

EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

NATIVE TONGUE

SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY & HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



SUZETTE HADEN ELGIN was born Patricia Anne Wilkins in November 1936, and grew up in Missouri. Suzette’s early years are relatively unknown, other than her marriage to Peter Haden in 1955. He predeceased her, and she remarried in 1964 to George Elgin.

By the midsixties, Haden Elgin was a graduate student in linguistics at the University of California, San Diego, while also taking care of five children. Money for school was scarce, so she began writing science fiction to help pay tuition. She gained her PhD in linguistics in 1973, with the distinction of being the only student to write two dissertations—one in English and one in Navajo.

Haden Elgin’s first published work was *The Communipaths* (1970), the first in a five-part series about Trigalactic Intelligence Service agent Coyote Jones. Her second science fiction series, *The Ozark Trilogy*, drew upon her Ozark background and heritage. Her best-known nonfiction includes *The Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense* series, which teaches readers how to use language to handle common types of verbal violence and redirect potential confrontations to avoid escalation. Haden Elgin was one of the first to use the term “verbal self-defense.” Her 2003 novel *Peacetalk 101* uses fiction to illustrate the same concept.

Native Tongue, originally published in 1984, describes a society following the repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment, in which women are forbidden to work, own property, or have agency. As men colonize other planets, women secretly construct their own language, Láadan, as a means of resistance to patriarchy. Láadan features in both sequels to *Native Tongue* as well: *The Judas Rose* (1987) and *Earthsong* (1993). A Láadan dictionary and grammar book was published in 1985.

Suzette became a professor at San Diego State University and retired in 1980, living in Arkansas with George Elgin. She founded the Science Fiction Poetry Association in 1978; their Elgin Award is named in her honor. She also wrote and published multiple short stories and newsletters, primarily focusing on the intersections of linguistics and science fiction. She died from undisclosed causes in 2015.

GLOSSARY

Nineteenth Amendment: Amendment to the United States Constitution adopted in 1920 that prohibits federal and state governments from denying citizens the right to vote on the basis of sex.

Linguist: Person skilled in a foreign language, or one who studies human speech through its structure and evolution in language. In *Native Tongue*, Linguists engage in negotiations with Aliens in order to create intergalactic peace treaties, and are disliked by their non-Linguist peers because of elitism.

Cant, Cryptlect, Argot: Secret method of speaking that is used to by a group to exclude or mislead outsiders.

Langlish and Láadan: Langlish is the socially approved language coding project the women of the Lines use to disguise their secret resistance language, Láadan.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does *Native Tongue* seem to define feminism? How do its characters demonstrate different ideas about gender and power?
2. How does the Barren House function as both a safe and harmful space? How does this dynamic change the way younger and older women interact there?
3. How does Michaela's transformation from dutiful wife to resistance agent echo or subvert the stereotype of the femme fatale? How do her tactics, such as seduction, put her at risk of objectification? Does her purpose transcend this objectification? If so, how? If not, why not?
4. The Encoding Project is the only means of resistance that the women in *Native Tongue* can participate in undetected. Unlike the other women of Barren House, Nazareth is initially unwilling to participate in the Encoding Project. How does her hesitance threaten the work of the other women? Does it undermine the book's overall message of unity and resistance? Why or why not?
5. Throughout *Native Tongue*, various characters participate in the Encoding Project to militarize future generations. Does feminism, or the movement itself, have a leader in this novel? How does this leadership structure, or lack thereof, affect the ways resistance takes shape?
6. How does the novel express the invisibility and relief that Nazareth feels post-operation? What connection is drawn between the appealing nature of invisibility and the female body?
7. The repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment deems women equivalent to minors. In what other ways does patriarchy manifest in *Native Tongue*? How is it similar or dissimilar to the way it exists in our own society, particularly in the United States?
8. An overarching plotline of the trilogy involves the colonization of other planets by Earth nations expanding humanity into space. What does this process reveal about their goals and values? Do you see colonization as a beneficial or harmful action in the context of the novel?

9. The linguists of the Lines differentiate between humanoid versus nonhumanoid languages, especially through the Aliens-in-Residence program. How do these linguistic politics play out in the world of the trilogy? Do you see any similarities to or differences from the ways language functions our own society?
10. Do you view the construction of Láadan as an effective act of resistance? Why or why not? What are its potential strengths? What are its limits?
11. *Native Tongue* includes a fictional preface that introduces the novel as a historical document, presenting it as the only known work of fiction from the women of the Lines. What purpose does this framework serve? How does it affect your reading of the novel?

FURTHER READING & COMPARATIVE TITLES

Oppression & Patriarchy in Speculative Fiction

***The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood (1985)**

This novel shares many themes with *Native Tongue*, most notably how men forbid women any power or autonomy. Lack of financial agency or education, rigid social roles, and authoritarian language all contribute to the oppression of women in both books.

***Parable of the Sower*, Octavia E. Butler (1993)**

In a dystopian society ruined by climate change and wealth inequality, a woman with hyperempathy starts a new community called Earthseed, believing that humanity's destiny lies beyond Earth. Butler, one of the most renowned US sci-fi writers, was nominated for a Nebula Award for this novel.

***Vox*, Christina Dalcher (2018)**

In this novel, women are only allowed one hundred words a day while men speak freely. Dalcher's exploration of the power of language in society is reminiscent of Elgin's, particularly the restriction of women's rights for the sake of "protecting" them.

"The Underworld" in *Mars*, Asja Bakić (2019)

Asja Bakić's collection features a speculative short story where humanity condemns writers to Mars in the near future. Connections to *Native Tongue* include the elements of space, dystopian government, and the distinct power of language.

Language & Linguistics

The Lord of the Rings series, J. R. R. Tolkien (1954–1955)

Perhaps the most famous example of constructed languages comes from Tolkien, who delved deep into the linguistics of his Middle-Earth series. He created at least fifteen different languages and dialects for *The Lord of the Rings*, each one representing the culture and customs of the speakers.

“Story of Your Life” in *Story of Your Life and Others*, Ted Chiang (2002)

In this short story that inspired the movie *Arrival* (2016), a linguist’s research into an alien language completely reorients her way of thinking and perceptions of time, all while she meditates on life with her daughter.

***Game of Thrones* television series (2011–2019)**

Based on George R.R. Martin’s bestselling fantasy books, this show features constructed languages such as High Valyrian and Dothraki. David Josh Peterson, the creator of the show’s languages, discusses the linguistic process on his website.

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

emotional
connection
amongst
power dynamic



does this
undermine
Landry's
supposed
power over
Michaela?



there's something
about Michaela
that emotionally
validates Landry
is that emotional
response inherently
feminine?

her words. Even when he was talking about the injustice of a man such as he was being afflicted with seemingly innumerable allergies—and Ned was willing to admit that his allergies were probably not the most gripping conversational topic of the season, he just needed to talk about them sometimes—even then, Michaela always looked interested. She didn't have to answer him, because he didn't have any desire for conversation, he just wanted to be listened to, attended to; but when she did answer, her voice never carried any of that taint of impatience and boredom that so irritated him in others.

Michaela listened. And she laughed at the lines that he considered funny. And her eyes brightened at just the places where he meant the tension to build. And she never, not once, in three years of marriage, said, "Could you get to the point, please?" Not once. Sometimes, before he really got a new story worked out, or when he was just bullshitting along about the morning and hadn't had time to make stories out of it, he would realize that he had maybe wandered off his subject a little, or said something more than once . . . but Michaela never showed any awareness of that. She hung on his words. As he *wanted* them hung on—not slavishly, but tastefully. That was the difference. He could have paid some female to listen slavishly, at so many credits the hour, sure. But you'd know. You'd know she was only listening because of the money, like some kind of a meter running. It wouldn't be the same. Penny for your words, Mr. Landry? Sure . . .

Michaela was different, she was a woman with genuine class, and there was nothing slavish about the attention she gave him. It was careful attention, it was intense, it was total; it was not slavish. And it fed him. When he got through talking to Michaela, somewhere into the down slope of the afternoon, and was at last ready to do something else, he was in a state of satisfaction that wiped away the rebuffs he got from others as if they'd never happened. At that point Ned believed that he really *was* one of those irresistible talkers, one of those men that anyone would feel privileged to sit down and listen to for hours, as it seemed to him that he ought to be. He knew his stories were as good as anybody else's . . . hell, he knew they were better. One hell of a lot better! People

NOTES ON EXCERPTS

While Landry's approach is aggressive and therefore masculine - is this desire feminine in nature? →

were just stupid, that's all; and Michaela made that trivial.

It was that particular thing that the baby ruined for him, when it came. He could have put up with all the other stuff. Having Michaela look tired in the morning instead of showing her usual fresh perfection was annoying; having her attention distracted during lovemaking because the baby was crying was irritating; twice he'd had to point out to her that the vases of flowers needed to be seen to, and once she had even let him run out of Scotch. (That did get to him, considering that all she had to do was push one button on the comset to get it delivered . . . but still, he could have put up with it.)

He understood all these things. It was her first baby, and she wasn't getting as much sleep as she wanted; he was a reasonable man, and he understood. She had a lot of things to do that she wasn't used to doing, it was hard on her, sure. Everybody knew you had to coddle new mothers, like you had to coddle pregnant women. He was willing. He was confident that she would be able to get herself straightened out and back to normal in a month or two, and he didn't mind giving her all the time she needed. He had no respect at all for a man that didn't treat his woman fairly, and he wasn't that kind of man.

→ is the need for companionship inherently feminine?

But it had never entered his head that the baby would interfere with the time of talking to Michaela! Jeezus, if it had, he would've had her sterilized before he even married her. There were brothers to carry on his family line, and nephews all over the place for him to adopt at a suitable age if he wanted somebody to carry on the "son" role under his roof.

He'd no more than get started telling her how that goddamn wimpoe of a technician had come up with yet one more stupid change in procedures, no more than get through a couple of sentences, when that effing baby would begin to squawl. He'd be right at a point in a story that he was starting to get perfect, one he'd only been telling a while but was beginning to see shaping up just right, just at a point where it was crucial for a person not to miss even one of the words he was saying, and the effing *baby* would start up!

It happened over and over again. And it made no difference

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