



# Jornades de Foment de la Investigació

## **STORYTELLER BY LESLIE MARMON SILKO**

### **Autora**

Elia Olucha Sansano  
Independent Studies

## THE TITLE AND THE STORYTELLER

Reading the **Storyteller** has been for me an eye opening experience. Like most non-American people, the only information I have received of the American Indians has come mainly from films. These “Western” films paint a picture of Native Americans as half-naked savages. However, reading **Storyteller** has been a great opportunity to learn about the Native American culture, that it is completely different from the one we have often been exposed to in films.

In **Storyteller**, Leslie Marmon Silko tells her story and the story of her people. The story is of the Lagunas, who are a part of the Pueblo Indians. The book brings us to a different culture, with different values and between these values is the strong importance of the older members in the community decisions. Another important point for this culture is the fact that for Indians, the word was sacred and the one who had the power of the word, the storyteller, was an authority of the tribe. In the book, the American Indian storyteller is presented as a mythmaker, a teller of her tribe that keeps the knowledge alive through the times. This point is clearly reflected in the following lines, where the role of the storyteller and the stories is discussed:

*“In this way  
we hold them  
and keep them with us forever  
and in this way  
we continue.” (247)*

In **Storyteller**, the feminine figure has an essential role, not only because the storyteller is a woman, but also because all the stories reflect in a certain way how to live in harmony with Mother Earth. The Mother Earth is sacred for the Laguna Indians, because it is alive and full of power. We can see this close relationship with nature clearly reflected in “Lullaby”. Ayah, an old Navajo woman, sings a lullaby that begins by telling the baby that all the universe is her family, and she is related as a child and sister to the entire natural world,

*“The earth is your mother,  
she holds you.  
The sky is your father,  
he protects you...” (51)*

It is women who fight against “witchery,” the force which causes suffering and torment, sterility and death, and against which characters such as Spiderwoman continually battle. The woman fights against abduction. And the woman also fights for the survival of her culture. In the case of “Lullaby” as in many others, Ayah is in charge of the heritage, culture, and way of life. Her role is to nurture and teach her children and grand children art, religion and natural history.

The telling of their myths and legends was not solely for amusement. These stories were part of their everyday life, and a moral is given with each poem, song, or story. Sometimes it is explicit and other times hidden. These morals or explications are mainly everyday advice or justifications of the origin of things: the origin of the butterflies (15), the importance of not telling lies because ‘they do not stop what was coming’ (32), ‘it isn’t very easy to fix things again’ (121), and how to plant corn (111). These are instructions that have been handed down orally through the years. The book also includes humorous episodes that expose us to a culture that is never afraid to laugh at itself. “The Man to Send Rain Clouds” is a good example of these humorous episodes. In this story one

of the Indians does not understand the priest's actions when the priest sprinkles the holy water on a death body, the Indian says,

*"I said that I had been thinking about something."*

*"About what?"*

*"About the priest sprinkling holy water for Grandpa. So he won't be thirsty." (184)*

All the stories reflect the spiritual sense of Laguna people, but not in the traditional Christian sense. The Lagunas were conquered and Christianized by the Spaniards. But only through the storytellers did they maintain their identity. In my opinion, Silko's intention in writing the book is to make people aware that Laguna represents a life, a history, and a liturgical culture that remains only in a few people's minds, and the rest of the world should not ignore it, even though it has been Christianized and many of old Native American ways have been forgotten or changed. We can also see the white people's influence in "The Man to Send Rain Clouds"(114) where Christian religious rites are misinterpreted by the Native American Indians that invite the priest to sprinkle holy water on the body of a dead man, but not for the reason the priest thinks. The water for the Indians is a way of ritually calling for rain, of maintaining the cycle of death and life, not simply ensuring the eternal condition of an individual soul.

**Storyteller** is unique because it combines many kinds of literature. Some are traditional, some are new, but when all are combined they introduce us to a new world where the family, the nature, and the supernatural together are part of the people's life. The title, **Storyteller**, in itself can suggest that this book is about a person who tells stories, in fact it does but, **Storyteller** also includes poems, songs, photographs and letters. We can say that this book is an amazing combination of diverse forms of art.

Since Indian folklore was oral, much of it has perished, but the testimony of this book is a way of keeping it alive. This collection of stories is a recompilation of the tradition, culture and beliefs of the Indians that has been passed from generation to generation by word. The manner in which the author Leslie Marmon Silko presents this collection of stories gives us the impression that we are no longer reading but are being told the stories by a storyteller, and the book has plenty of oral features. One of them is that the same characters reappear in the same places, but in different situations or with completely different lives. That reminds us that each time a story is told, something is lost and something is added, so sometimes the same story over time becomes different, as it is explained in the book,

*"As with any generation*

*the oral tradition depends upon each person*

*listening and remembering a portion*

*and it is together-*

*all of us remembering what we have heard together-*

*that creates the whole story*

*the long story of the people." (6)*

The stories in the **Storyteller** have plenty of quotations, explications, translations of terms from Indian languages, repetitions, and sometimes incomplete sentences that remind us of their oral

origin. For instance, the beginning of the following story that explains the reader the storytelling rites of Laguna People,

*“The Laguna people  
always begin their stories with “humma-hah”:  
that means “long ago”.  
And the ones who are listening  
Say “aaaa-eh.” (38)*

All the stories are marked by a strong sense of drama and mystery that maintains the reader’s, and in some cases, the listener’s attention. Sometimes we can read episodes, which from a European point of view are strange. An example would be in “Aunt Susie had certain phrases” (7) in this story a little girl’s clothes turned into butterflies.

By reading the book I realize the role of the storyteller is universal in every society. The storyteller figure has consistently appeared throughout all time, but it has taken different forms, used different mediums and also had different purposes in regards to the message. In the ancient times, the Romans considered oratory as a privileged art; they realized the power of the word. Afterwards, the kings’ jesters and the court entertainers play this role. All those ways of keeping the knowledge alive evolved to the radio and television. But in the case of the Native American Indian world, storytelling didn’t evolve in that way. The book Storyteller is a different way of this evolution; the powerful word has taken the written form in the book.

Nowadays, a part of that Indian life style has been disappearing, and little remains in our society. Only a little part of that particular culture remains alive. There are few storytellers that speak about the Indian life. However, by writing the book, Leslie Marmon Silko herself plays the role of the Indian storyteller, passing on to others the mythic episodes as a writer. But in this case, the storyteller has a wide audience and an audience from different cultures. Through the songs, poems, and prose this work introduces us in an entertaining way to this foreign world.

For Leslie Silko, the story is basic to existence, for the Lagunas have always had a tremendous concern for language. She says,

*“Storytelling for Indians is like a natural resource. Some places have oil, some have a lot of water or timber or gold, but around here, it’s the ear that has developed.”*

By this Leslie Silko tells us about Laguna people filled not only with harsh realities of hunger, poverty and injustice, but also fulfilled with unforgettable feats, magic legends, and strong traditional beliefs that have been communicated from generation to generation.