

# **The Way to Rainy Mountain Study Guide**

**The Way to Rainy Mountain by N. Scott Momaday**

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## Plot Summary

In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday traces his ancestral roots back to the beginning of the Kiowa tribe. While Momaday seems to have always known about his ancestry, the death of his grandmother prompts a deeper and more personal exploration of his family background. In order to get as close as possible to his roots, Momaday returns to his Grandmother's house where the spirit of the Kiowa tribe is very strong.

The book provides the reader with a series of oral stories from Kiowa tradition written down. The stories link together to narrate the entire life span of the Kiowa tribe from beginning to end. Momaday also provides explanatory information for the stories. Each story is followed by a short account of the factual event the story is based upon. Together the stories and the facts work to create a complete picture of the Kiowa way of life. The stories explain the world as the Kiowa saw it.

Kiowas were very tied to the earth. Their personal history maintains that the tribe came into being by entering the world through a hollow log. Additionally, the Kiowa were a tribe of hunters very dependent on the buffalo for their existence. Without the buffalo the Kiowa could not survive and when the buffalo herds died out, so too did the Kiowa. The Kiowa had other strong beliefs. They maintained a ritual Sun Dance that revolved around a buffalo sacrifice and prayers to Tai-me. Tai-me is said to be a sort of savior figure for the Kiowa. When the Kiowa were facing difficult times Tai-me came to the tribe and led them to a better life.

Most members of the Kiowa tribe who remembered the ancient ways have long since passed away. However, when the narrator returns to his Grandmother's house and Rainy Mountain, he is able to vividly recall the stories his Grandmother used to tell him. As the narrator works through these stories, he learns a great deal about the Kiowa and his own history. The narrator is able to step away from his everyday life and travel back to another time. The time the narrator spends exploring his ancestral roots through memories and physical expeditions to various locations around Rainy Mountain provide him with a newfound respect for his ancestors and for his present day existence.



# Characters

## The Narrator

There is a hint of non-fiction to this book that allows the reader to surmise that N. Scott Momaday is also the narrator. Under this assumption, the narrator is a man who has left his family's homeland to make his own life elsewhere. However, the narrator has remained in contact with his family largely due to his relationship with his grandmother. Grandmother's death prompts the narrator to return to her home and take a spiritual journey through his ancestry.

The narrator spends time revisiting Kiowa stories. As he works through each story, the narrator learns about his ancestors and in turn about himself. Although the book does not focus on the narrator's personal journey, the reader can see some growth from beginning to end. There is an increased sense of knowledge and appreciation for his family history. The narrator takes time out of his own life to do something that few people ever do - he pays tribute to his family by seeking a better understanding of whom they were. More than the narrator growing from his experience, the reader is given the opportunity to grow by mimicking the narrator's actions.

The narrator's physical characteristics are not mentioned in the story. However, as the reader learns more about the Kiowa a picture of the narrator begins to form. The reader pictures a man much like Mammedaty - tall, lean, sinewy and strong. Perhaps he also has dark hair and a tanned complexion. More than a physical picture the reader gains a strong sense of the narrator. Like his ancestors, there is a distinct ethereal feeling about the narrator. There is something otherworldly and earthy that surrounds the Kiowa. Their strong connection the earth and the spiritual realm seeps into their physical appearance.

## Grandmother Aho

The narrator's grandmother was named Aho. Aho died in the spring prior to the narrator's return to Rainy Mountain. There is a strong bond between grandmother and grandson and it appears that Aho instilled the narrator with a deep sense of family. Aho is a typical Kiowa matron. She runs her house with love and belief in the old ways even though she converted to Christianity. Aho's home was a sanctuary where everyone was welcome and wisdom was imparted with quiet grace. It is Aho and her death that prompts the narrator to return to Rainy Mountain and engage in a spiritual quest for knowledge of his ancestors.

The reader pictures a small, bent woman with long white hair twisted into braids as the narrator talks about his grandmother. Her face is wrinkled with age and tanned like leather from a life spent in the outdoors. Aho does not tolerate nonsense and rules with a firm hand, yet she is also soft and warm. Aho is not only a representative of the Kiowa



woman but also the center of the family. She possesses a strength that holds her loved ones together through space and time. Aho was not alive during the height of the Kiowa nation, but there is something everlasting in her character that allows the reader to believe that she saw the Sun Dance and the buffalo herds first hand. Just as the reader believes that Aho was there when Tai-me led the first Kiowa through the hollow log, the reader believes just as firmly that Aho will be there long after the narrator passes away. In death, Aho has returned to her native land to continue to nourish those who come after her.

## **Mammedaty**

Mammedaty is the narrator's grandfather. Mammedaty is a tall, lean figure of a man who has a mystical quality about him. Mammedaty is a peyote man which means that he possesses the ability to see things that others do not. Mammedaty sees four strange things in his life. The most interesting of which involves Mammedaty's wish to know where the fine dirt around a mole hole comes from. Mammedaty was a hard worker who held true to Kiowa tradition. Unfortunately, most of the narrator's knowledge of his grandfather comes from memories as Mammedaty died long ago.

## **The Grandmother Spider**

The grandmother spider captures the child of the sun and raises the boy. She struggles to raise the child and is faced with a greater challenge when the boy fails to heed one of her warnings and cuts himself in two. The result of the accident is that there are now two boys to raise. The twins do not heed the spiders warning again and end up killing their grandfather. Grandmother spider dies shortly thereafter of heartbreak.

## **The Twins**

The twins start out as a single boy. The boy is the child of the sun and a woman the sun enticed into the sky. When the boy's mother died, he was raised by a spider named Grandmother. The boy had a gaming ring and was cautioned by the spider not to throw the ring into the air. The child did not listen, and the ring cut the boy in two resulting in twins.

## **The Woman who Married the Sun**

The story states that a child was placed in a tree for safety. While in the tree a bird came along and lured the child away. The child followed the bird high into the sky where the child grew into a woman, and the bird became the sun. The woman married the sun and gave birth to a boy child. The woman was killed by the sun in a fit of anger.



## Tai-me

Tai-me can be categorized as both a character and an object. As a character Tai-me is the person responsible for altering Kiowa history. Tai-me offered the Kiowa a new start and aided the tribe in transitioning to a new home. Tai-me then became the central figure of worship in the Sun-Dance.

## Ko-sahn

Ko-sahn is a hundred-year-old woman who visits Aho's home long after both Aho and Mammedaty have passed away. She is probably the last surviving Kiowa matron. Ko-sahn dresses in tribal clothes and wears her white hair in braids. She sits in the kitchen and tells the story of attending a Sun-Dance with her sisters as a young girl. Her appearance at Aho's house is a sign that Kiowa tradition continues even though the people are gone.

## Little Red

Little Red is a horse that was one of the best Kiowa horses in tribe history. Little Red was stolen by a Pawnee captive who used the horse to escape. Mammedaty kept a box of horse bones in the barn. The horse's name was Little Red, although not the same horse stolen by the Pawnee. Mammedaty's box of bones was stolen and never recovered.

## The Steel-Horned Buffalo

Chapter Sixteen tells the story of the buffalo with horns of steel. The story says that a man was trapped in a tree by the steel-horned buffalo and was about to be killed when a voice instructed the man on how to defeat the animal. The man followed the voice's instructions and was able to slay the beast and save his own life.



## Objects/Places

### Rainy Mountain

The Kiowa moved from the north to the south and made a new home on the Plains in the shadow of Rainy Mountain.

### Peyote

Peyote is a type of cactus. Many Native American tribes use the peyote in religious ceremonies to induce a dreamlike state.

### Tai-me

Tai-me takes two forms in the book. It is both a character and an object. As an object Tai-me is a small idol under two feet tall. The image looks like a human and is dressed in a robe, a headdress, pendants, and painted with symbols of the sun and moon. The idol is made of green stone. When not being used for a ceremony the idol is kept in a small box and suspended from a stick inside the medicine lodge.

### Horses

Horses were introduced to the Kiowa by the Comanche. Horses created a whole new way of life for Native Americans by enabling warriors to range farther on raids, hunters were able to chase down prey and search farther for food sources, and work around the village was made easier with the aide of horses.

### The Hollow Log

Kiowa tradition maintains that the tribe entered the world through a hollow log.

### Dogs

Before the Kiowa had horses, they had dogs. Dogs were held in high regard because they were able to talk. One story relates how a dog helped save the life of a man who was starving and surrounded by enemies.

### The Sun Dance

The Sun Dance is a ceremony performed to honor the sun and worship Tai-me.



## **The Peyote Ritual**

The peyote ritual is held by the Kiowa people.

## **Talyi-da-i**

Talyi-da-i relates to the story of the twins whose grandmother was a spider. One of the twins transformed himself into ten portions of medicine that were given to the Kiowa. Talyi-da-i is the Kiowa phrase for "boy medicine."

## **Tsen-pia Kado**

Also known as the "horse eating sun-dance", Tsen-pia Kado commemorates the year that the Kiowa ate their own horses, because they were no buffalo to be found.

## **Man-ka-ih**

Man-ka-ih is a animal with the head of a horse and the tail of a fish. This strange animal roams the skies and throws lightning from its mouth and uses its tail to whip the wind into a tornado.





# Themes

## The Importance of Nature

All of the Kiowa stories feature some aspect of nature. The reader quickly comes to realize that Kiowa tradition holds a strong respect for the land on which they live. Rather than take the earth for granted the Kiowa understand that without proper conservation practices the land will eventually desert them. Indeed this precept comes true when the buffalo herds are almost decimated. Without the buffalo for food, clothing, and housing the Kiowa are at a loss for how to exist. The tribe is forced to abandon their old way of life and adopt the practices of the encroaching white men for survival. However, the new way of life does is difficult to accept and before long the Kiowa fade away.

There is a lot that can be learned from the Kiowa's respect for nature. The inclusion of natural elements in Kiowa life appears to give the tribe a more spiritual existence. There is a reverence in the Kiowa oral histories that is not found in other cultures. For example, the Sun Dance is a prominent feature of Kiowa tradition. There are three aspects of this ceremony. The first is the worship of the sun. The giving thanks for life sustaining sunlight which aides in growth and provides warmth. For a culture that once lived in the frigid North, the Sun becomes an important feature. Secondly, the ceremony focuses on Tai-me. As the savior of the Kiowa, Tai-me is responsible for moving the Kiowa out of the North into the South. Without Tai-me's guidance the Kiowa society would have died out sooner than it did. The third aspect of the Sun Dance involves the hunting of buffalo. While the buffalo hunt is largely ceremonial, it is also an opportunity to provide food for the village. The Sun Dance is an excellent example of the importance of including nature in everyday life.

## The Importance of Family

The narrator is deeply affected by the loss of his Grandmother. When the narrator describes Aho, the reader is presented with the image of strong family matriarch. Aho was a reverent woman who found a way to blend her Kiowa beliefs with her Christian beliefs without losing respect for either way of life. Aho's home stands as a sanctuary for her family - both before and after her death.

One thing that stands out in the book is the narrator's respect for his grandparents. Aho and Mammedaty feature prominently throughout the book. Aho's death prompted the narrator's return to his family's home. In the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the narrator finds his family's roots and a deeper understanding of his own life as a descendant of the Kiowa tribe. While at Aho's home, the narrator delves into the oral stories. As he progresses through the stories, the narrator is able to draw connections to his Grandfather. Mammedaty was a powerful figure of a man and in many ways, the reader believes that the narrator wishes to emulate his grandfather. It is as if the narrator is truly able to see his family for the first time. By returning to Aho's home, the narrator can



see the ghosts of his family. He relives family summers and stories passed down from the older generation. The distance of time allows the narrator to review his family and his own life. The journey back to Rainy Mountain permits the narrator to come to a deeper understanding of his own family and maintain their memories.

## **The Importance of Learning One's Ancestry**

In today's world, life moves very quickly. Extended families gather for holidays once or twice a year and nuclear families rarely sit down to dinner together. There is little time allotted to discuss day-to-day life let alone delve into family ancestry. Often a child will ask a few surface questions when assigned a family tree project at school. However, few people endeavor to research the complete history of one's family.

The narrator in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* decides to return to his Grandmother's home in order to discover more about himself and his family's history. The narrator already has a strong background in his genealogy because of his close relationship with his Grandmother. Since his Grandmother passed away prior to his return to Rainy Mountain, the narrator's exploration actually goes deeper than if Aho was still alive. The narrator is forced to work through his family's history alone. This isolation prompts the narrator to view his family in terms of his own life. He must see the land around Aho's home through his own eyes without the aide of his Grandmother's narrative.

When stories are passed down from an older generation to a younger one, wisdom is imparted but not necessarily understood. Usually the young listener smiles, nods, and unconsciously stores the tales away in a remote section of memory. However, once all ties to the past have vanished in death those stories resurface and become more important. There is no longer a physical presence available to impart wisdom. The only remaining ties to the past are the remembered stories passed down through generations. The narrator's choice to spend a significant amount of time sorting through the Kiowa stories not only allows him to gain a more meaningful understanding of his ancestor's, but also gives him the opportunity to place himself within the family history.



# Style

## Point of View

The story is told from both the first and third points-of-view. The oral tradition stories that begin each chapter are told in the third person. The stories are related to the reader as if the narrator himself is reading them from a book. The second paragraphs of each chapter appear to move between first and third person. In some paragraphs, the narrator continues to relate information as if he is reading it from another source. However, several of the paragraphs are told in the first person because the factual information comes directly from the narrator. All of the final paragraphs of each chapter are told in the first person. These paragraphs tell the story of the narrator's personal journey at Rainy Mountain.

The movement between points-of-view does not confuse the reader, but rather serves to bring the reader closer to the Kiowa. The third person stories allow the reader to become a Kiowa child listening as an elder hands down the tribe's oral history. At the same time, the first person connects the reader to the narrator. The reader walks the road to Rainy Mountain with the narrator and stares across the Plains from Aho's front door. By using both first and third person narration, the author has connected the past to the present.

## Setting

The setting of the book moves around quite a bit as both time and place change between each paragraph. Since the book relates the narrator's personal journey into his family's past, it is only natural that the setting would move about as the narrator travels his ancestral path.

The first paragraphs of each chapter are mostly set in the distant past. These beginning tales tell various Kiowa myths and tribe traditions. There is a mystical quality to many of these stories because they deal with gods, idols, and talking animals. Some of the stories take place in the sky but those that tell about the Kiowa tribe itself take place in villages. The Kiowa first lived in the northern part of Montana before moving south into the Plains. There is little detail given about the actual landscape of these stories. However, many of the events are said to take place during harsh, cold winters when food was scarce.

The second paragraphs do not always have a setting. Often these paragraphs relate pieces of information that offer clarification to the oral tradition tale. The final paragraphs are set around Rainy Mountain and Grandmother Aho's home. Rainy Mountain casts a shadow over the dry Plains. A man can stand and look for miles without seeing a tree or another building. The heat sears the ground in summer and the winter snows blow miserably into a person's bones without any obstacles to slow them down. Grandmother



Aho's house is small and grayed by the sun. There is an open-air arbor that the family would sleep in during the summer. The narrator does not mention other houses nearby so that the reader gets the image of a lone house standing in defiance of the Plains and Rainy Mountain.

## Language and Meaning

For the most part the language of the story is straight forward and easily understood. The author does not use big words that require clarification for understanding. Any questions the reader may propose are usually addressed by the factual information of the second paragraph. Only a few questions remain unanswered. The first is the identity of Mooney whose name appears at the end of several of the second paragraphs. The second question involves Kotsatoah mentioned in Chapter 15. Apparently, this Indian was important enough to be painted by a famous artist but the reader may not be familiar with the artist or his subject.

N. Scott Momaday writes beautifully. The emotional and spiritual bond between Momaday and his subject matter is palpably communicated by the reader. The reader cannot fail to miss the reverence in which Momaday holds his ancestors. When Grandmother Aho is described, the reader feels a calming sense of respect was over him. Mammedaty evokes a strong feeling of strength. Likewise, the reader is immediately connected with the physical landscape of Rainy Mountain. The earth is integral to the Kiowa and Momaday transmits a feeling of respect for nature to the reader. Momaday writes in a soft-spoken sort of manner that effectively instills the reader with a feeling of awe at the might of the Kiowa people.

## Structure

The book is divided into three parts: The Setting Out, The Going On, and The Closing In. There are twenty-four chapters, a Prologue, an Introduction, and an Epilogue. Each chapter is numbered with a small Roman numeral without a title. Each chapter is comprised of three distinct paragraphs. The first paragraph relates a story from Kiowa tradition. The second paragraph provides the reader with factual information regarding the Kiowas. The final paragraph tells the narrator's own journey as he retraces the steps of his ancestors. There are several line-style drawings throughout the book. The pictures depict important aspects of Kiowa life and myth.

The chapters move quickly because the author's style of writing is clear and concise. The brief nature of the chapters allows the reader to move rapidly through the book and can feasibly finish the entire book in one sitting. The Kiowa myths are simplistic in style as are most oral narratives. The straightforward narration makes for easy memorization and allows the reader to readily gain an understanding of the things held in reverence by the Kiowa. The facts of the second paragraph provide clarification for the reader by centering the myths in reality. The first two paragraphs are the motivation for the third

paragraphs. By working from the past into the present, the narrator takes the reader along on his personal journey of discovery.



## Quotes

"When the wild herds were destroyed, so too was the will of the Kiowa people; there was nothing to sustain them in spirit." Prologue, pg. 3

"To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion." Introduction, pg. 5

"My grandmother had a reverence for the sun, a holy regard that now is all but gone out of mankind." Introduction, pg. 8

"They called themselves Kwuda, "coming out." Chapter 1, pg. 16

"Before there were horses the Kiowas had need of dogs. That was a long time ago, when dogs could talk." Chapter 3, pg. 20

"One of the boys held the calf's liver - still warm and wet with life - in his hand, eating of it with great relish." Chapter 5, pg. 25

"The grandmother spider told him never to throw the ring into the sky, but one day he threw it up, and it fell squarely on top of his head and cut him in two." Chapter 7, pg. 30

"A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things." Chapter 8, pg. 33

"There was a great holiness all about in the room, as if an old person had died there or a child had been born." Chapter 10, pg. 37

"Mammedaty was a peyote man, and he was therefore distinguished by these things: a necklace of beans, a beaded staff and rattle, an eagle-bone whistle, and a fan made from the feathers of a water bird." Chapter 11, pg. 39

"Everything has slowed to a stop in order that the sun might take leave of the land." Chapter 12, pg. 45

"The Kiowa language is hard to understand, but, you know, the storm spirit understands it." Chapter 14, pg. 48

"She told of how her husband had been killed by enemy warriors. The blind man listened, and he knew her voice. That was a bad woman. At sunrise they threw her away." Chapter 17, pg. 58

"And when the season turned and it was necessary to move back into the house, there was a sense of confinement and depression for a time." Chapter 18, pg. 61

"Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe." Chapter 24, pg. 83



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss the Kiowa's close relationship with nature.

Family is a very important aspect of Kiowa life. Compare and contrast the importance of family for the Kiowas and present-day families.

Discuss the importance of the buffalo to the Native American way of life.

Most Native American tribes believed in several gods - god of sun, god of earth, rain god, etc. Discuss how the acceptance of several gods instead of one omnipotent God guided Native American culture.

The Narrator returns to his grandmother's home and retraces the steps of his ancestors. Why do you think the Narrator decides to do this after his grandmother's death and not before?

For almost half of the book the first paragraph of each chapter is the oral history of the Kiowa people. Discuss the role of oral narratives in Native American cultures.

Nature is very prominent in this story. Take a half hour and sit outside under a tree and listen to the world around you. Take the time to look deeper beneath a bush or tree and observe the happenings not usually seen by humans. Use this experience to write about modern society's lost connection to nature.