

Here's a beginner's guide to excellent Indigenous literature

Author of [The Epic of America](#), James Truslow Adam coined the term American Dream in 1931, during The Great Depression. Home ownership was at the cornerstone of that dream but before America was “discovered” and American Dream Homes were planted, there were people living here. These people lived on the land and not with the mindset of paper ownership but with the understanding that there is a relationship with the land. The relationship is palpable, has breath and desires, gives gifts, and lets us know when it is violated. The land still speaks to us, but we have ignored it and the indigenous people who came before us. Mary Lyons (Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe) of Northwestern University informs us, “When we talk about land, land is part of who we are. It's a mixture of our blood, our past, our current, and our future. We carry our ancestors in us, and they're around us...”

Although the atrocities of taking inhabited land occurred centuries before we were born, there are things that we can do. On the [Native Governance Center](#) site, there is a guide to creating an [Indigenous Land Acknowledgement](#). Following is an abbreviation of what is posted:

- Learn about the Indigenous people to whom the land belongs and the history of the land.
- Learn the names of living Indigenous people from these communities.
- [Indigenous people are still here](#). Use past, present, and future tenses.
- Land acknowledgments should be celebrations of Indigenous communities.
- Focus on the positivity of who Indigenous people are today.

From the guidelines for creating land acknowledgement, we springboard into the world of literature beginning with poet [Natalie Diaz](#), who is a 2018 recipient of the [MacArthur Genius Grant](#). “Diaz draws on her experience as a Mojave American and Latina to challenge the mythological and cultural touchstones that viscerally conveys the oppression and violence that continue to afflict Indigenous Americans in a variety of forms”.

- [MacArthur Foundation](#)

Her most recent collection [Postcolonial Love Poem](#) won the [Pulitzer Prize](#), 2021. Those that garner this prize do so from a board at Columbia University. The publisher, Gray Wolf Press describes the collection: “Diaz defies the conditions from which she writes, a nation whose creation predicated the diminishment and ultimate erasure of bodies like hers and the people she loves: “I am doing my best to not become a museum / of myself. I am doing my best to breathe in and out. // I am begging: Let me be lonely but not invisible.”

This was a year where the brilliance of indigenous writers was acknowledged. Novelist [Louise Erdrich](#) (Turtle Mountain band of Chippewa) won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction for [The Night Watchman](#) Pulitzer board described her novel as, “a majestic, polyphonic novel about a community's efforts to halt the proposed displacement and elimination of several Native American tribes in the 1950s, rendered with dexterity and imagination”.

Speaking of the Pulitzer Prize, in 1969, [N. Scott Momaday](#) of the [Kiowa tribe](#), was the first Indigenous person to win it for his novel, [House Made of Dawn](#). In 1977, [Leslie Marmon Silko](#) received critical attention for her first novel, [Ceremony](#), which is based on the oral traditions and ceremonial practices of the [Navajo](#) and [Pueblo](#) people. The 2018 novel, [There, There](#) by [Tommy](#)

Orange was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and a PEN/Hemingway award winner. Set in current day Oakland; it is a must-read.

In 2019, *Black Indian: Identity, Ethnicity, Landscape and Loss*, a program presented by [Inlandia Institute](#)'s Conversations at the Culver hosted award-winning poet and educator Shonda Buchanan to talk about and read from her memoir *Black Indian*. Wayne State University Press describes, "Black Indian, searing and raw, is Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* meets Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* – only it isn't fiction". The event was sponsored by [UCR Center for Ideas and Society](#).

Poet, musician, playwright, and author, Joy Harjo (Muskogee, Creek) was appointed the 23rd United States Poet Laureate in 2019. Harjo is the first Indigenous person in this position and she is currently serving her third term. Laureate Harjo's signature project is Living Nations, Living Worlds with the purpose of introducing the country to more Native poets.

First Nations #Native Reads has a seven-point Call-to-Action with the mandate to decolonize our bookshelves, which aligns with the Land Acknowledgement Guide and Joy Harjo's *Living Nations, Living Worlds* mission. Reading books by Indigenous authors is not land restoration or reparations but it is a way to show support and the beginning of understanding.

Romaine Washington is an educator and the author of "Sirens in Her Belly" and "Purgatory Has an Address".