CEREMONY
Leslie Marmon Silko

A starter guide for the first time reader.
“Ceremony is the greatest novel in Native American literature. It is one of the greatest novels of any time and place. I have read this book so many times that I probably have it memorized. I teach it and I learn from it and I am continually in awe of its power, beauty, rage, vision, and violence.”

~Sherman Alexie
Silko writes in a style and from a character perspective that is embedded in her own culture—the Laguna Pueblo. (Silko’s full heritage is Pueblo, White, and Mexican). Ideas of duality and hybridity are important.

Structure, cultural/religious worldview difficult to understand from the traditional white European analytical standpoint. Don’t try to put this novel into that box.

Traditionalist readers need to re-contextualize their understanding of what makes a novel, and try on different ways of interpreting the meaning of the world around us in order to truly gain from this book.

…but a demanding one.
Before approaching an indigenous novel, one needs to recognize...

- American Indian histories (like most minority histories) have been greatly underrepresented and skewed by the academy.

- As you can imagine, native people have complicated feelings about this country...

- Indians are not a mascot, nor a character, nor a vanished culture. Also, it’s inaccurate and potentially disrespectful to refer to “Native American Culture” as a single entity. There are many nations, and tribes within those nations, that each have a unique culture.
A history of colonialism, hegemony, and racism
Relating to Tayo

- Carries the legacy of his Laguna people with him, but is also half white and adopted by Auntie, her husband Robert, and her brother, Josiah.
- Story set in the years following WWII (early 1950’s), Tayo is a war veteran.
- Lives on the Laguna reservation in New Mexico.
Where culture and writing are intertwined, a knowledge of one can inform ideas about the other.

Understand that I’m an outsider, too, but I do have some information that I’ve gained from years of my own education and reading. I’m not an expert, but I can give us a starting point:
Things to understand about the Laguna culture

- **Oral culture with sacred stories** (similar levity to the Bible or Koran for other traditions)
- **Importance of continuity**, passing down the “old ways”
- **Matriarchal culture** — women are the leaders of extended family unit, most powerful deities in female form
- **Land is sacred** (This is beyond respect, *part* of the people)
- **Cardinal directions hold meaning**: North = logic/intellect, South = emotion/connection, East = beginnings, West = closure
- **Supernatural/godlike visitors** in this literature could (can) appear in human and animal form, literally/transform or come and go at will.
- **Rituals** used for healing — medicine men/women
- **Idea of honorable hunters and warriors** important
- **Time isn’t thought of as linear**. The present is the only “real” time. Things can repeat, or come back, or happen out of sequence.
How does this affect Silko’s writing?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainstream Literature</th>
<th>Indigenous Literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>linear</td>
<td>cyclical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>monologic or dialogic</td>
<td>conversational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hierarchical</td>
<td>egalitarian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>secular</td>
<td>metaphysical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>critique of culture</td>
<td>critique of colonialism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>individual</td>
<td>communitarian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Chart courtesy of the Northwest Indian Applied Research Institute at Evergreen*
There will be traditional oral stories woven into the narrative (and they’re not random—try to figure out how they relate to the narrative).

Events do not necessarily happen in chronological order. There are many memories, flashbacks, and stories within the story. But it will all make sense eventually.

Think of this type of novel as being immersed in an experience rather than hearing an account of something that happened.

Practice perspective taking—the more you can see through Tayo’s eyes, the more rewarding the story will be.

Think back to *Brave New World*, *Native Son*, and *The Things They Carried*—there are many connections to our previous learning.
Time to think, talk, and write.

- What is a ceremony? (Examples?)
- What is the purpose of a ceremony?
- How do we feel when we’re part of a ceremony?
- What shouldn’t happen during a ceremony? What’s the result if something wrong does happen?
- What’s the hopeful result of a ceremony?

WRITE: Freewrite about a sacred space/place.