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Native Tongue (Native Tongue Trilogy)



Synopsis

First published in 1984, *Native Tongue* earned wide critical praise, and cult status as well. Set in the twenty-second century after the repeal of the Nineteenth Amendment, the novel reveals a world where women are once again property, denied civil rights, and banned from public life. In this world, Earth's wealth relies on interplanetary commerce, for which the population depends on linguists, a small, clannish group of families whose women breed and become perfect translators of all the galaxies' languages. The linguists wield power, but live in isolated compounds, hated by the population, and in fear of class warfare. But a group of women is destined to challenge the power of men and linguists. Nazareth, the most talented linguist of her family, is exhausted by her constant work translating for the government, supervising the children's language education in the Alien-in-Residence interface chambers, running the compound, and caring for the elderly men. She longs to retire to the Barren House, where women past childbearing age knit, chat, and wait to die. What Nazareth does not yet know is that a clandestine revolution is going on in the Barren Houses: there, word by word, women are creating a language of their own to free them of men's domination. Their secret must, above all, be kept until the language is ready for use. The women's language, L'ajadan, is only one of the brilliant creations found in this stunningly original novel, which combines a page-turning plot with challenging meditations on the tensions between freedom and control, individuals and communities, thought and action. A complete work in itself, it is also the first volume in Elgin's acclaimed *Native Tongue* trilogy.

Book Information

Series: *Native Tongue Trilogy*

Paperback: 320 pages

Publisher: The Feminist Press at CUNY; Reprint edition (November 1, 2000)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1558612467

ISBN-13: 978-1558612464

Product Dimensions: 5 x 0.8 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.4 ounces ([View shipping rates and policies](#))

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Customer Reviews

I first read this book over 10 years ago. Even then I thought it was a little dated -- the author was clearly reacting against the Reagan era and extrapolating a hypothetical future where women have become chattel (albeit somewhat pampered chattel). This is an "idea" book, and the ideas are fascinating. Laadan, the "women's tongue," (Elgin has actually created and published Laadan books), the power of communication, very alien aliens.. these are all interesting. If you are a linguist, a feminist, or someone who just likes far-out social speculation, this book will be interesting to you. It does have a certain hold on the imagination, such that I still remember it and think about it years later. But as fiction, much less as science fiction, it leaves something to be desired. The entire premise, that the U.S. will become a sort of genteel Protestant patriarchal dictatorship, falls flat. (Some people may argue we are already heading in that direction, but I really can't see the repeal of the 19th Amendment and every man in the country becoming convinced that women have no more intellectual abilities than children.) Technology and space exploration is poorly explained, all the "sci-fi" bits are handwaved and thus there are some notable gaps in my suspension of disbelief. The aliens and the interstellar society exist as a backdrop for Elgin to explore her social views, which is fine if you are reading the book for social/feminist-linguistic theory, but will disappoint if you are reading the book for science fiction. Most annoyingly, every single male character is one-dimensional. All the men are at best condescending egotists, at worst thugs.

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