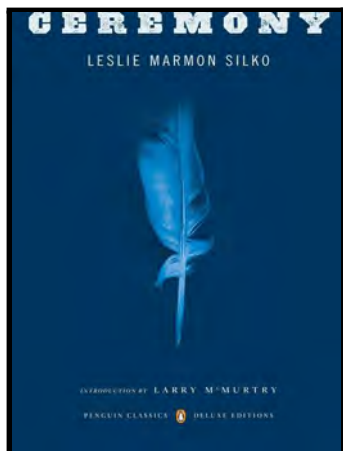


## Ceremony Reader's Guide

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# BOOK BUZZ



**Ceremony**  
By Leslie Marmon Silko  
Penguin Classics

[A Penguin Random House Reading Group Guide](#)

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### Questions and Topics for Discussion

#### Introduction

Tayo, the hero of Leslie Marmon Silko's groundbreaking novel *Ceremony*, is a half-blood Laguna Indian who returns to his reservation after surviving the Bataan Death March of World War II. As he struggles to recover the peace of mind that his experience of warfare has stolen from him, Tayo finds that memory, identity, and his relations with others all resemble the colored threads of his grandmother's sewing basket. The elements of his personality feel knotted and tangled, and his every attempt to restore them to order merely snags and twists them all the more. Tayo's problems, however, extend far beyond the frustrations and alienation he encounters in trying to readjust to peacetime. Having risked his life for an America that fundamentally disowns him, Tayo must confront difficult and painful questions about the society he has been fighting for.

In the pages of *Ceremony*, a novel that combines extraordinary lyricism with a foreboding sense of personal and national tragedy, Leslie Marmon Silko follows Tayo as he pursues a sometimes lonely and always intensely personal quest for sanity in a broken world. As Tayo searches for self-knowledge and inner peace, the reader, too, embarks on a complex emotional journey. In observing Tayo's efforts to come to terms with a society that does not fully acknowledge his humanity, one may initially feel personal sympathy with his character. However, as Silko's narrative steadily metamorphoses into an indictment of social and historical forces that have led to Tayo's suffering, the reader's feelings are likely also to transform, as simple pity gives way to solemn contemplation of the atrocities that our native peoples have been forced to undergo.



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As powerful as Tayo's story is, the enduring triumph of *Ceremony* extends far beyond its narration of events. Interwoven into the tale of Silko's hero, giving structure to the novel and added meaning to its insights, are the ancient stories of the Laguna people—stories that explore the nature of magic, that delve into the origins of evil, and that may also point a way toward purification and redemption. Silko's reader discovers that she or he is, indeed, taking part in a mystic ceremony—an initiation into a new way of thinking and feeling. Both tenderly humanistic and apocalyptically prophetic, *Ceremony* is truly a novel capable of changing both hearts and minds.

## About Leslie Marmon Silko

Leslie Marmon Silko was born in 1948 to a family whose ancestry includes Mexican, Laguna Indian, and European forebears. She has said that her writing has at its core “the attempt to identify what it is to be a half-breed or mixed-blood person.” As she grew up on the Laguna Pueblo Reservation, she learned the stories and culture of the Laguna people from her great-grandmother and other female relatives. After receiving her B. A. in English at the University of New Mexico, she enrolled in the University of New Mexico law school but completed only three semesters before deciding that writing and storytelling, not law, were the means by which she could best promote justice. She married John Silko in 1970. Prior to the writing of *Ceremony*, she published a series of short stories, including “The Man to Send Rain Clouds.” She also authored a volume of poetry, *Laguna Woman: Poems*, for which she received the Pushcart Prize for Poetry.

In 1973, Silko moved to Ketchikan, Alaska, where she wrote *Ceremony*. Initially conceived as a comic story about a mother's attempts to keep her son, a war veteran, away from alcohol, *Ceremony* gradually transformed into an intricate meditation on mental disturbance, despair, and the power of stories and traditional culture as the keys to self-awareness and, eventually, emotional healing. Having battled depression herself while composing her novel, Silko was later to call her book “a ceremony for staying sane.” Silko has followed the critical success of *Ceremony* with a series of other novels, including *Storyteller*, *Almanac for the Dead*, and *Gardens in the Dunes*. Nevertheless, it was the singular achievement of *Ceremony* that first secured her a place among the first rank of Native American novelists. Leslie Marmon Silko now lives on a ranch near Tucson, Arizona.

## Discussion Questions

1. Readers sometimes find the reading of *Ceremony* a disorienting experience, in part because Silko frequently shifts scenes and time frames without warning. How does this technique help the reader to participate in Tayo's thoughts, emotions, and experiences? Is its influence on the narrative consistently the same, and is it always effective?
2. How does Tayo's status as a half-breed influence his choices, his thinking, and the way he is perceived by other characters in the novel? What tensions and conflicts does his mixed ancestry contribute to Silko's story?



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3. For what reasons do Tayo and his cousin Rocky join the Army? In what ways do they and the other young Native American men benefit from their armed service, and why do these benefits evaporate once the war is over?
4. *Ceremony* has been described as a story of struggle between two cosmic forces, one basically masculine and one essentially feminine. Assuming this to be true, what are the images of masculinity and femininity that Silko presents? Is this gendered analysis an adequate way of understanding the novel? Are there important ideas that it leaves out?
5. *Ceremony* offers the suggestion that the European settlers of America were created by the “witchery” of a nameless witch doctor. What is the effect of this assertion? Does it make white people demonic by intimating that they are agents of evil, incapable of doing good? Or, to the contrary, does it somehow absolve them from blame because they are merely tools of the “Destroyers” and are not really responsible for their actions?
6. How do the poems and legends that are interspersed in Silko’s text influence your reading of the novel? Why do you think Silko centers Emo’s tale of debauchery (pp. 57–59) on the page in the same way that she centers the older, sacred stories?
7. One aspect of white culture that Tayo especially resents is the way in which its educational practices, particularly instruction in the sciences, dismiss Native beliefs as “superstitions.” What are the similarities and differences between the way Tayo feels about the treatment of his ancestral beliefs and the way in which a believer in the creation stories of Genesis might respond to Darwinism? To what extent is the novel a story of the struggle between technology and belief?
8. Silko’s use of symbolic imagery often makes use of contrasting opposites: dryness and wetness; mountains and canyons; city and country; sunrise and darkness. Choose one of these contrasts (or another one that you have observed); what values does each of the two terms represent? Do their meanings remain constant?
9. Blindness and invisibility are recurring motifs in *Ceremony*. What does Silko suggest through her repeated uses of inabilities or refusals to see?
10. How do the cattle and other animal presences in the novel function to illustrate the traditional values of the Laguna tribe and their conflicts with the principles and desires of white Americans?
11. Tayo believes that Emo is “wrong, all wrong” in his attitudes toward Indian identity and other aspects of life. What is the nature and what are the causes of Emo’s wrongness?



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12. Because Silko presents a number of Native American characters with drinking problems, her novel has been accused of playing into a negative stereotype. Do you think this charge has merit? Why or why not?

13. Silko, who has suffered from headaches, depression, and nausea similar to those that plague Tayo in her novel, has said, "I wrote this novel to save my life." How is *Ceremony* a novel of salvation, for Tayo, for its author, and for its readers? What are the limits to the salvation that it appears to offer?



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