

#NATIVE READS

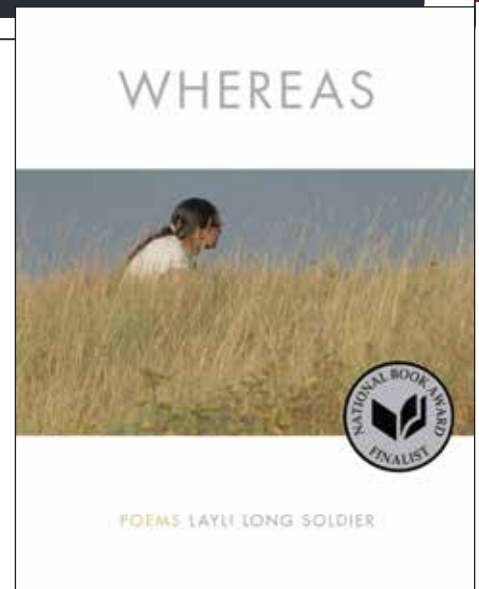
GREAT BOOKS from INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Whereas

by LAYLI LONG SOLDIER

Author Biography

Layli Long Soldier is a citizen of the Oglala Lakota Nation. She holds a B.F.A. from the Institute of American Indian Arts and an M.F.A. from Bard College. Her poems have appeared in *POETRY* magazine, *The New York Times*, *The American Poet*, *The American Reader*, *The Kenyon Review Online*, *BOMB* and elsewhere. She is the recipient of an NACF National Artist Fellowship, Lannan Literary Fellowship, and Whiting Award, and she was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award. Most recently, she received the 2018 PEN/Jean Stein Award and the 2018 National Book Critics Circle Award. She is the author of *Chromosomory* (Q Avenue Press, 2010) and *Whereas* (Graywolf Press, 2017). She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is a visiting writer at the Institute of American Indian Arts.



Book Summary

Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas* reminds us all of the devastation of broken promises and empty words of the U.S. government. She uses the enemy's language against them by deconstructing language to make it painfully beautiful. Specifically, she uses an array of short lyrics, prose poems, and longer narrative sequences to examine Oceti Sakowin histories and landscapes. Long Soldier's poetry book is divided into two sections. Part I: "These Being the Concerns" examines the themes of culture and language loss, landscape, motherhood and forgiveness. Part II: "Whereas" responds to the U.S. government's official "Apology to Native People," which President Obama signed into obscurity in 2009. Long Soldier's *Whereas* examines the U.S.'s many acts of violence against the Oceti Sakowin and other tribal people and communities. Her work is prevalent and a reminder of our perseverance as a nation.

Discussion Guide

This discussion guide was created by Oak Lake Writers' Society member Tasiyagnunpa Livermont Barondeau (*Oglala Lakota*).

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- 1 Layli Long Soldier's **Whereas** is a direct response to the U.S government's official "Apology to Native Peoples," which was quietly buried in the 2010 defense appropriation bill. Yet, what main theme shows up in the beginning of the book? How does that relate to the Apology?
- 2 The first poem in **Whereas**, "Ĥe Sàpa," focuses on the sacred and embattled site known to many as the Black Hills. The Oceti Sakowin Oyate has a profound spiritual connection to Ĥe Sàpa. Why might Long Soldier choose to open her poem with this culturally significant site? How does she use language to trace the many changes that impacted Ĥe Sàpa and the Oceti Sakowin? (Recommended Reading: *He Sapa Woinhble/ Black Hills Dream* by the Oak Lake Writers' Society)
- 3 In the poem on page 16, Long Soldier acknowledges Zitkala Sa for her contributions to the Oceti Sakowin literary tradition. Based on the poem, what lesson did the speaker learn from her literary predecessor?
- 4 Writing about social issues like alcoholism and poverty can sometimes reinforce negative stereotypes about American Indians by Euro-Americans. How does Long Soldier avoid the common pitfalls of what many would call "poverty porn"? In what ways does the author's use of the Lakota language help account for this?
- 5 In many of the poems, Long Soldier returns to the phrase *grassesgrassesgrasses*, in reference to the story of a trader who, when told the Dakota were starving, replied "Let them eat grass." How does the phrase change over the course of the book? How does it remain the same?
- 6 The expression of grief, particularly mourning a death, in Dakota, Lakota and Nakota culture is in large part led by the women. How are grief and crying dealt with in Long Soldier's book? What about historical grief and trauma? What are contemporary displays of memorials? What does Long Soldier share about white responses to grief by Dakota, Lakota and Nakota? (Recommended Reading: Ella Deloria's *Waterlily* and Albert White Hat's *Zuya*.)
- 7 Examine the structure of **Whereas**. How is the book organized? Why is the collection organized in this way? Why might the poet want you to read these poems in this order? What are some of the understandings and lessons that Long Soldier is leading the reader through?
- 8 The first section includes poetry about mothering, including pregnancy loss and birth. Why might she include these subjects in a book about legislation? In what ways does she illustrate cultural differences in the Dakota, Lakota and Nakota experience of motherhood? Of womanhood?
- 9 Part I also focuses on Dakota, Lakota and Nakota experiences. How does centering contemporary and historical tribal life and relationships with one another and the land prepare the reader for Section II's direct discussion of the Apology and corresponding critique? How is this a form of decolonization?
- 10 How did you feel reading poetry as political commentary? How did it expose the absurdities in the Apology? How does she return the reader full circle between history and contemporary tribal acts of nationalism such as the Standing Rock prayer camps?