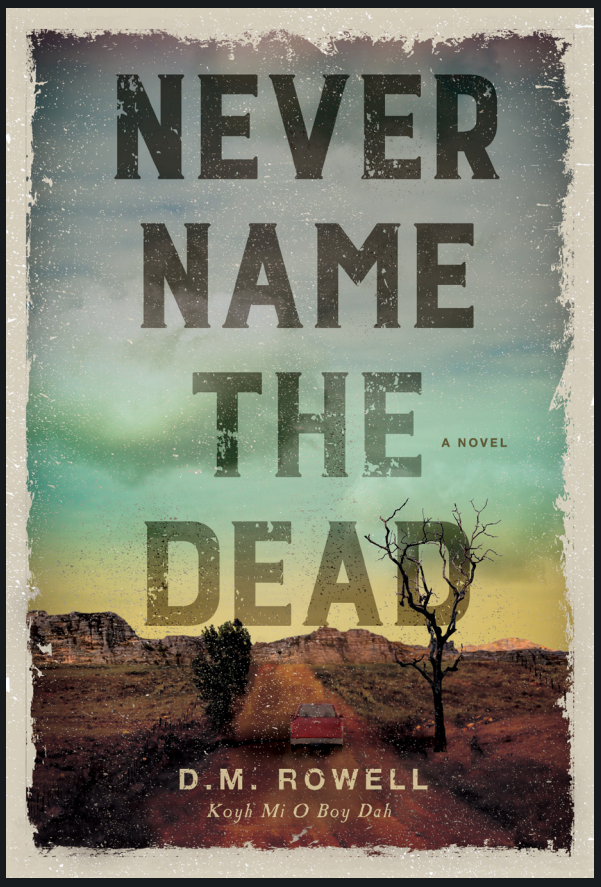
THE MUD SAWPOLE MYSTERIES • DAY ONE

Book Club Guide

Never Name the Dead

No one called her Mud in Silicon Valley. There, she was Mae, a high-powered professional who had left her Kiowa roots behind a decade ago. But a cryptic voice message from her grandfather, James Sawpole, telling her to come home sounds so wrong that she catches the next plane to Oklahoma. She never expected to be plunged into a web of theft, betrayal, and murder.



"[Never Name the Dead] may join the ranks of Native American books along the veins of Tony Hillerman and Anne Hillerman's Leaphorn/Chee mysteries."

— MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

"Your book is a treasure. Wishing you every success."

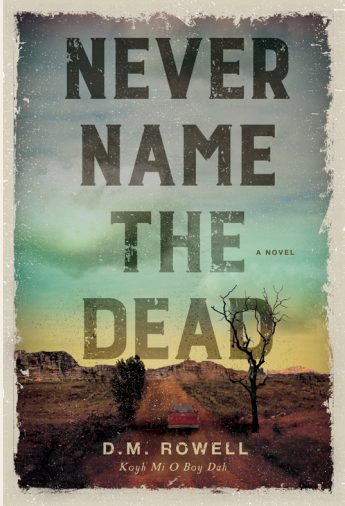
ANNE HILLERMAN
New York Times bestselling mystery author

Mud Sawpole's four-day spiritual quest begins.

WELCOME TO THE CONVERSATION

Get the Conversation Started.

Use these questions to explore Mud’s names, her life between cultures, the Oklahoma landscape, family responsibility, spiritual tradition, and the mystery at the center of the novel.



START HERE

Use this guide to explore Mud’s names, her life between cultures, the Oklahoma landscape, family responsibility, spiritual tradition, and the mystery at the center of the novel.

Conversation pathways
Identity and belonging
Family and obligation
Place and memory
Spirituality and intuition
Mystery, motive, and justice

READ TOGETHER • GO DEEPER

Discussion Questions

1) Mud Sawpole has three names: Mae, Mud, and Ahn Tsah Hye-gyah-daw. Discuss Mud’s names. How do they relate to the story?

2) Mud is mixed-race. Why is being Kiowa important to her?

3) Discuss Mud and Denny’s relationship. Do you have a similar one in your life?

4) How did the place and setting influence your reading of Never Name the Dead?

5) What do you think of Mae’s Silicon Valley business and life?

6) Is Mud a different person in her Silicon Valley life?

7) Why are Bernie’s calls important to the story?

8) What is the meaning of the novel’s title, Never Name the Dead?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS • CONTINUED

Following Mud’s Way

9) Was the Grandfather helpful to Mud?

10) Why is Mud’s trek to the Refuge important?

11) What did you think of Mud’s Grandfather’s interaction with the buffalo?

12) What do you think of Spirit Animals?

13) Do you think Mud is on a quest? Why?

14) Who did you think was the killer, and why?

15) Did you like blending a mystery with insights into Kiowa culture? Why?

HOST NOTE	There are no right answers. Invite readers to connect Mud’s choices with their own experiences of family, home, identity, and responsibility.

BEHIND THE STORY

Q&A with D. M. Rowell



Q: What inspired you to write Never Name the Dead, and how did you create your character Mud?

A: Since I was twelve devouring Trixie Belden mysteries, I knew that if I couldn't be Trixie solving mysteries, the next best thing would be writing mystery books. It took me over fifty years, but I am doing what I always wanted to do: write a mystery series.

Mixing insights about my Kiowa tribe's history and traditions into the mystery came naturally. I come from a long line of traditional storytellers and was greatly influenced by my Kiowa grandfather, C. E. Rowell. He was the tribe's historian, a traditional artist, and a master storyteller. His art and storytelling instilled a deep love and respect for my Kiowa heritage.

As I started Never Name the Dead, it was natural to make my main character Mud similar to my background: a professional woman with a traditional American Indian background and calling. The story was a fun way to educate people about the Kiowas. We're a small tribe getting smaller.

While I do focus a lot on the Kiowa side of my family, I wanted to also bring a piece of my mother's side into each story as well. I used my mom's name Mae and my grandmother's childhood nickname Mud for the main character. It was fun developing Mud's nickname through her Kiowa Naming Ceremony.

Q: In your author';s note, you write, "Although this is a work of fiction, the Kiowa customs and oral traditions shared are real....It is my hope that by adding a touch of Kiowa to my stories, it will help keep the culture alive." Can you say more about this?

A: I am extremely proud of my Kiowa heritage. I was fortunate to have my grandfather and several of his sisters and brother alive through my childhood. They were the first generation born on what had been the Kiowa, Comanche, Apache reservation. Like most Plains Indian tribes, we did not have books documenting our history, we had stories shared from one generation to the next; an oral memory chain.



C.E Rowell showing tribe members a story from one of the Kiowa calendars (1999)

My Grandfather, his sisters and brother shared Kiowa stories and songs with me from my earliest memories. The rhythm of the Kiowa language captivated me. The elders all used the old Plains Indian-style sign language unconsciously while speaking in Kiowa or English. In either language their hands flew in accompaniment to their words adding a hypnotic show to the already rhythmic sounds as they taught me about being Kiowa.

My Grandfather, C. E. Rowell, Adalhabakia was a Kiowa artist and recognized Tribal Elder, this meant that he was a man of distinction within the tribe, he knew the Kiowa history. Grandpa was the Tribe's historian. Most of my grandpa's art and stories came directly from the Kiowa deerskin calendars that chronicled the Kiowas from the late 1700s to early life on the reservation.

(cont'd next page)

BEHIND THE STORY • CONTINUED

A: Our tribe was one of four on the Great Plains that complemented oral history with a written record; pictograph drawings of a significant event effecting the tribe sketched above a winter or summer marking. Grandpa would bring out the calendars and captivate us with stories from the past. The tribe, the people, the individuals came alive through my grandpa's stories, calendars and art.

After a storytelling, grandpa pointed at me with his chin in the style of the old ones and decreed, "You. You will keep these stories alive. You are next." Our eyes locked, my body trembled with the truth of it. I had a responsibility. Even now at sixty-three I remember that moment vividly.

It is my turn, my responsibility to share our stories. Blending Kiowa culture with my mystery is one way I am trying to share Kiowa stories. I hope readers find *Never Name the Dead* a fun read while they learn a bit about the Kiowa Tribe, our language, history, traditions and customs.

Q: **Did you know how the novel would end before you started writing it, or did you make many changes along the way?**

A: I discovered the ending as I wrote. I'm not a planner, for me the story plays out as I write. My starting point is determining the murder and why. After knowing that, I can begin to write. It's fun for me to discover where the characters take me each chapter.

I captured the core story in my first draft. In the following drafts I added twists and turns to deepen the mystery. I really enjoy a good mystery and wanted mine to be a puzzle as long as possible. I hope readers don't realize who did it until the last chapters.

Q: **How was the novel's title chosen, and what does it signify for you?**

A: My Name is Mud was the novel's original title. I liked the dual meaning, Mud is always in a muddy mess, but the publishing team was concerned that the title would be seen as a children's book instead of a murder mystery. Working together the team came up with Never Name the Dead, taking the words directly from a line in the novel.

In the Kiowa culture once a person dies, you're not to say their name in fear of keeping the spirit bound to earth rather than transitioning on to meet the Creator, Daw'Kee. The title works well with the story since a Kiowa elder is killed and the characters are trying to show respect to the dead man and their Kiowa customs and beliefs.

While I resisted the title change initially, I have come to like Never Name the Dead as the title. For me the title brands it a Kiowa story. It's a fitting start to the series.

"It is my hope that by adding a touch of Kiowa to my stories, it will help keep the culture alive."

D. M. ROWELL
KOYH MI O BOY DAH