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Cheyenne Autumn, by Mari Sandoz

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CHEYENNE AUTUMN

Author: Mari Sandoz (1896-1966)

First published: 1953

Type of work: History

Time of work: 1877-1879

Locale: Great Plains

Subjects: Gender roles, military leaders, race and ethnicity, social issues, and war

Recommended ages: 15-18.

Little Wolf, Dull Knife, and their Cheyenne followers exhibit courage, resourcefulness, and honor in the face of deprivation, death, government duplicity and aggressive pursuit by the U.S. Army.

Principal personages

Little Wolf, an Old Man Chief, bearer of the Sacred Bundle, leads a resolute party of Cheyennes from Ft. Reno, Oklahoma, to Fort Keogh, Montana, against great odds.

Dull Knife, leads a splinter group of Cheyennes into virtual annihilation.

Little Finger Nail, a young warrior and Dull Knife follower.

Lieutenant White Hat Clark, U.S. Army officer

Thin Elk, a member of Little Wolf’s band

Captain Wessels, U.S. Army officer

Singing Cloud, a young woman in Little Wolf’s band

Buffalo Calf Road, a warrior woman, veteran of the Battle of the Little Big Horn

Black Coyote, a keeper of old Cheyenne ways.

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Form and Content

*Cheyenne Autumn* is an unflinching historical portrait of a people confronting physical extermination and cultural annihilation at the hands of duplicitous government forces. This work is structurally a chapter-by-chapter chronicle of a Cheyenne outbreak starting in Oklahoma and ending in the surrender of Little Wolf and his followers hundreds of miles and six months later in Montana. The northern Cheyennes of the Yellowstone region are promised land, food, and protection in treaties signed by the U.S. Government. These agreements, however, are repeatedly and brutally broken by the government.

Hundreds of northern Cheyennes agree, under government coercion, to removal to Oklahoma on condition that they can later return north if they choose. Finding the Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma unacceptable, Little Wolf leads his people back to the Yellowstone region. In returning north, the Little Wolf Cheyennes face massive resistance and retaliation by the U.S. Army. The Cheyennes’ struggle to return home is a study in human contrasts: of loyalty and betrayal, resolve and hesitation, mutual cooperation and unthinkable brutality. Sandoz describes a native culture placed under extreme and unpardonable duress by a dominant white society motivated by greed, fear, and the changing winds of popular opinion.

The central narrative details the difficult challenges encountered by Little Wolf: first, the need to elude U.S. troops while simultaneously securing horses, food, and temporary shelter for his followers during the bitter winter of 1878-1879 and, second, the need to control members of his band who oppose his decisions and who threaten to further endanger the little group of Cheyennes by making acts of revenge against white settlers. Ultimately, a schism between Little Wolf and Dull Knife deepens into the fateful division of the northward-moving Cheyennes into two groups.

The Dull Knife contingent is captured and incarcerated at Fort Robinson, in western Nebraska. Learning that they are scheduled for involuntary restoration to Oklahoma, the Dull Knife
Cheyennes launch a desperate escape during January 1879. Only a few Cheyennes survive the Army’s relentless onslaught under Captain Wessels.

Meanwhile, the Little Wolf Cheyennes winter among the Nebraska sandhills and then resume their flight toward Yellowstone. Rather than witness the unavoidable slaughter of his people, however, Little Wolf eventually surrenders to Clark in March 1879. By this time, however, adverse publicity reverses the government’s removal policy and the surviving Little Wolf Cheyennes are allowed to stay in the north in what is now Montana.

Drawing on archival records, historical documents, and interviews with Cheyenne informants, including a survivor from Little Wolf’s band, Sandoz crafts an epic tragedy that reads more like a novel than the sociologically astute historical account it actually is. This effect is created by Sandoz’ poetic, sonorous prose, evocative descriptions, and liberal use of imagined dialogues. Sandoz’ authoritative narrative voice (together with documentary notes, maps, photographs of several participants, and an index) frames the dialogues, however, and soberly reminds readers that the unfolding story is not at root a work of fiction.

The interconnected sagas of the Little Wolf and Dull Knife bands are embedded in past conflicts with whites, and these events are woven into the story as flashbacks. Sandoz employs the Cheyenne convention by which significant historical events “become as today” when one nears or stands on the place where the events originally took place. Thus, as the Cheyennes move northward, they also travel back in time to earlier pivotal struggles of the 1800s, including the Washita fight where General George Custer smashed a Cheyenne village in 1868 and the Battle of the Little Big Horn where the Sioux destroyed Custer and his troops in 1876. The temporal organization of the work as a whole is progressive, however, and opens with an historical forward that sets the stage for Little Wolf’s northward march. The book ends with an afterword describing Little Wolf’s subsequent fall from leadership and death in 1904.
Mari Sandoz adopts an empathetic approach to her subjects and their situations. Her work is fortified by numerous interviews and extensive documentary research in libraries and archives. This vital event in Cheyenne history is told primarily through the personal stories and experiences of the principal native American participants.

*Cheyenne Autumn* articulates several social and personal issues that confront many young adults, including questions about ethnic identity and trusting people from other races and cultures; the reciprocity and interchangeability of male and female roles; personal capacity for leadership, honor, hardship, and adaptive change; and attitudes toward violence, retribution, and forgiveness.

Sandoz portrays people with their moral flaws as well as their potential for rectitude and generosity. Although her word choices are highly circumspect, Sandoz does not sidestep acts of brutality, including rape, mutilation, murder, and infanticide. Her references to bodily elimination, sexual awakening, and married love are candid and appropriate without being gratuitous or inflammatory. Compassion and treachery are evidenced by Cheyennes as well as whites, with no race having a monopoly on virtue or corruption. The fundamental villains in *Cheyenne Autumn* are institutionalized social patterns: deceitful government policies, economic opportunism, and barbaric racism. Empathetic readers are challenged to weigh how they might respond if subjected to similar social situations and interpersonal circumstances.

Little Wolf is challenged throughout the northward flight by questions of personal morality and responsibility. For example, Thin Elk persistently pursues Little Wolf’s wives and daughter, but Little Wolf — as an Old Man Chief and keeper of the Sacred Bundle — must think first of the safety of his little band. Thus, he suffers insults to his manhood that he could have answered easily when he was only a young warrior with few responsibilities. So, too, many of the Cheyenne men, like Little Finger Nail, must think through their obligations to each other, to the Cheyennes as a whole, to themselves, and to the Powers, in a new and troubled era where traditional ways and
wisdom appear less certain and less reliable. Some, like Black Coyote, become mentally unbalanced and unable to make thoughtful choices.

The Cheyenne women also confront difficult alternatives. Some, like Buffalo Calf Road, become warriors who fight alongside the males. Others, like Singing Cloud, learn the healing ways, realizing that the traditional knowledge that could help save their little band is being lost. Still other women, facing ruthless assaults by U.S. Army troops, make the awful choice between killing themselves and their children, on the one hand, and surrendering to a life of captivity, on the other.

Critical Content

*Cheyenne Autumn* is one of several of Sandoz’ books recommended by the Mari Sandoz Heritage Society for study and discussion by high school-age readers. Sandoz’ works are less well-known than those of another Nebraska author, Willa Cather. Whereas Cather’s novels are fiction, Sandoz’ works, including her novels (such as *Slogum House, Capital City, The Tom Walker, Miss Morissa*, and *Son of the Gamblin’ Man*), are products of exhaustive historical research. As gateways to human experiences in accurately described historical settings, Sandoz’ writings are preferable to those by Cather.

Chronologically, *Cheyenne Autumn* stands midway in a progression of socio-historical studies that Sandoz called her Great Plains series, specifically: *The Beaver Men, Crazy Horse, Cheyenne Autumn, The Buffalo Hunters, The Cattlemen*, and *Old Jules*. Sandoz was an accomplished historian who, as a young writer, worked for the Nebraska State Historical Society and co-edited its scholarly journal, *Nebraska History*. Meticulous concern for historical accuracy is a hallmark of Sandoz’ work.

A useful companion reading is Karl Llewellyn and E. Hoebel’s *The Cheyenne Way*, a classic interdisciplinary study of law and anthropology on which Sandoz drew when writing *Cheyenne Autumn*. A short novel by Sandoz, *The Horsecatcher*, depicts the exploits of a young Cheyenne
brave. This fictional coming-of-age story is more accessible than *Cheyenne Autumn*, portrays the Cheyenne people in much happier times, and is suitable for younger readers.

The film version of *Cheyenne Autumn*, directed by John Ford in 1964, radically distorts the mood, intent, and historical basis of Sandoz’ study. Many inaccuracies and inside jokes portrayed on the screen are raucously ridiculed in Tony Hillerman’s enjoyable Navaho mystery novel, *Sacred Clowns*. Sandoz considered the movie a disaster.

*Michael R. Hill*