

Cherie Dimaline. *An Anthology of Monsters: How Story Saves Us from Anxiety*. University of Alberta Press, 2023. 42 pp. ISBN 978-1-77212-682-2

<https://www.uap.ualberta.ca/titles/1050-9781772126822-anthology-of-monsters>

I fully admit that I thought Métis writer Cherie Dimaline's *An Anthology of Monsters* was, well, a book of monster stories. But the slim book uses the metaphor of monsters to, as the subtitle suggests, understand "How Story Saves Us from Our Anxiety." By using "our," Dimaline invites us to her kitchen table by acknowledging how many of us have "anxiety, panic, and all their asshole acquaintances" (n.p); this is a communal journey, not a solitary one. Dimaline perceptively asks, "Why are we so mean to ourselves? What is it about anxiety that makes us so full of empathy and understanding for others but so decidedly evil to ourselves?" (14). Dimaline uses stories to create a path so we can better accept ourselves, to investigate "how our anxiety uses stories against us, how we can create stories to fight back, and how life is basically an anthology of both" (40). In other words, Dimaline is calling for both a resistance to anxiety and the use of storytelling tools learn to live with anxiety. In other words, is it possible to become kin with anxiety?

This push and pull between the collective and the individual dealing with anxiety are key to Dimaline's thought process in *An Anthology*, which stems from her 2022 CLC Kreisel Lecture (you can watch the lecture here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-tFpRFldgM>), published in book form by the University of Alberta Press. The book, featuring illustrations by Jill Stanton of a woman about to set fire to an overwhelmingly large pile of sticks, is broken into sections chronicling Dimaline's journey with anxiety. She begins by recounting her panic attack when she was seven as she prepares for her first communion (wryly noting that it showed her "relationship with the Catholic Church wasn't going to work out" (6)). She becomes more and more nervous, worried about messing things up: "What if I pee my pants in front of everyone" or "What if I take the Eucharist and then throw up the Eucharist, full exorcist-style?" (7). Dimaline recalls how her perception changed, like looking down a cardboard tube with the voice in her head suggesting "no big deal, Psssst. Maybe you're dying" (7). Dimaline manages to attend her first communion but is left with the worry that another panic attack (though she didn't have the ability to name it) would happen again. Dimaline copes with this panic by craving patterns and moving things to create a sense of control in her life. She also becomes an avid reader to "experience life from a sense of safety," finding stories that echoed her own experiences with anxiety in her early twenties (10). She wonders how her life would have changed if she had access to stories like the ones she writes for young adults like *Funeral Songs for a Dying Girl* (2023) about "a halfbreed girl from the Georgian Bay who could throw a mean right hook, who lived with panic attacks instead of dreams?" (10).

Dimaline credits Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) for fostering her love of story and for encouraging Dimaline to stand on her own two feet. Maracle perceptively told Dimaline that she could "hear your grandmother in your work. So you stand for your grandmother" (26). Dimaline begins to realize that we may not know the path we're on, but "We need to trust ourselves and those who came before us to break that path," like "[Maracle] did for so many of us" (27), a handing down that Dimaline does for so many Indigenous writers. Dimaline also spoke to an Elder based in Saskatchewan who stressed the importance of story, inspiring Dimaline to write her community's narrative. This advice reminds Dimaline "that I am part of something bigger, an important part of a larger narrative. . .that I am part of these specific and resilient people, all the way back in time rolling up to today. I am enough" (18). It is gratifying to Dimaline that she can use stories in the way

that her grandmother and her grandmother's sisters suggested: to hold anxiety at a distance as a story, "to not let [anxiety] run amok as I grew up" (24).

One of these stories Dimaline's relatives use is the Rougarou, the shapeshifting Métis werewolf-like creature, a being I've written about and teach about in my Indigenous horror class. Dimaline continues her use of the Rougarou as a metaphor for colonization, resource extraction, and gendered violence but also stresses that the creature is real and not relegated to "folklore." She uses the Rougarou in *An Anthology* to realize that "uncertainty does not always mean doom or chaos" (21). The Rougarou can be charming and scary "to teach and protect the community, even if his ways are harsh" (23), a way to think about how to live with anxiety.

Dimaline uses *An Anthology* to become kin with her anxiety monsters, a gift she shares with us. She also stresses the importance of balance despite the danger of "sharp rocks but we can choreograph joy and accomplishments over their edges" (36). She reminds us of RuPaul's maxim "It's none of my business what other people think of me" (41) and invites us to make our own anthology of monsters to help with anxiety but to remember to "celebrate ourselves, sing the song, write the story of us" (42).

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