Read with your Librarian



2026: The Books that Shape Us

NOVEMBER HIGHLIGHT

BURY MY HEART AT WOUNDED KNEE BY DEE BROWN



Strong primary sources breathe life into an "Indian History of the American West". Librarian Dee Brown wrote an eloquent, meticulously researched account of the conflicts between Native Americans and the U.S. government from the eyes of the Native American tribes affected by the conflicts during the second half of the nineteenth century.

CONTEXT & IMPACT

1971, the year this month's featured title was published, found in America a nation plagued by gnawing self-doubt. It was a time of cultural unrest in the country, as deep disillusionment with the U.S. Government and the myths of American History spread. Segregation had just ended in 1968 with the Fair Housing Act. The environmentalism movement sparked by Silent Spring was gaining ground; the first Earth Day was celebrated in 1970. Second-wave feminists were fighting to gain equality in all aspects of life; the Equal Pay Act was passed in 1963, but Title IX wouldn't come until 1972. The Stonewall riots happened in 1969, pushing LGTBQ rights to the forefront. The Vietnam War triggered a deep anti-war protest, many seeing parallels between the government's treatment of Native peoples and the military response in Vietnam, especially the 1968 My Lai massacre. The American Indian Movement (begun in 1968), was a grassroots movement seeking to address the systemic issues of poverty, discrimination, and police brutality against Native Americans. Many other minority groups, including Mexican-Americans, migrant farm workers, Asian-Americans, Americans with Disabilities, and Cubans were protesting and fighting for better treatment. It was a time when our nation was fighting to become more like the vision laid out by our founders. Similarly to the environmental movement sparked by *Silent Spring*, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* awakened the American consciousness to the plundering of indigenous peoples in the era of Manifest Destiny.

Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee was written by an Arkansas librarian-historian named Dee (Dorris Alexander) Brown. In Brown's childhood, he was friends with many Native Americans, and they told him that the Indians in the old western movies he loved weren't real Indians. That stayed with him over the years, and he was inspired to research and became an expert in the Old West. He published seven books and numerous articles to mediocre success before writing *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, published when he was 60 years old.

He intentionally wrote the book from the perspective of the Native American, subtitling the work An Indian History of the American West. Though critics termed it revisionist history, Brown argued that it was intentional and grounded in primary sources. Brown took the history written by the winners of the war and reminded American readers that there was another side of the story. His narrative wasn't perfect; he depicts Native Americans as victims without agency, a simplistic description at best. In all likelihood, this is at least partially due to the trouble with the primary sources available to Brown. Many of his sources were from the US government's records of treaty meetings. Many Native tribes were oral peoples, without written language. Cultures with strong oral traditions also tend to use image-based language; often, the quality of the spoken word is dependent on the quality of the translator. There were also issues with Native Americans that did give interviews or histories: fear of reprisal often meant they couldn't speak freely. Others delighted in hoaxing gullible interviewers with tall tales and stereotypical performances.

Despite those hurdles, Brown did manage to write a book that made many question if he

continued

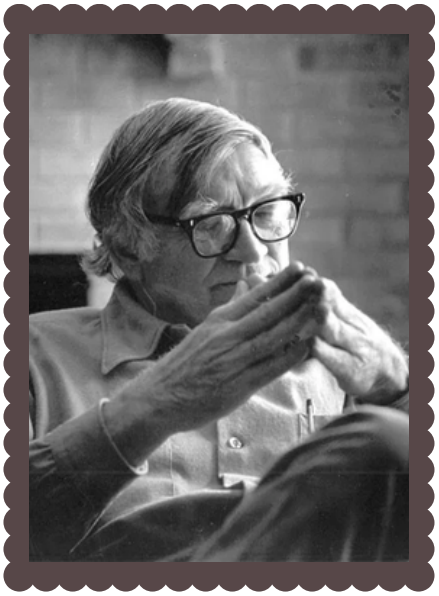
was White or Native (he was White). He balanced a strong narrative with the representation of a variety of tribes and cultures that prompted different responses by the US government. Though he touches briefly on a few of the tribal alliances, Brown did not delve fully into the way that US forces were able to turn different Native peoples against each other. Native groups often identified with their community and tribal identity more than being a "Native American" in general, a trait colonial powers often exploited. (It is reminiscent of the identity issues with the United States during the founding, as described in *The Federalist Papers*. Colonists viewed themselves within their State identity (New Yorker, Pennsylvanian, etc.) and didn't have a strong federal American identity yet.)

It is not an easy book to read, even though the prose itself is compelling. As Brown wrote in his introduction: "This is not a cheerful book, but history has a way of intruding upon the present .." It sheds light on the greed of the doctrine of manifest destiny and shows how negative stereotypes can be weaponized against a people whose ways are foreign to our own.

Brown ends the book with a quote from Black Elk: "A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream . . . the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead." The white settlers of the West wanted every people of the land to act like they did, but the Native peoples didn't understand how to do that. Despite the book painting Wounded Knee as the end, Native Americans and their culture are not destroyed. Their cultures and civilizations are present and evolving as rapidly and creatively as the rest of us. To highlight this living, continuing story, Ojibwe author David Treuer penned a response to *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* entitled *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee*, published in 2019.

FUN FACTS

- Brown uses the term "American Indian" throughout the book. One of the outcomes of the American Indian Movement was the rejection of that term in favor of the term Native American by the US government, though that term is not universally accepted by Indigenous groups.
- The title of the book was taken from a 1927 poem American Names by Stephen Vincent Benét. The final two lines of the poem are used as the book's epigraph "I shall not be there. I shall rise and pass. / Bury my heart at Wounded Knee."
- The text is peppered with songs referenced in the chapters.
- The book was made into an HBO film in 2007.
- A adaptation for young readers was written by Dwight Jon Zimmerman in 2011 entitled *Saga of the Sioux*.



Dee Brown, circa 1978
Photo by Charles Ellis

SOURCES & MORE

Articles & Websites

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- *To understand the present, we must confront the ghosts of 1876. They still haunt the American soul*. July 12, 2026, *Kansas Reflector*. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A895636976/STND?u=pl2583r&sid=bookmark-STND&xid=0f5de9a7
- Woo, Elaine. *Dee Brown, 94; 'Wounded Knee' Author Altered Perceptions of Frontier History*. December 14, 2002, *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved October 15, 2026 from https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2002-dec-14-me-brown14-story.html

Video

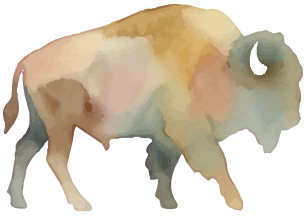
- *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*. HBO, 2007.
- *Little Bighorn and Wounded Knee*. Episode 16 of *The American West*. Great Courses, 2016. *available on Kanopy.*
- *Standing Bear's Footsteps: A Native American Chief Who Fought Equal Rights*. Nebraska Public Media/PBS, 2011. *available on Kanopy.*
- *We Shall Remain*. PBS American Experience, 2009. *available on Kanopy.*
- *Who Controls the Land: Bears Ears National Monument and the Fight for Native American Equality*. Season 2, Episode 2 of *America Divided*. Epix, 2018. *available on Kanopy*.

"Their musical names remained forever fixed on the American land, but their bones were forgotten in a thousand burned villages or lost in forests fast disappearing before the axes of twenty million invaders."

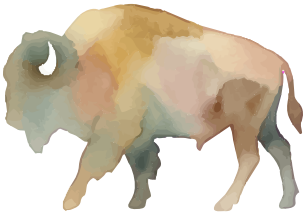
- Dee Brown

"The old Lakota was wise. He knew that man's heart away from nature becomes hard; he knew that lack of respect for growing, living things soon led to lack of respect for humans, too."

- Chief Luther Standing Bear

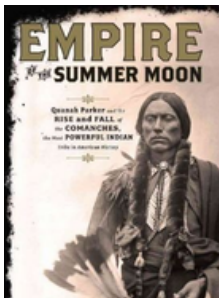


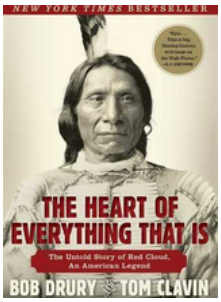
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- Was there a specific event described in the book that impacted you more than the others? What about it struck you?
- What commonalities did you see in the different interactions in the book? What do they say about the American government? The Native tribes?
- Are there modern-day parallels to what happened with the Native tribes, similar to how readers saw parallels between the events of the book and the Vietnam War?
- Did reading the perspective of the Indians challenge the view you held about how the American West was settled?
- While reading, did you consider any ways that the American West could have been settled differently, to allow the Native Americans to keep more of their land and ways of life?
- The month of November is Native American Heritage month. Does reading this book help you understand why this awareness month is celebrated?
- Many agree that 'history is written by the winners'. Is it important to have historians like Dee Brown write nonfiction about the 'losing side'? Why would this be important information to learn?
- The myth of the American West is dismantled in *Bury My Heart*. Are there other American myths that you once believed and no longer do? Are there other myths that should be reexamined; for example, the story of Thanksgiving or the stories about Sacajewea?
- Brown states that white settlers wanted every people of the land to act like they did, but that Native peoples did understand how to do that. Is there one way that is better than others? Why or why not? What elements would make it difficult to live in harmony? Is a sense of superiority justified for any way of life?
- One of the critiques of Brown was that he depicted the Native American culture as having died at Wounded Knee, but modern Native Americans disagree. Do you think either side is correct? Why or why not?
- One of the factors that influenced the US Government's settling of the West was their ability to divide-and-conquer tribes to fight against each other. What elements of identity can be used against and within American culture today?
- Are there other Native authors or histories you have read recently? Share who the authors and/or books were.

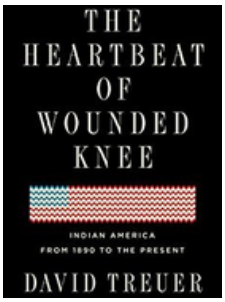
READ-ALIKES - BURY MY HEART AT WOUNDED KNEE

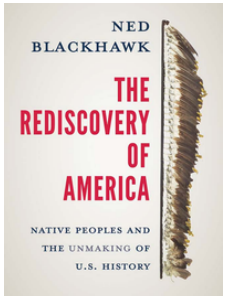


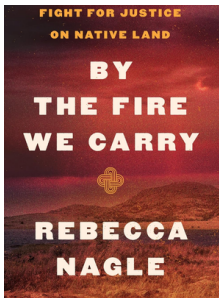


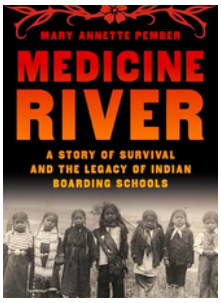
Native American Histories

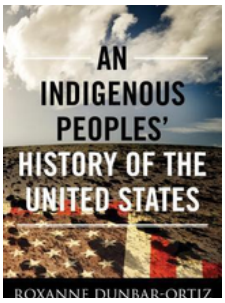


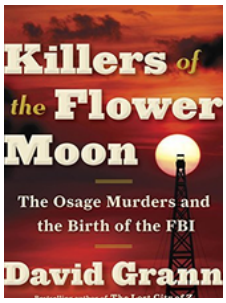




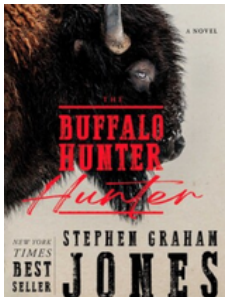


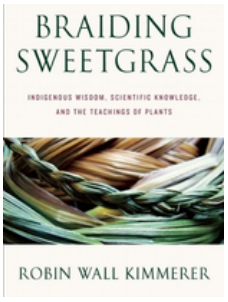






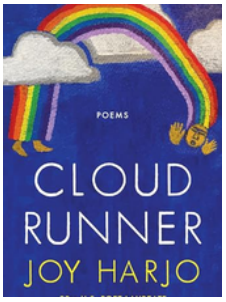
- *The Rediscovery of America* - Ned Blackhawk
- *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* - Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz
- *The Heart of Everything that Is* - Bob Drury & Tom Clavin
- *Killers of the Flower Moon* - David Grann
- *Empire of the Summer Moon* - S.C. Gwynne
- *By the Fire We Carry* - Rebecca Nagle
- *Medicine River* - Mary Annette Pember
- *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* - David Treuer





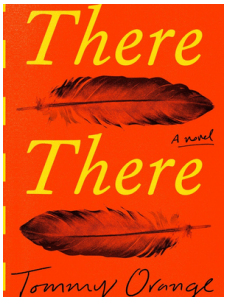
Native American Authors

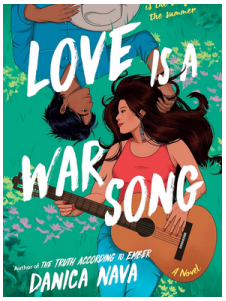


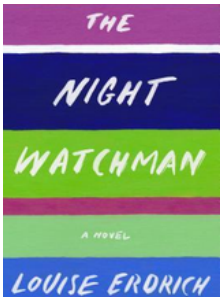












- Stephen Graham Jones (Horror)
- Robin Wall Kimmerer (Nonfiction)
- Angeline Boulley (YA Contemporary)
- Tommy Orange (Contemporary)
- Joy Harjo (Poetry)
- Rebecca Roanhorse (Spectulative Fiction) -
- Danica Nava (Romance)
- Louise Erdrich (Mystery)

UPCOMING SELECTIONS



The Books that Shape Us

★★★★★★ 2026 ★★★★★★

- ☐ **January**: *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- ☐ **February**: *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- ☐ **March**: *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- ☐ **April**: *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- ☐ **May**: *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- ☐ **June**: *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- ☐ **July**: *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- ☐ **August**: *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- ☐ **September**: *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- ☐ **October**: *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- ☐ **November**: *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- ☐ **December**: *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder

Your digital library

OIL REGION Library ASSOCIATION

2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

Read with Your Librarian is an initiative of the Oil Creek Library District. The Oil Creek Library District works in partnership with the public libraries in Clarion, Jefferson, and Venango Counties (Pennsylvania) to provide support and facilitate digital library resources.

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