Waterless Mountain Short Guide

Waterless Mountain by Laura Adams Armer

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Many books about Native Americans, such as Shannon Garst's Crazy Horse, Brent Ashabranner and Russell Davis's Chief Joseph, and Dee Brown's Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, focus on the cultural clashes and inevitable wars between Native Americans and white settlers. While these stories are historically accurate and often depict the human side of the Native Americans, their main purpose is to detail the bloody clashes.

On the other hand, Armer's Waterless Mountain, like Jim Kjelgaard's Wolf Brother and Dyre W. Doughty's Crimson Moccasins, falls into a category of books that focus on Native American life, folklore, and religious beliefs, providing insight into a rich culture. Because Armer lived among the Navajo and increased her understanding of their culture through research and firsthand experience, her work demonstrates a strong grasp of the Navajo perspective.

Armer's novels are set in the 1920s, after the major cultural clashes and battles had taken place, and this setting enables her to focus on the Navajo's daily life and their stoic attempts to carry on tribal ways despite the onrush of twentieth-century technology and development.

About the Author

Laura Adams Armer was born on January 12, 1874, in Sacramento, California. Her family moved to San Francisco when Armer was young, and she attended public and private schools there until the age of sixteen, when she was forced to continue her schooling at home because of ill health. Because San Francisco was an ethnic melting pot, Armer became infatuated at a young age with the various customs and traditions to which she was exposed.

In 1893 Armer enrolled at San Francisco's California School of Design and studied art under Arthur Matthews, a teacher and mentor who advised her against formalized systems of academic training. In 1902 she married Sidney Armer, a fellow artist who also studied under Matthews. The Aimers' only child, Austin, was born in 1903, and Armer dedicated much of the next twenty years to being a mother and a homemaker.

In 1923, accompanied by Paul Louis Faye, a family friend, the Armers vacationed in northern Arizona's Navajo land; because she had brought with her printed translations of Navajo songs, as well as other books about Navajo lore, many Navajo came to visit her out of curiosity. The Navajo were impressed with Armer's painted reproductions of their sacred paintings, and Armer was impressed with the richness of their culture.

Armer returned to Navajo land in 1925, and with the help of Lorenzo Hubbell, a white trader, and Herbert, a Hopi, she set up camp at the base of the Blue Canyon cliffs that she described as a "painter's paradise." Eventually she became so well known and accepted among the Navajo that she was permitted to witness ceremonial dances that even Navajo women were not allowed to see, but only after she told the men to think of her as an artist rather than as a woman.

Aimer's heart and imagination were captured by the beauty, legend, mysticism, and people of the Navajo land. In 1928, with the assistance of Lorenzo and Roman Hubbell, Armer produced Mountain Chant, a film about a Navajo ceremony featuring an all-Native American cast. Along with Armer's reproduction of Navajo sand paintings, Mountain Chant premiered at New York City's American Museum of Natural History in September 1928. Three years later, Armer published Waterless Mountain, a young adult novel based on her experiences among the Navajo. The book won the 1932 Newbery Medal.

Armer's next book, Dark Circle of Branches, is the story of Na Nai (Navajo for "he who creeps"), an old medicine man born without any feet whom Armer often visited. Armer went on to publish books about other cultures as well, including The Forest Pool (1938), a book for young children about a Mexican boy.

The Forest Pool won the 1939 Caldecott Medal for the best American picture book. One year before her death on March 3, 1963, Armer published an autobiographical account of the time she spent immersed in the Navajo culture entitled In Navajo Land.

Setting

Waterless Mountain takes place in the 1920s, a time that coincides with the author's visits among Arizona's Navajo people. The Navajo, as well as the other Native American tribes, have clashed culturally with the white world and have suffered from these clashes. In Waterless Mountain, for example, Armer alludes to the Navajo's "Long March" of the 1860s, when the United States government exiled them to Fort Sumner, an ordeal related in Ruth Roessel's Navajo Stories of the Long Walk Period and in Scott O'Dell's novel Sing Down the Moon. Armer's main purpose, however, is to detail the simple pleasures of Navajo daily life, especially their close bonds with the land itself. Armer also alludes to twentieth-century inventions that intrude upon the Navajo way of life: the airplane, the automobile, and the steam locomotive. Even the segment in which Younger Brother and the white boy join each other hints of the white world's eventual incursion into Navajo land and life.

At the same time, Armer's primary setting is the Navajo land with its beautiful mountains, canyons, and sage brush.

Armer's depiction of this setting not only conveys an accurate sense of the land itself, but it also complements the story's main thrust: the rites-of-passage theme as Younger Brother matures and moves toward becoming a Navajo medicine man who is one with the land, the animals, and the universe.

Social Sensitivity

Unlike many books about Native Americans, Waterless Mountain does not dwell on the social issues surrounding the conflicts between the white and Native American cultures. Armer acknowledges the existence of such conflicts and mentions the tragic Navajo "Long March," but her primary purpose is to celebrate the vitality of the Navajo culture, not to emphasize events that undermined it. She shows Younger Brother and his people pursuing a traditional way of life as the twentiethcentury technology that threatens traditional ways lurks in the background of the narrative. Younger Brother's interactions with the white characters who appear in the narrative suggest that Armer, perhaps idealistically, hoped that her novel would stand as an example of how white and Native American cultures could live in harmony if each tried to understand the other. Some readers, though, may find Armer's depiction of the Big Man somewhat disturbing, for the Native Americans occasionally seem to be too dependent on this benevolent white man.

Literary Qualities

Waterless Mountain belongs to the universal literary tradition of the ritesof-passage story that traces an adolescent's acquisition of knowledge about himself or herself and the world. In Waterless Mountain, the rites-of-passage motif fuses with the journey motif, during which the questing hero or heroine experiences a separation, a series of adventures, and a return.

Younger Brother's separation occurs when he begins his journey in quest of the Turquoise Woman. During his journey, he experiences different adventures—his meeting with the white boy during the sand storm, his encounter with the renegade Cut Finger, the tragic flood at the camp called Beautiful Under the Cottonwoods, and the strange, marvelous inventions in the white man's twentieth-century world. When he returns from his quest, he has matured and gained knowledge about himself and Navajo traditions. Complementing these exciting adventures are the Navajo legends that Armer weaves into the narrative—the legends about the Deer People, the Spider Woman, the Pack Rat, the Sun Bearer, and the Turquoise Woman. While providing deeper insights into Navajo life and beliefs, these legends also explain how and why Younger Brother moves toward becoming a medicine man.

Another valuable literary quality of Waterless Mountain is its vivid imagery, derived from Armer's painting background and her firsthand experience of living among the Navajo. Whether it is a thunderstorm with "evil serpents of lightning across the sky," a girl's skirt that is "the color of the garnets on the ant hills and trimmed with a finger-wide band of deep blue," or the landscape's vivid blues, browns, greens, golds, and yellows, Armer's descriptions carry the reader into Navajo land and life.

Themes and Characters

Through the characterization of her protagonist, Younger Brother, Armer develops the rites-of-passage theme in Waterless Mountain.As the novel opens, Younger Brother is eight years old and lives with his family—Father, Mother, Elder Brother, and Baby Sister. These generic names suggest the universal aspects of the family unit. Younger Brother's duties as an eight-year-old include taking care of the family's sheep herd. While tending the sheep, he observes the birds and beasts, wind, clouds, rain, and rainbows. He also forms mystical bonds with the bees that eat jam from his lips, the Deer People that sing and dance for him, and the Pack Rat that trades treasures with him. When Younger Brother grows up, he will be a medicine man, and to prepare him for this role, his medicine man uncle tells him Navajo legends about the First Man and the First Woman, the Spider Woman who teaches the First Woman how to weave Navajo blankets, and the Turquoise Woman and her husband, the Sun Bearer.

When Younger Brother is twelve years old and has his own pony, he leaves home as part of his initiation to adulthood and travels west in search of the Turquoise Woman and the Sun Bearer.

This journey increases his knowledge and enriches his perspective by introducing him to the outside world. At the same time, the journey increases both his appreciation of his home and his desire to become the tribe's medicine man. When he returns home, he knows the location of the tribe's lost deerskin masks that were hidden in a cave before the Navajo began their "Long March" in 1863.

The members of Younger Brother's family are not important to the plot line, but Armer uses them to round out her picture of Navajo family life and traditions. Father is an excellent silversmith who fashions turquoise jewelry and thus provides insight into Navajo beliefs about the mystical qualities of turquoise. Mother is a skilled weaver of rugs and thus reflects the influence of the Spider Woman legend. Elder Brother teaches Younger Brother about hunting and Navajo lore.

The Big Man, the white man who operates the trading post, is the Navajo's friend whom they respectfully call "Grandfather." When Younger Brother first meets the Big Man he senses the man's friendly nature and thinks that the Big Man may be a medicine man whose power is in his blue eyes. In addition to taking Younger Brother on his first airplane and automobile ride, the Big Man also accompanies Younger Brother on his excursion into the modern world and to the Pacific Ocean.

Within the plot's larger construct, the Big Man's characterization represents the white man who admires and respects the Native Americans. In a sense, too, he may be a fictional combination of Armer, Paul Lewis Faye, and Lorenzo Hubbell. At the same time, with his automobile, airplane, adding machine, and trading post, the Big Man also symbolizes the intrusion of the twentieth century upon the Navajo's life and world.

Topics for Discussion

1. Waterless Mountain contains insights into Navajo customs and traditions. Discuss the importance of one or two of these customs or traditions.

2. Waterless Mountain also contains insights into the Navajo's religious beliefs. Can you draw any parallels between Navajo religion and other religions that you are familiar with?

3. In terms of the novel's plot and theme, discuss the role and significance of the following characters: the Big Man; the white boy whom Younger Brother meets during the sandstorm; Cut Finger; and Elder Brother's wife.

4. In terms of the novel's plot and theme, what is the significance of Younger Brother's encounter with Yellow Beak, the Pack Rat, and the SoftFooted Chief?

5. Younger Brother gains important knowledge from his experiences during his journey west. Which experience do you think he learns the most from?

Why?

6. After the Big Man and Younger Brother and his family have been in the white man's world, the Big Man says, "Yes, we must all go back. We do not belong here. There is too much noise and too much heaping of goods." What does this mean and how does it also apply to Younger Brother's newfound knowledge?

7. Before she became a writer, Laura Adams Armer was a painter, and in Waterless Mountain her prose descriptions create vivid images. Pick one of your favorite descriptions from the novel and read the passage aloud. What makes it an effective passage?

8. Because she lived among the Navajos and learned their language, customs, and traditions, Armer's narration has an insider's point-of-view. Discuss several scenes in which the insider's point-of-view is evident.

9. The entire narrative of Waterless Mountain points toward Younger Brother's return home and his help in finding the lost tribal masks. What gives him insight into the masks' location, and how does finding the masks emphasize his role as a future Navajo medicine man?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Prepare a report about turquoise.

Discuss where it is found in the United States, what colors it has, what the Navajo use the stone for, and what they believe about this gemstone. What is the significance of turquoise in Waterless Mountain?

2. Prepare a report about Navajo sand paintings. Discuss the colors that are used, the subject matter of the paintings, and the paintings' legendary or religious significance.

3. Prepare a report about Navajo rugs—how they are made, what colors are used, what figures are depicted, and what the figures represent.

4. Prepare a report about Laura Adams Armer's art career and paintings, describing her various subjects and explaining the critical response to her art.

5. Prepare a report about Armer's In Navajo Land and emphasize some of the interesting and exciting events she describes in this biographical account.

What is her attitude toward the Native Americans? Is her tone explicitly or implicitly condescending?

6. Prepare a report about the Navajo medicine man, emphasizing the purpose of the medicine man, the process for becoming a medicine man, and the duties of the medicine man. Is the medicine man still a respected member of the Navajo community? How does his role compare to that of an American medical doctor?

7. Prepare a report about the ancient cliff dwellers who once lived in cliff dwellings near Younger Brother's home.

Where did the cliff dwellers come from, and what became of them?

8. Prepare a report about the history of the Navajo's "Long March," emphasizing why they made the march, the hardships they endured on the march, and the final result of the march. Are Native Americans still oppressed in the United States?

9. Prepare a report on the traditional roles of men and women in Navajo society. How have those roles evolved?

Are Navajo men and women still able to practice the rituals and traditions that once defined their identities? How has the influence of white culture changed these roles?

For Further Reference

Amsden, Charles Avery. Navaho Weaving: Its Technique and History.

Chicago: Rio Grande Press, 1964. This book provides interesting insights into an ancient Navajo art and includes photographs showing techniques.

Bleeker, Sonia. The Navajos: Herders, Weavers, and Silversmiths. New York: William Morrow, 1958. A valuable background for understanding Navajo life, customs, and skills.

Breed, Jack. "Better Days for the Navajos." National Geographic 114 (December 1958): 809-847. An easy to read account of the Navajo life in the 1950s, highlighted by excellent photographs.

Frisbie, Charlotte J., and David P. McAllester, eds. Navajo Blessingway Singer: The Autobiography of Frank Mitchell, 1881-1967. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1978. An account of one man's experiences as a Navajo ceremonial singer.

Gilpin, Laura. The Enduring Navajo.

Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968. Readable text augmented with photographs of the Navajo land and its people.

Newcomb, Lois. Navajo Folk Tales.

Sante Fe: Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, 1967. An interesting collection of folktales.

Roessel, Ruth, ed. Navajo Stories of the Long Walk Period. Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press, 1973. An interesting collection of stories about the "Long Walk" as recounted by individual Navajo.

Related Titles

Like Waterless Mountain, Dark Circle of Branches focuses on a Navajo adolescent—Na Nai—as he matures, learns from his medicine man uncle and from life, and realizes that his destiny is to become a medicine man. Armer also addresses Navajo legends and the relationship between the white and Navajo world in this later novel, and devotes some narrative sequences to the place of the "Long Walk" in Navajo history.

Although In Navajo Land is an autobiographical account of Armer's experiences, the details she records echo some of the plot details from her fiction.

This work of nonfiction describes ceremonial dances, cliff dwellings, and Navajo customs and traditions, and even includes a chapter on Na Nai.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotes Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature□Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction□19th century□Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction□20th century□Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3□dc20 96-20771 CIP

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996