

## House Made of Dawn by N. Scott Momaday

For the Novel Club – April 2021

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When he “announced to all who would listen that [he] was a professional writer,” N. Scott Momaday was still an undergraduate at the University of New Mexico, but had already won poetry contests, and, crucially, seen one of his poems published. He was admitted to the Stanford University doctoral program in English and American Literature as the year’s sole recipient of the Stegner Creative Writing Fellowship in Poetry, winning the Academy of American Poets prize for “The Bear” in 1962, one year before completing his doctorate. By then, as Momaday recalled for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition of his first novel, *House Made of Dawn*, “I had written poetry for four straight years, and I felt the need to write something else.”

For prose, Momaday returned to something begun as an undergraduate “merely as an exercise, not daring to imagine that [his] early efforts would result in a novel.” Momaday set the novel in the Jemez Pueblo, where he’d moved when he was twelve, his parents having been hired to teach there. Located in the Rio Grande Valley, east of Navajo country, in the novel, the Pueblo is called by its ancient name, still in use among its citizens, Walatowa.<sup>1</sup> For the Benevides house, which Angela St. John rents, Momaday described house his parents bought in Jemez Springs, NM, twelve miles north of the Pueblo, and which the family owned for 65 years.<sup>2</sup>

In the insular community of the Pueblo, his father’s Kiowa, and his mother’s mixed Cherokee and English ancestry perhaps informed Momaday’s description of Francisco and Abel’s having been regarded as “somehow foreign and strange.” But neither is a stand in for the author. According to Momaday, Abel was a

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s Preface and the articles contained in the P.S. section of the Fiftieth Anniversary edition of HMoD.

<sup>2</sup> Mother’s obituary: <https://jemezvalleyhistory.org/?p=539>

Photo and caption of Momaday house: <https://jemezvalleyhistory.org/?p=3386>

composite of men who had gone from Pueblo to World War II battle fields, returning scarred. Francisco had a single model, Momaday's close neighbor, Francisco Tosa, whom the author regarded as "a near perfect example of a Pueblo elder."<sup>3</sup>

The Pueblo inspired numerous plot elements including the addition of Christian belief and rituals to the indigenous origin stories and folklore, which had already assigned a significant, negative role to witches and the snake. The Pueblo has a high incidence of albinism,<sup>4</sup> and the killing of the "white man" – an albino Abel believes was about to turn into a snake – was based on an actual event. While some interpreters have posited that the "white man" had a dual meaning: the majority white society. Perhaps, but some racial terms are different in the Southwest. If, in New York, you're regarded as white, in New Mexico, you're Anglo.

For his debut novel, which won the Pulitzer Prize, Momaday has said that he drew on Kiowa storytellers and Navjo chanters, as well as Faulkner. Some later critics who praised the novel, note that its style, steeped in poetry and the Oral Tradition, made it difficult for readers unfamiliar especially with the latter.<sup>5</sup> The effect, "resisting standard narrative models or an accessible character psychology," wrote another as "disorienting to the reader who expects a sequential train of thought and readily intelligible metaphors."<sup>6</sup> Perhaps supporting this, an early review had described HMoD's style as "mannered" and

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<sup>3</sup> Author's Preface and the articles contained in the P.S. section of the Fiftieth Anniversary edition of HMoD.

<sup>4</sup>Jones, J. A. "Rio Grande Pueblo Albinism." *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 22.3 (1964): 265-270. 1 in 184, compared to 1 in 20K for European populations.

<sup>5</sup> Oleson, Carol "The Remembered Earth: Momaday's House Made of Dawn". *South Dakota Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, Spring, 1973, pp. 59–78.

<sup>6</sup> Kaiser, William "Disability and Native American Literature in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *House Made of Dawn*." *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*. 9.2 (2015), p. 202.

“slack,” “get[ting] in the way of content”<sup>7</sup> An even earlier review had praised it, highly but vaguely (“as subtly wrought as a piece of Navajo silverware”), ascribing the novel’s “haze” to cultural differences, and admitting the reviewer’s discomfort criticizing a work by an Indian writer.<sup>8</sup>

1. Did the novel’s style enhance or detract from your understanding and/or enjoyment of it?
2. Chapters titles are dates but the events they recount span years, even eras. The first two, July 20 & 21 both nominally refer to 1945, but July 20 contains a flashback to 1889. July 21 covers approximately a century. A partial list of the nearly stream-of-consciousness events: Abel’s mother’s death, when he was five; Later in his childhood, his brother’s death; Still later, a first hunt; Even later, a festival and loss of virginity; Then, before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the arrival of the remnants of the Bahkyash; Then, ahead about a century to Abel’s first ride in a motorized vehicle (the bus to the military base) and his close brush with a tank in the battlefield. What do you think was the author’s intention? Did it draw you into the novel?
3. Some of us noted changes in points of view in *A Town Like Alice* as a significant distraction. HMoD begins with a third person omniscient, but sometimes shifts to Benally’s perspective, or Olguin’s. Did these shifts bother you? Were some sections more illuminating than others?

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<sup>7</sup> Smith, William James *Commonweal* (1968).

<sup>8</sup> Sprague, Marshall *New York Times* June 9, 1968.

4. How well do you feel you know or understand Abel, a character the author later described as “a man without a voice”<sup>9</sup> and a critic, as “quasi-aphasic?”<sup>10</sup> What, if anything, are we readers supposed to make of his name? Did author want us to think of Cain and Abel? Of “able or unable?”
5. In an early sketch of the novel, Momaday mentions a few characters, most of whom appear in the published work. The last on the list was Angela St. John, writing of her “the less said, the better.” While the Angela St. John of the novel might be quite different from the one in the sketch, what do you think of the character? Is her name significant? If so, how? What is her role in her novel?
6. Compare Angela to Milly. Is she more or less believable than Angela. More or less sympathetic than Angela? What is Milly’s role in the novel?
7. Father Olguin is the parish priest, carrying on the work of a predecessor, Fray Nicolás, as we see through the latter’s journal and letter at the rectory. What can we tell about each’s relationship with their parishioners? Does Father Olguin’s one bad eye signify an incomplete understanding of his flock? If so, does it relate to his final lines when he shouts, “I understand! *Oh God! I understand – I understand!*”

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<sup>9</sup> Momaday, quoted in Evers, Lawrence J. “Words and Place: A Reading of House Made of Dawn,” *Western American Literature*. Vol. XI, No. 4, February 1977, pp. 297–320.

<sup>10</sup> Kaiser, William “Disability and Native American Literature in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* and *House Made of Dawn*.” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*. 9.2 (2015), p. 202.

8. What does the Rev. J.B.B. Tosamah, Pastor and Priest of the Sun, of the Los Angeles Holiness Pan-Indian Rescue Mission provide his congregation?