

# Speaking of Indians: Ella Cara Deloria's Enduring Legacy in Native American Literature



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In the annals of Native American literature, Ella Cara Deloria stands as a towering figure, her name synonymous with groundbreaking contributions that have left an indelible mark on the literary landscape. Born on December 31, 1889, in the Yankton Sioux Reservation, Deloria emerged as a powerful voice for her Lakota people, crafting works that bridged the gap between indigenous and Western cultures. Through her poignant storytelling, insightful ethnography, and tireless advocacy, she shattered stereotypes and paved the way for generations of Native American writers to come.

### Early Life and Education:

Deloria spent her formative years immersed in the rich traditions of her Lakota heritage, gaining a deep understanding of its language, spirituality, and customs. Her father, Philip Joseph Deloria, was a renowned Dakota spiritual leader and author, and her mother, Susan Bordeaux, belonged to the Yankton Dakota tribe. From a young age, Deloria exhibited a keen interest in writing and storytelling, qualities that would later propel her to literary stardom.



### Speaking Of Indians by Ella Cara Deloria

★★★★☆ 4.9 out of 5

Language : English  
File size : 1007 KB  
Text-to-Speech : Enabled  
Screen Reader : Supported  
Enhanced typesetting : Enabled  
Word Wise : Enabled  
Print length : 163 pages



In 1913, Deloria graduated from Oberlin College with a degree in English and history. Her academic journey marked a significant milestone, as she became one of the first Native American women to earn a college degree. After graduation, she returned to the Yankton Sioux Reservation, where she dedicated herself to documenting and preserving her people's cultural legacy.

### **Literary Trailblazer:**

Deloria's foray into literature began in the early 1920s when she published her short stories in the Dakota Farmer newspaper. These stories, often drawn from her own Lakota experiences, depicted the complexities and beauty of Native American life with sensitivity and authenticity. Her writing style, infused with lyrical language and vibrant imagery, resonated deeply with readers of all backgrounds.

In 1932, Deloria published her groundbreaking ethnographic work, "Waterlily." Regarded as one of the earliest and most significant ethnographies written by a Native American author, "Waterlily" provided an insider's perspective on Lakota culture, religion, and social organization. Through this work, Deloria challenged prevailing stereotypes and misconceptions about Native American societies, presenting them as vibrant and sophisticated.

### **Collaboration with Ruth Benedict:**

A pivotal moment in Deloria's career came when she met renowned anthropologist Ruth Benedict in 1936. Together, they embarked on a collaborative project to document the culture and traditions of the Sioux people. Deloria's deep cultural knowledge and Benedict's anthropological framework proved to be a potent combination, resulting in the publication of

the seminal work, "The Sioux of the Rosebud: A Study of Social and Cultural Change." This book remains a valuable resource for understanding the impact of colonization on Native American communities.

### **Preserving Lakota Language and Culture:**

Beyond her writing, Deloria played a crucial role in revitalizing and preserving the Lakota language. In 1941, she co-authored a Lakota grammar and dictionary, providing essential tools for future generations to learn and preserve their ancestral tongue. She also served as the editor of *The Dakota Friend*, a Lakota-language newspaper, and dedicated herself to teaching the language in various educational settings.

### **Later Years and Legacy:**

As Deloria entered her later years, she continued to write and advocate for Native American rights. In 1978, she published her autobiography, "Speaking of Indians," which offered a poignant and inspiring account of her life and experiences as a Native American woman and writer. Deloria's unwavering commitment to her people and her enduring legacy in literature earned her numerous awards and accolades, including the National Medal of Arts in 1985.

Ella Cara Deloria passed away on February 12, 1971, leaving behind a remarkable body of work that has profoundly influenced the course of Native American literature. Her ability to articulate the complexities of Lakota culture, challenge stereotypes, and bridge cultural divides has established her as a trailblazing figure in the literary world.

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Ella Cara Deloria's legacy extends far beyond the pages of her books. She has inspired countless Native American writers and scholars, demonstrating the power of storytelling to preserve cultural heritage and promote understanding. Her work continues to be celebrated and studied today, offering valuable insights into the traditions, values, and resilience of indigenous communities. Through her enduring contributions, Ella Cara Deloria remains a revered and influential voice in the literary landscape, her name forever etched in the annals of Native American literature.



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