

Good book review about ella cara delorias waterlily

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



The novel *Waterlily* was written by Ella Cara Deloria in 1940s but the writer insisted that the book must be published after her death. Thus, *Waterlily* saw the light 1988 when it was first published, eighteen years after the author's death. The first publication of the book was almost twice shorter than the original novel. This editorial advice given by Ruth Benedict allowed to underline the plot focusing on its most remarkable parts and make the novel more readable. The book concentrates on the life of the Dakota state with exploration of its ethnography and local traditions. The main heroines of *Waterlily* are two Sioux women, Blue Bird and Waterlily, the mother and the daughter who explore the importance of kinship. Deloria focuses on the destiny of these two women, mainly describing their experiences and life in the Dakota society. This paper will analyze the major subjects of the book and investigate the author's writing style and tendency to focus on certain specific features and themes that create the plot of *Waterlily*.

Despite that the story of *Waterlily* is mostly about the life of South Dakota, the novel has not much in common with the historical fiction. However, Ella Cara Deloria was a Sioux herself, and an accomplished ethnologist, and her writings illustrate that she knew the subject very well making the novel valuable for the researchers. The brilliant style of Deloria reveals the intricate system of relatedness, obligation, and respect that governed the world of all Dakotas as it takes the protagonist, Waterlily, through the everyday and the extraordinary events of a Sioux woman's experience (Cotera 34).

Deloris's major point is that life in Dakota before American western expansion was quite simple and rolled around following the kinship rules,

correspond to the accepted moral norms, and pertain to civilized way of living. Dakotas were raising their children with a great sense of responsibility, impressing them with the notion that every action must be taken with understanding the consequences. The responsibility for each other was the greatest value that allowed Dakotas living in the society and prosper. The power of the word given to someone else was ultimate and must not be disrespected. Oath was the highest form of reliability: " Once she gives it, an honorable Dakota woman does not break her word to a man." (Deloria 12).

Kinship is the main theme of the novel. Deloria points at the importance of rituals in everyday life of the Sioux Dakota. For example, the ritual known as ghost keeping serves both religious and cultural importance by honoring a well respected and beloved person's death. In Deloria's novel, it is Gloku's spirit that is retained through ghost keeping. Ghost keeping is a long and laborious ceremony in which a ghost bundle " must be guarded with relentless care in accordance with a ritual that might not be neglected even once." (141). Those who disrespected the rituals were punished through social censure and could be even thrown out of the tribe. It happened to Waterlily's father Star Elk who interrupted the victory dance in order to " throw away" his wife. Star Elk was a jealous man, and he suspected his wife in cheating. However, people in the tribe knew that he was wrong, and his public expression of disrespect to Blue Bird during the important ritual evoked disapproval of the community. Star Elk had no other option but to leave the tribe after such a shameful action: " Star Elk not only succeeded in losing a good wife and making a fool of himself; he earned such public

disfavor that he could not remain in the camp circle. He left immediately, his destination unknown." (16).

This passage alone is a great indication of some of the tribe's core values: generosity, the importance of etiquette and propriety, pride, and fairness. Examples of this type abound throughout the book, and more than anything else, an emphasis is placed on gender roles and the process of becoming assimilated to be a part of the tribe. This is supported by Deloria's own words in the publisher's preface, where she states " the ultimate aim of Dakota life, stripped of accessories, was quite simple: One must obey kinship rules; one must be a good relative. No Dakota who has participated in that life will dispute that. In the last analysis every other consideration was secondary - property, personal ambition, glory, good times, life itself. Without that aim and the constant struggle to attain it, the people would no longer be Dakotas in truth. They would no longer even be human." (Deloria Publisher's Preface). This directly states that personhood can only be attained by assimilating individual values to the values of the tribe.

In Dakota tribes, life was indeed simple at the first glance. However, a deeper look at their way of living revealed complex social structure that dominated over all spheres of life: " Any family could maintain itself adequately as long as the father was a good hunter and a mother an industrious woman. But socially, it was not enough; ideally it must be a part of a larger (extended) family, constituted of related households In the camp circle, such groups placed their tipis side by side where they would be easy reach for cooperative living. In their closeness lay such strength and social importance as no single family, however able, could or wished to achieve

entirely by its own efforts." (Deloria 20).

The value of *Waterlily* as an ethnographic novel is undoubted. The context of the book represents the great interest for modern researchers and enthusiasts. Perhaps, the reason why Deloria insisted on publishing the novel after her death lies in the educational purpose of it. Deloria must have thought that over time, the novel would present more value to historians, sociologists, and ethnographers who would like to study the traditions of the Sioux Dakota. Indeed, today, the interest for native traditions has increased, and *Waterlily* may be considered a good guide to the nineteenth century Dakota.

Nowadays, Deloria's novel is studied in many educational institutes not only because of its scientific value, but due to amazing life lessons presented in the book. Through pages of *Waterlily*, the author shows the reader how balanced and well-organized the life of Sioux was back in the day. In fact, our contemporaries may learn a lot from such tribes. The philosophy of Sioux is remarkable for its workability. It is simple and highly efficient at the same time. Moreover, it is universal. Many religions have the same values and guidelines placed at the centre of their ideology. However, the referencing to God, or other divine creatures and supernatural forces makes many people to stay in doubt because they do not believe the notion that the world was created and is ruled by some abstract highest creature. In Sioux philosophy, there is no mentioning that the rules and traditions that must be followed are given by abstract God. The traditions of the tribes simply come from the experience of the ancestors. The rules are followed not because they were given by the highest forces with a designation to blindly follow them, but

because they were received through the hard process of living, and because they work.

Waterlily is a great example of how basically an ethnographic study may become a popular and enjoyable novel that has a great value not only for researchers, but also for students, and readers who want to be entertained. The lessons that can be learned from this book are priceless and deserve to be taught in every school and college for their marvelous practicality and accessibility. Ella Cara Deloria presented the culture of Sioux Dakota in a brilliant manner that motivates to learn about it even more. The incredible insight of the author allowed her to carry her experience and knowledge to the readers of the future generations. The fact that the book was published eighteen years after Deloria's death gave it a chance to become appreciated and interpreted the way it had to be. Modern readers across the world find Waterlily a very enjoyable and deep reading that reveals the greatest sides of the Sioux Dakota with all its unique traditions, customs, and rituals. It makes the novel a true masterpiece of writing, priceless and brilliant.

Bibliography

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