About the Author

Frank Waters was born in 1902 in Colorado Springs, Colorado. His life course would take him far and wide and through a variety of occupations. From working as a lineman at a telephone company, to information consultant at Los Alamos, to editor of the Taos bilingual newspaper, Waters wrote from his varied experiences. Eventually he would publish 27 books, the majority still in print. He was nominated for the Nobel Prize several times by many who admired him and was the respected friend of many Native American leaders and writers of the time. Dr. Vine Deloria, Jr., an authority and ardent spokesperson for Native America, considered Frank one of the great thinkers of his time and place.¹

Frank’s father was part Cheyenne, a fact his mother did not wish to acknowledge in a time when Indians were not welcome in white communities. However, as a boy Frank accompanied his father on visits to local tribal dances or ceremonies. His father introduced him to the beliefs and practices of the Cheyenne people. Frank was born into the early mining era in Colorado. The technology devastated many landscapes to fuel the economy of a new nation. Eventually his maternal grandfather and father both owned mines on Cripple Creek. The values learned as a child and those inherent in extractive technologies like mining created grist in the mill of Frank’s conscience. He witnessed the early days of industrialization, and with his early orientation to native values and the land, he began to observe, imagine, and write about the conflict in cultures. Eventually he left home before finishing his last year in engineering at Colorado State University to begin a colorful journey spanning the southwest and Mexico. During this discovery period, Frank worked in Los Angeles during the heated debate about diverting the Colorado River to green the desert and quench Angelinos’ thirst. His early experiences caused him to reflect on the dual nature of American life: extolling its beauty while destroying the landscape.

Eventually Frank made a home in the Southwest working as an editor for the Taos Times, and becoming a part of Mabel Dodge Luhan’s salon-out-west. A famous New York patron of the arts, Dodge cultivated writers, artists, and thinkers during the 1930’s at her pueblo mansion in Taos.² Waters eventually bought land and an old adobe cabin adjacent to the Taos Pueblo in Arroyo Seco, New Mexico where he would live for the rest of this life.

In his books, lectures, and relationships with tribal leaders and great American artists of his time, Waters became an important writer on the anthropology and metaphysical lives of Native Americans in the Southwest and Mexico—especially among the Hopi. A persistent theme in all his writing is the duality of cultural views, the strengths and weaknesses in both. This

A comprehensive approach to understanding both cultural perspectives is highly relevant today. Americans are in the midst of revisiting those values in light of native values as we face climate change and widespread environmental degradation from our activities.

Socio/Political Background
In the 1940s government agencies such as the Fish and Wildlife Commission controlled decisions that were once the province of the tribe only. Sovereign rights of hunting and fishing were regulated by season and number of animals that could be taken by an individual hunter. In contrast to the complex, spiritual relationships tribal members held with animals on their native lands, secular rules and regulations were based purely on the science of wildlife management (which was in its infancy). This rendered powerless the traditional beliefs and practices of an entire people.

Reservation poverty was endemic due to a poor land base, substandard education, poor health care, subsidized government food, and widespread depression. These conditions resulted in a pervasive hopelessness that settled like a dark cloud over Indian Country. Frank Waters’ proximity to the Taos Pueblo fostered friendships among tribal members and families that drew him into the daily life and challenges of the Taos Pueblo people. Frank happened to be in a tribal court room when a young man faced the court for killing a deer out of season. He was struck by the conversations that ensued which juxtaposed tribal spiritual law with U.S. federal law and saw immediately how the young man had been trapped between them. This real incidence was the germ for The Man Who Killed the Deer—a best-selling novel continuously in print for 75 years.

The Plot and Main Character
Martiniano is a Taos Pueblo Indian youth who has returned from boarding school, married and has a young child. He was very young when separated from his parents and community by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He, like his peers, lost memory of his tribe’s traditions and values through a program intended to destroy any ties to the culture. He was forced to assimilate European-American values and practices. While he learned to follow the rules, Martiniano nevertheless did not fully accept foreign concepts and ways. Thus, like many of his peers, he eventually belonged to neither culture. To make matters worse, the traditional people on his reservation suspected any member of the tribe educated in Indian Boarding schools, believing their minds altered irrevocably by Western values and ways of thinking. Equally, he would always be an Indian in white culture.

Martiniano predictably is not very successful. He struggles at low paying jobs and is generally depressed. His Indian wife wants him to be a man—assertive and confident. He can find no peace. The family is hungry during a particularly cold winter. Martiniano decides to kill a deer out of season. Yet even this turns into a huge controversy as he finds that he violates both the
traditions of his people and a federal law. He faces a court hearing and maybe jail time because he cannot pay any fine imposed on him. His tribal elders press him to enter into ceremony to heal his broken spirit and come back into the tribal community again. Thus the voice of the pueblo rises throughout the book speaking to readers as well as Mariniano.

Waters puts the values of Western society on trial. He skillfully shows how the youth who grew up in westernized schools believes his actions are separate rather part of a group mind. Martiniano believes there is no personal freedom in following traditional ways. Yet the over culture’s system of artificially controlling populations of animals is in stark contrast to tribal sensibilities that measure the taking of a life against values that respect the sacred nature of the landscape, considering whether the taking is absolutely necessary and asking for the consent of the hunted as an equal being of value and purpose. During the trial period, Martiniano must make a choice of one culture over another to preserve his sanity. Tribal leaders decide to reach out to him with a powerful healing ceremony that can make him whole again. During a dance ceremony he communes with the spirit of the deer.

Analysis
Assimilation of Western culture by Indian youths in boarding schools began in the latter half of the 19th century. It started with religious groups who brought the Christian message of salvation to “natives.” Later the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) supported these religious efforts with funding. In the early 1900’s to as late as 1960, the BIA built and ran its own schools. Toward the end of the campaign many tribes relocated boarding schools to reservations governed by Tribal Councils. Older tribal leaders who attended Indian Boarding Schools carry the emotional scars of that terrible time. Martiniano is an adult manifesting the outcomes of such a childhood experience. In his struggle to accept community limits on his activity, he queries his rights as an individual, a value he learned in boarding school. Why can’t he decide to kill a deer when his family is hungry? The tribal voice answers in eloquent passages that become an address to Western culture. The taking of another life is not a simple matter based on numbers of separate things as the U.S. environmental laws are written, but a response to killing some part of the whole, of being inextricably connected to this deer and its life and its family. Ritual and group decision-making are the only way to properly take a life for ones sustenance, survival. The story, with its own sonorous voice of a people who understand the wholeness of being in nature, is a startling small manuscript of a spiritual journey much like Herman Hesse’s Siddhartha.