



Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko (Literary Conversations)

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"The most effective political statement I could make is in my art work. . . . The most radical kind of politics is language as plain truth."

Leslie Marmon Silko, one of America's best known Native authors, was born in 1948 and grew up at Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, of mixed Laguna, Mexican, and white ancestry. Her early short stories, poems, and brilliant first novel *Ceremony* (1977) earned her recognition as a star of the Native American Renaissance. In *Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko*, her readers will find both the power that fueled her early work and an update on her recent career.

A MacArthur "genius" grant funded the beginnings of her second novel, *Almanac of the Dead*. This epic retelling of the 500-year history of the Americas took her ten years to complete. She intended her most recent book, *Gardens in the Dunes*, a historical novel of the Victorian era, as a reward for her readers who survived the fury of *Almanac of the Dead*.

Silko grants interviews rarely, but the sixteen included here are generously wide-ranging and deeply honest. They reflect her heritage of storytelling and give vivid accounts of her life experiences, her creative processes, and her forthright political views. As she speaks, she spins out descriptions of the living oral traditions, the communal relationships, and the desert landscape that are the sources of her inspiration.

Before she decided to become a writer, Silko was a student in the Indian law program at the University of New Mexico. She has dedicated her life and career to the cause of justice for Native Americans. Her interviews, like her art, give voice to the silenced histories of the colonized peoples of the Americas and draw incisive connections between the abuses of the past and contemporary political corruption.

The conversations included here reveal how Silko's thought and writing have been influenced by American and British literature, Eastern philosophies, economics, politics, psychology, and physics. As she integrates these into her

powerful works and her expansive interviews, she expresses a hopeful vision of global spiritual awakening.

Ellen L. Arnold is an assistant professor of English and ethnic studies at East Carolina University. Her work has been published in *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *Modern Fiction Studies*, and *National Women's Studies Association Journal*.

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Editorial Review

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Novelist and poet Silko has granted few interviews since her first novel, *Ceremony* (1977), was published and has even remarked that "novelists should write more and talk less." Yet, she's a fluent and thoughtful interviewee, answering questions in depth with equal measures of seriousness and humor in the 16 hard-to-find interviews gathered here. Editor Arnold provides a concise introduction, noting that Silko, of Native American, Mexican, and white ancestry, grew up in Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, where she developed a love for traditional Native American storytelling and a devotion to reading and writing. Silko also developed a commitment to helping achieve justice for Native Americans and initially studied law until she realized that for her, literature was a far more versatile tool. Conversant in history, psychology, spirituality, and literature, Silko talks generously about her life and work, reflecting on her interest in the interfacing of Native American and Western cultures; the psychic demands and unexpected discoveries associated with writing *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999); and her belief that the "human spirit wants no boundaries." *Donna Seaman*

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