

#NATIVE READS

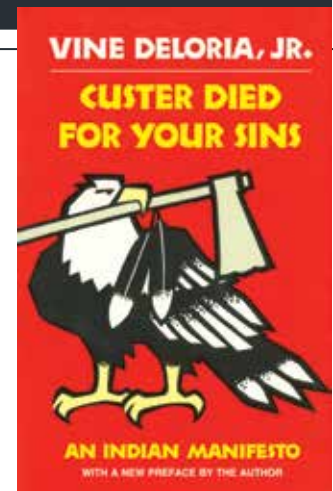
GREAT BOOKS from INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Custer Died for Your Sins

by VINE DELORIA, JR.

Author Biography

Historian, theologian and scholar Vine Deloria, Jr. (1933-2005), citizen of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (and the Oceti Sakowin Oyate) fought for American Indian rights throughout his academic and writing career. He is considered a father of American Indian Studies and an example of the American Indian Intellectual Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s. He is best known for his book *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, though he wrote many other books further centering the commonalities between American Indian thought and philosophy. While his work engaged mixed audiences, his writing influences tribal scholars and writers and the discipline of American Indian Studies. Deloria grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and was educated in reservation schools. He graduated from Iowa State University and then earned a master's degree in theology from the Lutheran School of Theology in Illinois. Deloria modeled that rare leader of both academia and activism, leading the National Congress of American Indians from 1964 to 1967, before completing his law degree at the University of Colorado in 1970. His career included participation in many organizations and academia, as well as teaching at the University of Arizona from 1978 to 1990 and at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He continued writing and lecturing until his death in 2005.



Book Summary

After 50 years, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* remains the crucial treatise on tribal sovereignty and self-determination. Driven by the largely successful fight against the “paper war” land grab by states and the U.S. Congress during what historians now call the Termination Era, Deloria describes firsthand the attack on the Oglala Sioux Tribe’s grazing rights and land base and the subsequent work of Indian Nations near and far to fight back.

This landmark book continues to remind us that Indian Country can solve the problems continuously caused by America’s ongoing domestic (and global) imperialism and settler colonialism, so long as tribal people work within their local bands and tribes and intertribally. As an architect of American Indian Studies, Deloria continues to inform today’s tribal scholars, as well as those seeking to understand Indian Country beyond stereotypes. While the language and detailed examples may seem specific to the time of its writing, the larger themes and exercises in Oceti Sakowin Oyate (or Great Sioux Nation) culture-based writing and thought continues to challenge all readers to recognize that Western civilization is in no way superior to Indigenous cultures and political realities, whether in North America or globally.

Discussion Guide

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

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- 1** The author uses Indian humor throughout the book, especially when highlighting the clash between Western civilization-centered thought and Native knowing. How does his humor add to the text? How might it be confusing for those inexperienced with Indian humor?
- 2** In Chapter 1, Deloria writes, "To be an Indian in modern American society is in a very real sense to be unreal and ahistorical." To what end does he say the book will address it? What are the examples of this unreality? How does it affect everyday life?
- 3** Deloria writes that Indians weren't really considered human until it was economically viable to do so. He does not inform the reader of the many instances in which official government documents liken American Indians to animals, including the famous line from the Dakota War, in which it was said of the Dakota, "Let them eat grass." Where else does he assume historical or cultural understanding by the reader? Can the reader be sure to know? How does it feel to read a book not centered in Western civilization?
- 4** This book is 50 years old. Which issues and ideas are still relevant today? Which are outdated? What are current examples of the major themes voiced in the book?
- 5** Readers might be surprised or even disturbed that Deloria does not spare Indian Country in his criticism. How is his analysis of issues facing Indian Country (and specific tribes and reservations in particular) differ from what the U.S. government and white America see as a problem?
- 6** How do Indians today view treaties and laws? What is the root of Indian resentment against the United States?
- 7** Deloria ends each chapter with a strong call to action and often a prescient critique of the United States and its institutions, as well as Indian tribes. How do these conclusions further the unveiling of unrealities facing Indian tribes today?
- 8** How does tribalism and unity define Indian policy and leadership? What is the greatest threat to that unity?
- 9** What is the difference between nationalism and militancy? What does Indian nationalism look like? How does Deloria's premise hold in regard to the Standing Rock prayer camps?
- 10** Through many examples and ideas, Deloria pushes for, at minimum, the equality of Indian thought and political ability with that of Americanized Western civilization. Do you think the U.S. is ready to admit this equality? How does this affect America? The tribes?