



# Paula Gunn Allen

## Biography

Paula Gunn Allen was born in Cubero, New Mexico in 1939. Her parents were both Native New Mexicans. Her father was a Lebanese American and her mother was Laguna-Sioux-Scotch. But for Paula her ethnicity was derived from exposure and experience to the Pueblo culture. This culture is a female-centered culture which is where Allen derived many of the ideas for her poems. Cubero, New Mexico, is a diverse town with cultures ranging from Hispanic, Native American, to white immigrant settlers. Paula Gunn Allen shares her Pueblo culture with Leslie Marmon Silko, author of *Ceremony*. Allen's writing career began in 1974 with the publication of her first book *Blind Lion Poems*. She received her BA in English in 1966 from the University of Oregon after several brief stints at other colleges. She went on to earn her MFA in creative writing in 1968 at the same university. She then traveled back to New Mexico where she earned her Ph.D. in American Studies with an emphasis on Native American Studies in 1976. She was awarded an NEA creative writing fellowship in 1978 and, in 1980, received a postdoctoral fellowship to study Native American women's writing at UCLA. At the same time, she was busy editing the MLA critical volumes entitled *Studies of American Indian Literature: Critical Essays and Course Designs*, published in 1983. In 1984, she received a postdoctoral fellowship grant from the Ford Foundation-National Research Council. During her academic career, Allen taught at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado, the College of San Mateo, San Diego State University, San Francisco State University, where she was the director of the Native American Studies Program, the University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, and the University of California at Berkeley, where she was Professor of Native American and Ethnic Studies. She was Professor of English, Creative Writing, and American Indian Studies at UCLA until her retirement in 1999.



### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1939
- \* Works feature Native American culture, characters, and themes
- \* Writes academic books, novels and poetry

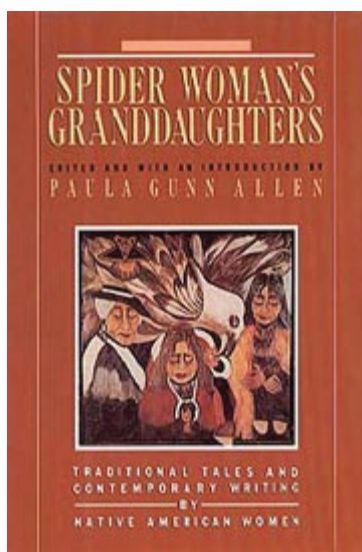
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Paula Gunn Allen explores the concept of “breeds” within her personal and educational backgrounds. She defines “breeds” to be those alien to both traditional Native Americans and whites. “Breeds” is a concept of Allen’s that she extends to other groups, as well as to herself: Allen identifies with “breeds” so strongly because she considers herself to be one. Much of Allen’s writing focuses on her desire to identify and describe her exact “breed.” The many influences in Allen’s life have also prompted her to advocate several issues. She is an active public spokesperson for the teaching of Native American literature in American academe. She has held positions on the Native American panels of the Modern Language Association and the American Studies Association. Through these positions she has influenced many people seeking knowledge of the Native American literary community. Her importance in this field has helped foster her sense of her own breed, a breed which enlightens others. Allen’s views are also anchored in her knowledge of tribal societies. Most American Indian Societies are based on woman-focused world views. These views are obvious in much of her writing including the passage quoted above. Adrienne Rich described Allen’s poetry as “Essential reading for the white poet/ woman/ lesbian/feminist who wants a larger and truer vision than white culture alone can offer.”



Allen’s involvement in the literary community is a combination of critical reviews of other Native American author’s writings, compilations, and her own writing. Her critical work includes the previously mentioned *Studies in American Indian Literature*. In this and other critical works Allen is concerned with the reader’s perspective. According to Allen, it is important that as readers of Native American Literature, we not impose European and American expectations. We must not allow preconceptions to interfere with the message being offered. We must recognize the Native American culture as real and deserving of open minded consideration. While acting as a critic, Allen herself has had a strong voice as a writer. Allen’s writing is mostly poetry. Her poetry explores the various breeds Allen encounters in her personal life, ranging from minorities to feminists. These poems explore tribal ties among not only Native Americans, but among all.



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Allen's writing is not limited to poetry. She has also written a novel entitled *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows*. In this novel about the difficulties of creative work, Allen tells the tale of a "halfbreed" named Ephanie. Many view this tale as somewhat autobiographical for Allen. While Allen has a strong voice as a poet and author, she is most well known for her academic work. In her scholarship, she has defined new ways in which to study Native American writings and culture and opened doors for other Native American scholars and writers.

Allen received the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation in 1990 for her anthology *Spider Woman's Granddaughters: Traditional Tales and Contemporary Writing by Native American Women*. She also received the Susan Koppelman Award from the Popular and American Culture Associations and the Native American Prize for Literature. In 2001, she was awarded a Lifetime Achievement Award by the Native Writer's Circle of the Americas.

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