

#NATIVE READS

GREAT BOOKS from INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Waterlily

by ELLA CARA DELORIA



Author Biography

Born during a time of sweeping changes to the traditional life of Dakota people, Ella Cara Deloria (1889-1971) was a member of the Yanktonai Dakota band. Her mother and father were of mixed ethnicity: Yanktonai, English, French and German. Her father, one of the first among the Oceti Sakowin to become an ordained Episcopal priest, served on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation, where Deloria grew up and attended and graduated from All Saints Boarding School in Sioux Falls. She attended Oberlin College, and then transferred to Columbia University where she completed graduate studies and field work in anthropology with Franz Boas, a well-known anthropologist. Later, she did field work with Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, also anthropologists and ethnographers studying Native American lifeways. Fluent in Dakota and English, Deloria wrote and translated texts of Native American ethnographer George Bushotter and the brothers Gideon and Samuel Pond, who were Presbyterian missionaries.

Book Summary

Waterlily is a fictional account of the life of a young Dakota woman from early childhood through age 22. Born into the White Ghost camp circle (tiospaye), she learns the honorable and complex role of a good woman during pre-colonization: how to behave within her tiospaye, and the expectations of her within and beyond that circle when she is bought and leaves to live with her first husband's people. She demonstrates her exquisite womanhood skills against the backdrop of ritual ceremonial life and enduring the plague of smallpox, all the while maturing into the exemplary life she leads in her time. She serves as a model for the various expressions of womanhood and of marriage. The novel is a historical love story.

Discussion Guide

This discussion guide was created by Oak Lake Writers' Society member Lanniko Lee (*Miniconjou Lakota*).

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- 1** The lives of pre-colonized Tituwan Dakota women of which Deloria writes were governed by communal rules. Why was courtship a dangerous time for young women? What were the consequences of not living by acceptable courtship rules? How were the rules reinforced?
- 2** How were in-laws expected to socialize with one another in those days? Compare and contrast Star Elk and Rainbow.
- 3** How was kinship living achieved and why was it important to childrearing?
- 4** What was the alternative to corporal punishment and how was it used? What do you gather was at the heart of Star Elk's behavior?
- 5** Why does Deloria explain in detail the care and keeping of a tipi? Why were specific spaces within the tipi important to the telling of this story?
- 6** Describe Gloku's teaching of spirituality. Are there some differences between Deloria's characters and the author's Christian upbringing? If so, what are they?
- 7** Who is Woyaka and why is he a significant character to the story? In what ways are the author's life and that of Woyaka's similar? Discuss differences between the "sweet smelling deed" of the Dakotas and that of the Holy Communion of Deloria's Christian upbringing.
- 8** Discuss the practice of polygamy and its features. How is this in keeping with life in the tiospaye? Discuss the practice of marriage and behavior under different circumstances.
- 9** What are some of the examples Deloria uses to illustrate reciprocity with animals? Discuss some of the established beliefs and practices of this kind of reciprocity?
- 10** Discuss the changes to the landscape and the traditional tiospaye when Americans began to occupy more and more tribal territory of the Oceti Sakowin. How did these changes affect the Dakota and other Plains tribes?
- 11** Deloria's novel of the coming of age of Waterlily highlights the traditional role of women during a time of great cultural changes. Despite the historical backdrop of colonizing changes, how is Deloria's own life a reflection of Native American resilience and familial honor?