



# **Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed**

*Judy Pasternak*

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**Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed** Judy Pasternak  
WINNER OF THE J. ANTHONY LUKAS WORK-IN-PROGRESS AWARD

Atop a craggy mesa in the northern reaches of the Navajo reservation lies what was once a world-class uranium mine called Monument No. 2. Discovered in the 1940s—during the government's desperate press to build nuclear weapons—the mesa's tremendous lode would forever change the lives of the hundreds of Native Americans who labored there and of their families, including many who dwelled in the valley below for generations afterward.

*Yellow Dirt* offers readers a window into a dark chapter of modern history that still reverberates today. From the 1940s into the early twenty-first century, the United States knowingly used and discarded an entire tribe for the sake of atomic bombs. Secretly, during the days of the Manhattan Project and then in a frenzy during the Cold War, the government bought up all the uranium that could be mined from the hundreds of rich deposits entombed under the sagebrush plains and sandstone cliffs. Despite warnings from physicians and scientists that long-term exposure could be harmful, even fatal, thousands of miners would work there unprotected. A second set of warnings emerged about the environmental impact. Yet even now, long after the uranium boom ended, and long after national security could be cited as a consideration, many residents are still surrounded by contaminated air, water, and soil. The radioactive "yellow dirt" has ended up in their drinking supplies, in their walls and floors, in their playgrounds, in their bread ovens, in their churches, and even in their garbage dumps. And they are still dying.

Transporting readers into a little-known country-within-a-country, award-winning journalist Judy Pasternak gives rare voice to Navajo perceptions of the world, their own complicated involvement with uranium mining, and their political coming-of-age. Along the way, their fates intertwine with decisions made in Washington, D.C., in the Navajo capital of Window Rock, and in the Western border towns where swashbuckling mining men trained their sights on the fortunes they could wrest from tribal land, successfully pressuring the government into letting them do it their way.

*Yellow Dirt* powerfully chronicles both a scandal of neglect and the Navajos' long fight for justice. Few had heard of this shameful legacy until Pasternak revealed it in a prize-winning *Los Angeles Times* series that galvanized a powerful congressman and a famous prosecutor to press for redress and repair of the grievous damage. In this expanded account, she provides gripping new details, weaving the personal and the political into a tale of betrayal, of willful negligence, and, ultimately, of reckoning.

## **Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed Details**

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# From Reader Review *Yellow Dirt: An American Story of a Poisoned Land and a People Betrayed* for online ebook

## Gayle says

Due to my preference for non-fiction, I often read books that I have no desire to review. Why? Because the subject matter is just too depressing to write about. This is one of those books.

How long and how often will we continue in the U.S. to rape and pillage non-whites? I'm thinking maybe when non-whites *finally* become the majority? That day is coming soon, thank God! Oh, no wait, then of course there is the constant barrage of abuse of the poor, who are just getting poorer and less powerful, by the rich, who are just getting richer and therefore more powerful. Well, most of them are white, so maybe they'll keep a lid on the majority/minority? The thing is, American Indians are both, a minority and very poor, so they *really* get the worst of it, and always have.

This is *another* story of the abuse of American Indians, this time to get our hands on the uranium deposits that are present throughout the Navajo Nation in the Western U.S. Welcome to America! There's hope at the end of the story, but it ends in 2006, and the story is beginning again now in 2013. Same story.

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## Patrick C. says

A disturbing account of one of the many terrible things done to the Navajo. The book is well-researched and reads easily. Some parts are just heart-wrenching, others beg the question "who the hell thought THAT was an okay thing to do?"

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## Rebecca Martin says

Reading this for fall learning community: Neglected Landscapes: Approaching the Environment Through Film and Creative Writing. Deborah Poe and I are teaching the class together. I'm reading this book because the Monument Valley area is one of the "neglected landscapes" we will deal with. This is a very readable and informative (not to mention disturbing) book by a writer for the LA Times exposing the devastation of the environment and people of the Four Corners area by 70 years of mining for radioactive materials. An indispensable adjunct to this reading is "Ceremony" by Leslie Marmon Silko.

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## Ryan Mishap says

There have always been some fucking monsters in this world--we don't need fictional stories to conjure them up because greed, racism, and patriotism already create them.

Pasternak writes a concise, well-researched report on the depredations of the U.S. government and uranium mining countries as they exploited Navajo land to fuel their profits and weapons supply. The neglect, recklessness, and lack of compassion shown by those entities is absolutely stunning, and the shock is all the

more sharp given the straight-forward prose it is delivered by. While the tale is told with a reporter's equanimity, Pasternak's often dry, sarcastic wit easily pierces the excuses of officials and executives.

Everyone should know about this--especially now as people are still trying to argue for more nuclear power and claiming that it was our nuclear arsenal that kept us "safe" all those long years of the Cold War. Tell it to the Navajos.

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### **Marie Carmean says**

Where do I begin? This book opened up a new understanding for me of the uranium mining tragedy on the Navajo Reservation. Told with exacting detail and covering a span of the over 60 years that this catastrophe continued, Judy Pasternak tells of the lack of communication to the Navajo people about the dangers of uranium mining and its aftermath on the Reservation, and about the hundreds of affected families...and what was NOT done by our government to rectify the situation, and eventually was WAS done. Sixty years of poisoning of a people who had no idea what was happening to them. It is one of the worst atrocities ever committed on American soil.

Two years ago we visited Monument Valley, one of the most beautiful sights in the West, and I loved it. It has been the backdrop in many a western movie, and tourists visit there every year and are amazed by the landscape. I had no idea that only a few years before (2011) the tragedy of the mining that had played out on this very soil was coming to a close. It broke my heart to have visited there, and not to have known that this valley and the one adjacent to it, played a pivotal part in the raping of the Navajo people and culture. The original digging was part of the Manhattan Project to create the nuclear bombs that destroyed so much of Hiroshima and Nagasaki....and yet the radiation levels the Navajos were exposed to were thousands of times greater than the people in those two Japanese cities endured. Thousands. And they weren't told.

This book should be read by every American. It is a morality tale of the highest sort....we have to learn from our mistakes. We have to care more.

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### **Mikey B. says**

A penetrating study of what happened to the Navajo people when they started to mine Uranium in the early 1940's.

This occurred on the Navajo reservation that is located in Arizona and Utah. A great deal of the mining was in Monument Valley. The initial reason for extracting the Uranium was the real fear that the enemies of democracy, particularly Nazi Germany, would also start to process Uranium for the purposes of making a nuclear explosion. In the early 1940's little was known of the affects of radiation from exposure to Uranium. There was no effort to protect the Navajo workers. The debris from the mines was dumped pell-mell all over the reservation. Some of the debris was utilized to build homes on the reserve. The water sources were also becoming contaminated by the dynamiting at the mine sites.

After the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki the affects of radiation became very obvious. But on Navajo land nothing at all was done to protect the workers. With the advent of the Cold War and the Korean War Uranium mining kept accelerating in Navajo country.

Eventually workers started dying of cancer (lung cancer, colon cancer, brain tumours). More and more women and children became diagnosed with cancer and died prematurely. Tests and studies were made on people, on the drinking water, and the habitats – some of which showed severe levels of radiation. The radiation was literally spreading more and more across their land. And nothing was done! The companies and the managers got rich. The Navajo's got hardly anything, particularly compared to miners off the reservation.

Both the companies and the various government organizations (and there are many) obfuscated the issues and "Passed the Buck" as people continued to get sick and die. This was certainly not "Government of the people, by the people, for the people..."

To extract this Uranium, haste and utility were used; to compensate and aid the victims and to clean up the radioactive environment, only a withering and inept bureaucracy was encountered. It took over sixty years for a real cleanup to begin in earnest. Some parts of this book make one want to scream in frustration at the intransigence of government and the immorality of companies who put profits ahead of protection of workers.

Ms. Pasternak's book is very well written and frightfully convincing. There is no scientific jargon on radiation to deter readability. We are left saddened once again at the plight of a dispossessed people in North America. A highly recommended read.

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### **Fredrick Danysh says**

During World War II and during the the Cold War, the United States was looking for a source of uranium for its nuclear programs. A mother lode was found on the Navaho and Hopi reservations in the Four Corners region. This is the story of the exploration for the uranium and the exploitation of the Navaho who became exposed to its toxic properties even generations after the mining stopped.

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### **Becki says**

Summary from B&N: From the 1930s to the 1960s, the United States knowingly used and discarded an entire tribe of people as the Navajos worked, unprotected, in the uranium mines that fueled the Manhattan Project and the Cold War. Long after these mines were abandoned, Navajos in all four corners of the Reservation (which borders Utah, New Mexico, and Arizona) continued grazing their animals on sagebrush flats riddled with uranium that had been blasted from the ground. They built their houses out of chunks of uranium ore, inhaled radioactive dust borne aloft from the waste piles the mining companies had left behind, and their children played in the unsealed mines themselves. Ten years after the mines closed, the cancer rate on the reservation shot up and some babies began to be born with crooked fingers that fused together into claws as they grew. Government scientists filed complaints about the situation with the government, but were told it was a mess too expensive to clean up. Judy Pasternak exposed this story in a prizewinning Los Angeles Times series.

Shocking. My sister said it would be when she recommended it, and she was not wrong. My brother-in-law is Navajo, and I have always been fascinated with Native American culture, wishing I had such deep roots and abiding family ties.

But what the government allowed to happen to the Navajos?all for the sake of uranium?is appalling. The U.S. government is supposed to be a protector for

these people. Instead, from 1930 -1960 they exploited the Navajos and their resources. And the implications of this exploitation are still being felt today. \nI had never heard of this before reading this book. There were a lot of technical and political items in the book that made it slightly more difficult to read. But Pasternak also tells the story through the eyes of The People, the Dine, who experienced uranium mining and its after-effects first hand.\n\nThe government again clearly proves that it is not capable of taking care of anyone ? as government interests will always come first.\n\nI recommend reading this book. It will open your eyes to something that is not even touched upon in our history books.\n\n

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## **Elizabeth says**

Looking back at the 20th century now has an eerie ring of “the end justifies the means” for those with eyes to see it. True, here in America we developed faster than any other period in history: from the Industrial Revolution to the automobile to electricity to running water to medicine to the information age, we accomplished more than has ever been done in a century before. Not to mention we fought two enormous wars during those years and five or six smaller ones. In truth, history will probably look back on the 20th century as an enormous success for progress.

However, we miss the little things. For example, the topic of Yellow Dirt: people thrown by the dangerous, radiation-ridden wayside in the name of national safety. Not only did the hasty desire to be the most powerful drive us to destroy one of the most beautiful areas of the American Southwest, we set a legacy of pain and loss for three generations of people.

Impeccably researched and journalistically reported, Yellow Dirt takes readers back to the 1930s on the rocky, arid Navajo Reservation in the Four Corners area, where people still herded sheep and lived off the land just as their ancestors had done for thousands of years. Certainly not an easy life, but one the Navajo people have fought government legislation and invading frontiersmen for hundreds of years to preserve. However, when an intruding white prospector discovers the presence of potent uranium in the “yellow rocks” of a northern section called Cane Valley, it’s only a matter of time before the Navajo lands are to be breached.

For the next twenty-some years, American mining corporations excavated the nearby mesa in the Monument Valley for uranium to power the Manhattan Project and the arms race leading into the Cold War. Until the mine was abandoned in the 1950s, hundreds of Navajo workers entered the mesa and breathed in radiation-laden smoke every day for twelve-hour shifts, then returned home to houses built of uranium-rich ore and drank from uranium-polluted water. So, to modern readers, it is no surprise that fifteen years later, they were developing cancer in record numbers, and the US government refused to take any responsibility.

Judy Pasternak, a former L.A. Times reporter, has laid out each character and his or her role in the escalation of the situation in precise language, taking us logically through the story with little to no extraneous information. With a concept this complicated, it would be easy to go down rabbit trails of history or politics, but she has edited down the essentials of what we need to know about what occurred on the Navajo lands during those years, and it lends a refreshing brevity to what could be a very cumbersome story. E.G. Straight to the point, no wishy-washy ambiguity.

Pasternak has also not taken the “victimized underdog” approach that many people take when writing books about the abuse of the Native American culture by the encroaching U.S. government. She presents the characters as gravely real, faulted people (Adakai, the forefather in Cane Valley, is a rampant gambler; his

son, Luke Yazzie, is a chronic drinker) caught up in a situation over which they have little to no control (Luke thought he could get enough money for a truck out of presenting the prospectors with the yellow rocks). By the time we reach the 1990s, when attention on the situation is finally coming to the environmental forefront, the people are just catching on and have begun to make noise about it, just as any other community would do.

Environmental journalism is nothing new, but Pasternak has put an emotional human face on it, similar to Rachel Carson's infamous *Silent Spring*. It's amazing how fast we forget these happenings: I had absolutely no idea about the extent of the mining or its aftereffects, and the news about this only came out in 2005. For sure, this kind of heavy topic is not for casual reading, but for those interested in the powers or ideas involved, this is a great work to start in on. Weighing in at just over 200 pages, it's not a long read, and flows much like a novel.

*Yellow Dirt* is available on the Kindle for \$10.38, or in paperback from Amazon for \$10.40. I snagged my copy off a random shelf in my library, and because it's almost four years old now, your library is likely to have a copy. See if you can find it, because it's definitely worth a read, but unless you're a social worker or an environmental lawyer, it may not be a book for prolonged study.

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### **Ray says**

There's been a lot of talk since the 2010 election about intrusive government regulations hurting the economy and being at least partly responsible for rising unemployment in our Country. Without making it the point of the book, the author tells a story of why the opposite is also true. Unfortunately, as part of the Cold War, Uranium mining became a national priority in the 1950's, and one of the largest sources of domestic uranium was found on Navajo lands in the vicinity of the Southwest United States. *Yellow Dirt* describes the quest for uranium on the Navajo lands, the limited knowledge of the hazards of uranium, and the price paid by the workers in the mines. Additionally, Pasternak describes the longer lasting affects among the local residents due to the failure of the mining companies to clean up mine tailings, and from the poisoning of local drinking water supplies. Cleanup and compensation to those affected was a struggle, fighting through the obstacles of corporate buyouts, failed regulations, and a complicated legal system. This often overlooked but quite compelling story is well worth reading.

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### **Barbara says**

Great reporting here, tragic story about the devastating effects of uranium mining on the Navajo people. I've seen enough of the area to picture everything she talks about. Such a collection of lessons about how wheels that don't squeak get no grease.

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### **Jerrilyn says**

A hard book of more betrayal of Native Americans into the 21st century. After the Navajo's own trail of tears and exile from which they returned in 1868, uranium was mined on their land starting in the 1940's for development of the nuclear bomb, through the cold war years. Navajo men worked as miners, with no protection breathing air thick with yellow dust in tunnels or pits of high radiation. Navajo miners



accumulated radiation exposure 44 times that of survivors of Nagasaki and Hiroshima! And after mining companies and government men left, mountains of waste remained that locals innocently used to make cement for their floors (where they traditionally slept on sheepskins) and stucco for their walls, in houses used for generations. Radioactivity contaminated their groundwater. Children used the pliable ore as clay, forming animals or cigarettes! Our government studied them for decades without warning or helping! And the people paid the price in cancers and birth defects. This was not corrected, incredibly, until after 2000! This author is responsible for bringing much of this to light and bringing about cleanups and solutions. An important book, available at TGCL on CDs.

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## **Dan C. says**

Yellow Dirt was the second book I read while on vacation this January. The first was Torment - a piece of post-apocalyptic zombie fiction, and then this book which tells the story of how we basically raped the land in Navajo Nation of uranium, left the radioactive crap laying around to contaminate everything in sight and are just now getting around to making restitution to the Navajo. Not exactly the feel-good books of the year. But as I always say, the funny thing about feeling is don't always expect it to tickle.

I can't remember how I came across Yellow Dirt, although now that I think about it, it might have been the "people who bought this book also bought..." thing on Amazon. In any event, I was pleased (and surprised) to discover that the library had it. So I trekked down there to get it, along with five other books. It was one of those trips to the library where I got a crapload of books just to see if anything will stick.

Yellow Dirt, as I said, is about uranium mining in the Navajo Nation during the 40s and 50s and the effects it had on the people and the land. We drove through Navajo Nation on our trip west last summer. I have never in my life seen a more desolate and depressing place. In many ways, it resembled the Martian landscape. Considering our nation's treatment of the Native Americans, it's not surprising that we gave them the crappiest land to live on. Granted, it was their homeland from which they were forcibly removed in 1864, only to return to 4 years later. But it was of not much use for farming or anything else and was not desirable real estate until uranium was discovered on the reservation in the 1940s during the race to build the world's first atom bomb.

The book follows one Navajo family through the generations. It specifically talks about a mine known as Monument No. 2, which was a mesa that was almost completely destroyed due to uranium mining. Navajos mined uranium without even the most rudimentary of precautions, despite mounting evidence that exposure to uranium (and all the radioactive elements that it breaks down to) was detrimental to human health. Once the boom of uranium mining started to fade in the 1960s, the mines and uranium mills were mostly abandoned, leaving piles of radioactive waste to contaminate the ground and the water. For a people that depend on the land for a living, the short term monetary gains provided by uranium mining - which the mining companies mostly cheated them out of - were not worth the long term effects on the environment and their health. Cancer, relatively unknown in the Navajo, began to show up in levels several times that in the general population, starting with the miners themselves and then, as waste contaminated the water, the rest of their families.

When I read books like this, I am always amazed at how horribly we've treated our nation's first inhabitants. At the end of the book, I was more convinced than ever that the United States has one hell of a karmic payback headed its way based solely on our treatment of the Native Americans. Yellow Dirt is a riveting account of people deliberately poisoned because no one gave a crap about them. It is also pretty easy to read

in that it does not get bogged down in facts and figures. It also ends with some hope, as cleanup efforts are underway.

As one who was not really aware of this, I can't recommend this very tragic book enough.

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## **Text Addict says**

During World War II, the United States needed uranium. The Navajo Nation had uranium deposits and needed jobs and money – and was glad to be helping the war effort, as well. After the hot war, the Cold War required uranium for American nuclear weapons.

But the mining was carried out with no safety standards. No ventilation, no dust remediation, no breath masks, and not a word to the workers that the substance they were excavating might be dangerous. Pasternak notes that this was true at mines worked by whites as well, but truly vast quantities of uranium were mined on the Navajo Reservation by people who often did not speak English and usually were illiterate. This went on for approximately twenty years.

For about forty years, many of the Navajo people lived next to mine tailings piles that scattered dust all over their homes and workplaces, and drank water contaminated with uranium and arsenic. Having no idea that the “yellow dirt” was dangerous, people used the tailings to make concrete for houses and floors. For decades, the mines themselves were left open to the elements and anyone who wandered through. Cancers and birth defects became common causes of death across the reservation.

All together, there were about sixty years of occasional individuals trying to raise the alarm, and being silenced by business interests, government interests, bureaucratic buck-passing, and lack of both money and the willingness to try to get the money to clean up the hazards. Even when money was available, it was often tied up in language that addressed only a fraction of the problem.

Meanwhile, a town in whites' territory whose residents had done equally foolish things with the local uranium mill's waste material (used it for fertilizer, for adobe, etc.) had every scrap of contaminated material cleaned up and properly disposed of, and the yards, houses, etc. repaired and replaced (or even improved). Part of that, the book makes clear, was because the town's problem caught the interest of a powerful Congressman.

In fact, it seems likely that the Navajos' problem has only been dealt with because it caught the attention of a powerful Congressman, Henry Waxman. In 2007 – a year after the author's newspaper series about the slow-motion disaster appeared – he brought the heads of the relevant agencies in front of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. They listened to Navajo testimony, and testimony from several of the people who'd tried to help in the past, and got reamed out by another interested Congressman, Tom Udall.

You can read a transcript of the testimony here (<http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-b...>). It's not all that long, really.

You can also read this book. It's painful, but necessary. Those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it. And frankly, it would be all too easy for the agencies who are supposed to protect these people – just like the rest of us – to drop the ball again.

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## **Marguerite says**

Really superb reporting in this account of the Navajo people's complicated and deadly relationship with uranium, from 1943 until 2009 -- and beyond. The people and their land were exploited and poisoned, with predictably lethal results, and neither state and federal governments, mining companies nor Native American advocates offered any help until the Navajo (and reporter Judy Pasternak) made a lot of noise. This is journalism at its best.

"They had little concept of its capacity to wreck their health until too late, when "yellow dirt" had crept into every aspect of their daily lives: their homes, their drinking water, their playgrounds, even their garbage dumps."

"This was the Navajo Way, the binding pact that wraps the whole world into one interconnected force -- spirits, humans, animals, plants, trees, water, rocks, and sky, all meant to bless and sustain one another."

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