GENERAL

history of native american literature

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Introduction

When most people think of American literature, images of Shakespearean drama, modernist poetry, or the sprawling narratives of the West come to mind. Yet, long before the arrival of European settlers, a rich tapestry of storytelling already thrummed across the continent. The **history of Native American literature** is a chronicle of resilience, creativity, and cultural preservation that spans thousands of years. This article traces that journey from ancient oral traditions to contemporary digital storytelling, highlighting pivotal moments, influential voices, and enduring themes that continue to shape the literary landscape today.

Pre-Colonial Oral Traditions

Storytelling as Cultural Transmission

Across the vast expanse of North America, Indigenous peoples cultivated diverse oral traditions that served as the bedrock of communal memory and identity. Storytelling was not merely entertainment; it was an essential mechanism for passing down laws, histories, moral lessons, and cosmological understandings from one generation to the next.

In many tribes, the **storyteller**—often an elder or a specially trained individual—held a revered status. Their words were believed to carry the power of the ancestors, and the act of storytelling itself was considered a sacred ritual. These narratives were performed in communal settings, such as around a fire or during seasonal gatherings, reinforcing social bonds and shared values.

Poetry, Songs, and Mythology

Oral literature manifested in various forms: epic poems, lullabies, chants, and mythic tales. The *Powwow songs* of the Plains tribes, for instance, blended rhythmic chants with ceremonial dance, creating a multisensory experience that conveyed historical events and spiritual beliefs.

Mythology played a central role in explaining natural phenomena and the origins of life. The **Creation Stories** of the Navajo, the *Dreamtime* narratives of the Australian Aboriginals (often shared by Indigenous peoples across the Americas), and the *Great Spirit* tales of the Ojibwe all illustrate how storytelling was intertwined with cosmology.

European Contact and Early Documentation

Missionaries and Ethnographers

The arrival of European explorers and missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries marked a turning point for Indigenous literature. While the missionaries sought to convert Native peoples to Christianity, many also recorded oral traditions, songs, and chants for their own purposes—whether as a tool for evangelization or as a scholarly endeavor.

Figures such as Father Jacques Marquette and Father Louis Hennepin documented stories from the Illinois and Huron peoples. Later, ethnographers like James A. Fenimore Cooper and John L. O. Smith collected narratives that would become foundational texts for the nascent field of anthropology.

First Written Accounts

One of the earliest written works by a Native author was *Hiawatha: A Legend of the Indian* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1855), which, though written by a white author, drew heavily on Iroquois folklore. The first authentic written narrative by an Indigenous author emerged in the early 19th century with the publication of *The Indian Who Died* by Charles Eastman, a Dakota Sioux who later became a prominent physician and writer.

19th Century: The Rise of the “Indian Novel”

Anthropological Narratives

During the 1800s, as the United States expanded westward, the government and academic institutions intensified efforts to document Native cultures. This period saw the emergence of the so called “Indian novel,” a literary form that blended narrative fiction with ethnographic detail.

Works such as *Myths and Legends of the Indians* by James A. Fenimore Cooper and *Stories of the Indians*by George Washington Hill offered readers a glimpse into Indigenous life, though often filtered through a Eurocentric lens.

Key Figures: Charles Eastman, Zitkala Ša

Charles Eastman (1890–1919) was a pioneer of Native American literature in the 20th century. Born in Minnesota to a Dakota Sioux family, Eastman became one of the first Native authors to publish autobiographical essays in mainstream American magazines. His works, such as *We Indians* and *My People*, explored the cultural clash between traditional Sioux values and the encroaching forces of modernity.

Another influential voice was Zitkala Ša (also known as Gertrude Simmons Bonnell), a Yankton Dakota writer, educator, and activist. Zitkala Ša’s essays, poems, and autobiographical novel*The Woman Who Would Not Die* (1911) challenged prevailing stereotypes and advocated for Native rights. She is often credited with founding the American Indian Women"s Club and promoting Native literacy.

Early 20th Century: The “Indian Renaissance”

Literary Journals and Publications

The early 1900s witnessed a surge in Indigenous literary output, often referred to as the “Indian Renaissance.” The establishment of journals like *Native American Review* and *Indian Country Today*provided platforms for Native writers to publish essays, poems, and short stories.

These publications fostered a sense of community among writers and readers alike, allowing Indigenous voices to reach broader audiences. They also played a crucial role in preserving linguistic diversity, as many authors wrote in both English and their native tongues.

Poets and Playwrights: N. Scott Momaday, Louise Erdrich

One of the most celebrated figures of this era was N. Scott Momaday, a Kiowa author who won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Way to Rainy Mountain*(1969). Momaday’s work interweaves oral histories with contemporary narrative, creating a layered exploration of identity and memory.

Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa, has authored numerous novels and short stories that blend realism with magical realism. Her books, such as *The Bingo Palace* (2007) and *The Round House* (2012), have earned critical acclaim for their nuanced portrayal of Native life in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Mid 20th Century: The Influence of the Civil Rights Movement

Political Themes and Identity

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s had a profound impact on Native American literature. Authors began to address issues of sovereignty, land rights, and cultural preservation with renewed vigor.

Works such as *Native American Literature: A Critical History* by James A. P. Brown (1972) contextualized Indigenous narratives within broader socio political frameworks, encouraging a more critical engagement with colonial legacies.

Notable Works: “The Lone Ranger” and Others

While the popular Western genre often perpetuated stereotypes, some Native authors subverted these tropes by offering alternative narratives. For example, the novel *The Lone Ranger* (1975) by James A. Brown, though written by a white author, was later reinterpreted by Native readers who found resonance in its themes of justice and self determination.

Meanwhile, the emergence of the **Native American Poetry Movement** in the 1970s—led by poets like James Schuyler and Sherman Alexie—further expanded the literary canon, blending traditional forms with contemporary concerns.

Late 20th Century: Institutional Support and Education

Native American Studies Programs

By the 1980s, universities began establishing Native American Studies departments, providing academic legitimacy to Indigenous scholarship. These programs fostered interdisciplinary research and encouraged the publication of literary criticism focused on Native voices.

Academic journals such as *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* and *Native American Literature Review* became essential outlets for scholarly articles, creative writing, and critical essays.

Grants and Fellowships

Government agencies and private foundations started offering grants to support Native writers. The *National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)* and the *Native Arts and Culture Foundation (NACF)* have funded numerous projects, enabling authors to pursue research, writing, and publication.

These financial resources have been instrumental in preserving endangered languages and ensuring that Indigenous stories reach wider audiences.

21st Century: Contemporary Voices and Digital Platforms

New Genres and Multimedia Storytelling

Today’s Native American literature is characterized by hybrid forms that blend prose, poetry, visual art, and digital media. Authors like **Alexie, Erdrich, and Momaday** continue to innovate, while younger writers experiment with graphic novels, interactive storytelling, and virtual reality experiences.

For instance, the graphic novel *Black Elk Speaks* (2010) by John R. M. (illustrator) and *The Great Riddle* (2018) by A. K. (author) combine Indigenous myth with contemporary design, making these stories accessible to new generations.

Impact of Social Media and Podcasts

Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have become powerful tools for Native writers to share short-form narratives, poems, and cultural insights. Podcasts like *Native Voices* and *The Native American Storyteller* offer audio storytelling that preserves linguistic nuances and oral traditions.

These platforms democratize literary production, allowing voices that were previously marginalized to gain visibility and influence.

Key Themes and Motifs in Native American Literature

Connection to Land and Spirituality

A recurring motif across Indigenous literature is the profound relationship between people and the land. The concept of *“Earth as Mother”*—found in Navajo, Cherokee, and Lakota

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