

# Green Grass, Running Water

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS KING

Thomas King was born and grew up in Riverside, California. His father was Cherokee, and his mother, who raised King and his brothers after their father left, was Greek and German. King worked several jobs before becoming a writer, including ambulance driver, hair salon photographer, and a short time in the U.S. Navy. He went on to earn PhDs in both English and Native American studies, focusing in particular on oral storytelling traditions. In 1980, King moved to Canada and started teaching at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta. He published his first novel, *Medicine River*, in 1989 and has continued to publish novels for both children and adults that focus on First Nations people, including *Green Grass, Running Water*, which remains one of his most popular novels. King also published a series called the *DreadfulWater* Mystery, and has written for television and radio. He currently lives in Calgary, Ontario.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the plot of *Green Grass, Running Water* is fictionalized, some elements of it come directly from First Nations culture in Canada. The Sun Dance in the novel, for example, is a ritual that involves annual dancing and is performed by several indigenous peoples. Just as in the novel, photographing or filming the Sun Dance is prohibited, and so details about it remain mysterious for many outsiders. At some points in history, the Canadian government has banned the Sun Dance, and this is just one of many clashes between the government and First Nations peoples. The Indian Act acts in the novel are all the descendants of the aboriginal inhabitants of the land that became Canada, while the white characters largely descend from European immigrants who started to settle in Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries. These two groups have a long history of antagonism, including several wars. After the end of the wars, the Canadian government shifted to policies aimed at "assimilating" First Nations people into a European-derived version of Canadian culture, but many of these policies had the effect of attempting to eradicate Indian culture and spurred to violence against Indians. The legacy and influence of the Canadian government's relationship with First Nations people continues to be a topic of debate today.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Green Grass, Running Water*, like many of King's novels, is based on the oral traditions of American Indians and First Nations

people of Canada. Some of the characters that appear in the novel, such as Coyote, are variations on characters that were passed down in stories through generations orally (meaning they weren't written down). The novel also makes direct references to several famous pieces of American popular culture, most notably *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville, the adventures of the Lone Ranger (a character from a radio series and later films), *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper, and *Redoubt Creek* by David Dutton. Each of these stories was created by white people but played an important role in shaping popular perceptions around indigenous people. By including versions of these characters in his own novel, King explores and challenges these popular myths. King also makes several references to the Bible, particularly the book of Genesis, which some of the creation stories in the novel have a strong resemblance to. Finally, the multiple timelines and shifting perspectives of the novel bear some similar ties to the post-modern literary movement, which took shape in the 1960s and included writers such as William S. Burroughs, Donald Barthelme, Kurt Vonnegut, *Household Name*, and Thomas Pynchon (*Crazy in the Head*).

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Green Grass, Running Water*
- **When Written:** 1992
- **Where Written:** Mississauga, Ontario
- **When Published:** 1993
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern
- **Genre:** Indigenous Fiction, Indian Novel, Magical Realism
- **Setting:** The small town of Sisseton in Canada
- **Climate:** Colder, ranging and being uncertain about the time of the year (winter)
- **Antagonist:** White culture's attempts to control Indian culture
- **Point of View:** Various

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Same Name.** The children of the character Littlefeather—Christian, Benjamin, and Elizabeth—have the same names as King's own three children.

**Broken Promises.** The title *Green Grass, Running Water* is a reference to a phrase that appeared in a treaty between the Canadian government and Indians: "As long as the grass is green and the water runs." The novel explores how many of these treaties were broken and how the phrase became an

# Green Grass Running Water Study Guide

**M Woodhall**



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