sees Patty Pourier, they reminisce about how they nearly died together. A young man



called Germaine is often at Big Bat's and enjoys hugging people; while some people seem frightened, others understand the gentle gesture. When Frazier sees Germaine at the pow-wow and receives a hug, he notices that everyone else walking away from one of Germaine's hugs has a smile on their face. Frazier seeking Le shows a rekindling of their friendship, but disturbed by a white man concentrating hard on the dance competition, Frazier wanders off and considers how he would feel as a young immigrant a few centuries ago hearing the noise of the pow-wow for the first time; his admission that he would be afraid shows some understanding for the settlers' fear of the Indians even though he disagrees with their methods of dealing with that fear.

## Vocabulary

collided, dormitory, mono-filament, poverty, artifact, luminous, magnetized, ominous





# Chapter 11

## Summary

Wandering into the main tribal building one morning, Frazier enters the empty council room where the 17-member Oglala Tribal Council meets, and when a man enters, Frazier thinks he recognizes Oliver Red Cloud from the papers. The man is actually Lyman, Oliver's son, and they discuss his family's lawsuit against Turner Network TV for the inaccurate portrayal of Lyman's ancestor before the room fills up and Frazier leaves. Frazier admires the original Red Cloud, a powerful war chief who founded Pine Ridge Reservation and fought in the Powder River War, making him the only Indian to win a war against the U.S. The war led to a 1868 peace agreement so generous that the government soon regretted it. The main struggle of Red Cloud's leadership was establishing a permanent home for the Oglala, but when the Oglala finally settled on the land he advocated for, the government did not name it after him to avoid the associations with the controversy he stirred; still, his name survived under the Pine Ridge name.

Frazier thinks of other places on the reservation that are named after people he has never heard of, such as the retirement home named after Felix S. Cohen, a white lawyer who worked for the tribe. Rather than agree with the popular assumption that Indians should assimilate to American culture, he fought for the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 which gives tribes the power to govern themselves because he believed "our democracy entrusts the task of maintaining its most precious liberties to those who are despised and oppressed by their fellow men" (page 193). Other buildings on the reservation are named after famous athletes and residents, and when Frazier asks about the SuAnne Big Crow Health and Recreation Center, Le explains that it is named after a Pine Ridge High School basketball star who died in a car wreck shortly before her eighteenth birthday. Visiting the building, a happy place, Frazier looks at the trophy case and reads about SuAnne Big Crow, feeling the sense of discovering a true Oglala hero in the 1980s. SuAnne won against all odds, and one of her teachers praised her because "she showed us a way to live on the earth" (page 199). SuAnne's stature and generosity were so great that she was able to do so for the Oglala and any who heard of her, and Frazier is as eager to share her story as any other in his book.

## Analysis

Frazier begins Chapter 11 by recounting a visit to the tribal council's building, going on to explain that there are many places on the reservation which are named after people he has never heard of. The Moses Two Bulls Tribal Court building was named after a famous judge, and though his daughter, Joan, works in the tribal enrollment office, she refuses to talk to Frazier about her father. Frazier discusses Felix S. Cohen is some death; Cohen was the leading expert on federal Indian policy in the 20th century, and in contrast to the way that this policy has historically been a crooked path between



attempts to abolish all tribes and to assimilate them into the American mainstream, Cohen was strongly involved with the idea of assimilation. He worked on the Wheeler-Howard Act of 1934, also known as the Indian Reorganization Act, which gives tribes the power to govern themselves, but around a quarter of the tribes refused to accept the act. Cohen fought for Indians' rights until his death in 1953, and his admirers recognize him for trying to inspire harmony. Introducing the topic of SuAnne Big Crow, Frazier explains that Oglala heroes are admired by both millions and a select few, and his admission of how greatly he wants to share her story foreshadows the retelling of SuAnne's life in the next few chapters.

## Vocabulary

portrayal, pictorial, refuge, imperatives, demotion, bucolic, advocated, ineradicable, aligned, renowned



# Chapter 12

## Summary

SuAnne Marie Big Crow was born March 15, 1974 at Pine Ridge Hospital to 25-year-old Chick Big Crow who already had two older daughters by another man and will not tell SuAnne who her father is. SuAnne is born during a dark time on the reservation, filled with violence related to conflict about the tribal government. SuAnne was an active child, but because her strict mother forbade her daughters to socialize outside of school, they had to make their own fun. Chick was always anti-drug and alcohol, and SuAnne took the same stance after watching her drunken godbrother shoot himself in the chest, and she often spoke on the topic - "SuAnne didn't respond to peer pressure; SuAnne was peer pressure. She was the backbone of any group she was in, and she was way wiser than her years" (page 204).

Though Chick forbade certain activities, she encouraged her daughters in sports, and SuAnne began playing basketball in kindergarten, practicing endless hours in her determination to be the first girl to dunk a ball in an official game. In 8th grade, SuAnne played for the JV team, moving to Varsity for the district playoffs where she scored 31 points. Race was always an issue when Pine Ridge played non-Indian teams, and the team was regularly harassed by the Lead, SD players. When Pine Ridge played Lead in 1998, SuAnne was a full member, and her teammate, Doni De Cory, was unwilling to enter the court first because of the heckling coming from the stands. Volunteering to lead her team, SuAnne enters the floor, stopping at center court to sing a Lakota song and do a Lakota shawl dance, and Doni notes "all that stuff the Lead fans were yelling - it was like she reversed it somehow" (page 209). The fans cheered as SuAnne dribbled and dunked the ball, and her team went on to win the game.

Though there is some conflict about the accuracy of the story, Frazier feels that it was so brave and interesting when considered from the larger perspective of Pine Ridge's 125 years of history with Leads. Leads was founded in the 1870s when gold was found there, preventing the Sioux from keeping the Black Hills and resulting in years of court battles for fair compensation, creating conflict between the two villages. For the Oglala, SuAnne's actions that day immediately take on the status of a myth, and Doni claims that it changed their relationship with Leads for the better, allowing the Pine Ridge team to become friends with the Leads team. America was founded on a leap of imagination as it was uncertain whether the ideas of freedom and justice were possible, but SuAnne shows that leap by proving that the idea cannot exist unless it is expressed by an action. Her action was risky, but if successful, the payoff would be glorious, and Frazier believes there was magic in what SuAnne did and sees it as "proof that it's a public service to be brave" (page 214).



## Analysis

Fulfilling the previous chapter's foreshadowing, Chapter 12 begins by introducing SuAnne Big Crow, born in 1974 to one of the largest clans on the reservation. Though her surname is very common in Sioux history, her mother, Chick, does not believe any famous Big Crows were her ancestors, but a medicine man once told her that she descended from a wise chief of long ago, and after SuAnne's death, he says that the girl was the spirit of this great leader, returned to reunite his people. An active, athletic child, SuAnne idolized popular basketball stars since girls' basketball is a big deal in the West. Her high school coach first noticed her running and admits she would have excelled at cross country if that schedule did not conflict with her basketball schedule. Talking about the racism prevalent in the towns surrounding Pine Ridge Reservation, Frazier recalls a story about SuAnne's bravery during a game in Leads, but he admits that the story told after her death was inaccurate; it actually took place when SuAnne was in eighth grade, and Pine Ridge lost the game in the last three seconds, plus no one in Leads seems to recall SuAnne's dance at center court. Regardless, Frazier is impressed by her actions and notes that people on the reservation saw it as a "counting coup", the most honored deed of war which indicates the warrior has touched their enemy without striking, indicating how close they came though the act is one of peace, not of war. Instead of eliciting a fight, SuAnne mocked the audience's heckling and invited them to dance and play, proving the benefits of bravery as this improved relations between the Pine Ridge and Leads players.

## Vocabulary

permeated, vexed, quarrel, dwindled, socialize, unharmoniously, caricature, investigated, abstract



# Chapter 13

## Summary

Doni De Cory is eager to talk to Frazier about SuAnne, and speaking with intensity, she explains that she and SuAnne were very close. She recalls that SuAnne was a big personality, and concerned with the tribe's future and wishing there were more opportunities on the reservation, she always tried to make them by helping others. Frazier finds that SuAnne is still on a lot of people's minds even years after her death. Rol Bradford, the boys' basketball coach, praises her skill in the sport, but a coach from out of town talks about how patient she was while playing and how she always greeted him, unusual for Indian kids. Other friends and family members recall SuAnne's popularity, mischievousness, modesty and determination, as well as how she stood against racism and stood up for those weaker than herself.

When SuAnne's team lost the state tournament her freshman year in 1988, she promised the coach they would win before she graduated. In addition to basketball, SuAnne participated in cheerleading, volleyball and track, kept good grades and even worked at Big Bat's deli over the summer. By her sophomore year, more people knew her and lauded her as a sophomore sensation because she set several state records. Before an all-Indian tournament, a medicine man tells Chick that someone is trying to harm SuAnne, but though SuAnne suffers a mild concussion, she soon returns to the team, helping them win many games at regionals.

Around the same time, NBC Nightly News hosts a special on the bleakness of the reservation, agitating SuAnne because they mention nothing positive. SuAnne and her team play admirably at the state tournament that year, taking the victory, but as soon as they win, security tells the coach to keep his fans off the floor because they do not want a demonstration, so the coach waits until the arena is empty before returning to run a victory lap with the trophy. When reporters question SuAnne about the victory, she jokingly tells them to call the story "Tragedy at Sioux Falls". The girls take the bus home, arriving to find hundreds of their neighbors waiting and cheering as they celebrate the girls' victory. Over the next weeks, the girls receive fan letters from all over the state, and for SuAnne, the victory means fame throughout the state and beyond. She is listed in an all-American roster a few weeks later, a huge honor, and soon, college recruiters begin calling her. SuAnne and her team make the biggest noise to come from Pine Ridge Reservation in a long time!

## Analysis

Chapter 13 introduces Doni De Cory, an athletic woman with big hair who was close friends with SuAnne and is very eager to talk about her. Though SuAnne was three years younger, it never seemed that way to Doni as they were very close and made a great basketball team. Both girls loved and were proud of their tribe, and Doni talks a lot



about her ugly feelings following SuAnne's death. Many other people on the reservation are also willing to talk about SuAnne. Her older sister, Pigeon Big Crow, recalls SuAnne's laughter and how popular she was in high school, while Chick admits that her daughter was quite mischievous.

Yvonne De Cory recounts her niece's determination to make a statement when playing softball even at the young age of five or six. Cheer leading coach Jeanne Horse still compares her squads to SuAnne's team. AIM leader Dennis Banks praises SuAnne for taking a stance against racism, whereas Milo Yellow Hair, the tribal vice-chairman, praises her for sharing attention with her entire team. Chick recalls that her daughter hated when she bragged about her because "if you have to do that, I didn't earn it" (page 222). SuAnne's cousin recalls how she took him under her wing during his freshman year and how much he admired her. Frazier recounts SuAnne's victory at the state tournament and how she joked about it being the "Tragedy at Sioux Falls", an ironic allusion to a recent NBC documentary that depicted the bleakness of life on the reservation which she found offensive and one-sided. This became the slogan of the victory during the ensuing celebrations, revealing SuAnne's sense of humor as well as her pride in her heritage.

## Vocabulary

immaculately, nondescript, generalizations, disposition, equilibrium, marquee, initiation, extraneous



# Chapter 14

## Summary

Small town glory is both huge and intimate, especially for a 15-year-old, and while SuAnne's year proceeds as the previous year, she is really someone now, sparking jealousy on the reservation. She joins a Native American All-Star girls' team on a tour to Europe, but she gets sick, and by the time she can rejoin her team, they have already lost too many games to make it to the playoffs. Chick notes that SuAnne was never really well again, possibly because of her fame, and she asks "how can a person always act just like everybody else when, as it happens, she's not?" (page 240). Now one of the older girls on the team, SuAnne is looked up to, creating a lot of pressure for a young girl. Because Oglala culture is simultaneously infatuated with and repelled by fame, the reservation is not a comfortable place to be famous for more than a week or two. SuAnne's ambition was to play ball at a Division I school, but as scholarship offers poured in, she began to worry about being homesick and considered attending a school in SD. SuAnne suffers some trouble from people on the reservation which saddens her, but her worst enemies are the Red Cloud girls, and a conflict in the fall of her senior year results in a fistfight which leads to SuAnne and several others going to tribal jail; since no one is seriously hurt, the charges are eventually dropped. Though the team has a good season, they ultimately lose to Red Cloud in the playoffs. Senior year presents a lot of "lasts" for SuAnne, and she surprises her mother when she says she does not need a car and will not be going to Spain the next year. She is very upset when a medicine man writes her that she is "a holy person of great importance to the future of her tribe" (page 244).

On February 9, 1992, SuAnne and Chick set out for Huron, SD to attend a prestigious award banquet for which SuAnne was nominated, but having gone without sleep the previous night, SuAnne falls asleep at the wheel, crashing and being rushed to the hospital; she dies at 3:35PM before they can transport her to a larger hospital by helicopter. Pine Ridge Reservation grieves for SuAnne, holding a large memorial service, but Chick quits her job, staying home and becoming withdrawn. One night, two girls deliver Valentines saying SuAnne was their hero, and the next day, Chick decides what she will do, thinking of how her daughter always talked about building a happy place for kids to have fun without getting in trouble. With the tribe's support, Chick opens the SuAnne Big Crow Center, and it serves thousands of kids. Chick credits its success to SuAnne who taught her mother more than her mother taught her and whose spirit kept the center alive. Frazier believes that while much is wrong with the reservation, the worst is the evil that exists and makes him want to run home at times; still, good exists too and can be sensed when entering the SuAnne Big Crow Center which is sustained by SuAnne's legendary goodness. Visiting the crash site, Frazier mentally composes a historic memorial marker for SuAnne since there will never be one.



## Analysis

When Frazier discusses SuAnne with Le, Le claims that she was a hypocrite because his niece went to school with her and reported that she was a big partier, but his niece seems baffled about where he obtained this information since she was several years younger and never went to school with SuAnne. Frazier considers the effects that fame must have had on such a young girl, and SuAnne's lack of plans during her senior year, compared to her previous ambitions, foreshadows her imminent death while indicating that she may have suspected her life was drawing to an end. When a popular teacher died unexpectedly, SuAnne considered how her funeral would be held without any sign of sadness. The day before going to the awards banquet in February 1992, SuAnne told Doni how saddened she was by the jealousy on the reservation, yet she was very excited about her first date that night.

During the next day's drive, SuAnne wrecks and dies, and fulfilling earlier foreshadowing, her funeral proceeds exactly as she imagined it with miles of procession, a white coffin and a tearful memorial service in the high school gymnasium. After SuAnne's death, Chick shuts down emotionally, losing her job and her Catholic faith, but a medicine man tries to comfort her in her grief, urging her not to let her soul slip away. Though Chick wants to leave the reservation, two girls' praise of SuAnne reminds her of SuAnne's dream of a center for kids, so she pursues it with the tribe's support, and they convert an old drill factory into the SuAnne Big Crow Center. Because Chick knows that the center must sustain itself, she engages in negotiations until the center becomes the first chartered Boys and Girls Club on an Indian reservation, serving thousands of kids since its opening in 1992. The Center's openness to strangers is based on SuAnne's own attitude, and her goodness sustains the center, even though she is gone forever. The impact that her life and death has on Pine Ridge Reservation and its inhabitants supports Frazier's view of SuAnne as a true, modern-day Oglala hero.

## Vocabulary

comprehend, exhibition, diagnosis, metaphor, disorderly, exaggerated, uncongenial, prestigious





# Chapter 15

## Summary

Pine Ridge Reservation continues to be what it is, and there is no end to its hard times as alcohol-related accidents and corrupt tribal leaders continue to exist. After a tornado kills a man and destroys 160 buildings in June, 1999, protesters riot about the mysterious Indian deaths that occur near the reservation borders, eliciting a visit from President Clinton who promises tax credits for new business development. Frazier does not see Le for a while because they are still mad at one another, and on the rare occasions that Frazier finds him on the reservation, Le tells incredulous stories. When Frazier refuses to send money, Le forbids him from contacting him when he returns to the reservation, but when Frazier visits, Le greets him cheerfully, and they reconcile their differences.

Frazier visits Pine Ridge in all seasons and all moods, but it still looks grand to him. When he visits near Christmas, he drives to Aurelia's house with Le and Floyd John where he feels oddly at home and comfortable. Returning to his motel in Chadron, NE, Frazier stops at a casino one night to play the nickel machines, exploring Americans' fascination with gambling. He also visits the SuAnne Big Crow Center to visit Chick, and he accompanies her to put Christmas lights on her daughter's grave. While visiting Florence one morning, he plays with her granddaughter, Dawn, and thinking how much his children would enjoy playing with Dawn, he considers asking to take her home. When Floyd John and Le's attempts to repair a transaxle seal fails and convinces them that they require an expert, they search for Chet, Florence's oldest son, who agrees to complete the repair for a case of beer. After he fixes it, he tells Le he will send the bill, and Le quips "I'll pay you when I get my Black Hills money" (page 275). Frazier immensely enjoys the visit, finding it easier to be with his friends since Floyd John quit drinking. He even gets to enjoy the scenery while riding in Floyd John's backseat. One evening, Frazier attends a memorial service for SuAnne, and as a young man sings a Lakota memorial song, he tries to stop gripping the hand of the woman next to him so hard.

Having nearly finished his novel, Frazier is tempted to draw conclusions like most books about Indians do. He can see the tribe improving and prospering, but he has no actual advice for the Oglala, plus advice has not worked well for them in the past and no Oglala ever asked his advice. Instead, Frazier suggests that the rest of America reconsidering restoring the Black Hills to the Sioux. One morning not long before Christmas, Frazier drives Le to see his friends, and Le says he will stay with Verna Yellow Horse for a while because Aurelia kicked him out since he refused to give her \$500. Le talks about the police and how he reviles immigrants as well as the spiritual bond between himself and Frazier. Though Frazier discounts much of what Le says, he does not ignore the idea of them being brothers. As Frazier leaves, Le tells him to send his love to his family, but he disappears before the next morning so Frazier visits Floyd John; the two exchange "God bless you" before Frazier heads home.



## Analysis

In the final chapter, Frazier wraps up his novel by acknowledging that Pine Ridge is still Pine Ridge; his frequent presence on the reservation has had little to no impact. He acknowledges that there are many negative aspects about life on the reservation, yet he still finds it to be an enjoyable place. Pine Ridge makes the national news again when their August pow-wow exceeds the previous year's event. It's quite some time before Frazier sees Le again, but eventually, Le calls to tell his friend that he has been diagnosed with prostate cancer, a diagnosis that is fortunately wrong. It is nearly Christmas before Le can return to the reservation, and while hugging Le in Aurelia's homey kitchen, Floyd John informs Frazier that most people on the reservation do not celebrate Christmas, an unsurprising revelation given Frazier's earlier notes about the Oglala's conformity to traditions of old, including their religion.

Frazier enjoys Le's stories about his bull riding days, and he has a very good time during this visit to Pine Ridge. While discussing payment with Chet, his nephew, Le quips "I'll pay you when I get my Black Hills money" (page 275), a common joke on the reservation which alludes to the lands the U. S. government stole from the Sioux centuries ago. In concluding his novel, Frazier refrains from drawing any conclusions about the Oglala or offering them advice, pointing out that they did not ask his opinion; instead, he shows his affinity for the Indians when he urges the rest of America to reconsider restoring the Black Hills to their rightful owners. Though Frazier says his goodbyes to Le and Floyd John, it is obvious that their friendships are not at an end and that their stories will continue even though they are not included in "On the Rez."

## Vocabulary

epidemic, compensate, unverifiable, navigable, denomination, contorted, saturated, discharge



# Important People

## Ian Frazier

Ian Frazier is the author of "On the Rez" and the first-person narrator of the book. Although he is a white American, he greatly admires and reveres the Indians, and his interest leads to his friendship with Le and his frequent visits to the Pine Ridge Reservation in SD. The narrative begins with Frazier praising Indians for their sense of freedom and explaining how this idea contributed to America's founding principles of liberty and equality. Seeing Indian reservations as the last area of the U.S. to maintain its original identity and refrain from yielding to the country's "paving mechanism", Frazier admires the Indian's culture, especially their affinity for heroes.

While living in New York, Frazier meets Le War Lance, an Oglala Sioux, and the pair develop a long-lasting friendship. Le often introduces Frazier to his visiting family and friends, such as Floyd John, and they discuss various Indian-related topics, such as Indians' role in Hollywood. After being sentenced to prison on a drunk driving charge, Le seeks refuge in Pine Ridge. Soon after, Frazier relocates his family to Montana, and after settling in, he visits Le on the reservation where Le takes him to the cemetery and tells him about his deceased relatives. Frazier shares many anecdotes about the site-seeing ventures he goes on with Le, paying particular attention to his trip to Wounded Knee, the site of an infamous Indian massacre in 1890 as well as a protest occupation in 1973.

Frazier examines how various tribes were oppressed by European settlers when America was being founded and explains how their affinity for gambling led to the establishment of casinos on many tribes' reservations. Detailing how many Indians choose their tribe by affinity rather than birthright, Frazier proudly claims affinity to the Oglala, and he is also proud that Le identifies him as a brother, not just a friend. When Frazier visits the reservation, Le and Floyd John escort him around, introducing him to members of their tribe, and many of these impromptu interviews are included in the narrative. Frazier also visits neighboring towns and shares their histories which are usually rife with tales of bigotry and violence, especially as it pertains to the negative effect alcohol has had on Indian culture. A conflict arises between Frazier and Le when Le visits his friend's home and family while drunk, but their sense of kinship is restored after Frazier gets into a car accident on his way home from his next visit to Pine Ridge. Frazier attends the August pow-wow, and though he enjoys himself, he imagines how terrified he would be as a young European immigrant visiting the wilderness for the first time in the 19th century.

Frazier learns much about Pine Ridge Reservation through his conversations with its inhabitants, but he is most interested in SuAnne Big Crow, a popular high school basketball player who died in a car wreck during her senior year. Frazier conducts many interviews pertaining to SuAnne, and her story encompasses nearly a quarter of the narrative as he details examples of her bravery and tribal pride. After SuAnne's death,



her mother honors her by establishing a recreation center in her name, ensuring that her daughter's legacy of goodwill continues. In conclusion, Frazier admits that Pine Ridge Reservation remains unchanged, and though he offers no advice to the Indians, he encourages the rest of America to restore the Black Hills to their rightful owners. Bidding adieu to his friends, Frazier heads home to his family in Montana.

## **Le War Lance**

Le War Lance is an Oglala Sioux who Frazier befriends while they both live in New York. Much of the narrative centers around this friendship as Le escorts Frazier around the Pine Ridge Reservation; in fact, Le considers Frazier to be his brother despite the differences in their heritages. While living in New York, Frazier meets Le War Lance, an Oglala Sioux, and the pair develop a long-lasting friendship. Le often introduces Frazier to his visiting family and friends, such as Floyd John, and they discuss various Indian-related topics, such as Indians' role in Hollywood. After being sentenced to prison on a drunk driving charge, Le seeks refuge in Pine Ridge. Soon after, Frazier relocates his family to Montana, and after settling in, he visits Le on the reservation where Le takes him to the cemetery and tells him about his deceased relatives. Frazier shares many anecdotes about the site-seeing ventures he goes on with Le, paying particular attention to his trip to Wounded Knee, the site of an infamous Indian massacre in 1890 as well as a protest occupation in 1973.

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## **SuAnne Big Crow**

SuAnne Big Crow is a girls' basketball star at Pine Ridge High School who died in a car wreck during her senior year. Frazier greatly admires her and spends nearly a quarter of his book describing her bravery and heroism. SuAnne is born on March 15, 1974, to Chick. Though her mother is very strict, she encourages her daughters to participate in sports. SuAnne is active in multiple sports from a young age, and when she plays JV basketball during 8th grade, she leads her team onto the court amidst jeers at Leads High School, stopping at center court to sing and dance in a traditional Lakota style. SuAnne was a leader in her community during her teen years, and many people on the reservation are eager to talk to Frazier about how she spoke out against drugs and alcohol, was kind to everyone and expressed great pride in her heritage. She led her



team to victory at the state tournament in her sophomore year, making her team the largest noise to come from Pine Ridge in a long time.

SuAnne suffers from the pressure of her popularity and grows saddened by the jealousy it inspires on the reservation. On a trip to Huron where she is being honored as a nominee for a prestigious award, SuAnne falls asleep at the wheel and wrecks. She is rushed to the hospital but dies at 3:35PM before they can transport her to a larger hospital by helicopter. Pine Ridge mourns SuAnne's death, and her mother honors her by opening a recreation center in her name.

## Russell Means

Russell Means participates in the riot at the Custer courthouse and stands trial in Sioux Falls, SD in April 1974. Russell Means stood trial for multiple charges which were dismissed, but when he and a friend killed a guy, Montileaux, in a bar fight several months later, Marlon Brandon bailed Means out. Means was shot several times over the next few months without serious injury, but when he was found guilty of rioting in December 1975, he was sentenced to four years imprisonment. He was allowed to stay free on the reservation, but he was shot at a party a few months later. Before standing trial for the murder of Montileaux, Means visited Andy Warhol in NY to have his photo taken, and though he planned to kill the judge and prosecutors if he was found guilty, he was acquitted fortunately. After more protests, arrests and even a stabbing, Means traveled to Libya in 1984 and Nicaragua in 1985-1986 where he toured the country to speak on the abuses of the Sandinistas. He lost the vote for presidential nomination in 1987 and proceeded to have a successful career in movies.

## Charlotte Black Elk

Charlotte Black Elk is a woman in her early forties who, with her husband Gerald Clifford, is among the leaders in the movement to convince Congress to return the Black Hills to the Sioux. She supports their claim with a theory based on astronomy and ancient Sioux tradition and has appeared in a documentary about Sioux history. Great-granddaughter to Nicholas Black Elk, a famous holy man, Charlotte admits that she has never read his book "Black Elk Speaks" because she knows much more about her culture than what the book discusses.

## Leatrice Big Crow

Known as Chick, Leatrice Big Crow is SuAnne's mother. She has two older daughters as well, and Frazier describes Chick as having a round, pretty face with dark eyes, a determined chin and wiry reddish-brown hair. Chick is a strict mother, but she never tells SuAnne who her father is. After SuAnne's death, Chick quits her job in grief, but she eventually honors her daughter by opening the recreation center and running it in SuAnne's spirit.



## **Floyd John**

Floyd John is a close friend of Le's who becomes friends with Frazier also. He accompanies his friends during many adventures on and around Pine Ridge Reservation, and after Floyd John quits drinking, Frazier finds it easier to spend time with him.

## **Aurelia Two Crow**

Aurelia Two Crow is one of Le's sisters who returns to Pine Ridge after her husband's death. She talks to Frazier about her decision to quit drinking and also advises him that hair spray kills insects.

## **Florence Cross Dog**

Another of Le's sisters, Florence Cross Dog is a big-boned woman with short, dark hair, high eyebrows and measuring eyes. Her grandchildren live with her, and Le also resides in her home at several points. Frazier often visits Florence on his trips to Pine Ridge, and she sells him a beautiful star quilt which she learned how to make in a dream.

## **Doni De Cory**

Doni De Cory is a big woman with vivid dark eyes and huge hair. Though she was three years older, Doni had played basketball with SuAnne in high school, and they were very close friends. Doni is eager to talk to Frazier about SuAnne.



# Objects/Places

## Pine Ridge Reservation

Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota is the main setting of "On the Rez". An impoverished area, this is the home of the Oglala Sioux, and Frazier visits often to conduct multiple interviews which are included in the narrative.

## New York City

Frazier meets Le while living in New York City.

## Washington Heights

While living in New York, Le's home is located in Washington Heights.

## Missoula, MT

After finishing a book, Frazier grows restless and moves his family to Missoula, Montana, which is close enough to Pine Ridge Reservation for him to visit frequently.

## Red Shirt Table Road

Red Shirt Table Road, the road to Pine Ridge Reservation, is poorly paved and difficult to traverse. However, its design was intentional to keep the "savages" away from the railroad.

## Wounded Knee

During one visit to Pine Ridge, Frazier travels 15 miles to explore Wounded Knee which is the site of an infamous Indian massacre in 1890 in an attempt to suppress the Ghost Dance, and it is also famous for the 71 day protest demonstration in 1973 when AIM leaders occupied the village to demand political changes and to negotiate with the American government.

## Big Bat's Texaco

Big Bat's Texaco is a convenience store and gas station in Pine Ridge where Frazier often has breakfast while visiting the reservation. It is one of the few places on the reservation that looks like "paved America".



## **Chadron, NE**

During his visits to Pine Ridge Reservation, Frazier stays in a hotel in Chadron, NE and drives back and forth each day.

## **Red Cloud School**

Located south of Highway 3, about three miles from the reservation, Red Cloud School is a group of brick buildings that are over 100 years old, and this is where Frazier talks to Brother C.M. Simon.

## **White Clay, NE**

White Clay, NE is a Wild West town survived into the present and has been the site of much violence. It consists of two rows of stores and houses that line the main street for a block and a half, and though there are no longer any bars in town, Frazier finds that it is always loud, even at 9AM.

## **Billings, MT**

Billings, MT is a town with wide streets which used to be filled with Indian bars and wild goings-on, but few bars exist now. Casey's Golden Pheasant was known as the "preeminent Indian bar in this country" (page 132) in the 1950s and 1960s, but now it's just a vacant lot.

## **Buffalo Gap, SD**

Located 15 miles west of the reservation line, Buffalo Gap, SD is a small town named for the gap in the Black Hills that the Sioux used to enter and leave the Black Hills. It has been the site of many battles, and it was one of the wildest Western towns ever with big dreams when he was used as a terminus and departure point for the gold mines in the Hills around 1885, but the town diminished when the railroad extended to Rapid City. Buffalo Gap was also the site of the murder of Wesley Bad Heart Bull.

## **Prairie Wind Casino**

The Oglala built Prairie Wind Casino on the western edge of the reservation, 13 miles from US Hwy 385, and on his way back to his hotel one night, Frazier stops to play the nickel poker machines.





# Themes

## Tribal Pride

Tribal pride plays a large role in "On the Rez" as a prevalent recurring theme displayed by many of the narrative's characters. As the book opens, Ian Frazier explains how the Indians' sense of freedom influenced the concept of the American dream in terms of liberty and equality. After Frazier meets Le, Le often expresses his feelings of pride in his heritage, beginning with his inclination to return to the Pine Ridge Reservation, but his pride is also shown when he brags about his scars, symbolic because of how the Indians' culture revolves around warriors and heroism. During their conversations about Indians appearing in films, especially Westerns, Le's tribal pride is apparent as he laments the lack of recognition that his people have received for their contributions in Hollywood. When Le needs money from Frazier, he gifts his friend with a Western saddle which is obviously useless to the city dweller, but his desire to compensate Frazier in some form shows a sense of pride in himself and his heritage. During Frazier's first visit to Pine Ridge, Le demonstrates pride in his heritage and his family when he takes his friend to the cemetery to share stories about his deceased relatives. His participation in protest demonstrations throughout the 1970s also serves as indisputable evidence of his Indian pride.

The histories that Frazier shares about the Kickapoo, Cherokee and Tuscarora tribes all reveal extreme pride in their heritages and their ways of life which they refuse to change despite pressure from the European settlers. This is also evidenced in many tribes' refusal to join America, instead maintaining tribal sovereignty on the reservations allotted to them by the United States government. Florence's happiness to return to Pine Ridge and Le's pride in being a dog soldier both exemplify this theme, as does Le's attempts to teach Lakota words to Frazier. Although Frazier is born white, he claims that his affinity for the Oglala makes them his tribe, explaining why he is proud when Le views him as a brother, thus giving him a right to call the Oglala his people. SuAnne also exemplifies tribal pride by her center-court dance at the Leads high school and her objection to the documentary that only highlights the "Tragedy at Pine Ridge". Other examples of this theme of tribal pride include the Indians' adherence to their cultural heritage, their objections to whites participating in their ceremonies, their continued fight for the restoration of the Black Hills to their people, and their habit of naming locations on the reservation after famous Indians.

## Heroism

Considering Frazier's claim that tribal life revolved around heroism, it is not surprisingly that this theme appears repeatedly throughout his narrative as he examines various levels of heroism exhibited by many Indians, past and present. Frazier has always revered Crazy Horse for his bravery and acts of heroism, so it's no surprise that he admires Le's grandfather, James Walk Out, for hiding the war chief's bones so they



cannot be sold; this shows one means by which the Indians honor their departed heroes. Floyd John is a Vietnam Veteran, and Frazier notes that many Indians have served in various wars that America has waged, despite the fact that they are not considered citizens of this country. The events that occur at Wounded Knee in both 1890 and 1973 serve as examples of the heroism that is such a prevalent part of Indian culture also.

Le's view on this is seen by his claims that he is a dog soldier who fights for his people and only takes orders from the spirits, and his decision to dedicate his services to Cora, Frazier's daughter, reveals the level of intimacy between the two friends. Frazier gives another example of heroism through his tale about Oliver Red Cloud, a powerful war chief who was the only Indian to win a war against the United States. Frazier is most excited when he uncovers the story about SuAnne Big Crow who he views as a true Oglala hero in the 1980s because of her bravery during the Leads game and her refusal to yield to peer pressure.

## Car Accidents

In a culture plagued with violence of all sorts and which suffers greatly from the influence of alcohol, it does not seem unusual that Pine Ridge is greatly afflicted with car accidents, particularly those resulting from intoxicated drivers. Frazier first notices this on his first visit to the reservation when he discovers eight markers where a fatal accident occurred, and his research reveals that seven Sioux were killed by a non-Indian drunk driver at this location. In Chapter 7, after Frazier returns home to MT, Floyd John calls him to inform him that Wanda was run over and killed by a car on the highway, adding to this depressing theme.

SuAnne Big Crow also dies in a car accident while driving to an awards ceremony in Huron, SD. She falls asleep at the wheel and crashes into a guardrail, and though she is rushed to a local hospital, they are not properly equipped to treat her and she dies before they can transport her to a larger hospital via helicopter. Of course, not all car accidents are fatal as seen by the many that Le has survived all across the country. Frazier also gets into an accident in Chapter 9; while driving home from Pine Ridge in the snow, he crashes into a freeway fence and has to get his car repaired. He gets a hotel room for the night, but he is flagged down the next day because his rear tire is wobbling. When Le learns about Frazier's accident, he shares anecdotes about the many accidents he has survived, restoring the sense of kinship between the two friends.



# Styles

## Structure

### Perspective

"On the Rez" is written from the first-person perspective of the author and narrator, Ian Frazier. The non-fiction narrative explores the life of modern-day Native Americans (Indians), and Frazier's perspective is unique but appropriate because of his affinity to the Indians despite his white heritage. Throughout the book, Frazier shares anecdotes pertaining to his friendships with various Indians, particularly his close friend, Le, as well as his multiple visits to the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, home of the Oglala Sioux. The narrator does a fantastic job of incorporating historical facts and events into his narrative, explaining how the past continues to impact the lives of the Oglala even today. Through his portrait of a largely fallen culture, Frazier explores their humanity and how their culture impacted the American dream while simultaneously introducing readers to the harsh realities of life on the reservation where tragedy is a prevalent and accepted part of daily life.

The intended audience is anyone interested in Native Americans but particularly average white Americans whose ancestors were the European settlers who displaced the Indians from their lands. The narrative strives to help these readers understand the Indians' culture and urges them to consider measures that would improve these natives' lives. Various Indians on the reservation also have a voice in this narrative as Frazier writes about multiple interviews and explains their beliefs on many topics. Though the narrative is not suspenseful, it is propelled by series of small surprises and a sense of impending revelation as Frazier's knowledge of this strong culture grows with his increased contact with individuals at Pine Ridge Reservation.

### TONE

Ian Frazier's "On the Rez" is written in an informative tone, and though his narrative often follows a meandering path, he refrains from passing judgment on the Indians' lifestyle. Disregarding the prevalent notion that life on the reservation is bleak, Frazier presents anecdotes about his visits to Pine Ridge and shares historical accounts of various Indian-related events in a comical way, despite the fact that many subjects he broaches are quite sad. The narrative is a composite of many voices and multiple forms of history. Due to his affinity for the Oglala tribe, Frazier expresses sympathy and understanding when addressing their plight since the arrival of European settlers, and though the majority of the book focuses on the Oglala Sioux, he also explores the cultures and histories of several other tribes. His compassion for these people, as well as his admiration, is evident in his exploration of their culture, especially as he examines the hero concept which he finds is most clearly exemplified by the life of SuAnne Big Crow.



Frazier's narrative is very detailed as he incorporates many viewpoints as discovered through multiple visits filled with interviews on the Pine Ridge Reservation. "On the Rez" is considered one of the most truthful accounts of the lives of modern American Indians, and Frazier achieves this praise through his respectful, nearly reverent, tone while exploring the current conflicts in Oglala society and how this was impacted by the arrival of European settlers. Abstaining from making any suggestions to the Oglala, he reserves his criticism instead for the descendants of the usurping Europeans who originally oppressed this proud people, urging them to reconsider restoring the Black Hills to their rightful owners.

## STRUCTURE

"On the Rez" consists of 279 pages, divided into 15 chapters which average around 18 pages in length. The chapters are numbered, not titled, allowing Frazier to focus on his visits to Pine Ridge Reservation and his kinship with its inhabitants, the Oglala Sioux. Interspersed throughout these interviews and anecdotes, readers will find statistical information about various American Indian tribes as well as historical lessons about how these peoples were oppressed by the European settlers who invaded their lands. In addition to the tales of oppression and disrespect granted by the settlers, Frazier explores modern life on an Indian reservation, examining their continued adherence to the lifestyles of their ancestors and their culture.

Tying his anecdotes into historical fact, Frazier notes how the past affects the present in this informative narrative which is considered one of the most accurate accounts of modern-day Indians in America. The timeline is generally chronological, though there are frequent departures into the past as the narrator incorporates history and interviews into his story.

## Perspective

## Tone



## Quotes

That self-possessed sense of freedom is closer to what I want; I want to be an uncaught Indian like them.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

**Importance:** This quote explains Frazier's affinity to the Indians as well as emphasizing the impact their sense of freedom had on the founding of America.

But such accounts can't do justice to the thrilling spark of freedom in the encounter - the freedom the Indians had, the freedom that white people found. As surely as Indians gave the world corn and tobacco and potatoes, they gave it a revolutionary new idea of what a human being could be.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 1 paragraph 19)

**Importance:** This quote describes the impact that the Indians' culture had on the European emigrants who settled in America and founded this country.

You ask me to be a Lakota, And that is the hardest thing in the world to be. I am a Lakota, So I suffer for my people.

-- Le (chapter 2 paragraph 16)

**Importance:** This Lakota song that Le sings was first sung by Red Cloud. Its lyrics tell about the difficulty of being a Lakota Indian.

It's not hard for me. I'm nomadic.

-- Le (chapter 3 paragraph 44)

**Importance:** This quote references the nomadic lifestyle of Indians which exemplifies their love of freedom.

My cousin was saying that there was too many white guys dancing at the sun dances on the reservation last summer. Him and his friends think letting white guys or any non-Indians in ruins the ceremonies. They don't think outsiders should be allowed even as helpers or water carriers. They say that you let white guys buy the food and the firewood, the way some sun dances do, and then you've gotta let 'em dance, and then pretty soon people who don't know anything are running the whole ceremony. And he's right that there was hundreds of white guys goin' to the sun dances last summer. But I say, If a person's heart is good, let him participate in a respectful way. There's non-Indian people that love the sun dance and are really sincere. You just have to be sure that you have elders and medicine men who run the ceremony as it's supposed to be.

-- Le (chapter 4 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This quote shows an example of Indians' racism against whites, but Le's opinion is that anyone can participate in Indian rituals as long as they do so in a respectful way.



Lots of times there was gunfire. Gunfire at night is like when you bring a new baby home and it cries in the night - you don't have much choice but to get up and pay attention to it. But after a while you get used to it, and you pay attention to it without really waking up.

-- Floyd John (chapter 4 paragraph 54)

**Importance:** In this quote, Floyd John recalls the violence of Wounded Knee II and how gunfire was so common that he was eventually able to sleep through it.

Indians are embedded deeply in America. You find them everywhere - in remote places where almost no one else could live, in small towns, and in the biggest cities. 30.9 percent of Indians have incomes below the national poverty line, more than any other race or ethnic group, so the neighborhoods where they live tend to be run-down. But Indian tribes also own high-priced real estate in Las Vegas, Nevada, and Palm Springs, California; five tribes operate gambling casinos that gross \$100 million or more a year. The federal government has granted official tribal status to 570 tribes. Over 150 others remain unrecognized but continue to exist all the same. From time to time you read of another officially overlooked tribe turning up in a makeshift community under a highway bridge or in the desert between two Western cities. Of the almost two million people who identify themselves as American Indians on the U.S. census form, about half are enrolled members of a federally recognized tribe.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 5 paragraph 70)

**Importance:** In this quote, Ian Frazier describes how deeply embedded Indians are in American culture and civilization.

By blood and circumstances, I can never be an Oglala; but by long-standing affinity, the Oglala are my tribe.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 5 paragraph 46)

**Importance:** After explaining how Indians often choose their tribe by affinity rather than birthright, Ian Frazier explains that the Oglala are his tribe by affinity, even though he was not born an Indian.

Listen - I want to tell you something - you know I'm a dog soldier, right? You know what that means? It means I fight for my people, that I'm a warrior. You understand? I'm a dog soldier, today is a good day to die! It's a good day to change the world! I'm standing on my own two feet on the bosom of our mother earth. I go where I want, I do what I want. I take no orders from anybody. The spirits tell me what to do. I'm just a man...

-- Le (chapter 6 paragraph 1)

**Importance:** This quote demonstrates the importance of heroism in Indian culture.

Well, that's the Indian way. We'd rather laugh about still being alive than moan about how we almost died.

-- Le (chapter 6 paragraph 50)



**Importance:** This quote highlights the differences between whites and Indians, particularly between Frazier and Le.

It's remarkable, really, when you think about it, how much of their tribal culture the Sioux have retained. Certainly they've retained a lot more than the rest of us. Take me, for example. Two of my grandparents came to Minnesota from Alsace-Lorraine. But would you by any stretch of the imagination consider me an Alsatian? The family has lost its memory of ever coming from there. The Oglala still dance as their ancestors did centuries ago. Can you still do the dances your forefathers did long ago back in Scotland or wherever?

-- Brother Simon (chapter 7 paragraph 10)

**Importance:** In this quote, Brother Simon points out how much of their culture the Indians have retained compared to European emigrants, and this serves as an example of tribal pride.

To tell you the truth, I've never had the inclination to sit down and read it. Being related to someone like Black Elk brings a sense of responsibility that's not very gratifying sometimes, especially when you're a kid. I guess I never really felt I had to read it. As Granpa Ben told me, "The book is about this much [thumb and forefingers an inch apart] and you already know this much [arms wide apart]."

-- Charlotte Black Elk (chapter 7 paragraph 21)

**Importance:** This quote serves as proof that books about Indians, no matter how well-written, cannot truly encompass all there is to know about their culture.

I'm not an American and I'm not a Canadian. I'm a North American from the Kahnawake Reserve, which is older than the U.S. and older than New York State and older than Canada. My people are the natural people, the people of the earth. We've always been here and we'll always be here. After the white man has destroyed everything, and even after the buildings we built for him have fallen down and disappeared, we'll still be here.

-- Ronnie Tarbell (chapter 8 paragraph 7)

**Importance:** This quote expresses the belief that the Indians will persevere and continue their culture long after America has destroyed itself.

The stories I had recently been reading about Pine Ridge in the local histories and newspapers had left me with a residue of dread. They all seemed to involve suffering and violence and hopes destroyed, and car wrecks, one after the next. I felt guilty for my journalistic interest in Le, and for being a chintzy middle-class white guy.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 9 paragraph 22)

**Importance:** In this quote, Frazier acknowledges that learning of all that the Indians have suffered makes him feel guilty for his interest in them.

The phenomenon of the dying Western town has been reported often before. But on Indian reservations, despite a lower life expectancy, population figures have been on





the rise. If the trend continues, perhaps in a hundred years most of the descendants of the pioneers who settled in the West will have left the still-rural parts of it, and the descendants of the Indians will have increased their numbers to more than they were when the first pioneers arrived.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 10 paragraph 6)

**Importance:** This quote serves as a prediction that Indians will continue to increase their population until it surpasses what it was when their lands were first usurped, thus expressing admiration of their resilience.

The destruction of the Indian way of life in those years was such that no Indian leader really survived it; Red Cloud almost did.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 11 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** In this quote, Frazier examines how European settlers' destruction of Indian culture destroyed many Indian leaders.

[Felix Cohen] believed that 'our democracy entrusts the task of maintaining its most precious liberties to those who are despised and oppressed by their fellow men,' and Indians were foremost among the oppressed in his mind.

-- Felix Cohen (chapter 11 paragraph 24)

**Importance:** This quote emphasizes the oppression the Indians have suffered since America was founded and argues that Americans are duty-bound to protect them.

You have to understand. SuAnne didn't respond to peer pressure, SuAnne was peer pressure. She was the backbone of any group she was in, and she was way wiser than her years. By coming out against drinking, I know she flat-out saved a lot of kids' lives. In fact, she even had an effect on me. It dawned on me that if a sixteen-year-old girl could have the guts to say these things, then maybe us adults should pay attention too. I haven't had a drink since the day she died.

-- Rol Bradford (chapter 12 paragraph 9)

**Importance:** This quote serves to establish SuAnne's character and how she was not influenced by peer pressure.

We're from an Indian reservation in the middle of the country, we're from Pine Ridge, South Dakota... We're Oglala Siooooooooux!

-- SuAnne Big Crow (chapter 13 paragraph 3)

**Importance:** Here, SuAnne expresses her pride in her tribe and their heritage despite racism from the fans at Leads.

She would never let me brag about her. She used to tell me, 'Mom, if you have to do that, I didn't earn it.

-- Chick Big Crow (chapter 13 paragraph 21)





**Importance:** SuAnne's quote, recalled by Chick, demonstrates SuAnne's modesty.

I've made many mistakes in what I've done here over the years. I never followed up on a lot of ideas for improvements I had, I didn't acknowledge people who sent me donations, I let important matters slide sometimes. I tried to handle everything myself, from cooking in the restaurant to figuring out our computer system to managing the budget to mowing the softball field. I had a hard time delegating any job. Maybe I was trying to punish myself over guilt at SuAnne's death, maybe I was expressing a grief that I had never dealt with. I don't think I was really fitted to the job of running this place – I guess I had never even liked kids very much before. Looking back now, I see what I would have done differently, and what I'll do differently in the future. I've learned a lot – I've learned more from SuAnne than she did from me. But considering all my failings, I really believe it was the way spirituality of this place that's kept it open, not me.

-- Chick Big Crow (chapter 14 paragraph 40)

**Importance:** In this quote, Chick credits SuAnne's spirit as the reason behind the success of the SuAnne Big Crow Recreation Center that she established to honor her daughter after SuAnne's death.

A life of bravery and generosity and victory and heroism was the founding inspiration here, and if SuAnne's death was a terrible sorrow, it also had the effect of holding the good she represented fixed and unchanged. SuAnne Big Crow, though gone forever, is unmistakably still around. The good of her life sustains this place with a power as intangible as gravity, and as real.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 14 paragraph 43)

**Importance:** This quote describes how the goodness of SuAnne's life is transfused into the center that bears her name.

As to actual advice to the Oglala, however, I have none. Advice from authors and others – representatives of the church, or officials in the government – usually has not worked out too well in the past. Besides, no Oglala has ever asked me. I do have a suggestion for the rest of us Americans. Back in the 1980s bills were introduced in Congress to return the federal lands in the Black Hills to the Sioux. One of the bills was sponsored by Senator Bill Bradley of New Jersey, who learned about the Sioux during a basketball clinic he held on Pine Ridge in his playing days. In 1987 Bradley's land-return bill died in committee, and no similar bill has been introduced since. That the Black Hills were stolen is a fact on which the Sioux and the government have been in essential agreement for almost twenty years. The remaining disagreement is about how to right the wrong. Perhaps now we could again consider the possibility of returning some or all of the stolen federal lands.

-- Narrator/Ian Frazier (chapter 15 paragraph 63)

**Importance:** In this quote, Frazier refuses to offer advice to the Indians since they never asked for it. He urges Americans to restore the Black Hills to the Sioux, the rightful owners of this stolen land.



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic for Discussion 1

What role does heroism play in Indian culture?

## Topic for Discussion 2

Describe how Indians have been involved with Hollywood since its inception.

## Topic for Discussion 3

What observations does Frazier make on his first trip to the Pine Ridge Reservation?

## Topic for Discussion 5

What happens at Wounded Knee in 1890? Why?

## Topic for Discussion 6

In your opinion, which tribe was treated the most harshly after the arrival of the European settlers? Defend your position.

## Topic for Discussion 7

Why is laughing at averted danger “the Indian Way” according to Le in Chapter 6?

## Topic for Discussion 8

What does Frazier find odd about White Clay, NE?

## Topic for Discussion 9

Compare and contrast Le and Frazier. How are they brothers?

## Topic for Discussion 10

Why is Frazier angry at Le after his visit to Frazier’s Montana home? How does he feel about his anger?



## **Topic for Discussion 4**

Describe Frazier's experience at the August pow-wow in Chapter 10.

## **Topic for Discussion 11**

Who was Felix Cohen, and how did he fight for Indian rights?

## **Topic for Discussion 12**

Why does Frazier believe SuAnne Big Crow was brave?

## **Topic for Discussion 13**

How does SuAnne's basketball success benefit the reservation?

## **Topic for Discussion 14**

How does Chick Big Crow honor her daughter after SuAnne's death?

## **Topic for Discussion 15**

How is Frazier, born a white man, a member of the Oglala tribe?