

A Flawless Biography of a Unique American

By Terry A. Green (Glencoe, IL United States)

What can you say about a shy, slender, half-blind woman, about five feet in height, who slept on the open prairie, lived with Indians on South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, interviewed the likes of Black Elk, He Dog, Short Bull, Red Feather and others who personally knew Crazy Horse, who had already struggled for years as a writer before penning the ultimate biography of America's first authentic hero? From page one of "Crazy Horse: The Strange Man of the Oglalas" there is a sense that something spectacular is being recorded for posterity, never again to be witnessed by a living being.

We are fortunate that Mari Sandoz lived during a time when the legend of Crazy Horse was still able to be told by those who knew and lived with him, but even more fortunate is that this amazing biography was written by an artist of the highest order. The story of the great Lakota warrior who refused to let his heritage be destroyed by the white man, will make you weep and wish you could have ridden with him on that open prairie.

Crazy Horse Study Guides

The following discussion questions were created and compiled by students in English 435, Native American Literature, in the Spring 2007 term at Chadron State College. For more information, Matt Evertson, associate professor teaching American Literature, American Realism & Naturalism, Native American Literature, Western American Literature, Writing at Chadron State College, Chadron, NE. Contact: mevertson@csc.edu.

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Major Themes and Issues Related to the Book as a Whole

- On pages 104 and 105, Sandoz describes the vision that is central to Crazy Horse's life. In what ways does the vision influence his life?
- Crazy Horse is often viewed as someone working to defend his people's traditional ways, but on page 214, the book describes him as believing "if the Indians followed the old ways they were lost." In what ways does he advocate a return to traditionalism? In what ways does he advocate change?
- How does Crazy Horse's relationship with Black Buffalo Woman dramatize the conflict between his personal life and his role as "Man of the People?"
- How does the disparate nature of the tribal factions underscore Crazy Horse's thoughts about the necessity for cultural change?
- Death is prevalent in Crazy Horse. Though survival is at the top of everyone's minds, there is also a respect for and an expectation of death. In what ways do Crazy Horse and those around him seem to expect death, to almost live for death? Is this attitude toward death unique to the Oglala, or are there instances of this attitude in all cultures? Is it possible that the expectation of death pertains only to the warriors in the Oglala culture, and not to the women, children, and old people waiting in the village?
- Too often, people try to oversimplify the expansion westward and the conflicts that ensued as mere "cowboy and Indian" fights, with one side being the "bad guys" and the other side being the "good guys." Sandoz suggests in Crazy Horse that there could be good guys and bad guys on both sides of the fight; indeed, there might be many more than just two sides of the Sioux War conflicts. Discuss the idea of good and bad guys from the perspectives of the Native Americans (particularly the Lakotas) and the new Americans pushing their way west. Using Custer, Crazy Horse, Crook, and Red Cloud as examples/ discussion springboards, explore the issue of what it means to be a good guy or a bad guy.
- In the many battles that are described in Crazy Horse, courage is lauded on both sides. Crazy Horse himself even notes the acts of bravery committed not only by his own people but also by the whites and their allies. What were some of these acts that stood out to you, and what does it say about the commonalities between cultures and human beings? What are some cases of bravery bringing respect from one's enemies, and how did that respect play out in the final chapters of Crazy Horse?
- In Native American culture, many boys showed that they had come of age by going on a vision quest, counting coup, or making their first kills of buffalo and enemies. This rite of passage was integral to their way of life. In what ways did those rites of passage change with the influx of white settlers into the country, and how did that affect the Native American culture?
- Was the shooting of the Mormon cow the cause for the following events or were they inevitable?
- Does Crazy Horse's vision give him the ability to remain alive after many other warriors die and the fortitude to withstand becoming a loafer like those left?
- What other religious figures could Crazy Horse be compared to?
- Is Crazy Horse set apart from his peers at a young age so that he can remain detached from the forces of assimilation?
- Was Crazy Horse a good leader? What were his strengths and weaknesses?
- Describe the geographic location throughout Sandoz's novel.
- What were some of the constant struggles that Crazy Horse and the Oglalas had to endure?
- What role did the women play in the Lakota culture? Describe some of the women characters?

Discussion Questions related to BOOK I: “The Light-Haired Boy”

- When Curly sees the dying Conquering Bear, he takes it to be “somehow a sacred thing” (41). In what ways do the death of Conquering Bear and the subsequent events shape young Curly?
- In a speech before the tribe, High Back Bone tells them that young Curly has been given “the great gift, the gift of ears for his people” (60). What could he mean by this, and what impact would this have on his people?
- In what ways does the desire for honor versus the need to serve the people influence Curly’s adolescence?
- What instances of foreshadowing (for instance, his vision of being held back by his people on page 105, or the manner of his death) can be found in this first section?
- Several times in Crazy Horse, Crazy Horse remembers times in his youth when people passing on the Holy Road would notice how light-skinned and haired he was compared to his playmates, and they would assume that he was a prisoner. In what ways did this confusion affect Curly, and how did the fact that Curly was different from the other Natives influence Crazy Horse as he grew older and became a leader?
- Buffalo were sacred to the Lakota because of the survival they allowed the people. Cattle, on the other hand, were the white man’s sustenance. Many times in Crazy Horse Sandoz refers to cattle as producing a tough meat without nutrients, not nearly as life sustaining as buffalo meat. The first chapter of the book is called “Cow Tracks on the Holy Road,” and much of the action begins with a Mormon’s worthless cow wandering into the camp. What is the symbolic significance of this cow and the cow tracks? In what ways does this foreshadow what is to come?
- While still a boy, Curly creates strong ties with Hump, his “warrior-father.” However, Crazy Horse (the elder) is also a strong influence on the boy. In what ways can the influence of Hump be seen on Curly as he becomes a man and a leader? What about the influence of Crazy Horse the elder? Why is it important to have this blend of spiritual guide and warrior in order to be a good leader?
- After the council at Bear Butte, Crazy Horse and Curly go out to a ridge alone. There Crazy Horse tells his son that a leader must rise up among the Lakota who will be able not only to speak words of wisdom, but also to give the people ears to hear and hearts that are strong against the power of the white man. This initiates what will become Curly’s life mission. What does this conversation on the ridge foreshadow? How does Curly seek to become a man like his father said must rise? At what point, if ever, does Curly decide to become the leader his father describes?
- Why does Curly wait so long to come forward with his vision?
- What is the significance of no one taking Wyuse’s scalp? Pg. 29
- Is Crazy Horse blasphemous to his people’s traditions by shunning the ritual preparations for a vision quest?
- When Harney attacks the helpless ones, what are the prevalent feelings among the Lakota camp before the violence and afterwards?
- Who was Conquering Bear? Why was he known as one who could befriend the white people? Who is the Great Father?
- Describe the incident involving the Mormon cow. Why was the incident not resolved peacefully between the Indians and the soldiers?
- Who is Jim Bordeaux? How is he related to the Brule tribe and what is his relationship with the Indians and Conquering Bear.
- Who was Wyuse and what were some of his characteristics? Did Wyuse benefit or harm the Native Americans around him?

Discussion Questions related to BOOK II: “The Glorious Warrior”

- This section is entitled “The Glorious Warrior,” yet it culminates in what can only be described as setbacks. To what, then, does this title refer?
- What lessons are learned, both militarily and personally, by Crazy Horse in this section?
- In the text, the name “Snakes” is actually a derogatory term for the Arikara tribe. Additionally, the Lakota in the text have a longstanding feud with the Crow and several other tribes. In what ways do these prejudices influence your opinion of the Lakota battles in this section?
- On page 177, an old man sets certain criteria for the shirt-wearers. Do you feel Crazy Horse violates these? Why or why not?
- This section, which details Crazy Horse’s coming of age and his rise as a leader of the people, begins with “Fat Times for the People.” This period marks a great buffalo hunt, plentiful grass, a unity between many of the tribes of the Lakota. Thus begins several years of ups and downs for the Oglalas, ending with “Many Things Thrown Away.” At the end of this section, Crazy Horse loses his position as one of the shirt-wearers as well as losing Black Buffalo woman and his credibility with some people in the tribe. What are some of the main points in this section that are demonstrative of the rise and fall of the strength of the Oglalas? How does unity among the members of the tribe directly relate to this rise and fall?
- Spirituality- particularly the power of medicine- is prevalent in all of Crazy Horse, but particularly in the battles. As a young man, does Crazy Horse place more emphasis on his medicine as his savior in battle or on his own prowess as a warrior? In what ways are these interchangeable, and in what ways are they inseparable? Do the other Oglalas seem more willing to follow young Crazy Horse because he has strong medicine or because he shows himself brave and fearless in battle and wise in his leadership? How does this motivation for following Crazy Horse impact the last few months of Crazy Horse’s life?
- During his early years as a warrior, it seemed only logical that Crazy Horse would eventually get Black Buffalo Woman. He had been pursuing her his whole life, and it seemed that, because of his wisdom, he should know exactly whom he should marry. However, when he does not get Black Buffalo Woman, Crazy Horse and Hump have a falling out, during which Crazy Horse mentions angrily that Hump has never liked Black Buffalo Woman. Is there evidence previously in the story to suggest this? If so, where does it show up? If not, why does Sandoz choose to hold out that information until this point? Is it a literary device, or does it simply help the plot along?
- At the Fetterman Fight, the warriors thought that they would have a hundred soldiers in their hands. However, after the battle, they discovered that they fell about twenty men short of the predicted number. What effect does this have on their morale and the credibility of the medicine man who had predicted the hundred in the hand? Later, at the Battle of the Rosebud, the Oglala have a much greater victory in numbers, as well as many valiant shows of bravery. However, the attitude after that battle is much different. What occurs between the two that accounts for this difference? *Continued Next Page*
- Would you consider Crazy Horse to be charismatic for pulling so many of the friendlies away from the forts to help fight?
- What are the causes behind more and more of the Lakota people turning to the white man ways?
- Do you think there was a strategy behind the soldiers attacking in the winter and demanding the Indians come into the reservations during the summer?
- What makes Crazy Horse a good leader? Is it because of his vision, the physical example he sets, or his strategies in battle?
- What things make a young warrior a “big man” in the village?
- How does Crazy Horse feel about Black Buffalo Woman, and what happens between them? Who is No Water?

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- What was the great thing that was going to happen during the Big Year that no man had ever seen? What did this mean? How did the Indians know it was true?
- Who is the Old Lone One? How did he acquire this name, and why did the girls tease him when he came around?
- Describe the scene that Crazy Horse watches as he comes to this realization: “Crazy Horse watched this and saw again that the bow and arrow club was nothing against the guns of the whites; even with the heart of the grizzly and the arm of the north wind they would be nothing against the guns.” Were the Indians foolish in the battle against the whites? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions related to BOOK III: “The Man of the People”

- Does Crazy Horse’s life in the army camp change your view of him? If so, in what way?
- Does the description of the battle of Little Big Horn fit with any preexisting knowledge you might have? If not, in what ways does it differ?
- How does the Lakota view of leadership seem to differ from the Euro-America view? With which do you agree, and why?
- How does the character of General Crook differ from Crazy Horse? In what ways are they alike?
- Mari Sandoz offers this final section of Crazy Horse’s life under the title “The Man of the People.” This insinuates that he is solely the leader of his people and, more largely, of the Lakotas as a whole. The fact that Crazy Horse has long wished for a uniting of his people that would enable them to be as strong as they were at the Great Teton council at Bear Butte gives the reader reason to believe that he would gladly serve as a leader of only his people would stand together. Contrast this with his attitude (and the attitude of those in his camp) about Red Cloud going to Washington and trying to serve as the one leader over all of the Lakotas. Is it reasonable to believe that Crazy Horse had any intentions of having all of his people under his counsel, or is this an irrational assumption?
- If one were to read only Crazy Horse, it would be easy to form a bad opinion of Red Cloud. However, from this text alone there is much that can be discovered about his motivation for conferring with the three Great Fathers that he did. What are some of the reasons given in Sandoz’s book that suggest that Red Cloud was trying to help his people, not just to further his own cause? Do you, as a reader, find this credible?
- There is much foreshadowing to suggest that Crazy Horse will die as a result of imprisonment. Beginning with the description of the trading posts along the Holy Road, discuss certain attitudes and behaviors Crazy Horse displays that foreshadow his stabbing outside of the jail.
- When Crazy Horse finally brings his band to live on the “white man’s island,” is he justified in thinking that he could perhaps speak with them and get an agency on their hunting grounds, or is he being blatantly naïve? What are some examples to back both sides of that argument? Considering that his family and some of those closest to him do not come in with him, is it possible that Crazy Horse has just finally given up and is submitting to the inevitable? Discuss evidence for and against this hypothesis.
- Is it the passage of time or lack of contact that makes Black Buffalo’s daughter less significant than They Shall Be Afraid of Her?
- Would Crazy Horse have died the same way if he had not made an enemy of No Water years before?
- Is there an importance in where Crazy Horse died? Is the location of his death significant.
- When Black Shawl is given to Crazy Horse as a wife, is it his people giving him permission to be married and also choosing his bride? Why or why not? What about the trader’s daughter?
- Who was Hump, and how did he die? Why did Hump insist on fighting, despite the bad weather conditions and the odds they were up against? What did they use as weapons in this fight against the whites?

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- What had happened to generations of Teton Lakota? What caused the Teton to come together again sixteen years later?
- Who was Three Stars? How did the Indians drive Three Stars Back? After the battle was over and Crazy Horse was alone on the ridge, what vision came to him?
- Describe in detail the Battle of the Little Bighorn, from the perspective in this book.

Reader Testimonials

By Chastity Julson, Chadron State College

The wind sweeps through the grass, or what is left of it from the winter, its brown stalks crunching softly under the iron-shod hooves of the black horse I am riding. From the hill I am on at the base of Crown Butte, I can look out across the country where Crazy Horse spent his last days. Whistling, whispering, the wind that drops from the Ponderosa's to play with the dormant grass seems to want to talk to me, claims my attention as it sings of things that have happened in this same ground that I now ride across.

To the north I can see the hazy horizon that I know is South Dakota, less than one sleep away from where Crazy Horse came into the world as a light-haired boy named Curly. On north and a bit to the east of that, I know Bear Butte lies, and beyond that the hilltop where Crazy Horse the elder and his son Curly stopped after the Great Teton Council. I imagine they must have been near Deer's Ears, looking out to the east, glancing where my grandparents would run cattle and sheep in less than eighty years.

Though I cannot see into the far northwest, I know from many years of living there that hiding just beyond where I can see them is the Big Horn Mountains, the place Crazy Horse would eventually prove his medicine strong and his valor true. I recall, as I look to the west framed in my horse's ears, hunting trips and rides into the Cloud Peak Wilderness that always became history lessons. Wagon Box Park especially holds a place of prominence in my mind, for no particular reason other than that was near the end of our ride one day and the sun was finally breaking through the icy fog.

Perhaps it is these memories that make Mari Sandoz's Crazy Horse powerful to many readers, but particularly (if I may risk sounding conceited) to me. Certainly, there are writers who have chronicled the rise and fall of many nations, the heroics of many individuals, all over the world. However, Sandoz writes of country that she knew, and that I know. The story of Crazy Horse is not one that took place long ago and far away.

Rather, it is one that happened in a time that my great-grandparents can remember. It is touchable, a time and a place of which I can still feel the repercussions today. That is the strongest part of Sandoz' writing. She not only did research into the lives of the characters in her story, she also understood the locations of the days of Crazy Horse. She saw the sun-filled meadows in the Big Horns, the open, endless prairies of South Dakota and Nebraska, the beautiful darkness of the Black Hills.

Sandoz committed herself to the understanding of where the events in Crazy Horse's life took place, and by doing so she created a book that touches the soul of the people who have seen those same places and lived similar lives of devotion to a way of life and a part of the land.

From this dedication and reverence we can learn how to live in this, the land of Crazy Horse. Sandoz models an attitude that should be emulated in the deeper perusal of the lessons of Crazy Horse and his home. We have at our disposal locations and a people rich in history. It is our duty as scholars and as humans to strive to understand what has occurred before us in order to carefully prepare foundations for what will come after us.

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It would be a mistake, however, to callously handle the history of our area. It is not a dead history and cannot be treated as such. This part of our past is still alive- a short trip the Pine Ridge reservation will prove that the U.S. government is still trying to understand their role in the lives of the Native Americans. A discussion with any rancher or other local will produce evidence of the widely varying opinions of the Natives and of Crazy Horse himself.

I am reminded of the attitude toward elders that Sandoz portrays in her book. It is with that reverence that those older and wiser than oneself are approached for wise counsel, and it is with the same reverence and respect that one must approach the history that is at our fingertips, ripe for the taking.

But now I must continue. My horse acts like he is ready to be rid of me, and if I harbor any more thoughts on this issue, I will never remember them all to write them down later. Reluctantly I turn and begin to make my way down into a dark, pine-scented canyon. The wind in the treetops occasionally dips down to whisper at my ears and shoulders, urging me to come back and learn more from this country that has already instructed so many.

By Daniel Schweitzer, Chadron State College

I enjoyed some aspects of the book thoroughly. I have spent all of my memorable life within Hot Springs and Chadron, two thresholds between the Black Hills and the surrounding prairie. I know the landscape she describes, and I know it well enough to see that it is not the mythologized softness of the West seen in popular culture. It gets much hotter in the summer, for one thing. Clearing away gooseberries and poison ivy from hillsides on a day in early August does much to dispel the romanticized beauty of the plains. They have a beauty of their own – a rugged, harsh beauty that shatters conceptions and tries to take the mind out of itself.

Everything done here takes on a strange dimension, a surreality that arises when everything is ultimately real. The plains are cruel, killing wantonly and fighting viciously against life. The breath drawn in a stiff Nebraska wind is one that the world wants to suck from you. That is why the plains are beautiful – every moment of existence is one that has been hard won, every action a reaffirmation of an intensely powerful will to live.

The choking cold of winter and the savage heat of summer make you prove, again and again, that you are human. After wandering for an afternoon in foot-deep snow with your vision framed by the oppressively thick flakes in the air, you wonder if you are even in the same place that, by summer, threatens to drive you insane with the sheer amount of sensory input, the microcosm of infinity.

These areas, created by their balance between every polarity, are the single shining element in Sandoz's book. The plains that Crazy Horse rides, the hills where he seeks visions, are (while broken by fence) still the statues to immutability and enormity they were. In a sense, Sandoz's whole book is one of liminal positions, for it occupies a place at the threshold of the landscape that, while it cannot be captured, can be revealed to the astute reader.

By Sunny Brinker, Chadron State College

Overall, I enjoyed Mari Sandoz's depiction of Crazy Horse. Living in the Midwest made it easy to relate to many of the scenes and settings in the story. Sandoz gave a vivid account of the life of Crazy Horse and his people. These details made it easy to engross myself through out the entire account. My only disappointment through out the story was the leadership displayed by Crazy Horse throughout different periods in his life.

I will confess, my background knowledge of Crazy Horse before reading Sandoz's book was less than extensive. In my mind, I had portrayed Crazy Horse as the people's hero-strong and fearless. This was not the picture Sandoz painted in her writing. Crazy Horse seemed distant from his own people. He did not believe in performing the ritual dances, a significant part of his tribe's culture.

As I mentioned in class, I was not aware that these cultural traditions were optional. Another instance when I was taken back by the leadership of Crazy Horse was at a time in battle when Crazy Horse thought better of an attack, but immediately backed away from his instincts when met with resistance by his own fellow warriors. The result of his actions was the loss of many lives.

Crazy Horse remains a mysterious character in my mind. He had his strengths and weaknesses as all humans do, but I think his actions run much deeper than this. I would be curious to learn more about this leader in greater detail.

By Kaitlin McDuffee, Chadron State College

I probably never would have read Crazy Horse if it hadn't been forced upon me. The genre is not one I typically have interest in. After reading the novel I'm still not a big fan of western historical fiction, but I was pleasantly surprised at how the story moves around events. The pace at the beginning lags, setting up a story rather slowly when compared to modern novels, but when carried through the whole book it works well.

The background framework is almost painstakingly set up, the battle scenes intricate but not jumbled. Crazy Horse also shows the intricacies of Lakota life and culture, which I knew nothing about previously. The biggest thing I had a problem with was how out of place Crazy Horse seemed among his people, as Sunny and Chastity already discussed. Then again Jesus was strange to a lot of the Jews while he was on earth, so he would not be the only odd one that people have followed historically.

The book has some rough patches but is a fairly easy read and can appeal to multiple types of readers.