

**Ramona**  
by  
Helen Hunt Jackson

**StoryLines California  
Discussion Guide No. 2**

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



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

**Discussion questions**

In *Ramona*, the early Spanish culture of California is portrayed as distinctly superior to that of the cruel and greedy new Yankee settlers of the 1840s. Jackson suggests that the Native American culture of Alessandro and his people is ethically superior to both. Is the author's comparative ranking of the three major California cultures fair?

Ramona invites discussion on the nature of honor and nobility. Who is honorable in the book? Who is noble? Why? How does Senora Moreno define honor and nobility? How does Ramona define honor and nobility?

**Additional readings**

Ida Rae Egli, ed. *No Rooms of Their Own: Women Writers of Early California*, 1992.

Helen Hunt Jackson. *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government's Dealings with Some Indian Tribes*, 1881, reissued 1995.

Limerick, Patricia N. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, 1987.

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



*Helen Hunt Jackson*

Warfare between Mexico and the United States ended in 1849, with the United States adding to its southern border vast tracts of land that are today the states of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Spanish colonists and Mexicans were already living in these newly acquired territories, however, as were dozens of tribes and bands of indigenous Native Americans.

As Anglo-American settlers moved into these territories, conflicts arose concerning land ownership. Old Spanish land grants and deeds signed by Spain and Mexico were no longer valid, and American settlers eagerly claimed much of the American Southwest as their own. Tribes of Native Americans, who had created villages and settlements in these territories centuries before, were forced out of their homelands, lost in the frenzy of land-grabbing immigrants.

Helen Hunt Jackson's *Ramona* portrays the plight of these indigenous tribes as the world closes in on them. *Ramona* is a love story, but it was also intended to attract public attention and to incite political reform. In this light, *Ramona* is much like Harriet Beecher Stowe's politically-motivated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a sympathetic portrayal of Blacks in nineteenth-century America.

Before writing *Ramona*, Jackson was already an influential voice in political affairs regarding Native Americans. Her earlier, controversial work, *A Century of Dishonor*, had offered a view of native peoples as victims, not aggressors. Its publication led to her appointment by President Chester Arthur as Commissioner of Indian Affairs for southern California. Jackson traveled by wagon to Indian villages in the region gathering information, intervening in land rights disputes, and gaining firsthand knowledge of the hardships suffered by Native Americans. Much of *Ramona* was created out of her experiences as commissioner.

In *A Century of Dishonor*, Jackson "tried to attack the people's conscience directly," but in *Ramona* she "sugared the pill" with the intention of influencing a wider audience. Romantic novels were popular reading at the time, so Jackson chose to couch her political message in that more widely accepted form.

Central to the plot of *Ramona* are the complexities of cultures intersecting during a time of dramatic political change. The novel opens on the ranch of Señora Moreno, the descendant of Spanish Colonialists, widow of a Spanish officer, and proprietor of an estate that once stretched from the interior of California 40 miles to the ocean, but has been greatly reduced in size since American rule.

With her Spanish heritage, Señora Moreno fancies her breeding superior to the mixed-blood Mexican laborers and the local Indians. She carries out her daily affairs with an air of Spanish nobility, ruling the household with an authority born of her desperate resistance to the changing social structure of the world beyond her ranch. She dotes on her son, Felipe, her last hope for the purity of the Moreno blood line. Ramona, a step-daughter of sorts, has lived with Señora Moreno since age four, but because of her questionable, mixed-blood heritage, the Señora views Ramona with disdain.

Ramona and Felipe accept each other lovingly as brother and sister, but Señora Moreno is so threatened by and ashamed of Ramona's mixed blood that she hides the fact even from the child. All might have gone smoothly had Ramona not fallen in love with Alessandro, a hard-working, likable, and handsome young Indian man who has come to the Moreno ranch to shear sheep.

When Señora Moreno finds out about Ramona's attraction to Alessandro, she locks her in her room and forbids any further contact between the two. Alessandro returns to his village for a few days to let the crisis cool, but he discovers alarming news at home—American settlers have taken possession of his tribe's lands. Eventually Alessandro and Ramona elope and have a daughter of their own, but their marriage becomes a long, sad struggle with homelessness, poverty, and trouble with greedy, encroaching whites. One night, Alessandro becomes distracted, mistakenly rides another man's horse home, and is shot as a horse thief.

Ramona nearly dies from grief. She and her daughter are cared for by local Indians until, miraculously, in the tradition of nineteenth-century romantic novels, Felipe appears at the last moment, rescues Ramona from poverty, professes his long-standing love for her, marries her, and takes her child as his own.

To modern sensibilities, *Ramona* may seem contrived and sentimentalized. Alessandro, for example, is the perfect image of the "noble savage"; he is handsome, brave, and true to such an extent that even Señora Moreno remarks "how the boy makes one forget he is Indian!" Ramona has remarkable will power and is flawlessly kind, compassionate, generous, and persevering. The late Native American scholar/writer Michael Dorris reminds the reader that "Ramona was propaganda," and the characters were idealized for a purpose:

***By peopling these communities with characters who exemplified the highest American attitudes and behaviors, Mrs. Jackson invited her readers to empathize with Native Americans whom the public had been educated—by a century of U.S. dishonor and conquest—to disdain.***

#### **About the author**

Helen Fiske Hunt, born in 1830 in Amherst, Mass., was a friend of poet Emily Dickinson. She married William Jackson of Colorado in 1875 and moved west, where she heard from Indians of their mistreatment by whites. She researched the situation and wrote *A Century of Dishonor*, an indictment of the U.S. government's policies toward Indians. As Commissioner of Indian Affairs in southern California, Jackson was a powerful political force for Native Americans. A "Ramona Festival" is still held each year in the town of Hemet in Riverside County, Calif.