
Angeline Boulley. *Firekeeper's Daughter*. Henry Holt and Company, 2021. 494 pp. ISBN: 9781250766564.

<https://us.macmillan.com/books/9781250766571/firekeepersdaughter>

Toward the end of Angeline Boulley's riveting YA novel *Firekeeper's Daughter*, Perry, the young cousin of protagonist Daunis Firekeeper, worries about her "auntie" Daunis going off to college. "Is college like a boarding school?" Perry wonders (484), declaring that at the "boarding schools for Anishinaabem... the government took kids even when moms and dads said no," and the kids "got punished if they didn't follow school rules" (485). "Kids couldn't speak Anishinaabemowin and they couldn't go to ceremonies," Perry announces with awe and horror (485). She then "points defiantly at her own chest as she declares, 'Indanishinaabem'" (485). Perry's defiance—her very ability to proudly declare "I speak Anishinaabemowin" in her language—is a powerful expression of what her relatives and generations of Anishinaabeg before her have made and continue to make possible for Anishinaabe children. Daunis's Auntie Teddie Firekeeper has just taught Perry and her twin about the trauma of the boarding schools; long before this lesson, she and other relatives have offered Anishinaabe teachings and language that enable the children to defy centuries of settler colonial attacks on their traditions, language, relations, and lives.

Though Daunis Firekeeper is *Firekeeper's Daughter's* unforgettable protagonist, I begin this review with her young relative's capacity for power in relation to language and community because Daunis's force as a character accumulates by way of relationality. We first encounter eighteen-year-old Daunis during her pre-morning-run ritual, in which Boulley immediately introduces us to the forms of knowledge, carefully taught by her elders, that guide her. As she stretches, Daunis offers a prayer to one of the seven grandfathers: "teachings about living a good life" ... "Humility. Respect. Honesty. Bravery. Wisdom. Love. Truth" (166). She then silently identifies each muscle she stretches: "I want an edge over the other college freshmen in my Human Anatomy class this fall" (5). The seven grandfathers, we learn later, guide her alongside the "seven steps of the scientific method" that her late Uncle David taught her: "observe, question, research, hypothesize, experiment, analyze, conclude" (202). She ends her morning run at EverCare, an elder-care facility which currently houses her grandmother on her white mother's side, GrandMary, whom Daunis visits nearly every day since her Uncle David died; GrandMary seems to slip further and further away. Here, she also regularly connects with many Anishinaabe elders. Her next stop is the ice rink, where as a former player for the idolized Sault Ste. Marie Junior A-league hockey team—the

Superiors or “Supes”—Daunis joins the team (including her brother, Levi) in their weekly open skate with local kids. Her nieces and Auntie are a part of the skating ritual; the kids’ exuberant joy reverberates off the page as Daunis swings them around on the ice with her scarf, just like her late father used to do with her.

As the story progresses, Boulley peels back increasing layers of Daunis’s intricate relationship to her family and community, a community that includes Anishinaabeg past, present, and future, as well as the lands and waters of Sugar Island and the Michigan Upper Peninsula (U.P.) that have been home to the Anishinaabeg for millennia and that ground Daunis in her tribe’s history and future. If Daunis had a motto, it might best be elaborated by Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and author Leanne Betasmoke Simpson’s definition of “Indigenous freedom”:

I want my great-grandchildren to be able to fall in love with every piece of our territory. I want their bodies to carry with them every story, every song, every piece of poetry hidden in our Nishnaabeg language. I want them to be able to dance through their lives with joy. I want them to live without fear because they know respect, because they know in their bones what respect feels like. I want them to live without fear because they have a pristine environment with clear waterways that will provide them with the physical and emotional sustenance to uphold their responsibilities to the land, their families, their communities, and their nations. I want them to be valued, heard, and cherished by our communities.

I want my great-great-grandchildren and their great-great-grandchildren to be able to live as Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg unharrassed and undeterred in our homeland. (7-8)

Though young and trying to determine the contours of her future, as well as facing layers of tragedy and deception in her community, Daunis remembers that her actions now have the power to affect many generations to come, and this thought increasingly guides her as she is thrust into a series of events that bring danger, loss, heartache, and intense romance. While Daunis carries the emotions that anyone who has been a teenager will recognize, she consistently evinces a keen, steady awareness of how to rein in her reactions to deceit and violence and to stay the course (or break the rules) in conversation with Anishinaabe thought and practice. Daunis’s consistent rituals that connect her to place and kin are a choice, and they provide practical tools for determining what truth and knowledge mean when the stakes of uncertainty become increasingly high.

Such practices serve Daunis particularly well when she witnesses a tragic murder and is thrust into an FBI investigation. By centering the novel on Daunis as participant in a federal investigation, one chosen for her knowledge of both “science” and her “culture” (110), Bouley expertly and often subtly draws our attention to what Stephanie Lemenager has described as “Euro-Westerners’ longtime extractive passion for Indigenous practices and thought” (103). Daunis quickly realizes that, although the investigation provides an opportunity to seek justice for her friend Lily and to help “Nish children,” the investigators (despite being Native themselves) will never understand the depths of her community: “It’s their investigation, but it’s my life,” she realizes, and at one point she chides undercover officers Ron and Jamie: “It’s like... you haven’t earned our stories” (170, 217). The separation between investigation and life becomes blurred by Daunis’s shifting relationship with the young undercover officer who poses as a Supes player and goes by the name of Jamie Johnson. Throughout their relationship and the investigation, one of Daunis’s most striking characteristics is her growing awareness of precisely when and how to share or hide information, as well as when to let down her guard and when to be tough. Following her late Uncle David’s example, she organizes and documents, but she soon learns when scientific precision falls short of truth and when to offer only so much information to the FBI. By the end of the novel, Daunis learns more precisely how the investigation falls short of healing her community, something she has sensed all along. Floored by the lack of resolution that the criminal justice system brings to herself and her community despite the fact that some end up behind bars, Daunis attends a generational gathering involving hundreds of women that promises healing in the face of systemic lack of accountability.

Like Louise Erdrich’s iconic Fleur Pillager, Bouley’s Daunis Firekeeper sears the reader: I can’t stop thinking about her. I find myself want to emulate her smoldering power, her immense care and thoughtfulness, her constantly looking to past and future to determine how to act. In *Tracks*, set in the early twentieth century, Fleur Pillager’s storming desperation as the majority of her kin die of smallpox and their land is “sold and divided” ends with a careful, methodical calculation that brings revenge but ultimately forces her to leave her community (Erdrich, 290). Daunis seems almost an extension and revision of Fleur for the contemporary world. Daunis’s approaches are methodical, scientific, patient: Uncle David, the high-school science teacher, taught her to “sequence the order of tasks” (201) so as not to become overwhelmed by seeming chaos. She walks on cedar at her best friend’s funeral and offers tobacco to the river during the most turbulent crossings; these rituals likewise equip her to move deliberately, to slow down, to take time to assess and calculate, even in the face of

extreme danger and tender, consuming love. Anishinaabe methods are, Boulley suggests, scientific: it is no surprise that, by the end of the novel, Daunis has made plans to continue her education at both a renowned ethnobotany program and summer internships with the Traditional Medicine Program at home. She also handles her relationship with Jamie with immense care and love; this relationship binds her even closer to her values and community, rather than leading her away. Boulley drives home throughout the book that Daunis's clarity in the face of emotional turbulence is earned, carefully cultivated in ritual and relationality.

Boulley indicates that Anishinaabe kids and young adults, and particularly young women, need such methods at their disposal to handle the loss, death, violence, and drug use that are a part of this tribe's story, but importantly by no means the whole story. The novel's denouement and the investigation's end leave us wondering for whom justice was really sought. Attuned to Anishinaabe relational accountability in the face of the American federal law enforcement and judicial system's extractive, single-minded approach to holistic problems, *Firekeeper's Daughter* complements academic monographs such as John Borrows's *Law's Indigenous Ethics* (2019) and Sarah Deer's *The Beginning and End of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America* (2015). It also joins a burgeoning world of Indigenous YA literature rooted in the power of relations, traditional teachings, and Indigenous languages, most notably Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017).

I began this review by drawing attention to Daunis's young relative; I'll end it with attention to her elders. Two of the most moving moments in the novel occur when Daunis's elders combine forces to support her, in one instance by providing attestations to her tribal identity and in the other by assisting her as she attempts to escape life-threatening danger. In both cases, the elders team up to save the day, because they *know* Daunis, know her truth, in every sense of the word. Reciprocity carries a life-saving realism in this book that reminds readers how relations can mean survival. Boulley has given us a great gift in allowing us to get to know Daunis and all her relations, and has laid a path here to truth via ethical relationships. She has made a story of drugs, deception, and crime a deeply moving story of how to live with care. I can only hope for more stories of the U.P. from storyteller Angeline Boulley.

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