

Broken Paths, Shared Blood: The Raintree Sisters' Journey

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ABSTRACT:

Broken Paths, Shared Blood: The Raintree Sisters' Journey delves into the emotional and cultural odyssey of April and Cheryl Raintree, the Métis protagonists of Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's acclaimed novel *In Search of April Raintree*. This study explores how the sisters' divergent experiences in the foster care system fracture their paths yet bind them through shared heritage and enduring love. It examines the impact of systemic racism, identity denial, and intergenerational trauma, while also highlighting the resilience and strength rooted in Indigenous sisterhood. Through a close reading of their intertwined narratives, the abstract underscores how Mosionier's work offers a powerful lens into the complexities of Métis identity, the scars of displacement, and the healing potential of familial bonds.

Keywords: survivor, bodies, indigenous, sisterhood.

Canada is well known for cultural fusion. Multiculturalism is not only the government policy but also the given reality. One could see the flowering of the British, French and American cultures. The latest to flower and assert is the Native Culture. Each group has been producing its literature and has been busy asserting and preserving its identity. Amongst the Native writers, a separate small canon of the women Native writers exist whose writings are a blatant critique of the mainstream White Canada. Long unheard, often brutally silenced, and more often than not spoken for by white Canadians, Canadian Native women are increasingly correcting the misdefinitions and defining themselves, writing their own stories. In doing so, they provide an indication of potential directions towards a world in which oppression on the basis of sex, race, or class does not have to be a given. Native Canadian women writers in Canada can only provide these indications of hope for the future from a particular place in time and understanding. This place is near the end, or the beginning of the end, of an examination of the forces of oppression. As Native women writers locate the roots of their oppression on the basis of race, sex, and class in Canada's colonial history. They also begin to find the means of changing the system which perpetuates that oppression.

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier (1949 -) is another Canadian métis author, who is most notable for her novel *In Search of April Raintree*. The novel is also autobiographical and unlike Campbell, Culleton wrote for herself. Her book served as a catharsis so that she could finally come to terms with her personal history. The story included traumatic incidents from her own family life, including the suicide of two of her sisters and her own experience of being raped. A revised edition of *In Search of April Raintree*, was published in 1984 with the title *April Raintree*. The main difference between the two is that *April Raintree* contains a more graphic rape scene. Mosionier's second novel, published in 2000, is titled *In a Shadow of Evil*. It is set in the Canadian Rockies, and follows the life of a young girl going

through family trauma and foster care. The novel was inspired by Mosionier's molestation by a priest at age three.

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier is well known and highly respected for her first novel, *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), which received serious critical attention and has been widely taught at the university level. A toned-down version for high school students truncated one of the most vivid racially inflected rape scenes written in English. In this second novel, *In the Shadow of Evil*, Culleton Mosionier revisits some familiar territory, although the emphasis on Aboriginal experience is reduced. She tells the story of a conflicted sister relationship, this time from the perspective and narrative voice of the darker-skinned younger child; the incompetent, alcoholic mother; the untrustworthy foster care system; and the main character's long struggle to undo the effects of betrayal and loss.

I admired *In Search of April Raintree*, enjoyed its tight and complex structure, and was moved by its powerful articulation of the minds and experiences of both Cheryl and April. This novel, too, has a story – a very important one, one that is not often told – the story of how the evil of sexual violation grips a child, even though she is a “survivor,” and, throughout her life, keeps her in its “shadow.” Culleton Mosionier shows how this evil is both psychologically internalized and externally manifested – a powerful metaphor for how the sexual predator steals the joy of a child victim's life.

Culleton Mosionier somewhat complicates the structure of first person narrative as the novel opens with an unidentified evil voice planning a tormenting cat-and-mouse game with the unsuspecting object of his attention. A second narrative opening lyrically describes the members (with names) of a wolf pack enacting their free lives. The novel proper is narrated in the first person by a woman who, although plagued with insecurity from an early trauma, is now a successful writer with a loving husband and a cherished son. She tells the story of the unwelcome visit of her estranged sister and, soon after, the mysterious disappearance of her husband and child. Flashbacks of her life as a sexually abused foster child, a young woman, and a writer of children's books are interspersed with the ongoing unravelling of her life as sinister events accrue around her. Her only supports are a wise and kind Aboriginal couple who are her neighbors and a ghostly wolf that appears at key moments. Despite the elements of the “thriller” here, the story occurs almost entirely within the mind of the main character, and the tension and drama associated with that genre are absent. The narrator tells us in detail about her actions and thoughts, both in the present and in the past. The latter sections are not presented as memories but relivings, and the movement is slow, often repetitive. Set against the generally uninflected voice of the narrator, none of the scenes from childhood, adolescence, or her present adulthood give us much feeling for who she is, why her husband loves her, or why her elder sister remains devoted to her. It is hard to imagine the children's stories she'd write.

While the autobiographical narrator may appear to offer great intimacy and emotional authenticity to the story, the mind of this narrator single character must be intense and textured. The author must be ruthlessly critical of dead air. Here is an example of the mental processes of the narrator in a moment of despair:

"My first thought when I woke the following morning was to wish that I didn't have to go through another day. And why should I wait? I now had no doubt that Peter and Todd were dead, so I really didn't have to wait for the police to find their bodies. And I had never cared for the ritual of funerals. I knew, too, that Peter's parents would claim the bodies once they were found, so they could bury them too. Inside the small enclosure of the cabin I paced restlessly, just as I had when I was younger and felt trapped and needed to be free." (123)

This interior voice does not sound, to me, like the actual thought/feeling processes of an anguished and desperate person. The voice is flattened, reporting the mental movements rather than living them. Given the importance of this story and the real knowledge the author demonstrates about the reality she is portraying, how is it that the novel fails its readers? As I read, I found myself wondering repeatedly, “Where is the editor?” Almost every writer acknowledges the assistance of these gifted first readers, their keen eye for the clunky line, the wooden dialogue, or the drag of a too-long description. This text is free of irritating errors, typos, and the like. But the weaknesses in it suggest either that editorial advice was not given or that the author refused to take it. A significant representation of a too common life experience is muffled here. This numbing feels like loss and waste, especially given the strength and courage it takes to write a novel of this substance. *In the Shadow of Evil* is gripping almost in spite of itself: the author knows much about the menace and the power of evil and its mercilessness pervades the novel. There seems to be a conundrum: to me the flattened prose dulls the effect of emotional tension; yet I am left with an overwhelming sense of the narrator’s damaged spirit. Perhaps the narrative style reflects the defensive player that the narrator exudes in order to insulate herself against the pain and horror of the past. If this is so, Culleton Mosioneir will have to find ways to signal her intention more clearly. Her work deserves it.

Like *In the Shadow of Evil* Jeannette Armstrong’s novel, *Whispering in Shadows*, also uses the image of “shadow”; however, to Armstrong the force of shadows is not evil but part of the necessary world – something not to be feared but, rather, accepted, taken in, and changed. Armstrong’s work as a poet and an activist permeates the language and content of this novel, which reads as an assemblage of the main character Penny’s chronological narratives: her letters to sisters, lovers, and friends, and her diary entries. The novel is even formatted like a prose poem, with much white space, abrupt shifts from dialogue to Penny’s italicized self-talk, to diary entries, and to bare description. The fragments hang together, each making the narrative more intelligible, the emotional reality of the character more dense. Penny, whose own name seems foreign to her until she hears it in her great-grandmother Susapeen’s voice – “Paen-aye” – is presented as a speaking/thinking presence and as a character intimately known by the narrator. Penny is an artist, and some of the novel’s most effective segments involve her musing and puzzling over her effort to get the colour of snow just right on her canvas, or her grappling with the relation of art to ethics and the marketplace. Armstrong’s narrative takes us through Penny’s life, first as a young woman, then through her childhood memories, and finally through the memories of her grandmothers. Direct narrative makes us feel the sting of the pesticides and the weight of the apples Penny picks at her summer job. The materiality of the bodily experience is so strong here that I was reminded of Robert Frost’s “After Apple Picking.” Penny becomes an activist in environmental and indigenous resistance movements which take her, in one of the novel’s most powerful sections, into the Chiapas guerrilla movements. Armstrong presents a thorough analysis of the interconnections of politics, economics, and ecology in the strangulation of the earth’s peoples and the consumption of its resources. Her despair at seeing the marketing of her art as inextricable from a global system that consumes the many to support the few leads her to destroy her paintings and to quit making art.

Unfortunately, much of the political information comes to us as polemic rather than in the dramatic forms of the apple picking or the Chiapas visit. Penny, a single mother, continues with her world-travelling activism until she exhausts herself and returns home with her children to the reserve, her family, and the earth. This trajectory of movement from a centre outwards and then back is not uncommon among First Nations authors; however, in significant ways, Armstrong’s character is

dissimilar from the abused and neglected children depicted in some other Aboriginal novels. Penny is raised in a loving and strong extended family, and she is capable to taking on a wide range of experiences and making numerous decisions. The harm done to her is a byproduct of the larger injury foisted upon the earth and its peoples by the greed and blind consumption of global capitalism. We are meant, for example, to connect the cancer that strikes her to the poisonous chemicals used by the apple growers. And the metaphoric cancer of environmental destruction and cultural genocide shifts back and forth, from foreground to background, in Penny's life.

Whispering in Shadows, like *In the Shadow of Evil*, raises a profound question: how can one resist the forces arrayed against the earth and still maintain a life that is connected to the earth. Everyone who struggles with the contradictions of contemporary life will feel grateful for Armstrong's insight and her generosity as well as for her unflinching assessment of power and money and how they work.

Armstrong's prose is rich, engaging, and crisp. Her spiritual and philosophical musings, along with her intricate assessment of activism and its costs to her family, make even the lecture-like sections of the novel affecting. This balance falters only when someone rails about how immigration works for global capital, or what effect tourism has on local economies, or why mass industrialism paralyzes creativity. Even these segments never go on too long. Armstrong seems to trust her reader much more in *Whispering* than she does in *Slash* (Theytus, 1990). She presents herself here as a fully mature author whole-heartedly engaged with her characters and the world in which we all live.

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