


N. Scott Momaday, Pulitzer-Winning Native American Novelist, Dies at 89

The success of his novel “House Made of Dawn,” the first work by a Native American to win a Pulitzer, inspired a wave of Native literature.

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N. Scott Momaday at his home in Santa Fe in 2017. His explorations of identity and self-definition, of the importance of the oral tradition in literature, and of his Kiowa heritage were interwoven with reverent evocations of landscape. Steven St. John

By John Motyka

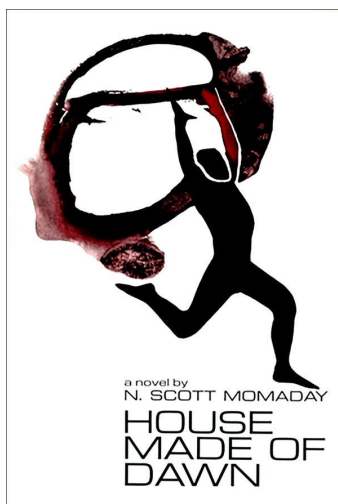
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N. Scott Momaday, whose portrayal of a disaffected World War II veteran's journey to spiritual renewal in his novel "House Made of Dawn" won a Pulitzer Prize, the first for a Native American author, heralding a more prominent place in contemporary literature for Native writers, died on Wednesday at his home in Santa Fe, N.M. He was 89.

The death was announced in a statement by his publisher, HarperCollins.

Mr. Momaday also wrote critically acclaimed poetry, memoirs and essays. His explorations of identity and self-definition, of the importance of the oral tradition in literature, and of his Kiowa heritage were interwoven with reverent evocations of landscape in passages of soaring lyrical prose.

Mr. Momaday began "House Made of Dawn," a first novel that won the Pulitzer for fiction in 1969, with a one-word sentence: "Dypaloh." The word is a traditional invocation of storytellers at the Jemez Pueblo (called by its Native name, Walatowa, in the book) in New Mexico, to which the young Native American protagonist, Abel, returns in 1945. That opening is followed by a short prologue that describes runners on a ritual morning run.



Mr. Momaday's novel "House Made of Dawn" won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1969, the first time a Pulitzer was awarded to a Native American. Credit...Harper & Row

To tell Abel's story, Mr. Momaday combined modern literary techniques — stream-of-consciousness, a disjointed narrative featuring multiple character perspectives (he acknowledged the influence of William Faulkner) — with a near-mythical, circular structure common in traditional Native American tales.

He traced an arc that describes Abel's drunken, ignominious return to his grandfather's house at the pueblo and his inability to readjust to life in a traditional setting after the war and the deaths of his mother and brother. The book describes his affair with a white woman, his dreamlike, highly symbolic murder of an albino Indian, and an interlude in Los Angeles among hard-edged but nostalgic urban Native Americans and a trickster-like shamanic figure.

"His return to the town had been a failure, for all his looking forward," Mr. Momaday writes. "He had tried in the days that followed to speak to his grandfather but he could not say the things he wanted; he had tried to pray, to sing, to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue, but he was no longer attuned to it." And finally: "... he was dumb. Not dumb — silence was the older and better part of custom still — but *inarticulate*."

Abel subsequently returns to the pueblo to witness his grandfather's death and, as a measure of self-knowledge and cultural acceptance, participates again in a ritual run.

Mr. Momaday borrowed the title, "House Made of Dawn," from the Navajo "Night Chant," an ancient prayer/song that a friend of Abel's in Los Angeles recites to remind Abel of his traditional roots.

A reviewer, William James Smith, wrote in *Commonweal* magazine that the book was an effort "to push the secular mode of modern fiction into the sacred mode, a faith and recognition in the power of the word."



N. Scott Momaday, at his Santa Fe studio with family photos, in 2020. His work tackled themes of identity and self-definition, the importance of the oral tradition and his Kiowa heritage. Credit...Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal, via ZUMA Wire, via Alamy Live News

The Pulitzer was a surprise for Mr. Momaday and for others in the publishing world. Originally asked to submit poetry by an editor at the Harper publishing company, he sent instead the relatively slender manuscript of the novel as an entry in the company's novel contest. Although he had missed the deadline, an editor, Frances McCullough, immediately saw its merit and urged that it be accepted for publication.

Mr. Momaday pursued the theme of self-definition further in "The Way to Rainy Mountain," a book based on tales told to him by his grandmother. He drew on ethnology, history and personal recollection to reimagine the southward migration of his nomadic Kiowa forebears from the headwaters of the Yellowstone River to their ultimate home near a small rise called Rainy Mountain in Oklahoma.

The Kiowa, he wrote, "had dared to imagine and determine who they are."

He added: "In one sense, then, the way to Rainy Mountain is pre-eminently the history of an idea, man's idea of himself, and it has an old and essential being in language."

Reviewing the book in the journal *Southern Review*, the critic Kenneth Fields, to explain its appeal, cited the somewhat mystical nature of the book and Mr. Momaday's assertion that in Native tradition the word is sacred.

"The Indians," he wrote, "took for their subject matter those elusive perceptions that resist formulation, never entirely apprehensible, but just beyond the ends of nerves."

The Native American writer Sherman Alexie called Mr. Momaday "one of the primary foundations for all Native American literature" and credited his Pulitzer with bringing Native writing into the mainstream.

"Momaday was a multigenre writer — poetry, fiction, nonfiction — as were nearly all the Native writers of his era," Mr. Alexie said in an email. "I write multigenre because Momaday made it seem like it was the thing that Native American writers do. Like it was a natural part of our identity."



Mr. Momaday receiving the National Medal of Arts from President George W. Bush in 2007 for works “that celebrate and preserve Native American art and oral tradition.” Credit...Gerald Herbert/Associated Press

Kenneth Lincoln, in his comprehensive 1983 book “Native American Renaissance,” described Mr. Momaday’s work as “seminal.”

In a 1997 collection of essays, “The Man Made of Words,” Mr. Momaday offers several eloquent defenses of the oral tradition. In the essay “A Divine Blindness,” he delineated the long reach of writing and printing in human history, but added that “in America there is something else.” He called it “a continuum of language that goes back thousands of years before the printing press — back to the times of origin — an Indigenous expression, an utterance that proceeds from the very intelligence of the soil: the oral tradition.”

Mr. Momaday was also an artist. His book “In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-1991” included 60 drawings by the author. “But it is words Mr. Momaday is in love with,” the reviewer Barbara Bode wrote in *The New*

York Times Book Review. She describes the book as “a refined brew of origins, journeys, dreams and the landscape of the deep continental interior.”



Mr. Momaday in his cadet uniform, with his mother, Mayme Natachee Scott Momaday, in Jemez Pueblo, N.M., circa 1952. Credit...N. Scott Momaday family photograph

Mr. Momaday was born Navarre Scott Mammedaty in Lawton, Okla., on Feb. 27, 1934. He explained in “The Names: A Memoir” that Mammedaty, as a single appellation, was his grandfather’s name. It means “walking above” in Kiowa. During his grandfather’s lifetime, the Kiowa began to designate surnames. Mr. Momaday’s father, Alfred Morris Momaday, a full-blooded Kiowa, changed the name to Momaday “for reasons of his own,” the author wrote.

The father was an artist and teacher who contributed illustrations to “The Way to Rainy Mountain.” Mr. Momaday’s mother, Mayme Natachee Scott Momaday, also a teacher, was descended from early American pioneers as well as a Cherokee great-grandmother. The author was originally raised among Kiowa relatives on a family farm in Oklahoma; his parents later found work at the Jemez Pueblo in New Mexico, where he spent part of his childhood.

Mr. Momaday attended the University of New Mexico and graduated in 1958 with a degree in political science. He earned a master’s degree and a doctorate in English from Stanford University under the mentorship of the literary theorist and critic [Yvor Winters](#). He went on to teach English at the University of California at Santa Barbara, Berkeley and Stanford, and taught English and comparative literature at the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Mr. Momaday’s marriages to Gaye Mangold and Regina B. Heitzer-Momaday ended in divorce. His third marriage, to Barbara Gregg Glenn Momaday, ended with her death in 2008. He is survived by two daughters from his first marriage, Jill Momaday and Brit Momaday-Leight; a daughter from his second marriage, Lore Denny; eight grandchildren; and one great-granddaughter. Another daughter from his first marriage, Cael Momaday, died in 2017.

Mr. Momaday’s work was sometimes criticized for being repetitive, but he said that was intentional.

“I’ve written several books, but to me they are all part of the same story,” he wrote. “And I like to repeat myself, if you will, from book to book, in the way that Faulkner did — in an even more obvious way, perhaps. My purpose is to carry on what was begun a long time ago; there’s no end to it that I see.”

Alex Traub contributed reporting.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/29/books/n-scott-momaday-dead.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>