

# RIVER WOMAN BY KATHERENA VERMETTE BOOK REVIEW

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## BOOK REVIEW

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In her second poetry book *River Woman*, Governor General's award-winning poet, Katherena Vermette delves into the strength and vulnerability found in nature and in love. Born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Métis writer from Treaty One territory creates a decolonial narrative in *river women* with personal and politically charged poems that weave stories of love, loss, and trauma with water through land. In *River Woman* healing happens with the natural world.

In this collection of poems, Vermette portrays women and rivers as one in the same by connecting Indigenous women to water. They are both strong and resilient and are both subject to colonial violence that seeks to control or limit them. A river is centred on movement and change, as is a woman's everchanging role in contemporary society.

The collection of poems is presented in three parts; the first drawing the reader in with personal poems that address trauma and relationships, where Vermette's voice grows in power and clarity with each poem. The second part focuses in on relationships with nature, with most of the poems connecting Vermette's identity to land and water. In the second section, almost every poem is presented with the word 'river' in the name and with an orality to the text that makes the words flow on the page resembling a river. The poems pour into one another like tributaries; for example, 'riverdawn,' 'riverevening,' 'riverlove,' and 'riverstory.' The final section of the collection is called 'An Other' as opposed to using the word 'another'. The wording draws attention to the way colonization 'others' Indigenous women, as well as how colonization 'others' parts of the natural world that are exploited, like rivers. She is calling out the systems of colonization that historically and continually dehumanize Indigenous peoples with the wording.

The anticolonial theme comes to light overtly in the final section. Vermette's poems concerning stories of history and land and in 'New Year's Eve 2013' she writes, 'truth is a seed / planted deep / if you want to get it / you have to dig.'<sup>1</sup> The truth she is writing about is the alternate history, a different perspective from the dominant colonial lens. It's a history where Indigenous people aren't 'discovered' by European explorers and a history that doesn't ignore missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. It's a history that doesn't ignore the campaign of dehumanization and genocide by the

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<sup>1</sup> Katherena Vermette, *River Woman* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2018) p.63.

Canadian Government that remain in subtle ways today.

The timelessness of nature is expressed throughout the collection and the meaning gains more power from reading the entire collection together. Each poem builds on Vermette's personal feelings and emotions. At first it feels like a love story, a broken one, like the name of the very first poem in the collection, 'Pieces.' However, as you hear Vermette writing to her loved ones it grows into a feeling of a larger movement, one of love of the land and the natural world.

One of the most compelling poems in the collection is 'This River,' about the Red River which flows through Winnipeg. It is a river that comes alive in the poem. The river is a powerful female force that is the reason for historical settlement in the area, first by Indigenous peoples and then later with the arrival of settlers. In the poem the river is 'a dump,' she's 'in a mood,' and a 'trickster' but at the same time 'a masterpiece.' The river is part of the land that will outlive all of us and the conflicts surrounding her; 'she was here before you / and she will be here / long after we've all / gone.'<sup>2</sup>

Vermette won a Canadian Screen Award for Best Short with her National Film Board documentary named after the poem, *This River*.<sup>3</sup> The documentary adds invaluable context to the poem that might otherwise be unknown about police inaction for missing members of Indigenous communities. Volunteers use boats to dredge the river with small nets looking for any clues of their missing loved ones; because the river

is known as a place where someone can disappear, but it is not a place the police actively search. Context is vital in this collection. Having knowledge of what historical and ongoing systems of colonialization and bias looks like in Canada; both historically and how it remains today is imperative to the understanding of these poems. Vermette speaks to the treatment of Indigenous peoples and more specifically Métis people regarding to 'blended' identity and land. She writes about her own loss of a sibling and a feeling of responsibility to find him.

The collection ends with direct and tangible anticolonial themes, from current street names in the city to the land Europeans stole centuries ago. Vermette uses a strong voice to write poems that thoughtfully linger. They show nature as something that can heal both itself and people through the timelessness of the river.

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<sup>2</sup> Vermette, *River Woman*, p.53.

<sup>3</sup> *This River*, dir. By Erika MacPherson & Katherena Vermette (National Film Board of Canada, 2016).