

# *Ishi in Two Worlds*

by  
Theodora Kroeber

## StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 1

by  
Lowell Jaeger  
Flathead Valley Community College  
Kalispell, Montana

### Consulting Scholars:

David Littlejohn  
University of California,  
Berkeley

Marta E. Sanchez  
University of California,  
San Diego

Kevin Starr  
California State Library,  
Sacramento



A Radio/Library  
Partnership Exploring Our  
Regional Literature

StoryLines America is  
supported by the National  
Endowment for the  
Humanities and administered  
by the American Library  
Association to expand  
American understanding  
of human experience and  
cultural heritage.

Additional support from  
Barnes & Noble

### Questions for discussion

Were the conflicts between the Yahi and foreigners encroaching on Yahi land inevitable? Is it possible that history might have played out differently?

How were the values that governed Ishi's life different from those of his protectors?

What can be learned by this modern encounter with a Stone Age survivor?

### Additional readings

Mary Ellicott Arnold and Mabel Reed. *In the Land of the Grasshopper Song*, 1957, reprinted 1980.

Robert Fleming Heizer. *Ishi, the Last Yahi: A Documentary History*, 1979.

Alfred Kroeber. *Handbook of the Indians of California*, 1925, reissued 1977.

Malcolm Margolin, ed. *The Way We Lived: California Indian Stories, Songs and Reminiscences*, Rev. ed. 1993

Malcolm Margolin and Yolanda Montijo, eds. *Native Ways: California Indian Stories and Memories*, 1997.

Jerry Stanley. *Digger: The Tragic Fate of the California Indians from the Missions to the Gold Rush*, 1997.

StoryLines America is supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and administered by the American Library Association to expand American understanding of human experience and cultural heritage. Additional support from Barnes & Noble

©1999 American Library Association



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**HUMANITIES**

**BARNES & NOBLE**  
BOOKSELLERS

# StoryLines America

A Radio/Library  
Partnership Exploring Our  
Regional Literature





**Ishi in Two Worlds**  
by  
*Theodora Kroeber*

In August of 1911, a lone Indian wandered out of the bushes and collapsed in a slaughterhouse corral a few miles from the town of Oroville, near the foothills of Mount Lassen in north-central California. This man— “emaciated to starvation...naked except for a ragged scrap of ancient covered-wagon canvas which he wore around his shoulders like a poncho...” —soon became renowned as Ishi, “the last wild Indian in North America.” His surrender marked the close of an era in the history of the original inhabitants of this continent. *Ishi in Two Worlds*, by Theodora Kroeber, is a heartwarming biography of this remarkable man who eventually made a purposeful life for himself in the “trolley world” of San Francisco.

Theodora Kroeber begins her biography by tracing the long decline of Ishi’s tribe, the Yahi, which dwindled over three or four centuries from a thriving community of thousands to Ishi, its lone surviving member. Kroeber reveals that at one time native peoples in California numbered approximately 250,000, from at least 21 known tribes.

The Yahi had remained virtually untouched by Spanish and Mexican newcomers until 1844, when land grants by the Mexican government deeded large parts of the Sacramento Valley into private ownership, including Yahi holdings in the creeks and forests at the foot of Mount Lassen. In 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Spanish/Mexican reign in California by seceding to the United States all of that state and other large areas of the present American southwest. A year later Yahi lands were inundated by the “FortyNiners,” hordes of Anglo immigrants pouring in from the east over the Sierra Nevada ranges in search of gold.

The ensuing conflicts between the indigenous tribes and relentless waves of hungry settlers are stories all too familiar across the American West, the continent in general, and perhaps the world. From time immemorial, migrating peoples have displaced indigenous populations by one means or another. Yet the annihilation of entire tribes of American Indians seems particularly disturbing to many, perhaps because we think ourselves in this modern age to be more civilized than our actions have shown. At any rate, “Gold seems to work on the human psyche to its undoing,” states Kroeber.

By 1874, in less than three decades, the Yahi had declined from as many as three thousand to only a dozen adults and one ten-year-old child, Ishi. For the next 12 years this small band managed to conceal itself in the canyons and forests of its homeland, traveling “long distances by leaping from boulder to boulder, their bare feet leaving no print,” sleeping under rabbit skin blankets and otherwise surviving in a manner “. . . the most totally aboriginal and primitive of any on the continent, at least after the coming of the white man to America.”

Ishi’s appearance in the corral signified his arrival at the limits of human endurance. After his fellow tribesmen expired one by one, Ishi had lived alone for more than three years in the wild, knowing a language intelligible to no other man, practicing a culture that would pass into extinction upon his death. All Ishi knew of the white man’s world was that surely a Yahi would be put to death. There is gripping drama in the moment the lone figure from the past reaches out to the modern world. Happily, in this instance at least, the modern world in 1911 was civil enough to help with Ishi’s adaptation, discerning enough to recognize the value of his knowledge, and compassionate enough to comprehend the global tragedy of an entire culture’s demise.

Given a home of sorts at the University of California’s Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco, Ishi is cared for largely by the anthropologists Thomas Talbot Waterman and Alfred Kroeber, the author’s husband. The daily details of his introduction to modern life are at once sad and triumphant, humorous and tragic, but entirely heartwarming as well, offering a reassuring glimpse of the human potential for bonds of friendship which transcend racial and cultural barriers.

Ishi works as an assistant janitor at the museum and gives public demonstrations of his native crafts and cultural practices to eager audiences of museum visitors, young and old alike. He learns to manage his life independently and with dignity in the “wilds of civilization.” Wearing a gentle smile and presenting an affable demeanor, he wins the trust and friendship of his community and much admiration from people far away, as news of “the last wild Indian in North America” spreads across the globe.

Ishi’s life in the modern world lasted only until 1916, when he died of tuberculosis. Two years before, in May of 1914, Ishi had escorted his anthropologist friends back to his old homelands on an extended camping tour in which he instructed his friends in the art of “going native.” Kroeber’s insightful rendering of this adventure portrays it wryly as both scientific field work and boyish good times. Of Ishi’s value to the world, Kroeber concludes:

***...he was unique, a last man, the last man of his world, and his experience of sudden, lonely, and unmitigated change-over from the Stone Age to the Steel Age was also unique...a living affirmation of the credo of the anthropologists that modern man—homo sapiens—whether contemporary American Indian or Athenian Greek of Phidias’ time, is quite simply and wholly human in his biology, in his capacity to learn new skills and new ways as a changed environment exposes him to them, in his power of abstract thought, and in his moral and ethical discriminations.***

#### **About the author**

Theodora Kroeber (1897-1979) and her husband, Alfred L. Kroeber, were associated with the University of California Museum of Anthropology in San Francisco and were Ishi’s close allies in the “wilds of civilization.” She made use of her husband’s notes and her own experiences with Ishi to compose this account after Alfred Kroeber’s death in 1960.