

Discussion Guide

Blonde Indian By Ernestine Hayes

Erika Aldana

ENGL A245

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Synopsis

- Ernestine enthralls readers with a glimpse into her childhood memories as a half-Tlingit, half-white girl growing up in Juneau, Alaska. Her story takes us on her journey as she navigates early childhood, teenage years, her impassive relationship with her mother, encounters with abusive men in her life, and the yearning to be loved and belong.
- Old Tom is taken from his family at a young age in Juneau, Alaska, to conform to the westernized ways of American culture. He later enlists in the army to serve his country, and ultimately returns to the comfort of his childhood home to make sense of the trauma he endured as a young child. Yet, he finds himself in the presence of many other Alaska Natives dealing with their own traumas and adversities. His story proceeds through Young Tom, his son, who repeats the same generational pattern of struggling with his own identity of who he is and who he has been told to become.

Description

- Blonde Indian is an amalgamation of two personal narratives transpiring simultaneously. Each chapter begins with anecdotes of cultural depictions, igniting a sense of inquiry with each word as curiosity takes over. Blonde Indian is a memoir about cultural heritage, the struggles with cultural affiliations, connecting with nature, the effects of colonization, oppression, wanderlust, returning home, and finally, finding oneself.
- Blonde Indian is not a typical memoir, in fact, it is inexplicably unusual, yet captivates readers' attention and firmly holds grasp, never letting go until the last word is absorbed.
- It is a book about love and acceptance as well as loss and tragedy.



Author Biographic Summary

Ernestine Hayes, born in 1945, grew up on the edge of town, in what was known as the old native village in Juneau, Alaska. She is a Kaagwaantaan woman. Her Tlingit name is Saankaláxt, she is Eagle, of the Burnt House People Clan, and she belongs to the Wolf House. Her mother is Tlingit woman, and her father she never knew, only that he was a white man.

Ernestine Hayes lived in Juneau for most of her childhood, however in her teen years she moved with her mother to California, never to see home again until she was in her forties and her children were grown. After she moved back to Juneau, she attended college, receiving a Master in Fine Arts and went on to publish her first book, *Blonde Indian*, in 2006. (United States Artists, 2024).

Ernestine has experienced a life of overwhelming difficulties, yet despite her adversities, she is a survivor. Through the ambition of finding her own cultural identity, she has found her true purpose. As a result, she has found meaning in sharing her own personal experiences to help others. She is advocates for education and academia, empowering Alaska Native culture, and exhibits an uplifting and positive outlook on life despite it all. Ernestine is an English Emerita professor at University of Alaska Southeast and currently lives in Juneau, Alaska, not far from the very place she was born. (Hayes, 2006).

Citations:

Ernestine Shaankaláxt' Hayes. Search. (n.d.). <https://www.unitedstatesartists.org/fellow/ernestine-shaankalaxt-hayes/>
Hayes, E. (2006). *Blonde Indian: An Alaska native memoir*. Univ. of Arizona Press.

Discussion Questions 1-4

- Blonde Indian is a carefully structured novel, involving the prose of two different Alaska Native narratives. Of these narratives, is there one that is of central importance to the novel? If so, why? If not, how does the structure work to balance each narrative?
- Each chapter begins with cultural depictions of Alaska Native anecdotes. What are the significance of these depictions, and why are they presented in the beginning of each chapter? How does their presence enhance (detract from) your engagement with the two narratives?
- What does the title Blonde Indian mean? What does it represent in terms of assimilating cultural identity?
- Blonde Indian is filled with histories unique to the Tlingit community in Southeast Alaska. Name three cultural values communicated within the novel that are important to the Tlingit culture specifically.

Discussion Questions 5-8

- Colonialism has had a strong impact on both narratives. What effects of colonization stood out the most in each character? And introspectively, what resonated with you the most?
- How does Ernestine's mixed ethnicity influence her choices, thinking, and the way she is perceived by other characters in the novel? What tensions and conflicts does her mixed ancestry contribute to her story?
- For what reasons do Old Tom and Young Tom enlist in the army? In what ways do they and other young Alaska Native American men benefit from joining the army and why do these benefits cease to exist once their time is served upon returning home?
- How do Alaska Natives, and more specifically, Tlingit Alaska Native Americans, navigate the confictions of keeping traditional values of their heritage alive with the oppressive ideals of white people to adhere to their principles and standards of Westernized culture?

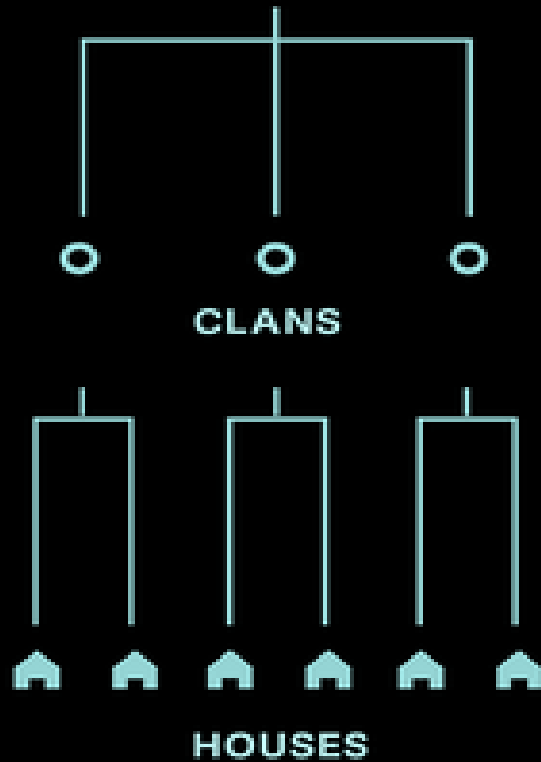
Common phrases in Tlingit

- Wáa sá i yatee? | How are you?
- Yak'úi yee xwsateení | It's good to see you!
- X'oon gaawx' sáwé? | What is the time?
- Shaa | Mountain
- ku.éex' | **inviting people** A traditional ceremony hosted by a ɫingít clan, informally called a party or potlatch.

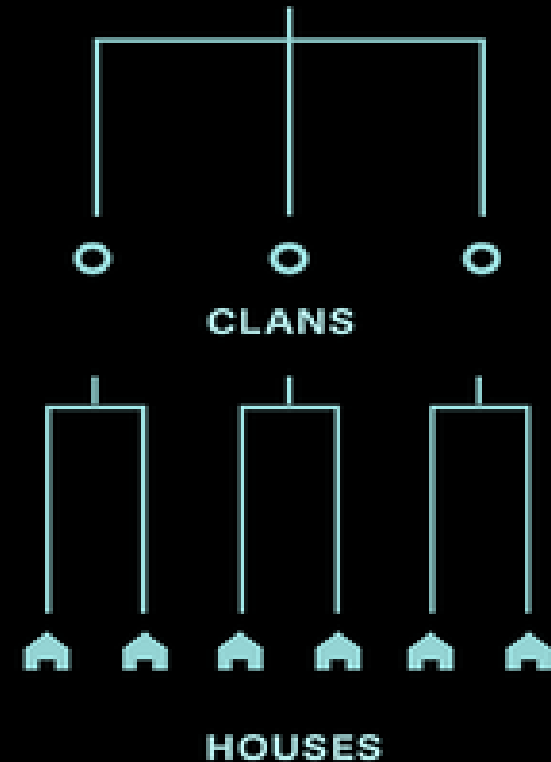
Source: *ɫingít : Tlingit*. American Museum of Natural History. (n.d.). <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/northwest-coast/lingit-tlingit#:~:text=%C5%81ing%C3%ADt%20people%20live%20all%20along,across%20the%20border%20into%20Canada.>

TLINGIT PEOPLE

RAVEN/CROW



EAGLE/WOLF



Within Raven and Eagle are many clans, and within them smaller groups called houses.

On each side, clan membership descends from mothers to their children.



EARLY SPRING
yaana.eit
wild celery



MARCH, APRIL
gáax'w
herring roe



APRIL, MAY
k'áach'
seaweed

Native foods

Wild foods that thrive on the shores of southeastern Alaska have nourished Tlingit people for many hundreds of years.



FALL, WINTER
gáal'
clams



SUMMER
t'á
salmon



SUMMER
kanat'á
blueberries



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Thank you

Source: *Learn thanks.* (n.d.). First Alaskans Institute. <https://www.firstalaskans.org/learn-thanks>