

Suggested Discussion Questions for *Blonde Indian, an Alaska Native Memoir*

The conventions of Western-defined genres originally challenged and are now challenged by Indigenous forms of literary work. *Blonde Indian* weaves memoir, clan stories, fiction, history, and nature writing into a blended whole. To signal changes to the reader, the author manipulates point of view, varies narrative stance, and adjusts the degree of lyricism she employs in the work's literary voice.

What reader expectations must an author be guided by when creating a literary work?

Compare the author's voice in a passage narrating her mother's death (217?) with her description of the Angoon bombing (189-190?). In what ways does the author signal degrees of distance from these experiences?

What literary purpose is fulfilled by the author's employment of third person in the book's Old Tom and Young Tom threads? Why is this choice necessary?

When discussing her inclusion of fiction and nonfiction in one work, Hayes has remarked that there is a difference between truth and fact. What characters or places appear in memoir threads as well as in fictional threads? How does such a choice challenge Western defined genres? In your opinion, does such a challenge illuminate or diminish the credibility of a literary work?

Characteristics of writing often termed Native American literature include a direct link to oral tradition and the traits associated with that genre, for example, repetition (phrases, images, themes), reader/listener participation, polyvocality, and other characteristics such as theme (tragedy in isolation, triumph in community), the presence of land as character, Indigenous worldview and philosophy (progression of and relation to time, enspiritedness, metaphor).

What phrases or images are repeated in *Blonde Indian*, and to what effect?

In the following poem, published in the Spring 2015 issue of *Yellow Medicine Review*,

Hayes discusses the impacts of colonization on a subsistence lifestyle:

Brand Names

My mother drank Hills Brothers coffee
She smoked Pall Malls
She shuffled worn blue cards
and dealt Bicycle hands of cribbage and canasta,
poured herself a cuppa steamin' joe,
flashed an etched Zippo with a quick snap –
the one bit of memory she let me see –
the one from which I built an imagined ghost
to call my father.
In the morning she planned a budgeted order
from Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs:
two pleated skirts, three pastel blouses, four pair of pink-laced anklets.
No shoes this year, no winter coat,
no beads, no feathers, no history.
We shopped for mail-order acceptance following send-away instructions.
We searched for our mislaid culture in shelved boxes of pilot bread.
Sailor Boy, Tang, Libby's corned beef—traditional foods
of our colonized cupboard.

In *Blonde Indian*, Hayes uses land as metaphor for the Alaska Native experience.

In what ways is this metaphor extended by descriptions of food, from childhood hunting and gathering activities to the growing emotional and physical distance from the food traditionally gathered from the land?

Literature gives order to human experience, explores cultural values, and demands an emotional response from the reader/listener. Common literary themes include:

Death

Identity

Spirituality

The relationship between mother and daughter

The relationship between father and son

Themes that are perhaps a bit more common in Indigenous literature are:

Cultural loss/alienation

Colonialism

Racism

Relationship to the land

Readers sometimes find the structure of *Blonde Indian* difficult to follow. Hayes has explained that each of the book's four sections represents a stage in the geologic cycle of the land, the life cycle of human beings, the annual cycle of the seasons, and the diurnal cycle of earth:

Retreating Glacier	Emerging Forest	Climax Forest	Bog
Birth	Childhood (puberty)	Ceremony (marriage)	Death
Summer	Fall	Winter	Spring
Night	Sunset	Daytime	Dawn

Section One: The Retreating Glacier: Birth, Summer, Night. In the temperate rainforest, the year can be said to begin with summer.

Section Two: The Emerging Forest: Childhood, Fall, Sunset. The land cycle, the human life cycle, and the seasonal cycle can be said to go "forward" in time, or, as some might say, presented in "physical time."

Section Three: The Climax Forest: Ceremony (marriage), Winter, Daytime. The diurnal cycle goes in what could be called “backward” order.

Section Four: The Bog: Death, Spring, Dawn. Here the arrangement is contrary to Western thinking in that it associates death with spring and dawn. The bog now leads to an Advancing Glacier, just as spring leads to summer. Some go forward, some go backward, some must change. The author has said that her hope is that this arrangement suggests a spiral and/or rebirth.

The Bear/Salmon cycle is also represented through the seasons.

Hayes explains that the Western / Cartesian reliance on what is termed “intellectual reasoning” as separated from emotion is accepted as some sort of truth by many people. “I think, therefore I am” can be made more meaningful with the unapologetic addition of “I feel, therefore I think.” Separating human intellect from human emotion is one of the first steps that can lead to an attempt to separate and categorize what cannot be separated. Everything is connected, even fiction and truth. Time is not always a straight line, but can be more like an ocean spiral: how much more so our memories, thoughts, and existence.

Hayes has said that it was her intention to symbolically refer to each element of the four cycles in the one-page italicized introduction to each section. Identify these elements in each of these one-page introductions and relate them to cycles in the structure.

These suggested discussion questions are offered only for consideration. As a composition and creative writing professor, Hayes is careful to tell her students that writing is a transaction that is completed only when the reader engages the work.

Hayes goes on to remark that she has read papers and received comments about *Blonde Indian* that articulate understanding that Hayes finds instructive, unexpected, and insightful. She learns from her readers.