



Firekeeper's Daughter

Written by Angeline Boulley
Henry Holt, 2021, 496 pp.
ISBN: 978-1-250-76656-4

“I am a frozen statue of a girl in the woods. Only my eyes move, darting from the gun to their startled expression” (p. 1). The first lines of books are important because they are meant to hook the reader and Boulley’s *Firekeeper’s Daughter* does just that. With this first line, she hits the ground running, grabbing readers and keeping them hanging on as we navigate this story to figure out what has led to mysterious deaths.

The story follows Daunis Fontaine, a recent high school graduate, who has decided to forgo her university dreams to attend a local college in order to stay at home and help her aging grandmother who is in the hospital. Although Daunis’ father was a member of the local Ojibwe tribe in Michigan, her mother is not. Daunis’ mother was not allowed to list the father on the birth certificate, leaving Daunis as unenrolled in the tribe she holds close to her heart. Besides her step-brother Levi, Daunis has a myriad of other family members in the tribe whom she interacts with. Daunis also follows the faith of the Ojibwe tribe as every morning, she prays to the Creator, “Prayers begin with offering semaa and sharing my Spirit name, clan, and where I am from” (p. 5). Although she is not an enrolled member of the tribe, she still honors the traditions and beliefs. Throughout the book readers see her deep connections to tribal belief systems, even as she at times feels like she’s on the outside looking in.

Set at the border of Canada and Michigan in the town of Sault Ste. Marie, where hockey is played by everyone, Daunis meets a new addition to the local hockey team named Jaime. As the story progresses, Daunis realizes that Jaime is an undercover agent for the FBI, and is recruited as a confidential informant to investigate meth that is being distributed and made with what the FBI assumes is a plant sacred to Ojibwe culture and used in traditional medicines. The FBI needs her help identifying the mystery ingredient. Ron, one of the FBI agents, states that “There’s a pattern of distribution...Similar batches of meth show up in hockey towns and on reservations in the Great Lakes Area. We’re trying to identify the manufacturers, the ones cooking it” (p. 107). Boulley handles this tragedy with care and attention, taking the reader into the darker parts of tribal life.

To call this book a rollercoaster is an understatement. Just when you think you see where it’s going and who the culprit is, it takes a spin and a dip, and you’re off on a new pathway. Boulley deftly crafts a story that interweaves aspects of a thriller with a coming-of-age YA novel, incorporating history, culture and lessons about the Ojibwe language and culture. Boulley exemplifies this dynamic through the concept of madoodiswan: “There is ceremony inside the madoodiswan. Healing. Returning to balance. Madoodiswan means ‘Mother Earth’s womb.’ You enter your mother and leave reborn” (p 326).

There aren't a lot of other books quite like *Firekeeper's Daughter*. But two novels that also incorporate mystery with Indigenous beliefs are *Elatsoe*, by Darcie Little Badger and Rovina Cai (2020) and *The Things She's Seen*, by Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel Kwaymullina (2019). Fans of *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999) and *Yolk* by Mary H.K. Choi (2021) will find another book with a strong female protagonist to love and keep around for many rereads and to share with others. There are many themes at play throughout the book, such as the role of the insider/outsider that make this book a great cornerstone for many classroom discussions.

Firekeeper's Daughter is already appearing on many "best of" lists and YA book of the month clubs around the country and won the 2022 Printz award as the best written book for teens in the U.S. Boulley's novel comes to life with such vividness because she is a member of the Sault Ste. Marie Chippewa Indians. Boulley says that she had the idea for the book for many years, and wrote in her spare time. She knew that there wasn't much representation for Indigenous women, especially in the YA book market, so she wanted to create a story to share their experiences. *Firekeeper's Daughter* is her debut novel, and will soon be on Netflix.

References

Boulley, Angeline – 1 NYT Bestseller. (n.d.). <https://angelineboulley.com/aboutangeline>.

Egan, E. (2021, April 1). It takes gumption to work on a novel for 10 Years. Ask Angeline Boulley. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/01/books/review/firekeepers-daughter-angeline-boulley.html>.

Erik Goen, Dallas, TX

© 2021 by Erik Goen



WOW Review, Volume XIV, Issue 1 by World of Words is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. Based on work by Erik Goen at <https://wowlit.org/on-line-publications/review/xiv-1/5/>