# The Way to Rainy Mountain

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF N. SCOTT MOMADAY

N. Scott Momaday, one of the most prolific American Indian writers of the 20th century, grew up on several different Indian reservations in the American southwest. He first lived with his grandparents on the Kiowa reservation, and then moved to Arizona where his parents were teachers on Indian reservations. This exposed Momaday to the traditions of his Kiowa ancestry, as well as the traditions of other tribes, such as the Apache, Pueblo, and Navajo. After earning a degree in political science from the University of New Mexico, Momaday gravitated toward literature, eventually earning a doctorate in English literature from the University of California at Santa Barbara. Alongside his scholarly writing, Momaday pursued creative writing, and he won the Pulitzer Prize for his first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, in 1969. Since then, Momaday has worked as a professor while pursuing writing in many different genres: he is an accomplished poet, novelist, memoirist, and essayist. Momaday is also an active painter, and a member of the Kiowa Gourd Dance Society, which carries forward the ceremonial Kiowa Gourd Dance tradition.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* tells the story of many true historical events: the Kiowa migration that took place between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the surrender of the Kiowas to U.S. forces in 1875, the disappearance of the buffalo herds in the plains, the final Kiowa Sun Dance, and many others. Momaday provides the necessary context to understand the significance of these events, but the book does not explain its own place in history. Momaday published *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in 1969, which was a time of crisis for many American Indian tribes. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the U.S. government implemented policies to try to assimilate American Indians into Euro-American culture (or, less optimistically, to try to stamp out Indian culture). This included sending American Indian youths to boarding schools where they would be Christianized and taught only English, and the 1956 Indian Relocation Act, which resettled American Indians from reservations to American cities. Many American Indians of Momaday's generation came of age distanced from their tribes due to government policy, and then rekindled their tribal connections as the political climate of the 1960s fostered racial solidarity and a reconnection with ethnic roots. *The Way to Rainy Mountain* was written simultaneously with the founding of the American Indian Movement, the most prolific civil rights group devoted to American Indian issues, and the book can be seen as a part of the historic resurgence of American Indian identity during the mid- to late-twentieth century.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The year before Momaday published his memoir *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (the result of a years-long study of Kiowa folklore), Momaday published his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *House Made of Dawn*. Like *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, *House Made of Dawn* blends Momaday's personal experience with historical events, and, unlike *Rainy Mountain*, includes imagined experiences. Momaday was seen as the instigator of a literary movement dubbed the Native American Renaissance, which refers to the proliferation of literature by American Indians following the 1969 publication of *House Made of Dawn*. Other significant works of this movement include *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *Winter in the Blood* by James Welch, and *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich. Momaday was also an influence on the contemporary generation of American Indian writers, the most famous of whom is Sherman Alexie, author of *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *Reservation Blues*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Way to Rainy Mountain*
- **When Written:** 1969
- **Where Written:** Santa Barbara
- **When Published:** 1969
- **Literary Period:** Native American Renaissance
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Kiowa lands in Oklahoma, and Kiowa ancestral lands between western Montana and Oklahoma
- **Point of View:** Shifting, as Momaday writes in different voices: the voice of tribal lore, the voice of historical commentary, and Momaday's own first-person memories

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Mammedaty.** In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday calls his grandfather "Mammedaty." The similarity in sound between "Mammedaty" and "Momaday" is not a coincidence. When Mammedaty was born, Kiowas were given only one name, but by the time Momaday's father was born, Christian influence dictated a first and last name for children. Mammedaty then became the family surname, which N. Scott Momaday's father later abbreviated to "Momaday."

**Artistry.** The illustrations in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* were done by N. Scott Momaday's father, Al Momaday, who was a painter. Later on in N. Scott Momaday's life he would become an accomplished visual artist himself, making his own drawings and paintings to accompany his books.

## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a memoir—and a nontraditional one at that. It is at once a history of the Kiowa people, a love letter to the plains landscape, a collection of memories of N. Scott Momaday's family and tribe, and an experimental reworking of historical writing that attempts to integrate different kinds of knowledge about the past. As such, the book does not have a conventional structure or plot arc.

The book is divided into three sections: "The Setting Out," "The Going On," and "The Closing In." These sections loosely track the major arc of Kiowa history: the Kiowas begin to migrate towards the southern plains from western Montana, the Kiowas become rulers of the southern plains and experience a golden era, and the Kiowas are defeated by the U.S. military and their culture goes into decline. While the content of each section does not simply narrate each of these historical periods, the stories and memories that are told in each section relate thematically to the period of Kiowa history that each section loosely depicts.

In the first section, for instance, Momaday narrates the Kiowa creation myth that the tribe emerged into the world from a hollow log, and then contextualizes the myth by describing the bleak conditions of Kiowa life before they migrated to the southern plains. In the middle section, which mirrors the historic Kiowa golden age, Momaday relays tribal stories of victorious Kiowas conquering their enemies through strength and cleverness, and he also dwells on the beauty of the landscape and the details of Kiowa religion and culture. The third section is the darkest because it mirrors the defeat of the Kiowas—it tells of the disappearance of the buffalo and the Kiowa struggle to maintain their religion and culture while under attack.

Each of these major sections of the book is further divided into numbered chapters, which are themselves divided into segments told in three different voices: the voice of tribal lore, the voice of historical commentary, and the voice of Momaday's personal memory. Because these distinct voices alternate, stories that arc over multiple chapters are interrupted by commentary from other voices. Sometimes this commentary is directly related (the story of the woman digging up a forbidden root interrupted by historical commentary on the plant to which the story refers), and in other instances the commentary relates only by association (as when the story of the giants in the cave connects to a meditation on the power of language).

The complex structure of the book is itself meant to be a commentary on the way that people understand the past: Momaday believes that instead of separating out scholarly history from memory, or family stories from tribal myth, the past should be understood as a blending of all of these modes of understanding. The book, then, is an attempt to create a new kind of historical writing, as well as an attempt to transmit Kiowa culture by making a written record of stories preserved only in the Kiowa oral tradition.

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**N. Scott Momaday** – Momaday is the writer and narrator of this memoir, and, as such, is its central character. He is of Kiowa anscestry, but he does not speak the Kiowa language and he was born after the time when Kiowa culture was at its peak. Momaday claims that his knowledge of Kiowa life and culture comes exclusively from his family's memories and the rich Kiowa oral tradition that passed down the history and values of his tribe. Momaday's presence is most felt through his recollections, which show him to be a deeply curious, spiritual, and family-oriented man. Aside from the parts of his personality that come out through his memories, though, readers do not learn much about him. The story focuses more on his family members and the stories of his tribe.

**The Kiowas** – The Kiowas are a nomadic tribe of plains Indians that migrated to the southern plains (parts of present-day Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico) from western Montana in the seventeenth century. From the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth century, the Kiowas ruled the southern plains in alliance with the Comanches. They were nomadic warriors who preferred hunting to agriculture, they were masterful horsemen, and their religion—borrowed from the Crows—was centered on the sun. After their defeat by U.S. forces in the late 1800s, the Kiowas were confined to an Oklahoma reservation, and their traditional culture irrevocably changed.

**Tai-me** – Tai-me is the central figure of the Kiowa Sun Dance, which is the ritual that was the centerpiece of Kiowa spiritual life until its discontinuation in the late nineteenth century. Tai-me is a small doll, about two feet tall. It is a human-like figure with feathers and the feet of a deer. Kiowas make offerings to Tai-me for good luck, and the Tai-me bundle is safeguarded by a Kiowa who makes sure it never sees the sun outside of the Sun Dance. Tai-me was given to the Kiowas by the Crows and the tribe has memories of the time before Tai-me; despite this, Tai-me is considered foundational to Kiowa culture and life.

**Aho** – Aho is N. Scott Momaday's grandmother, and, outside of Momady himself, she is the central figure of the memoir. Aho passed down her memories of the Kiowas to Momaday, and, as such, much of Momaday's knowledge of the tribe comes from

her. Aho was born at the end of the Kiowa golden age, and she was present at the last Sun Dance. She lived her whole life in Oklahoma within sight of **Rainy Mountain**, but her knowledge of the Kiowa oral tradition made her able to tell stories of the Kiowas that date back to their time in the northern plains. Aho signifies the human side of memory and history; the once-vibrant Kiowa culture was able to survive and be passed on because it lived on within her.

**Mammedaty** – Mammedaty is N. Scott Momaday's grandfather. He was a peyote man, which meant he oversaw an important Kiowa religious ritual. Mammedaty was a well-respected and important man in the tribe, but his presence in the memoir is less significant than Aho's, which seems to be because he passed down fewer stories to Momaday. Mammedaty was known as somebody who saw things that others could not.

**Crows** – Thecrows are a tribe of Indians who helped the Kiowas during their southward migration from Montana. Their historical lands are in the Yellowstone River Valley in Montana, Wyoming, and North Dakota. As the Kiowas moved through Crow lands during their migration to the southern plains, they formed an alliance with the Crows and their culture became deeply influenced by Crow culture. It was from the Crows that the Kiowas inherited their religion—the Sun Dance and Tai-me are Crow in origin.

**James Mooney** – James Mooney was a white American anthropologist who researched American Indians at the end of the nineteenth- and beginning of the twentieth-century, most notably by living with the Cherokee for several years. He wrote prolifically about the religion and culture of plains Indians, including the Kiowas, and published a study of the Kiowa calendar. Momaday quotes Mooney at length to give a traditional historical perspective on the tribe.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Comanches** – The Comanches are a plains Indian tribe who were close with the Kiowas during the Kiowa golden age—in fact, the two tribes ruled the southern plains together for a century. It is from a Comanche mispronunciation of a Kiowa word that the Kiowas derive their name.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### LANGUAGE AND STORYTELLING

While *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is the story of the Kiowa migration, it is also, at its heart, a story about stories. Throughout the book, Momaday emphasizes the importance of storytelling as a tool of Kiowa survival, and he meditates on the power of language to not only represent the world around him, but also to act in the world—for Momaday words can inspire emotions, they can create magic, and they are always powerful tools for understanding and shaping reality.

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* includes several stories that directly address the power of words. In the story of the giants' cave words have magical properties; the twins say a mysterious word (passed to them through the Kiowa oral tradition) that keeps the smoke from suffocating them. In the story of the arrowmaker, the arrowmaker uses the Kiowa language as a password to determine if the man outside his tipi is friend or foe—here, too, it is words that save his life. Momaday also reflects on the word that Aho used when confronted with something frightening. He muses that this word was "not an exclamation so much, I think, as it was a warding off, an exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder." Thus, for Momaday, language is a tool—almost a weapon, even—that can be leveraged against the world. In fact, Momaday even believes that certain ideas—such as "mankind's idea of himself"—exist in language alone. In other words, Momaday argues that it is only through language that people are able to know themselves, and for that reason language is important to preserve and revere.

The beauty of Momaday's prose—particularly in his descriptions of the southern plains landscape—illustrates another dimension of the power of language. Momaday writes in three different voices: the voice of tribal lore, which tends to be somewhat spare; the voice of written history, which tends to be straightforward and technical; and the voice of personal memory, which is lyrical and full of metaphor and image. The linguistic beauty of these personal reflections show the power of language to create feelings in a reader. It is through descriptions—Momaday's simile that antelopes' tails are "like a succession of sunbursts against the purple hills," for instance—that readers get a sense of the sacredness of nature to the Kiowas. Were readers simply told the importance of landscape without being made to feel it through language, Momaday's point would not have the same resonance.

Most important, Momaday emphasizes language as a tool for cultural survival. He writes, "A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred." This can be seen as a key to the entire book: it's a collection of words that Momaday uses to be on equal terms with the world. The Kiowas are a people whose culture has been under attack for more than a century by the U.S. government. With the Kiowa way of life in decline, it

is in spoken language (the Kiowa oral tradition) that Kiowa culture and history are preserved. *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, then, is not simply a history that tells of the Kiowa past, but a living document that attempts to project Kiowa culture into the future by preserving its traditions for generations to come. The book can be seen as Momaday's attempt to use language and storytelling to stake out his place in the world and actively maintain and promote a culture that might otherwise fade out of memory.

## MEMORY AND HISTORY

*The Way to Rainy Mountain* is a history of the Kiowa people, but it's a nontraditional history; it takes the kind of written "factual" history to which Euro-American culture is accustomed and blends it with tribal lore and personal recollection. This is a surprising and radical choice in the context of most works of written history that value objectivity and evidence while discounting the ideas found in storytelling and myth. However, Momaday writes that, "The imaginative experience and the historical express equally the traditions of man's reality." By this he means that memory and myth are just as important as traditional history to how a person understands reality, and therefore must also be addressed when attempting to write an account of the past.

Momaday's principal tool for giving equal weight to memory and history is his choice to narrate the book through three alternating voices: the voices of tribal lore, traditional history, and personal memory. These voices are always responding to one another, which shows that their perspectives on the past are related and even intertwined. For example, Momaday's juxtaposition of the Kiowa creation myth (emerging into the world from a hollow log) with the historical narrative of the Kiowas moving southward from a harsh northern landscape shows the parallels between the two foundational stories of the Kiowa people. While to Westerners the story of the log is seen as metaphor and the story of the migration is seen as literally true, both tell of moving from a world of darkness into one of sunlight, or of moving from a life of hardship into one of relative ease. Momaday insists that both of these stories essentially tell the same story, and thus both have a valid relationship to truth. This undercuts the Eurocentric primacy of traditional historical scholarship, and shows the importance of other modes of understanding the past, particularly when writing the history of a people like the Kiowa whose history has always been transmitted orally instead of through writing.

Momaday's focus on older people is also important to his ideas about memory and history. Much of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is devoted to Momaday's personal memories of his grandparents, as well as his recounting of their memories and stories. In a sense, he treats older generations as a proxy for history: it is in their memories and stories that the Kiowa live on. Because older people carry this sacred history within them, they are seen as worthy of veneration. This can be specific and practical (the best arrowmakers are old men who have honed their skill and patience), or more abstract (he writes of Aho that, "the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood," implying that she contains within her the whole of the tribe's memory of their ancestral migration). Either way, the wisdom and memory that old people have mean that they are afforded the highest honor in the book, which emphasizes that culture and history cannot be abstracted from the people that carry them forward.

Momaday's insistence on combining memory and myth with traditional history, and his focus on the importance of older generations as embodiments of history, are a direct challenge to the limitations of traditional history. Though memory and myth may not come with "proof" that a story is true, they are essential components to understanding the way the Kiowas understand themselves and their history. In other words, memory and myth are ways to place cultural truths alongside events that "actually happened." Momaday's focus on memory also emphasizes that the past must be actively transmitted in order to preserve Kiowa culture and identity. History is not an abstract time that is relegated only to the past; it is a set of stories, values, and ideas that live on through people who make the effort to remember. Without their memories and myths, then, the Kiowas would cease to be Kiowas as they move into the future.

## ORIGINS, LINEARITY, AND CIRCULARITY

The way that Momaday tells the story of Kiowa migration is nonlinear: he tells the same story two ways, moves forward and backward in time, and allows endings and origins to bleed into one another. In this way, *Rainy Mountain* is a challenge to the traditional linear narratives that structure most Western histories—narratives defined by having a clear beginning, middle, and end that are connected by cause and effect and anchored by a single perspective. *Rainy Mountain*'s structure implicitly argues that history and reality are too complex, fragmentary, and contradictory to be represented by a traditional linear narrative, and that Kiowa history in particular—as an oral rather than written tradition—requires a more experimental form of historical writing.

Momaday is consistently mysterious when writing about origins. He is preoccupied with the abstract idea that language is at the root of all origin ("In the beginning was the word, and it was spoken," he writes), but he has less to say about the specific historical origin of his tribe. The origin of the Kiowas is explained through the tribal story that the Kiowas came into the world through a hollow log, but Momaday's attempts at a more traditional historical explanation lead only to mystery; there's a tribe in the northern plains that speaks a language related to Kiowa, which suggests a geographic origin, but

Momaday never goes much further. This certainly points to a gap in knowledge—there is simply not sufficient historical evidence to draw concrete conclusions about the origin of the tribe. Momaday addresses this when he writes, "The verbal tradition by which [Kiowa history] has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay." However, Momaday's preservation of mystery in his discussion of origins is telling; these gaps in Kiowa history, which reflect the conditions of Kiowa culture and the nature of oral tradition, say as much about the Kiowa understanding of history as they obscure.

Similarly, the fragmentary nature of oral tradition means that linear history is not possible for the Kiowas to the extent that it would be for a culture with a written tradition, and this is reflected in the basic narrative structure of the interwoven voices. The often-indirect relationship between the voices undercuts the traditional narrative convention that events in a story should be connected by cause and effect. Sometimes the voices connect thematically, as in the section in which each voice reflects on the hardships of Kiowa women, and other times the voices are connected through imagistic association, as when a story of a fire is juxtaposed with a memory of the red glow of the sun on the horizon. Moreover, time does not move chronologically in the book; an example is Momaday's moving back and forth between stories of his grandmother's youth and old age. So the nonlinear and fragmentary structure of the memoir reflects the Kiowa understanding of their own past. Instead of a chronological progression of events that lead to the present, Kiowa history is better understood as fragments of stories and ideas that resonate with other memories and stories from across all periods of history.

Momaday's storytelling also emphasizes circularity, particularly in descriptions of older people. On numerous occasions the similarities between infants and the very old are described; Momaday even compares his grandmother's face as she was dying to the face of an infant. This suggests a cyclical worldview rather than a linear one—a notion of time in which endings loop back into beginnings. The sense of circularity in *The Way to Rainy Mountain* is also echoed by repetition of stories throughout the book. Sometimes this is the same story told in several different ways (the creation myth, for example, and the parallel narrative of the Kiowas migrating south), and sometimes it is a variation on the same story recurring over and over, as when the horse Little Red was stolen, just as his bones were stolen after he died.

The prevalence in the book of nontraditional narrative elements and structures reveals the differences between the Eurocentric worldview that underlies traditional historical writing and the Kiowa worldview—the Kiowas understand the past as a collection of story fragments that add up more to an understanding of a culture than a linear account of the passage of time. As the Kiowa cultural and historical tradition is predominantly oral (rather than written), it makes sense that Kiowas would understand history differently from the way the West, with its written culture, does.

## NATURE, LANDSCAPE, AND ANIMALS

Nature, landscape, and animals are just as important to Kiowa history and culture as people. This shows the Kiowa veneration of the non-human world and suggests that the Kiowas did not consider humans, animals, and nature to be entirely distinct.

The stories that Momaday narrates include many instances of a blurred line between human and animal. In one story, a man turns into a water beast, and in another a boy becomes a bear. Spiders can be grandmothers and redbirds can be husbands and fathers to humans. Animals' actions in Kiowa stories are often just as conscious as the actions of people—therefore, animals have as big a role in shaping Kiowa history and culture as humans do. Similarly, in Kiowa history, people and the landscape affect one another profoundly. Humans shape the landscape and nature (for example, by killing all the buffalo, or by clawing the sides of Devil's Tower) and the landscape shapes humans in return (the Kiowas are carnivores and hunters as opposed to farmers because they come from a landscape filled with animals that they can hunt).

More than any other natural force, **horses** shaped Kiowa history and culture. Momaday is up front about the difficulty of Kiowa life before horses: hunting was arduous and travel was impossible. Horses rescued the Kiowas from the difficult landscape of the northern plains and "set their nomadic soul free." Momaday suggests that it was horses that enabled Kiowas to find their destiny and dignity and to settle in their natural landscape of the southern plains. In other words, without the horse Momaday believes that the Kiowas would not have been able to fulfill their nature as a tribe. Because of this, horses were revered.

The landscape itself is also a central character of *Rainy Mountain*. Momaday's poetic evocations of the landscape reflect the ways that the Kiowas venerated nature and defined themselves through place. When Momaday writes that "to look upon that landscape [makes you think that this] is where Creation was begun" or that "the landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood" he is communicating that it is the landscape as much as anything else that has made the Kiowas who they are.

This focus on nature, landscape, and animals is part of the unconventionality of the history that Momaday is telling. In most western histories, humans are the central characters. They are distinct from nature, and they act upon the non-human world, not the other way around. The centrality of nature and animals is telling of the Kiowa relationship to the environment—the Kiowas see their history as inextricable from

the history of the natural world, and, as such, their stories show Kiowa people to be blended with natural forces.

### MIXING OF CULTURES

Throughout the book, Momaday emphasizes the extent to which Kiowa culture has been shaped by blending—voluntarily and involuntarily—with other cultures. This cultural blending is mostly celebrated, since many of the pillars of Kiowa culture were learned and inherited from other tribes. From the Crows, for instance, the Kiowas learned their religion and began to do the Sun Dance, a central aspect of Kiowa culture. The migratory Kiowa lifestyle, also a defining part of Kiowa identity, was made possible by their alliances with other plains tribes. Even the name "Kiowa" comes from a Comanche version of the Kiowas' own name for themselves. Overall, Momaday's telling of Kiowa history suggests that the Kiowas believe that they were not fully formed before the influence of other tribes turned them into the people they were always meant to be.

However, Kiowa culture has also been blended with white culture over the course of European colonization of Kiowa lands. Sometimes Momaday reserves judgments about this type of cultural blending. For example, he states that his grandmother became a Christian at the end of her life, a fact that he presents as being part of her long spiritual journey that also included being present at Sun Dances, a central part of Kiowa religion. This suggests that, in some ways, he sees white influence as being just another part of the Kiowa story. To bolster this sense, Momaday often quotes from James Mooney, a white anthropologist who studied tribes of the southern plains. That Momaday uses the work of a white scholar to tell aspects of Kiowa history shows that, despite the great violence of white settlers, he sees their histories as being tied together.

This is not to say, though, that the overwhelming sense that Momaday gives of the role of white settlement in Kiowa history is peaceful; Momaday makes clear that there was a systematic white assault on Kiowa people, history, and culture that resulted in the end of the Kiowa golden era. While Kiowa people and traditions still endure, he does not sugarcoat the profound negative effects of white settlement. For instance, the U.S. government prohibited the Kiowa Sun Dance, which led to its discontinuation. Momaday considers this act to have been "deicide," or the murder of Kiowa religion. He describes the whites taking all the Kiowas' **horses** and slaughtering them, which was an act of profound cruelty to a people who so valued their horses. The negative effect of white settlement is apparent in less dramatic moments, too; for example, Momaday doesn't speak Kiowa, which means that he cannot understand his grandmother's prayers. This shows the ways in which the prevalence of white culture separates Kiowas from their family and heritage.

Overall, then, the relationship of the Kiowas to cultural mixing is a complicated one. On the one hand, it was the influence of other Indian cultures that gave the Kiowas horses and religion and allowed them to become the rulers of the southern plains. On the other hand, the mixing of white culture and Kiowa culture—which occurred due to the violent subjugation of the Kiowas by the U.S. government—was what ended the Kiowa golden age and caused Kiowa culture to begin to dissolve. Rather than taking an ideological stance on cultural mixing, Momaday treats each instance of cultural influence as unique and deserving of its own analysis. This allows him to make a nuanced commentary on the different eras of Kiowa history.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### RAINY MOUNTAIN

Rainy Mountain, the landform that defines the skyline of Kiowa lands, is an iconic natural feature that encapsulates a sense of place for the Kiowas. It's also a shorthand for home; when Momaday says in the introduction that he "returned to Rainy Mountain," he's actually referring to a more general homecoming. Rainy Mountain is not an uncomplicated symbol for home, though. The Kiowas originally came from the northern plains, and they settled at Rainy Mountain after a long migration. The Kiowas think of this migration as a journey to fulfill their destiny: they became nomads and warriors, they came to worship Tai-me, and they grew to rule the southern plains. They settled at Rainy Mountain at the apex of this journey, so the mountain is a reminder of their most triumphant period of history. It's a slightly dissonant symbol, then, as the mountain—an embodiment of home and of the period of time when Kiowa culture was at its peak—presides over the dissolution of Kiowa culture and the death of Momaday's grandparents, who bear the last living memories of the Sun Dance.

### HORSES

Before the Kiowas had horses, their lives were hard. Their nomadic nature could not be honored because travel was too difficult, and hunting was arduous, which meant that food could sometimes be scarce. When the Kiowas discovered horses it set them free from their most persistent hardships and made it possible to fulfill their destiny of being nomadic warriors and skilled hunters. Horses, then, represent for the Kiowas the defining characteristics of the tribe and the best of the Kiowa people. Horses are brave and honorable, like the warhorse that died of shame after his rider turned away from a charge. Horses connect people to nature,

which is evident in Momaday's loving description of riding his horse through the New Mexico landscape and knowing nature more intimately than ever before. The equivalence of horses and humans is shown in the story of the man sacrificing a beloved spotted horse during a smallpox epidemic so that he and his family might be spared. Horses are an uncomplicated good. They elevate the Kiowas as people and are commensurately beloved.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the University of New Mexico Press edition of *The Way to Rainy Mountain* published in 1976.

### Prologue Quotes

> In one sense, then, the way to Rainy Mountain is preeminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself, and it has old and essential being in language. The verbal tradition by which it has been preserved has suffered a deterioration in time. What remains is fragmentary: mythology, legend, lore, and hearsay—and of course the idea itself, as crucial and complete as it ever was. That is the miracle.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), The Kiowas

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 3

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage explains N. Scott Momaday's intention for his book. He is writing a history of the Kiowa migration, but the deeper history he wishes to tell is the history of how the Kiowas understand themselves as people (in other words, "man's idea of himself"). When he writes that this idea has its being in language, he is implying that people are able to have ideas about themselves only to the extent that they can state those ideas in language. It's a debatable premise, but it is the premise on which Momaday bases his book. He continues on to state that if people only know themselves through language, and if it's through the verbal tradition (rather than the written tradition) that this language is preserved, then time will necessarily fray the ideas as they are passed down—hence being left only with the fragments of myth and memory that Momaday will assemble throughout the book. So Momaday is explaining here that the non-linear, fragmentary, myth-heavy version of Kiowa history that he is about to tell is a form dictated by Kiowa culture itself, as well as the historical evidence (or lack thereof) that is available to him. He argues, in other words, that this way of telling history *is* Kiowa history, and to tell Kiowa history in a way more recognizable to Euro-American audiences would be to obscure something fundamental about the Kiowa people.

> The buffalo was the animal representation of the sun, the essential and sacrificial victim of the Sun Dance. When the wild herds were destroyed, so too was the will of the Kiowa people; there was nothing to sustain them in spirit. But these are idle recollections, the mean and ordinary agonies of human history. The interim was a time of great adventure and nobility and fulfillment.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), The Kiowas

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 3

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage ties together the hardships of the beginning of the Kiowa migration—the time before the Kiowas had Taime or horses—and the hardships that the Kiowas faced after disastrous treaties with the U.S. government and the disappearance of the buffalo. This implies a circularity in Momaday's (and the Kiowas') understanding of history: the conditions of the past returned hundreds of years later, though in a form and context slightly different from before. It's notable that Momaday seems to dismiss these periods of hardship (despite their recurrence) as unimportant (or, at least, unremarkable). Momaday suggests that the more important subject to focus on is the Kiowa golden age, when the Kiowas were at the peak of their power and fulfillment. This passage also emphasizes the importance of the buffalo. The buffalo are seen, even, as a proxy for Kiowa culture; once they disappeared, the Kiowas lost their will and spirit. This shows the deep interrelation between Kiowas and the natural world. Though the Kiowas are, throughout the book, notably adaptable to changing circumstances, the disappearance of the buffalo is an exception. Without this element of the natural world, the Kiowas are unable to be their true selves.

The imaginative experience and the historical express equally the traditions of man's reality.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 4

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote is fundamental to understanding Momaday's reasoning behind telling Kiowa history the way he does. In traditional Euro-American history, scholars must have material evidence in order to claim that something happened in the past. This kind of evidence could be artifacts, diaries, historical newspapers, etc., but scholars are required to provide physical proof of an event in order to be believed. Many of the stories that Momaday tells lack evidence and even defy common sense: people turn into animals, unexplained intuition saves people from beasts, magic words affect the landscape, or objects give spiritual power to people. In traditional Euro-American history, there would be no way to assert these events as ones that literally happened, but for Kiowas those events have been understood as factual. This leaves Momaday in a dilemma; to explicitly label these stories as myth undercuts their power as historical explanation, but to assert that they happened might undermine his credibility as a historian. Momaday thus splits the difference by making the important observation that it doesn't matter whether an event literally occurred or was imaginary, because both the literal and the imaginary express reality as the Kiowas understand it. In other words, in our understanding of lived reality we do not apply the standards of Western historical writing, so in order to understand lived reality, we must not ignore the power of the imaginary. This is the justification for the fragmented and hybrid structure of storytelling that Momaday uses to convey Kiowa history.

To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 5

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Momaday is referring to the landscape of Rainy Mountain, or, in other words, the landscape of the Kiowa homeland. Crucially, this passage comes just before Momaday discusses his own return to Rainy Mountain and his decision to retrace the Kiowa migration. This quote is a way to explain the reasoning behind Momaday's choice. To Momaday (and, presumably, to the other Kiowas) landscape is not a backdrop to culture and history, but an integral part of Kiowa history and identity. Therefore, to seriously engage with the landscape is an essential part of understanding who the Kiowas are and how they have become what they are. In fact, here Momaday is even implying a spiritual dimension to the landscape (that "Creation was begun" at Rainy Mountain), which extends into a temporal justification for beginning Kiowa history with landscape—for if the landscape evokes the moment of creation, then landscape is a kind of origin point, and a logical place to start. It's notable, too, that the sense of the quote is that the landscape subsumes the human ("to look upon that landscape…is to lose the sense of proportion"). Momaday is not choosing to begin his history of the Kiowas with a moment that aggrandizes humans, but rather one that suggests a human unity within the natural world.

## Introduction Quotes

Although my grandmother lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), Aho

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 7

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote gestures towards an important premise of the book: that history and memory are stored within people, particularly elders. Momaday's grandmother Aho serves throughout the book as a proxy for the history of the Kiowas, since she witnessed the last Kiowa Sun Dance (the last moment of the Kiowa golden age, when the Kiowas were able to be most themselves). The Kiowa spirit, then, lived within her, even though Kiowa culture had been in

decline for decades. Momaday takes this premise further through a chain of metaphors: "landscape of the continental interior" is a stand-in for the Kiowa migration, which signifies, to Momaday, Kiowa history overall. Thus, Momaday suggests that Aho contains not just her own experiences, but the entire history of the tribe. By using "landscape" to mean "history," Momaday again shows the inextricable relationship between Kiowas and the land, and he also suggests the power of oral tradition to transmit experiences over generations. Hearing Kiowa stories made Aho not simply know the stories of the Kiowas, but also *contain* them. Momaday conveys the depth of this relationship to story and history by locating the knowledge in her blood rather than in her mind.

There is a perfect freedom in the mountains, but it belongs to the eagle and the elk, the badger and the bear. The Kiowas reckoned their stature by the distance they could see, and they were bent and blind in the wilderness.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), The Kiowas

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 7

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage demonstrates the extent to which the Kiowas believed that the landscape shaped people. Before the Kiowas migrated to the southern plains, they lived in the northern wilderness, and this was a time of great hardship. Momaday explains this hardship in relation to nature; the Kiowas understood their place in the world by how far they could see, so in the wilderness they thought of themselves as being of low-status. Though he doesn't say so, this sense of low status was clearly underscored by the difficulty Kiowas had hunting before the introduction of the horse. Momaday is careful not to malign the landscape itself—the landscape was empowering to animals like the eagle, elk, badger, and bear, and it is not an inherent badness in the landscape that made it defeating to the Kiowas. When the Kiowas migrated south, however, they found the landscape that would support their inherent strengths and desires—nomadism, sun-worship, and buffalo hunting. It was in this landscape—a southern plains landscape in which they could see for far distances—that the Kiowas had the most self-respect and success as a culture.

My grandmother was there. Without bitterness, and for as long as she lived, she bore a vision of deicide.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), Aho

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 10

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Momaday is referring to the last attempt to hold a Kiowa Sun Dance, a ceremony that was central to Kiowa religion. Aho was present when the Kiowas gathered for the Sun Dance for the final time, but the ceremony did not occur because the U.S. government sent soldiers to prevent the Kiowas from practicing their religion. This was an act explicitly meant to undermine Kiowa power and destroy Kiowa culture and religion, which were seen as threats to the white, Christian colonization of the American West. This quote explains the effect that witnessing this act had on Momaday's grandmother, and it's particularly significant that Momaday refers to this act as deicide. "Deicide," a word linguistically related to "homicide" or "suicide," means to kill a god, and to use the word here is a strong and appropriate condemnation of U.S. violence towards the Kiowas. In light of this, though, it is surprising that Momaday describes his grandmother as having no bitterness towards this horrific part of Kiowa history. Readers can only guess as to why this might be so, but Aho's sentiment evokes Momaday's attitude towards the periods of hardship in Kiowa history. Momaday has previously implied that hardship in Kiowa history is worth noting because it happened, but hardship is not worth emphasizing—it is not definitive of the Kiowa people and it is not as important as the periods when the Kiowas flourished.

Their wives and daughters served them well. The women might indulge themselves; gossip was at once the mark and compensation of their servitude. They made loud and elaborate talk among themselves, full of jest and gesture, fright and false alarm.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), Aho

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 11-12

**Explanation and Analysis**

In several moments in the book Momaday writes directly

about the hardships that Kiowa women faced, acknowledging that they were given lower status than Kiowa men. Momaday's observation, then, that the women talked and gossiped constantly, and that this talk was "at once the mark and compensation of their servitude," is a complex one. First, it shows the importance of language to Kiowa life—that language and storytelling could be a reward for servitude indicates the great importance and joy that language brought the Kiowas. Second, the notion of language as the "mark" of servitude seems to suggest that, since women were forced to serve men, they were in a unique position to spend all day talking amongst themselves—a position that, this statement implies, men did not find themselves in. Momaday does not explicitly state this, but it seems that women, because they were the ones who were able to talk all day, were the primary storytellers of the tribe. In other words, it was through women more than men that Kiowa history and culture was transmitted through generations, which points to the vitality of women. This observation seems to be supported by the fact that the primary storyteller in Momaday's life was Aho, not Mammedaty.

## The Setting Out Quotes

❝ A hundred years ago the Comanche Ten Bears remarked upon the great number of horses which the Kiowas owned. "When we first knew you," he said, "you had nothing but dogs and sleds." It was so; the dog is primordial. Perhaps it was dreamed into being.

**Related Characters:** The Kiowas, Comanches

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 21

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote gets at several important themes of the book. First, it underscores the idea of the horse as being an essential component of Kiowa identity—before the introduction of the horse, the Kiowas lived a demeaning and hard life, but the horse allowed them to become who they were meant to be. Since horses signify the golden age of Kiowa history and dogs are symbolic of the hard life the Kiowas lived beforehand, this again emphasizes that Kiowas understood themselves in relation to the natural world. The Kiowas suggest that horses and dogs changed them, rather than implying that they controlled the horses and dogs. This quote is also interesting because the passage about dogs being "dreamed into being" resonates with many of the ideas of origins in the book (the landscape as the catalyst for creation, and language as having the literal power to bring something into being). This is another example of traditional notions of cause and effect not being broadly applicable in the book. A last observation is that throughout the book Momaday is comfortable using observations from people of other cultures as evidence of certain aspects of Kiowa history or identity. Here, he quotes a Comanche, and in other sections he quotes James Mooney, a white anthropologist. This shows, again, that the mixing of cultures was a central part of Kiowa history, and because of that, Momaday believes that other cultures have some meaningful and true knowledge of Kiowas.

❝ A word has power in and of itself. It comes from nothing into sound and meaning; it gives origin to all things. By means of words can a man deal with the world on equal terms. And the word is sacred. A man's name is his own; he can keep it or give it away as he likes. Until recent times, the Kiowas would not speak the name of a dead man. To do so would have been disrespectful and dishonest. The dead take their names with them out of the world.

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 33

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote is resonant with Momaday's comment in the prologue that the Kiowas' idea of themselves is an idea that exists fundamentally in language. Here, the voice of history is suggesting a literal creative power of words—that words bring ideas (and even objects, as his use of "all things" seems to suggest) into being, rather than just representing them. In other words, he suggests that ideas and things would not exist independently of words. Because of this creative power—which is deliberately god-like—words have a sacred quality and a spiritual power to them, demonstrated by the Kiowa tradition of not speaking the names of the dead. This emphasis on the power and sacredness of language is particularly resonant in the context of a culture sustained by an oral tradition. There is no written record or evidence of Kiowa history and culture—it is all contained and perpetuated through the spoken word. In that context it makes sense that language would take on a spiritual power

and would be seen as having a central importance to culture.

> *It was not an exclamation so much, I think, as it was a warding off, an exertion of language upon ignorance and disorder.*

**Related Characters:** Aho

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 33

**Explanation and Analysis**

Directly following the tribal story of the twins using magic words to escape the giants' cave, and the subsequent meditation on the creative powers of language, Momaday here tells a personal story about the word Aho used when she was frightened. This seems to provide a concrete example of the more abstract powers that the voice of history has just attributed to language. Momaday emphasizes that Aho's use of the word was not a passive reaction to a frightening situation, but rather a way of taking control and asserting her influence on the world. The word was not exactly a "magic word" in the sense of the story of the twins in the cave, but nonetheless it is a word that, Momaday insists, gives Aho power in a situation where she would otherwise feel powerless. This indicates that words are not simply symbolic—they are also tools that give power and assert a particular vision on the world.

> *There was a great holiness all about in the room, as if an old person had died there or a child had been born.*

**Related Characters:** Tai-me, N. Scott Momaday

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 37

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote is Momaday's personal memory of visiting the Tai-me bundle as a child. Tai-me is the foundational religious object of the Kiowas, and, as such, its presence is sacred. Momaday describes the whole room as having been suffused with Tai-me's holiness, and it is significant that this sacredness is described in human terms rather than divine ones—a religious object reminds Momaday of being in the presence of birth or death, two of the most definitive human experiences. This emphasizes the interconnectedness, rather than the separateness, of the human and the divine, which echoes the interconnectedness that the Kiowas saw between humans and the natural world. The divine was found within and outside of humans, just as nature shaped and was shaped by humans. This quote also emphasizes the notion of circular time in which birth and death loop back into one another. This has been brought up before in several contexts: for example, when Momaday suggests that Kiowa history cycles repeatedly through similar periods of hardship, or when Momaday describes his great-grandmother's skin as becoming infant-like in her old age.

## The Going On Quotes

> The old men were the best arrowmakers, for they could bring time and patience to their craft. The young men—the fighters and hunters—were willing to pay a high price for arrows that were well made.

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 47

**Explanation and Analysis**

Throughout the book, Momaday emphasizes the respect that the Kiowas have for older people. This has generally been discussed in the context of storytelling; it is elders who know best the history of the tribe, and it is therefore elders who bear the responsibility and honor of passing on Kiowa history and culture. This quote is a different example of the importance of elders—their experience and patience means that they are able to make arrows of superior quality to the arrows of younger arrowmakers. This passage points, also, to the gender divide among Kiowas. The voice of personal memory that immediately follows this quote describes the (male) arrowmaker from Momaday's childhood as silent other than during his praying. The female equivalent to the arrowmaker is the old woman described in the epilogue who, like this arrowmaker, used to visit Momaday's house. The old woman told stories, and it was through her that Momaday knew of some essential tribal stories. From the arrowmaker, though, Momaday appears to learn no stories. This division echoes the sense given in the passage about gossip being the reward and mark of women's servitude—it does seem as though women are the primary storytellers of the tribe.

*The Kiowa language is hard to understand, but, you know, the storm spirit understands it. This is how it was: Long ago the Kiowas decided to make a horse; they decided to make it out of clay, and so they began to shape the clay with their hands. Well, the horse began to be. But it was a terrible, terrible thing.*

**Related Characters:** The Kiowas

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 48

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage begins the Kiowa story of the storm spirit, which explains the phenomenon of storms; the storm spirit emerged from a botched attempt to make a horse out of clay, and the terrible creature that resulted creates frightening storms. Nevertheless, these storms are not truly a threat to the Kiowas, because the storm spirit understands their language and will therefore pass them by when asked. This story is a fascinating tribute to the power of language—like Aho's word that she wields against frightening things, the Kiowas can use language to diminish the threat of storms. This is also the only example in the book of creation going awry. While Momaday often emphasizes that words give origin to all things and words have the power to create, this is an example of something created from clay rather than words. There is no example in the book of words creating something terrible, but this act of creation through clay results in something unnatural. There are several ways to read this—perhaps it was arrogant to attempt to create something as sacred as a horse?—but it's certainly true that this underscores the importance of words to Kiowa culture and spirituality.

## The Closing In Quotes

*Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it. He ought to imagine that he touches it with his hands at every season and listens to the sounds that are made upon it. He ought to imagine the creatures there and all the faintest motions of the wind. He ought to recollect the glare of noon and all the colors of the dawn and dusk.*

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 83

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage closes the body of the book—only the epilogue is left after this, and so this marks the end of the three-section structure that maps onto the three major periods of Kiowa history. As such, this passage can be read as a way to make a conclusion from the arc of Kiowa history, and as a conclusion, it conspicuously refuses to make any sweeping statement of meaning or destiny. Instead, Momaday brings Kiowa history back to the personal, the landscape, and, significantly, the imagination. Momaday had previously referred to the landscape of Rainy Mountain as evoking a sense of spirituality and of origin, and this description echoes that sentiment. However, the difference is that the first description of the landscape of Rainy Mountain was a literal one—Momaday was attempting to describe a landscape that was in front of him. Here, however, Momaday encourages readers to recall a landscape from memory in fine detail, to pull it from the imagination without being in the presence of it. This is an act of creation and imagination, then, rather than one of strict observation and representation. In a sense, this could be seen as a metaphor for the work of historical writing and memory. Kiowa history is not a landscape that can be observed and described, but one whose details must be gleaned from memory and imagination alone, as its referent (the past) no longer exists. So this return to a description of landscape is another instance of circular storytelling—of returning to a theme or event in a way that echoes, rather than repeats, the previous instance.

## Epilogue Quotes

The falling stars seemed to imagine the sudden and violent disintegration of an old order.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker), The Kiowas

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 85

**Explanation and Analysis**

Momaday opens the epilogue by describing a startlingly bright meteor shower that occurred just as the Kiowa golden age was fraying due to U.S. government violence and the theft of Tai-me by Osages. Significantly, Momaday states that the meteor shower became the symbol of the

transition from golden age to decline—the meteor shower represented the "disintegration of an old order." To define a historical period based on a natural phenomenon whose import was symbolic (rather than, for instance, catastrophic to landscape/human lives) is a different convention than Euro-American history, which tends to define historical periods based on significant political events (like the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the beginning of the First World War). To use the meteor shower as the marker of a new era shows how deeply interwoven the Kiowas were with the natural world—they could view natural phenomena as being directly related to, symbolic of, or in response to the political and cultural upheaval of the time.

> The culture would persist for a while in decline, until about 1875, but then it would be gone, and there would be very little material evidence that it had ever been. Yet it is within the reach of memory still, though tenuously now, and moreover it is even defined in a remarkably rich and living verbal tradition which demands to be preserved for its own sake. The living memory and the verbal tradition which transcends it were brought together once and for all in the person of Ko-sahn.

**Related Characters:** N. Scott Momaday (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 85-86

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the close of the book, Momaday emphasizes, once again, that Kiowa history and culture are inextricable from their mode of transmission: the oral tradition. Without language and storytelling, in other words, Kiowa history could not live on. Momaday does not sugarcoat the damage that has been done to the oral tradition—as old people with firsthand memories of the golden age die off and as (forced and unforced) assimilation by Kiowas to Euro-American culture weakens the continuity and relevance of Kiowa stories, the oral tradition becomes weaker. For this reason, and because of the richness and power of the oral tradition, Momaday explains that the stories must be preserved—a task to which his book has dedicated itself. It's significant that Momaday closes the book by anchoring abstract ideas of the oral tradition to an actual person, an elderly Kiowa woman who lived during the Sun Dance. While Momaday's concerns with history, memory, and storytelling might sometimes seem abstract, his turn to a living person shows the personal significance and the stakes of preserving Kiowa culture. History for the Kiowas is not an abstract and impersonal phenomenon, but one that is self-consciously and passionately carried forward through people who understand that it is the only way to make sure Kiowa culture lives on.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PROLOGUE

Momaday immediately introduces the arc of the story of the Kiowas, noting that their migration from the northern to the southern plains was one of adventure and triumph until tragedy struck and Kiowa culture withered. Momaday attributes this tragedy to the disappearance of the buffalo, since the buffalo (a key component of the Kiowa Sun Dance) were a pillar of Kiowa culture. Momaday notes that the tragedy that befell the Kiowas is ordinary in the scope of human history, and indicates that he prefers to focus on the time of the Kiowa migration when his people were at their most triumphant.

*Momaday's insistence on focusing on the Kiowa golden age rather than on Kiowa hardships and decline indicates the nature of the book: Momaday is attempting to preserve and promote Kiowa culture, rather than acknowledge and affirm the forces that have sought to destroy the Kiowas. This seems relevant to Momaday's strange choice to emphasize the disappearance of the buffalo as the signifier of Kiowa decline instead of explicitly blaming the white settlers who killed all the buffalo and attempted to eradicate Kiowa culture. It's not that Momaday is avoiding the subject—he has plenty to say about white violence later on—but in the opening he prefers to focus on the greatness of the Kiowas.*

Momaday introduces Tai-me without explaining what Tai-me is—he writes simply that Tai-me came to the Kiowas in a time of suffering and made their lives better. The Kiowa journey with Tai-me was one of constant improvement; they moved to a warmer landscape, discovered **horses**, fulfilled their nomadic spirit, and built an alliance with the Comanches that allowed them to rule the southern plains for a hundred years.

*This is the story of Kiowa greatness, the part of Kiowa history on which Momaday prefers to dwell. Momaday structures the story loosely around the three major periods of Kiowa history, and this passage describes the first two: the Kiowa journey out of the hardship of the northern plains, and the golden age in which the Kiowas ruled the southern plains. Notably, the story of Kiowa greatness is not limited to a focus on Kiowas; Momaday also gives credit to horses and the Comanches.*

Stepping back, Momaday explains that the story of Kiowa migration is not only the history of the Kiowas, but also the history of an idea: the Kiowa's idea of who they are as a people. He states that this idea exists, in its essence, in language, because the verbal tradition is all that remains of Kiowa history and culture. Since the Kiowa verbal tradition has weakened over time, though, this idea can only be communicated through fragments of myth and memory. Despite this, Momaday makes clear that Kiowa culture and spirit are still intact and vital.

*Momaday explains that he is telling the history of the Kiowa migration in order to explain how the Kiowas understand themselves as a people. He also clarifies that this can only be comprehended through a careful examination of language, since language is all that exists of Kiowa history. Momaday clearly believes that language and stories not only speak about culture, but are themselves* embodiments *of culture. He also nods to the fragmentary nature of oral tradition, particularly an oral tradition as weakened as the Kiowas'. Because Kiowa history is transmitted through oral tradition, it requires a different, more fragmentary structure than traditional written Western history.*

To explain his writing process and the importance of the book, Momaday suggests that the responsibility of the imagination is to tell an old story in a new way. For him, the Kiowa migration is a blend of history, legend, and personal and cultural memory—history and imagination, he insists, express reality in equally valid ways. He states that the three major components of this story are the landscape, a time that is long past, and the enduring spirit of the Kiowas. Momaday explains that he is interested in telling this story in a way that reflects the way the mind understands, remembers, and creates traditions. The journey to **Rainy Mountain**, he suggests, is at its core an expression of the identity and spirit of the Kiowas, one that should be understood as beautiful rather than tragic.

*The idea that imagination and history are equally important to a person's concept of reality is key to this book. Because the Kiowas understood history through an oral tradition of stories that mixed fact and myth, a simple retelling of the provable facts of Kiowa history might account for the passage of time, but would entirely exclude any notion of how the Kiowas understood their* own *relationship to the past, and even their values and culture in the present. Momaday is emphasizing again that the book should be understood as a cultural history rather than a literal, linear one. Its goal is to account for the identity and culture of the Kiowas, which Momaday insists is an optimistic project rather than a tragic one.*

## INTRODUCTION

Momaday describes the landscape of **Rainy Mountain**, which is a knoll (hill) in the Oklahoma plains where the Kiowas have lived for a long time. The weather here is harsh, but Momaday's evocative description of the landscape draws out its beauty. He notes that it's a lonely landscape—there are not many objects, simply one tree, one hill, or one person. Momaday suggests a spiritual element to this landscape, saying that to look at it in the morning is to "lose the sense of proportion." The landscape activates the imagination and raises the thought that "this is where Creation was begun."

*It's significant that Momaday chooses to open the book by focusing on the landscape, and on Rainy Mountain in particular. Rainy Mountain, which is a symbol of home for the Kiowas, is described as being integrated into a complex and dynamic landscape. One of the most powerful aspects of this landscape is that people, too, disappear within it by losing "the sense of proportion." Home, then, provides the Kiowas with a spirituality centered on unity between people and the landscape—a thread appearing throughout the book.*

Momaday then locates himself in time, saying that he had first returned to **Rainy Mountain** last July after the death of his grandmother, Aho, whom he notes was said to have looked like a child—despite her old age—in the moments before her death.

*This is the first instance of one of Momaday's most frequent and intriguing images: the resemblance between elders and children. This image suggests a circularity in time, in which death loops right back into birth. It's also a hopeful way to think about his grandmother's passing.*

Aho is Momaday's entry-point into the tribe's history; she was born at the last great moment of Kiowa history, at the very end of their control over the southern plains. In this context, Momaday first raises the specter of white colonization of Kiowa lands and culture. He invokes the U.S. cavalry coming into Kiowa lands and winning a military victory over the Kiowas that forced the surrender of their lands and possessions, a defeat from which they would never recover. Aho grew up surrounded by the mood of defeat and a general sense of brooding.

*Here, Momaday begins to suggest the great importance of older people: they literally carry history within them. By telling of Aho's life, Momaday is actually telling the story of the tribe. This type of storytelling shows that the grand and intimate moments of history are not separate from each other, and that history is not an abstract concept, but rather a past that lives within real people. Through Aho's story, Momaday is also able for the first time to directly address the violence of the U.S. military against the Kiowas. It's as though framing history as a personal story gives him courage to address the darkest parts of the Kiowa past.*

Momaday then moves to give context for the mysterious history of the Kiowas, noting that they came from western Montana three hundred years beforehand, speaking a language that linguists have never been able to classify. Their journey southward was one "towards the dawn," and that led to a "golden age" for the Kiowas. As they moved, they befriended the Crows, who introduced them to Plains culture and religion (including the Sun Dance, and Tai-me, the Sun Dance doll at the center of their worship). The Kiowas acquired **horses** on their journey, which transformed them into nomads and ruthless hunters. Through this journey they were liberated from an exclusive focus on survival, and they became dignified and visionary. Momaday notes the echo between this journey and the Kiowa creation myth that the tribe emerged into the world from a hollow log—that myth, like the tribe's documented history, reflects a journey from darkness to light.

*This is the true Kiowa origin story as Momaday sees it. Instead of being concerned with the literal formation of the tribe (a deeper origin than Momaday considers, perhaps because that history is unknown), he focuses on the Kiowa transformation into the great people he believes it was their nature to become. As such, the Kiowa "origin" story includes the influences of other tribes, the introduction of new religion, the adoption of horses, and the transformation of the Kiowa lifestyle. In other words, Momaday seems to suggest that the Kiowas did not start out as being fully Kiowa, but had to be* made *fully Kiowa over the course of a long journey. This is an unusual way to frame an origin, but it's a particularly generous one in that it gives ample credit to the non-Kiowa influences that gave the Kiowas some of the most valued aspects of their culture. This is also a moment in which Momaday asserts the similarity between myth and historical fact; the Kiowa origin myth and the known history of the Kiowas both tell a story with a similar plot, one in which the Kiowas move from darkness into light.*

Momaday returns to Aho, writing that though she lived her whole life by **Rainy Mountain** in Oklahoma, she could tell stories of the historic Kiowa journey from Montana down to the southern plains. Momaday writes that he had seen these landscapes in his imagination through her stories, and he wanted to see them in real life, so he began a journey to mirror the ancestral one from the tribe's stories.

*The strength of the Kiowa oral tradition is apparent here; though Aho has lived her whole life in Oklahoma, she is so familiar with centuries of history and myth that she is able to transmit her culture to her grandson. And this is a powerful transmission—Momaday notes that all these ancestral places were vivid in his imagination, even though neither he nor Aho had ever been to them. This passage also underscores the importance of Aho as living history. The past for Momaday is not separate from the people who remember it.*

Momaday begins at Yellowstone, where he describes the landscape as beautiful but crowded. The Kiowa understood themselves in relation to their landscape, and at Yellowstone they felt "bent and blind in the wilderness." However, as Momaday moves southeast from Yellowstone, the land flattens and expands, becoming less limiting and emphasizing the size of the sun and sky. Momaday notes that imagination and wonder are inspired by this landscape. Farther south in the plains was where the Kiowa culture irrevocably changed; in that landscape the sun was able to become godlike, and there the Kiowas would take on the sun-centered religion of the plains.

*Momaday's descriptions of nature illuminate the way that Kiowas see their relationship to the natural world. Since the Kiowas' idea of themselves (their culture, in other words) is wrapped up in their relationship to nature, they were different people when they lived in Yellowstone than when they lived on the plains. This notion that human identity is tied to the landscape is significant. Momaday also, by noticing the difference in the appearance of the sun in the southern plains (it's bigger and more majestic in an emptier landscape) shows the influence of landscape on Kiowa religion—as the Kiowas moved south, they began to worship the sun.*

In the Black Hills, Momaday notices Devil's Tower, a striking stone landform with striated edges that look like clawmarks. He recalls his grandmother's recounting of a Kiowa legend about Devil's Tower, in which a child turned into a bear and chased his sisters into a tree. The tree began to rise into the air, carrying the sisters to the sky, as the bear scratched at the trunk—creating the lines on Devil's Tower. The sisters became the stars in the Big Dipper. Momaday remarks that since the time of that legend the Kiowas found a way out of suffering in the wilderness, and he notes that his grandmother revered the sun in a way that is no longer seen on this earth.

*This is another example of the Kiowa blending of human, nature, and animal. In this story, the landscape acts on people, people act on the landscape, and people transform into an animal (a bear) and a natural feature (stars). There's a fluidity, then, between the human and non-human worlds. This is also an illustration of Momaday's idea that imagination and history equally inform the experience of reality. Momaday's reaction to Devil's Tower was not to explain the geological processes that created the landform; the sight instead provoked a memory of his tribe's story of the origin of Devil's Tower, which led to a broader meditation on Kiowa culture. Human consciousness is a string of memories and associations that may or may not reflect what is provably true—that doesn't make those thoughts any less powerful, and it doesn't mean that those thoughts can't reveal truths about human culture.*

Momaday notes, also, that his grandmother became a Christian later in life, though she never forgot her history. She had attended Kiowa Sun Dances as a child, including the last Kiowa Sun Dance, held in the late 1800s. The buffalo were gone by that time so the tribe hung a buffalo hide from a tree to take the place of a real Buffalo head. Before the dance could begin, white soldiers came to disperse the tribe, since Indian religions were seen as dangerous. That was the last time the tribe gathered for a Sun Dance, and Momaday says that his grandmother forever remembered the whites having killed her religion.

*Aho saw many significant changes over the course of her life. She saw Sun Dances, and she saw Sun Dance culture forcibly stopped; she saw the buffalo disappear, and her religion shifted from worshipping Tai-me to Christianity. This passage is notable for its lack of judgment about these changes; Aho became a Christian, but Momaday doesn't judge this as a sin against his culture, and Momaday notes that Aho always remembered the whites killing the Sun Dance, but she remembered it without bitterness. While white settlers objectively did terrible things to the Kiowas, this passage suggests that Kiowa history, which has been defined by cultural adaptation, primed the Kiowas for these moments of violence and, perhaps, allowed them to endure change with tempered optimism.*

With his grandmother now only existing in memory, Momaday attempts to describe what was characteristic of her. Prayer is what he most remembers—he writes that she gave long prayers that melded suffering and hope. Though he does not speak Kiowa and therefore could not understand her prayers in Kiowa, Momaday describes a sadness in them that transcended language.

*This is another example of Momaday withholding his judgment of white influence. His most significant memories of Aho—who represents the history and culture of the Kiowas—are of her praying. It's symbolic that Momaday could not understand those prayers because he never learned Kiowa; he doesn't say so, but this is an example of white influence separating him from his culture.*

When his grandmother was younger, Momaday remembers that her house was always full of chatter—Momaday suggests that this was an indication of the health of Kiowa culture. He says that gossip among the women was simultaneously the "mark and compensation of their servitude" to the men of the tribe. Momaday contrasts those lively days in his grandmother's house with the silence now, realizing for the first time how small the house is. He notes that his grandmother's grave is, as it must be, within sight of **Rainy Mountain**.

*Throughout the book, Momaday takes seriously the subservient position of Kiowa women. However, this passage seems to hint at one of the unique powers of Kiowa women; they talked amongst one another constantly. As Momaday notes, talking was a mark of healthy culture—unsurprising in the context of a culture defined by oral tradition—and, as such, those who talked most could shape the stories that defined the culture. This is, perhaps, what Momaday means by gossip being compensation for servitude. It's Momaday's grandmother, not his grandfather, who has passed down Kiowa culture and stories to him.*

## THE SETTING OUT

At this point, the book takes on a structure of narration that alternates between the voice of tribal lore, the voice of historical commentary, and the voice of personal memory. It opens with the voice of the tribe, telling the Kiowa creation story, which is that the Kiowas emerged into the world from a hollow log. There were originally more Kiowas, but a pregnant woman got stuck in the log and afterwards no more Kiowas could come into the world, as they were trapped behind her. The voice of history then takes over and explains several early names for the Kiowas, two of which meant "coming out" and one that referred to differing halves, a reference to the hairstyle of Kiowa warriors. This third name, "gaigwu," is where "Kiowa" likely comes from ("Kiowa" is probably the Comanche pronunciation of "gaigwu"). The voice of personal memory then describes the northern plains, the ancestral land of the Kiowas, emphasizing the way in which all the natural features seem whole and perfect.

*An interesting part of the Kiowa creation story is that it is defined by mishap: a pregnant woman got stuck in the hollow log, preventing many Kiowas from entering the world. Reality being shaped by accident rather than deliberate action is a common thread in many Kiowa stories (as in many other myths as well). This resonates with the structure of the book's narration, which is non-linear and therefore does not place particular importance on the cause and effect of actions over time. In addition, the fact that the word "Kiowa" is actually a Comanche mispronunciation of a Kiowa word is a fitting symbol of the centrality of the influence of other cultures to the Kiowa.*

The voice of tribal lore tells of Kiowa hunters who killed an antelope. Two chiefs then fought over the animal's udders until one chief left with all of his followers, never to return or be heard from again. The voice of history states that this is one of the oldest Kiowa stories, and that the people who left the tribe after the fight might be a people in the Northwest who inexplicably speak a language similar to Kiowa. For a long time the Kiowa lived off buffalo, but in the mid-nineteenth century (just as the golden century of the Kiowas was coming to a close) the buffalo were scarce and the hunters had to kill antelope again, returning to ancestral ways out of necessity. The voice of personal memory describes the way antelope look as they move in the distance, the flash of their tails "like a succession of sunbursts against the purple hills."

*The story of the chiefs fighting and the comment that a tribe with a language related to Kiowa was found in the Northwest shows, again, Momaday's view on the relationship between myth and history. While there is no way to prove that the story of the chiefs fighting over the antelope udders actually occurred, there is some evidence (the tribe with a similar language) that the rift that this story explains might have really happened. Both the myth and the historical commentary, then, have a relationship to truth. This passage also emphasizes the significance of circularity in Kiowa storytelling—Momaday points out that the Kiowa killed antelopes before the era of the buffalo, and were forced back to their ancestral ways once the buffalo disappeared. Again, the Kiowa story is not one of sustained and deliberate change over time, but one of accidental, serendipitous, and sometimes menacing changes that can lead the Kiowas to new experiences or back to familiar ones.*

Before the Kiowas had **horses** they had dogs, the voice of tribal lore recalls. Back then, a man who had been cast out was camping alone and surrounded by enemies. He was in danger, and then a dog offered to lead him to safety if he would care for the dog's puppies. The dog saved his life. The voice of history quotes a Comanche who recalled that the Kiowas had no horses, only dogs, when they arrived on Comanche land. Kiowa warriors modeled themselves after dogs back then, valuing standing their ground in battle regardless of the cost. Momaday then remembers the dogs that frequented his grandmother's house. They were "nameless and lived a life of their own," but people appreciated their presence even though they paid little attention to them.

*The description of Kiowa warriors modeling themselves after dogs is resonant with Momaday's description in the introduction of the effects of the landscape on the Kiowas—Kiowa culture, values, and behavior were shaped by the animals and landscapes that surrounded them. Though dogs represented for Kiowas the difficult period of their history before the introduction of the horse, dogs were not treated cruelly. In fact, Momaday's description of the relationship between the dogs and humans in his grandmother's house suggests that the dynamic was one of respect, in which the dogs were unnamed and uncontrolled because nobody claimed to own them. The people appreciated the presence of the dogs while respecting their independence.*

The voice of the tribe says that before the Kiowas had Tai-me, they lived in the mountains and told a story of a child who was stolen by a redbird from a cradle in a tree. The bird was so beautiful that the child followed it up to the sky, and by the time she arrived at the sky she was a woman, and the redbird had turned into a man. The man informed her he had brought her there to become his wife. She realized, then, that the man was the sun. The voice of history notes that the land itself rises up to meet the sky, and the voice of memory describes seeing a rose-colored bird in a tree whose branches moved against the sky.

*This passage is a perfect example of the nontraditional structure of the narration. The three voices are only loosely connected—they do not refer to the same story or share the same themes; they simply relate to one another by sharing images in common (the red bird, or the image of land meeting sky). Most Western histories are structured by a logic defined by chronology and cause and effect, but this history consists of Momaday asking the reader to make abstract connections between the different voices. Since Momaday believes that language and storytelling reflect culture, the structure of the voices suggests a consciousness that integrates seemingly unrelated parts of the world through memory and association.*

The tribal voice returns to the story of the redbird, saying that the woman began to feel lonely, and after a fight with the sun she dug up a root that he had warned her not to touch, which allowed her to see her people below her. She and her child descended a rope made of sinew, but it was not long enough to reach her people. When the sun came home and found her gone he went to the root and saw her and the child on the rope. The sun killed the woman by throwing a gaming wheel at her, which left the child all alone. The voice of historical commentary notes that this root was the pomme blanche, a turnip-like plant. Momaday then quotes the anthropologist James Mooney, explaining that the Kiowas were always hunters and never attempted to cultivate crops. Momaday's personal memories describe his grandfather Mammedaty, who failed to grow cotton and wheat on his land despite his efforts.

*Momaday's reflections on Kiowa hunting culture suggest that the Kiowas think of hunting as part of their nature, rather than a skill necessitated by circumstance. This belief is important to the notion that Kiowas have essential characteristics and tendencies that their migration helped them to achieve. In other words, Kiowas believe that the migration didn't change them as much as it helped them to fulfill who they naturally were. Thus, the cultivated root in the myth is dangerous, and Mammedaty has no success growing his own crops; each of these fits with the Kiowa narrative of agriculture versus hunting. From the Kiowa perspective, this is an example of a story reflecting truth, but from another perspective this might seem like a scenario in which a story is* creating *its own truth—is Mammedaty a bad farmer because he's Kiowa, or is he a bad farmer because the stories he tells himself make him believe that his crops will inevitably fail?*

The tribal voice again picks up the redbird story. The sun's child reaches the earth and meets a spider called grandmother, who realizes that she must raise the boy. After failing to capture him several times, she builds a snare from rope to catch him, and the boy cries until the grandmother sings him to sleep. The voice of historical commentary interjects by telling of a moment in which the U.S. troops were closing in on the Kiowas and trying to capture them. While the Kiowas camped it rained hard and spiders began to pour from the earth. Momaday's personal memory then turns to spiders, describing crotchety tarantulas crawling the dusty roads of the plains.

*It's important to note that for several chapters the tribal voice has been telling a single story in fragments. Instead of allowing the story to unfold in one telling, Momaday interrupts the narration with loosely-related commentary and personal memory, which reflects the fragmentary nature of Kiowa history as passed down through oral tradition. The gaps and frustrations of this kind of storytelling would be familiar to Kiowas, so the broken-up storytelling is itself conveying something about Kiowa history. This is also an example of different time periods collapsing in on one another, which is an aspect of Momaday's non-linear narration. Though the tribal story tells of the early days of the Kiowas, the association Momaday makes through historical commentary is one that invokes the beginning of the Kiowa decline. This shows that stories don't have one objective and static meaning; association and memory affect how a story is understood and what it means.*

As the years went by, according to the tribal voice, the sun's boy still had the wheel that killed his mother. Though the grandmother told him not to, one day he threw the wheel into the sky and it sliced him in half, making him a twin. The grandmother was alarmed because one child had been difficult enough, but she cared for both of them nonetheless. The voice of history says that Mammedaty owned **horses**, that there was a day when Mammedaty rode a horse for the last time, and that the Kiowas had more horses per person than any other tribe. Momaday's personal memory speaks of swimming in the Washita River. He remembers fixating on details of nature, and then seeing his own reflection in the river before a frog jumped in and broke it apart.

*While the narration is composed of distinct voices, those voices do blur in places, and this chapter is an example. The voice of historical commentary has generally referred only to events of collective tribal significance rather than ones of personal significance, but here the voice of history invokes an intimate moment of Momaday's grandfather's life: the last time he rode a horse. Since Momaday often uses elders to stand in symbolically for the history of the tribe itself, this moment can be interpreted more broadly. It mirrors, for instance, the tribe having given up their horses to the U.S. government at the end of the Kiowa golden age. It's also resonant with the moment in Momaday's memory when the frog breaks apart his reflection in the river. That moment evokes a loss of identity, much like the loss of horses—which Kiowas consider fundamental to their identity—was.*

The voice of the tribe returns, saying that each twin had a ring now, and they again disobeyed their grandmother by throwing the rings and running after them into the mouth of a cave. In the cave lived a giant and his wife, who both liked to kill people by suffocating them with smoke. The twins then remembered that their grandmother had told them words to say if they were ever in the cave, so they said the words and the smoke remained above their heads. This frightened the giant's wife, who let the twins go. The voice of history then meditates on the power of words, how they "give origin to all things." Words are sacred, and they enable people to meet the world on their own terms. When Kiowas die they take their names with them, and nobody is allowed to speak those names again. Momaday's personal memory then tells of the word Aho used when confronted with something frightening. He sees the word not as a reaction, but as an action—a way to ward off danger and create order in the world.

*This chapter provides several different perspectives on the power of language. In the story of the cave, words have literal magic power and, in that way, they can act on the world. The Kiowa tradition of not speaking the names of the dead shows that Kiowas thought of words as tangible things that could be taken from this world to the next, and could belong to someone, more like an object than a concept. Momaday's analysis of the word Aho used when frightened suggests that the word was not simply a signal of her emotional state, but an action directed at the source of her fright—a way to control something that seemed dangerous. This is echoed in Momaday's comment that words "give origin to all things." For Kiowas, language does not simply represent the world passively, but it shapes the world actively. It's important to note, too, that in the story of the giant the twins only knew the magic word because it was passed down to them by their grandmother through the oral tradition. This is another example of the power of language and storytelling; behavior is shaped by culture, and culture is inextricable from language.*

The twins, according to the voice of tribal lore, killed a big snake in their tipi. The grandmother spider cried when they told her, because the snake was their grandfather, and then the grandmother died. The twins lived long lives and were honored by the Kiowas. The voice of history then doubles back to the beginning of the story of the twins, stating that in another version it was a porcupine instead of a redbird that carried the woman off. In both versions, though, one of the twins walks into a lake and disappears while the other transforms himself into ten different "medicines" (objects of religious veneration with different special uses). Momaday then remembers his father telling him about going to a shrine with powerful medicine. The medicine's holiness stamped itself on his father's and grandmother's bodies, and Momaday could see that holiness in the blind eyes of his grandmother years later. He remembers that once she was very old her skin began to resemble that of a baby.

*The story of the twins and the snake emphasizes the fluidity between the human and the non-human in Kiowa culture: human twins had a spider grandmother, a snake grandfather, a redbird/porcupine father, and one twin turns from a human into a water creature. This story makes clear that Kiowas understand humans to be woven into a complex ecosystem of people, nature, and animals. This passage also shows that the human body and the sacred are not distinct for the Kiowas. One of the twins transforms his body into spiritual power (medicine), which is a gift to the Kiowas. The effects of such a gift are revealed in Momaday's recollection of the holiness that rubbed off on his father's and grandmother's bodies when they went to a medicine shrine. Much as humans blend into animals, human bodies can take on or transform into the sacred, and that sacredness can be passed along. This is a worldview of tremendous interconnection and fluidity.*

The voice of tribal lore then begins to tell a story about lean times when the Kiowas were hungry. A man with hungry children walked for days to look for food, and finally, very weak, he came to a canyon. He heard a voice ask what he wanted, and standing before him was a figure with feathers and the feet of a deer. The man was scared, but told the figure that the Kiowas were hungry, and the voice told the man to "take me with you and I will give you whatever you want." This was Tai-me, and that is how he came to be with the Kiowas. The voice of history is an excerpt from James Mooney that explains that Tai-me is the central figure of the sun dance, and the Tai-me doll is a small, decorated, human-like figure. The doll is kept in a box and never exposed to the sun except at the Sun Dance. Momaday then remembers going to see the Tai-me bundle. He made an offering, and felt a great holiness in the room "as if an old person had died there or a child had been born."

*This story of the origin of Tai-me differs slightly from the one Momady gave before, which was that Tai-me was given to the Kiowas by the Crows. In this story, the Kiowas find Tai-me, a benevolent stranger, by themselves. A similarity between the two stories, though, is that neither one presents Tai-me as a figure who is naturally Kiowa. This reiterates the centrality of mixing cultures to the Kiowas' idea of themselves. This passage also contains another reference to the similarity between birth and death, or infancy and old age. This strengthens the sense that the Kiowa idea of time is more circular than linear, and it also emphasizes the reverence that the Kiowas have for their elders. The holiness of the Tai-me bundle is compared to the holiness of an old person dying—as Momaday has gone to great lengths to suggest, old people are seen as embodying Kiowa culture and history because it is in their memories and stories that the Kiowa live on.*

The tribal voice tells of another winter without buffalo where food was scarce. Two hungry brothers found fresh meat in front of their tipi one morning, and one brother warned the other not to eat it. The brother ate it anyway, and he changed into a water beast and went to live in the water. The two brothers still spoke sometimes at the water's edge. The voice of history then tells of the peyote ritual, where four Kiowas and a priest sit around a fire singing and drumming and praying before a midnight baptismal ceremony. Momaday then writes that Mammedaty was a peyote man who could see things that others could not. Once he was in the creek and the water began to move strangely while something clamored under the surface. Mammedaty got out and ran away. When he came back, there were tracks of a huge animal by the water's edge.

*The repetition of stories about times of hunger in Kiowa history is another example of Momaday narrating history in a nonlinear fashion. Instead of telling about a lean time and then what happened afterwards, Momaday revisits different instances of hunger in Kiowa history, making thematic connections across different stories rather than connecting events chronologically. This gives the sense that periods of hunger occur cyclically, which is a different impression than might be given by a linear history. This passage is also another example of the blurring between human and animal (the brother turns into a water beast) as well as an example of the blurring between myth and "reality." A non-Kiowa reader would likely interpret the story of the water beast as pure myth, but the recollection of Mammedaty's experience of mysterious tracks by the water's edge and strange movements of the water shows that story and reality are not necessarily separate.*

## THE GOING ON

The tribal voice tells a story of a woman pounding meat. Her child kept bringing balls of the meat outside and returning to ask for more. Finally the child came inside with an enemy, who said he would harm the family if they did not feed him and his people. While the woman cooked, her husband snuck outside and led the enemies' horses upstream. He then birdcalled to the woman, who set fire to the fat and threw it at the enemies before escaping with the child. The voice of history describes a decorated tipi that was destroyed by fire in the late nineteenth century. Momaday's personal memory is of walking through the **Rainy Mountain** cemetery and the earth seeming to glow dark red in the sunset. He remembers the world seeming to stop while the sun disappeared.

*While this second section of the book maps onto the historical period of the Kiowa golden age, Momaday chooses to open with a story that fits better with the period of Kiowa decline (marked by their defeat at the hands of the U.S. military, and mirrored by the opening section's depiction of enemies at the gates). While the tribal voice tells a story that ends in optimism, the historical voice tells a pessimistic story of destruction, and Momaday's own reflection implicitly compares fire to a beautiful sunset, making catastrophe seem almost spiritual. Momaday has insisted that, while the Kiowa fate has been a difficult one, the story of his people should not be understood as a tragedy. His storytelling choices in this opening section symbolically reflect that.*

Well-made arrows have tooth marks on them, says the tribal voice, because Kiowas straighten arrows with their teeth. Once a man was making arrows at night and he saw an enemy through the flap of his tipi. He told his wife not to be afraid, that if the person were Kiowa they would understand his words and say so. As he spoke he drew his bow and aimed it all around. When there was no answer, he shot the man through the flap. The voice of history interjects that old men were the best arrowmakers because they were experienced and patient. Momaday then remembers his father telling of an old arrowmaker who used to visit him when he was a child.

*This passage, like the last, also builds on the theme of enemies infiltrating Kiowa life. The emphasis on the power of language is significant here. The Kiowa arrowmaker uses his language as a code to determine if the lurking person is an enemy, and in this way, language saves his life. To abstract this lesson, the preservation of Kiowa language and culture is shown to be an important way to resist those who would try to destroy the Kiowa way of life. The passage also returns to the importance of elders. Typically in the book, elders have been lauded for their stories and knowledge of the past—here, though, they are lauded for the skills they have acquired over their long lives. This draws a fruitful comparison between a skill/trade and the knowledge of history—the Kiowas saw both as useful and essential.*

The tribal voice says that Kiowa is a hard language to understand, but the storm spirit understands it. Once the Kiowas tried to make a **horse** from clay, but it became a terrible force that terrified the tribe. When storms come, it is that animal roaming the sky. They are not afraid, though, because it speaks Kiowa and they can tell it to pass them over. The voice of history simply states that the plains can be serene sometimes and wracked by violent weather at others. Momaday then remembers the storm cellar by his grandmother's house. He says he has seen it storm so hard that a grown man couldn't open the door to a storm cellar against the wind.

*The story that the tribal voice tells is another emphasis of the power of the Kiowa language. Though the storm spirit is frightening and destructive, the Kiowas can control it by speaking a common language. That this language extends across the boundary between what is human and what is animal/beast/supernatural shows, again, the porousness of the Kiowa conception of boundaries between humans and the rest of the world. Language is not just a tool for people—it's one that wields power also over animals and nature.*

Quoetotai, a young warrior, fell in love with Many Bears' wife, the tribal voice says. One day Many Bears shot him with an arrow and ran away. Quoetotai survived and decided to take Many Bears' wife. The two of them left to be with the Comanches for fifteen years, and when they returned Many Bears welcomed them back, giving them six **horses** and declaring himself and Quoetotai brothers. The voice of history reflects that the artist George Catlin, who spent a lot of time with Indians, thought that the Kiowas were better looking than the Comanches and Wichitas. The voice of Momaday's memory describes Catlin's portrait of a Kiowa man, reflecting that he looks strong, at ease, and tolerant. Momaday says he would have liked to see the man as Catlin did.

*The focus of this passage is shifting—the tribal voice tells a story that seems to emphasize the tolerance and forgiveness of the Kiowas, as well as the strong bond they had with the Comanches. However, the voice of history then reflects on the relative appearances of Kiowas and other tribes. Momaday's reflection loosely ties the two together by describing the Kiowa man in the portrait as looking "tolerant." This is an example of the non-linearity and thematic looseness of Momaday's storytelling. This passage is also an example of cultural mixing. The tribal voice describes Kiowas going to live with Comanches for fifteen years, and Momaday's voice and the voice of history both take seriously George Catlin's (a white painter) observations about Kiowas.*

Once a man came upon a buffalo with steel horns, the tribal voice says. The buffalo killed his horse and the man climbed a tree to escape. The buffalo began attacking the tree, and the man shot arrows at the buffalo that merely bounced off, leading the man to think he would die. Before firing his last arrow, something spoke to the man telling him to shoot the cleft of the buffalo's hoof. The man did, and he felled the buffalo. The voice of history then tells of a buffalo hunt, presumably in the 1920s or 30s, in which two Kiowas set loose a demoralized buffalo—one that did not at all resemble the wild ones of the past—so that they could hunt it. Momaday then remembers that once while walking by a herd of calving buffalo a mother buffalo charged him. She didn't hurt him, but in that moment he knew what it was to be alive.

*The tribal voice's story here shows another difference between linear Western storytelling and Kiowa storytelling. While in linear Western stories events tend to follow one another based on cause and effect, the story of the buffalo is different, because the driving event is a mysterious intuition that tells the man how to kill the buffalo. This is not inherited wisdom, learned knowledge, or astute observation: like other stories in the book, this one is defined by something irrational—intuition in this case, and mishap in others (like the pregnant woman getting stuck in the log). This passage also emphasizes the importance of the buffalo to Kiowa life.*

The next section concerns women. The tribal voice says that bad women "are thrown away," and then describes the wife of a newly-blinded man betraying him by leaving him to starve. He was rescued by a band of Kiowas who brought him back to the camp, and they threw his wife away the next morning because she was bad. The voice of history then notes that Kiowa calendars provide evidence that life was hard for both "good" and "bad" Kiowa women. They had low status, and were subject to all kinds of physical punishments. Momaday then remembers that Mammedaty's grandmother was a Mexican captive who would not submit to the Kiowa role for women, and consequently she rose to great respect in the tribe.

*All three voices in this chapter emphasize the hardships that Kiowa women faced, but there is a significant difference in tone between the first voice and the others. While the voice of the tribe seems to be telling a story that justifies the mistreatment of women, the second two are more critical of the Kiowa treatment of women. This is directly related to the influence of cultural mixing—for instance, Mammedaty's grandmother's Mexican background meant that she knew to advocate for more rights than the other Kiowa women. This passage seems to imply that the influence of other cultures led to a better life for Kiowa women.*

The tribal voice tells a story of a group of young men deciding to follow the sun to see where it goes in winter. They rode after the sun farther south than any other Kiowas had been before, and one night after setting up camp they saw men with tails jumping from branch to branch in the trees over their heads. They turned back home after that, longing for the familiarity of their homeland. The voice of history quotes James Mooney again, who describes the vital importance of the **horse** to Kiowa life. Before the horse, travel was impossible and hunting arduous. Horses transformed Kiowas into nomadic warriors and buffalo hunters. Momaday then remembers how cherished summers were at **Rainy Mountain**, and how during the summer he would live in an open arbor at his grandmother's house. When winter would come and he would return to the house, he would feel confined and depressed.

*This section communicates great passion for Kiowa culture. The voice of the tribe tells a story of homesickness, the voice of history considers the importance of the horse (a symbol of the best qualities of the Kiowa people), and Momaday's personal memory is of Rainy Mountain (which serves as a shorthand for home to the Kiowas)—this chapter is almost a love letter to Kiowa culture. In particular, this section emphasizes the Kiowa relationship to nature. Momaday suggests that Rainy Mountain (already a symbol of home) felt most like home during the summers when he could sleep outdoors. This underscores the Kiowa notion of a porous boundary between humans and nature—in winter when the boundary was enforced (by having to sleep inside) his life felt depressing and strange.*

## THE CLOSING IN

When one of two brothers was captured by Utes (another tribe), the tribal voice narrates, the other brother snuck into the Ute camp to set him free, but was captured. The Ute chief, out of respect for the brother's bravery, made a bargain that if the brother could walk across a line of greased buffalo skulls carrying his brother on his back, then they both would be set free. The brother succeeded, and the Utes kept their word to free the captives. The voice of history then tells that when the Kiowas surrendered to the U.S. government, they were imprisoned and their **horses** and weapons were confiscated. The government then slaughtered and sold their horses. Momaday quotes James Mooney, who recounts that once the buffalo disappeared, the Kiowa tried a Sun Dance with a horse. The following summer food was so scarce that they had to kill and eat their ponies. Momaday then describes the feeling of riding a horse through the New Mexico landscape, and getting to know it in a more intimate way than another traveler would.

*Just as the second section of the book (which maps onto the Kiowa golden age) opened with a passage more reminiscent of Kiowa decline, the third section (which maps onto Kiowa decline) opens with a story from the tribal voice that is surprisingly optimistic. This seems to be yet another challenge to linear narrative; Momaday mixes all parts of Kiowa history, undermining notions of chronology and cause and effect. However, Momaday's apparent optimism loses steam quickly—the next voice talks about the slaughter of Kiowa horses, which are a symbol of the Kiowa spirit. By introducing the Kiowa defeat through the sale and slaughter of their horses, Momaday emphasizes how closely the horse is associated with the Kiowas. Momaday further underscores this with his memory of being able to understand and blend with the landscape better on horseback than he could on foot—the horse makes Kiowas able to fulfill their nature and greatness. Therefore, the slaughter of the horses can be directly equated to the defeat of Kiowa culture and the tragedies to come.*

The tribal voice tells of a man whose hunting **horse** died from shame after the man turned it away from a charge. The historical voice then describes a Sun Dance in which the Kiowas offered a spotted horse to Tai-me by leaving it to starve outside the medicine lodge. Later in the year, smallpox broke out and a Kiowa man sacrificed one of his best horses to spare himself and his family. Momady, in the voice of his memory, then reflects on this man, empathizing with his love of the horse and his logic in giving a beloved life to Tai-me in order to spare his own.

*This section also emphasizes the importance of the horse to the Kiowas, which, following the previous chapter's description of the slaughter of Kiowa horses, serves to heighten the sense of tragedy. The tribal voice tells a story that explicitly addresses the qualities of horses that enabled and challenged Kiowas to live up to their values, and Momaday's reflection confirms that the horse was so important that it could symbolically stand in for a human life. Here, we plainly see horses affecting Kiowas as much as Kiowas are affecting horses, a dynamic we also see throughout the book in the relationship between the Kiowas and the natural world.*

The voice of the tribe tells a story of Mammedaty driving a team of horses through the tall grass, a landscape in which he could see everything around him. Then someone whistled to him and he saw a child's head peeking above the grass. He walked around to see who was there, but found nobody. The voice of history describes a photograph of Mammedaty, who is well-dressed and kind looking. His veins stand out in his small hands, which is a "family characteristic." Momaday then remembers that in his life Mammedaty saw four remarkable things: the child in the grass, the beast tracks by the river, three alligators on a log by a pecan grove, and a mole blowing powdery earth from its mouth around its hole. Mammedaty had always wondered why the earth around a mole hole was so fine, and witnessing this gave Mammedaty possession of powerful medicine.

*This section is, in a sense, a portrait of Mammedaty. Of course, Momaday describes a literal portrait of Mammedaty, but it is also a description of some the most important events of his life, events that would define him within the tribe as a spiritual leader and, as Momaday notes elsewhere, as someone who saw things that nobody else could. It's significant that the tribal voice (not Momaday's personal voice) is relating a story of Mammedaty—generally the tribal voice tells the legends of the tribe that have been passed down orally (these stories tend to feature characters from the distant past, not from recent memory) and Mammedaty's appearance in the tribal voice suggests his importance to Kiowas. That Mammedaty receives medicine from witnessing the mole dig its hole again shows the power of nature—the simple act of witnessing an animal at work on something secret gives Mammedaty powers.*

Once, the tribal voice recalls, Mammedaty wanted to get several **horses** out of a pasture, and he lost his temper because each time he nearly had them out, one particular horse would lead the others away. Mammedaty tried to shoot that horse, but killed another instead. The voice of history notes that once a Kiowa captive escaped on a beloved hunting horse called Little Red, and the loss of that horse defined the season for the Kiowas. Momaday then remembers that as a child he would look at a box of bones in the barn which were later stolen. Mammedaty said the bones were of a horse called Little Red, which was the fastest runner around. Momaday reflects that sometimes he understands why someone would preserve a horse's bones and also why someone might steal them.

*This is section elaborates on the role of the horse in Kiowa life. While the horse represents the best parts of Kiowa nature, the horse also makes Kiowas vulnerable—to revere anything so much leaves the Kiowas open to devastating loss. The tribal voice's story hints at the power horses have over people, since a horse is able to whip Mammedaty into such a rage that he tries to kill it. The stories of Little Red, told by the voices of history and memory, are fascinating for their repetition—Little Red is stolen while he is alive (a devastating loss), and then his bones are stolen after he's dead. These two stories also revisit the idea of the vulnerability that horses open in the Kiowas, as Momaday says he understands how loving horses so much might motivate people to do bizarre things like preserve or steal bones.*

Aho once went to see the wife of the keeper of the Tai-me bundle, the tribal voice recalls. While they were speaking they heard a terrible noise like something enormous had fallen. They went to investigate, and saw that what had fallen was Tai-me—just a small bundle. Nothing caused it to fall, as far as they could see. The voice of history describes Mammedaty wearing a medicine bundle around his neck for his mother. If someone showed the medicine bundle disrespect it would grow heavy around his neck. Momaday remembers an enormous kettle on his grandmother's porch that collected the rainwater for hair washing. He remembers thinking it was unmovable—that it was too heavy for anyone to ever pick up.

*These three voices are connected by the notion of heaviness—the Tai-me bundle fell and made a sound as though it were very heavy; Mammedaty's medicine bundle could grow heavy if disrespected; and the kettle on the porch seemed heavy to Momaday as a child. Heaviness here seems to stand in for power—Tai-me is powerful and so is Mammedaty's medicine bundle. In these instances, their apparent heaviness seems to match their spiritual power rather than their physical presence. The kettle might have been heavy as a physical object, but it's important to note that the kettle is a memory, and, in this context, the association of weight with power seems to comment on the power and spiritual importance of memory. This is underscored by the fact that it seems as if this kettle is now gone, which implies that the kettle is heavier as a memory than as a physical object.*

East of Aho's house is the unmarked grave of a woman who was buried in a beautiful dress, the tribal voice recounts. Nobody knows exactly where she is buried, but the dress was notable for being so fine, made of buckskin and decorated with elk's teeth and beads. The voice of history says that Aho's moccasins are made of skins and ornamented with beads, and Momaday then remembers the sunrise east of Aho's house. He says that it's important sometimes to fixate on a landscape, imagining it from all different angles and in as much detail as possible. For Momaday, this should be a remembered landscape, not one that is presently experienced—it is meant to be an act of imagination.

*This final reflection of Momaday's is among the book's most powerful. Throughout the book the landscape has been a central figure of Kiowa life. Here, though, the landscape becomes a memory rather than a physical reality. Momaday does not emphasize the act of looking closely at the world that is present, but rather the act of remembering in fine detail a landscape from the past. This is, in a way, mournful: in the Kiowa context, the landscape that is most sacred to them has not existed for a century, and thus the memory of landscape must stand in for reality. This passage also seems to suggest memory as a spiritual and even creative act—here, remembering a landscape is a way to access the past.*

## EPILOGUE

In 1833, an especially bright meteor shower awoke the Kiowas and earned a special place in Kiowa history, as it is considered a marker of the beginning of a new historical period. The Tai-me bundle had recently been stolen by Osages, which was a tragedy, and the Kiowas had just made their first treaty with the U.S. government. The falling stars symbolized to the Kiowas the upheaval of the order of their lives.

*That the Kiowas marked the new historical period with a natural phenomenon rather than a significant political one (the treaty, or the Tai-me bundle's theft) shows, again, the centrality of nature to Kiowa life. It also shows the ways in which nature and humans were seen to be connected: a meteor shower was seen to be of a piece with major political events.*

Momaday then zooms out to place the golden age of the Kiowas from about 1740-1840, though the culture persisted in decline until the late 1800s. Momaday writes that the culture is "gone" with "little material evidence" of its existence, but it is still "within the reach of memory." These memories are fading with time, but Momaday emphasizes that the Kiowa verbal tradition transcends memory in order to carry their culture forward.

*Momaday began the book by emphasizing the importance of the verbal tradition, and he closes it in this way as well. It's important to underscore this because the lack of material evidence for Kiowa history, alongside the presence of a strong oral tradition, dictates the way that Kiowa history is told and accounts for the differences between Euro-American-style history and Kiowa history. This also points to the importance of memory. Memory is all that is left of many aspects of Kiowa history and culture, which means that it is of vital importance to Kiowa survival.*

Momaday then states that living memory and verbal tradition were brought together for him in a person, Ko-sahn, a hundred year-old woman who had one of the last living memories of the Sun Dance. He describes meeting her after both of his grandparents were already dead, and listening to her story about the Sun Dance. She told of tying a cloth to a tree as an offering to Tai-me, about the men having brought the sacrificial buffalo in from the plains, and about the songs people sang. The dancers, after being treated with buffalo medicine, began to dance and everyone was dressed up. The woman described how beautiful it was, and said it was a long time ago. Momaday then reflects about her, thinking that she must have wondered who she was, as someone with all these memories in a changing world. He wonders if she sometimes thought of the falling stars.

*This ending ties many of the book's themes together. It explicitly conjoins elderly people, memory, and the survival of Kiowa culture by telling of the woman who witnessed the Sun Dance. Since the Sun Dance was a ceremony that defined Kiowa culture and religion, the woman's memories and stories of the Sun Dance embodied Kiowa history, even as Kiowa culture was in decline. Momaday ends the book on a note of tempered optimism, allowing the woman's memories of the Kiowa golden age to suggest the latent greatness of the Kiowas in the present day. The question of whether the woman sometimes thought of the falling stars, though, is a reminder that the Kiowas cannot return to the past.*

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