

Sacred Ground Short Guide

Sacred Ground by Mercedes Lackey

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Characters

Jennifer Taldeer is a young woman of multiple identities. To the outer world she is a private investigator with a degree in criminology. To her family she is Good Eagle Woman, a member of the Tzi-Sho gens. In her medicine ways she uses a third name, one which is "learned and not given," KestrelHunts-Alone. As Kestrel she can take flight and survey the world below with her spirit-animal self. There is the suggestion that "Kestrel" is her essential identity, the one she has won for herself. "Jennifer" indicates what she does, and "Good Eagle Woman" is simply a bridge between the two others.

Jennifer and her family are also a bit unusual because despite their Native American heritage (Osage on her father's side; Cherokee on her mother's) they have chosen to live in the "Heavy Eyebrows' world." They are not registered with any tribe. Her father works as a welder; her mother as a real estate agent.

Jennifer's biggest ambition is to become a full-fledged Medicine Woman. She also regrets her lost relationship with David; their breakup has left a big empty spot in her life. By the end of the novel both problems are resolved. Beyond these issues, the novel does not explore her character very deeply. If more Jennifer Taldeer mysteries are planned, presumably she will find herself with a new set of problems to surmount.

Her grandfather Frank Taldeer, or Mooncrow, is easily the most memorable character in the book. He lives with Jennifer in her modest Tulsa home. The neighbors think she is a dutiful granddaughter taking care of a feeble old man. But Frank is neither feeble nor in need of much care; Jennifer gets at least as much from him as she gives.

She worries about his pizza-and-softdrink diet and paying the rent; he worries about her happiness, her safety, and her growth as a shaman. As a Medicine Man, Mooncrow has an eclectic approach. He fits rituals from other tribes into the Osage traditions and does not hesitate to use an electric sauna as a sweatlodge, or to buy cornmeal at the supermarket.

Mooncrow also loves video games and likes to show the neighborhood children "tricks" which teach a lesson.

He was in the Army Air Corps during World War II. Later, he worked as an aircraft mechanic at the Tulsa airport.

Retirement has brought him the chance to explore the spiritual world and the serenity of living according to his heritage.

David Spotted Horse had shared Jennifer's bed and political concerns during college days. Then he dropped out, too impatient to change things to finish his degree and "work through the system." He tries to use the building site explosion as a cause celebre for his Indian rights campaign. This effort backfires, but not before it complicates Jennifer's investigation and almost causes his own arrest. When he sneaks out to the



site in the dead of night and nearly gets himself blown up at the hands of the Little People (Jennifer rescues him), he has to reevaluate his acts. In some ways he is the character who grows the most. Under Mooncrow's guidance, he then goes on his own spirit quest, learning the benefits of watchful waiting and cooperation.

Aside from these three, the other characters are basically two-dimensional figures made to fit their roles.

Rod Calligan is a standard-issue villain, full of bluster and greed and duplicity. His wife Toni is scared and isolated, so worried about incurring his wrath that she has little life of her own. The hired guns who kidnap Jennifer have the dubious distinction of being "the best in their field." They know how not to leave any traceable clues on bodies, but otherwise they are simply bad guys.

Social Concerns

Sacred Ground is full of social concerns. The plot revolves around stolen Native American remains and relics.

Much pain — both human and supernatural — follows their disturbance.

Four men are killed when a bulldozer blows up, just moments after the bones are rediscovered on a building site. As the story unfolds, we learn that they were taken for even worse reasons than the usual collectors' motives: to use as bait in a complicated insurance fraud scheme.

In placing these remains and relics at the story's center, Lackey makes three related points. The majority white culture has exploited and disrespected Native Americans' sacred beliefs and objects. As the Native American characters explain several times, we would be horrified to have our own ancestors' remains dug up and holy objects from our churches sold at collectors' fairs.

Additionally, it is not merely a question of respect for Native Americans' sensibilities and culture. As events go from bad to worse, it becomes at least thinkable that the buried objects may actually contain forces which are loosed at our peril. Finally, the disturbed relics serve as a metaphor for the bad treatment and broken promises to Native Americans in American history.

While these issues are discussed at length in the narrative, the protagonist's attitude toward them is more moderate than that of many Indian rights advocates. Jennifer Taldeer, a P.I. (private investigator), does seek out unaware holders of tribal artifacts, trying to regain the objects for their rightful owners. She even does this as an uncompensated sideline. But she sees no harm in university experts holding them temporarily for study.

All the Native American objects in the story date from the nineteenth century and clearly belong to some existing tribe, so the thorny issue of the ownership of very ancient, unidentifiable remains does not come up. Jennifer even has some kind words for the modern Bureau of Indian Affairs and has broken with her former boyfriend because he seems more interested in declaiming about Indian rights than in finding a calling for himself.

Another featured social issue is domestic violence. It enters the story when Jennifer interviews the developer's wife, becomes her friend, and soon realizes that Toni is deathly afraid of her own husband. This issue also is treated didactically as well as dramatically. The working-out of this subplot shows that a man who does not hesitate at violence in his business dealings will probably use it at home too, or vice versa. Toni eventually flees to a shelter. The author's purpose seems more to raise awareness than to suggest further solutions of the problem — a point which echoes our society's present approach.



Environmental wholeness is a third major concern. The developer's riverside project disturbs more than bones; it threatens an eagle nesting site. There are implications that global warming is making Oklahoma's summers wetter and causing large chunks of land to wash away. And during Jennifer's experiences in her other identity as a Medicine Woman apprentice, she comes to see the world as a web of living things, and its animal inhabitants as archetypal, sacred beings.

Other contemporary problems also enter the story briefly. Ticky-tacky suburbs, intimidating male body language, and New Age exploitation of Native American religion each get a page or two of attention. Bizarre features of Oklahoma law affect the way Jennifer operates. In whole, the novel seems consciously to be aimed at "political correctness." Such messages do not interfere with the fast-paced story line, but a sophisticated reader, even one who holds similar views, may wish they had been treated a bit more subtly.



Techniques

Although *Sacred Ground* has many plot devices of the mystery novel, its structure is unusual. Lackey uses a multiple point of view approach, following several different characters as significant things happen to them, although most of the novel focuses on Jennifer. This in itself is not unusual.

But early on, the villain is shown planting the artifacts and the bomb charge. Furthermore, because this scene is told from his point of view, the reader also learns his reasons. Thus the traditional mystery question of "who dunnit" — or, in some newer mysteries, "why he did it" — cannot provide suspense to drive the story.

In its place the author uses two methods common in modern fantasy: the parallel battle on a supernatural plane and increasing danger, building up to a series of action-sequences.

These are employed very effectively, so that the story acquires more tension just at the point where it seems Jennifer has solved the mystery. When she is thrown into the dark waters of the reservoir, the reader is likely to know that she will emerge somehow, to face even greater tests ahead. But there is still fascination in the suspense of seeing how she is saved. The biggest surprise in the book's latter half is the discovery of *Watches-Over-The-Land's* devouring antagonist, and how Calligan's crime has turned him loose on the world. In the final scenes, Jennifer's pursuit of Calligan's goons in a car chase up a winding road parallels Kestrel's aerial pursuit of three Black Birds. And a knife-fight and narrow escape at the developer's shack is preceded by a struggle in the spirit realm.

Kestrel and Mooncrow face the taunting evil force there and survive by shapechanging into the different animal forms they have met in their spirit travels.

Lackey has added a curious one-page postscript to the novel. In it, she cites the source she used as background for the tale and denies having expertise on Native American religions. It seems written to ward off any criticism the book might draw for inaccuracy, or for an outsider attempting to understand Indian ways.

In this note she repeatedly states that the book was written for entertainment only. A similar statement frequently appears in fanzines which consist of stories set in media-based science fiction worlds such as that of *Star Trek*. Its purpose there is to disclaim a profit motive and thus avoid copyright problems. This is obviously not Lackey's motive. Perhaps one should take her at her word — that she means only to tell an entertaining tale — but the popularity of magic in her books seems to indicate they have a deeper appeal as well.

Themes

Sacred Ground's primary theme is the timeless one that evil motives and acts produce more evil, which must be stopped for the world to be set right again. This idea is worked out on both the mundane and the supernatural planes. Rod Calligan's greed leads him to build on an environmentally disastrous site. When his project falls apart he raids Indian graves and plants explosives. He plans to blame Native American activists for the damage and to collect insurance to recoup his losses. This leads to several deaths and to more violence as he tries to cover up his deeds.

But in raiding the graves he also disturbs the spirit of Watches-OverThe-Land, a great Medicine Chief of the last century. This brings onto the present scene the struggle of the Medicine Chief with his ancient, malevolent adversary, along with a flock of minor vengeful spirits called Little People.

The evil medicine, thus freed, may target any vulnerable person who is around. Ultimately it kills Calligan's son Rod Jr. with a lightning charge through the television set, and Jennifer herself comes close to dying when she is thrown, unconscious, into a reservoir.

There is also a theme about the limits of our control of events. Calligan, the villain, has a fetish for total control — of his wife, his children, and his business affairs. He is even sure he can control press and police reaction to the disasters at his building site, by planting evidence that will be attributed to radicals and terrorists. Jennifer, in her other identity of Kestrel, is an apprentice shaman. Her grandfather, who is tutoring her in the medicine ways of all the Osage clans, cannot reveal to her what she lacks to become a full-fledged Medicine Woman. Jennifer is an overachiever, and this carries over into her Kestrel role. She needs to learn to let go at a certain point, to stop following instructions and striving, and let the flow of the unseen world take over.

Her ex-boyfriend David Spotted Horse also has to learn he cannot control his buddies or make events take the direction his ideology predicts. Once he sees this, he and Jennifer reconcile. Both are able to be more effective once they learn to tune into the currents of the spirit world. This is not a lesson in quiescence, but simply in not insisting upon imposing one's will and plans on the world.

Key Questions

Lackey has a large following, especially among young people. These readers are likely to enjoy seeing the author's imagination and metaphysical themes at work in a different setting.

Mystery and suspense aficionados will like the nonstop tension and the intricate, double-level plot. The theme of self-knowledge, of overcoming our drive to plan and control everything, provides ideas for thought and discussion. The ecology motif offers additional points to consider.

The subject of Native American sacred objects and their rightful use will appeal to those interested in earthbased spirituality, in Indian rights or culture, and even in the history and archaeology of the American West. The book touches only lightly on the more vexing controversies about these issues. The author has stacked the deck by making the villain a totally low character, and as she herself reminds us, she is not an expert on Native American religion. A session that treats these topics in depth may benefit from the presence of experts or practitioners of these areas. Another approach might be to discuss several books together.

Such a program could include novels like those of Tony Hillerman and James Alexander Thorn, as well as books on Native American spirituality like *Spirit Healing* (1991) and Thomas E. Mails's monumental *Mystic Warriors of the Plains* (1972).

1. Jennifer's family have never registered their tribal origins, preferring to live and make their way in the outside world without calling on tribal resources. Yet they cherish their ancestral religion and ways. What are the reasons they might have made such choices?
2. This novel can be criticized as being overly "politically correct." In fact, it has no individual white male characters who are sympathetic. Is the lack of them just a fluke caused by plot necessity? Do you think the criticism is justified?
3. Mooncrow, Jennifer's grandfather, is the one who discovers that the evil entity buried by *Watches-Over-The-Land* has been released. He knows immediately, once he sees that a stream has washed away the place where the bones were buried. Do you think he just put reasonable clues together subconsciously, or could he actually feel the emanations of evil?
4. Jennifer has three names. Her spirit-name Kestrel seems to be the closest to her true identity, but she spends most of her time in her outsideworld persona of Jennifer Taldeer.

Does this phenomenon happen to other people who are not Medicine Woman trainees or even Native Americans? If so, why do we not use separate names for it?



5. Many Native American cultural groups saw the earth, its other creatures, and humans as interrelated parts of one sacred whole, all sustained by a proper relationship with the other parts. Western religion and practice have tended to follow the biblical injunction that man has dominion over all other things on earth. To what extent is the latter belief related to our environmental problems? Is there any way the two approaches can both be accommodated in our time?

6. Rod Calligan is shown as a totally unadmirable man, filled with greed and not hesitating to hurt or even kill others in pursuit of his own goals.

Does this make him an effective villain? Would a villain with better motives have worked as well in this story?

7. When Jennifer tries to recover the Lakotah artifacts Mrs. Amberson has inherited, the author takes up about six pages with Jennifer's thoughts on the sterility of the suburb where the couple lives, what kind of lives they must lead, and other things that show her dislike for the entire layout. These people and their artifacts play no further part in the story. Is this shown because it throws light on Jennifer's character? Or was the author just "riding a hobbyhorse" here?

8. The need to learn to let go of control underlies both Jennifer's and David's quests. Rod Calligan provides a horrible example of someone for whom control is all-important. Is this a common problem in our society? Are there many people who need to learn the opposite lesson?

10. The theme of evil acts causing greater evil, and the need to set the world right again once such evil is released, is very common in mysteries as well as some other genres. Can you think of other novels where the struggle is played out on both the ordinary world and the supernatural or spiritual levels?

Literary Precedents

The book's Native American characters and setting inevitably suggest comparison with Tony Hillerman's Navajo mysteries and Jean Hager's recently published Molly Bearpaw series. Hager's mysteries are also set in Oklahoma with Cherokee characters and a female Native American protagonist.

Jennifer Taldeer more closely resembles Hillerman's Jim Chee, however, in her ambition to become a shaman. Like Jennifer, Chee frequently uses his knowledge of tribal lore in solving seemingly mundane crimes. Unlike her, he has not yet had to battle evil beings on a supernatural plane. Hillerman's mysteries, with the same protagonists in an ongoing series, show more main character development and more about the cultural background.

Related Titles

The author's *Jinx High* (1991) also has an Oklahoma setting and a plot involving struggle with ancient evil entities, but there is no direct connection to *Sacred Ground*.



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