



## REVIEW

**Alicia Elliott. *And Then She Fell: A Novel*. Double Day Canada, 2023. 333 pp. ISBN: 9780385684101.**

<https://transatlanticagency.com/clients/speakers/alicia-elliott/>

Alicia Elliott's *And Then She Fell* is a riveting debut novel that follows her transformative memoir *A Mind Spread Out on the Ground*. Much like the literary matriarchs, such as Beth Brant and Lee Maracle, who made way for Indigenous intellectual thought and whose work transcended western literary genres, Elliott's prose similarly offers emotional depth that weaves storytelling with the everyday contemporary realities of Indigenous womanhood. As a novel defined as realist fiction on the cusp of fantasy and horror, *And Then She Fell* is a brilliant "wonderwork" as it shapeshifts between realism and the fantastical (Justice 2018). Through universal themes of intergenerational trauma, daily experiences of racism, language loss, and navigating the early days of motherhood amidst colonial violence, *And Then She Fell*, is a poignant reminder of the matrilineal roots that bind generations of Haudenosaunee women and girls.

*And Then She Fell* begins with a scene where the protagonist Alice is a teenager babysitting and watching Disney's *Pocahontas*. Offering a glimpse into the portals between the physical and the spiritual world and a past-present-future continuum, Pocahontas speaks to Alice from the television, reminding Alice that Pocahontas's real name is Matoaka and that she was only a 10-year-old girl when she met John Smith and was captured by the English. In this exchange Alice reflects on the connection between Matoaka's fate and the fate of Indigenous women all around her:

Maybe the spirit of a little Powhatan girl really was trapped in this movie, inside a story that was never hers, stuck replaying the lies other people told about her over and over. And maybe she really was trying to connect with Alice, another Native girl who felt in many ways trapped in the stories people told about her. In this way, Pocahontas brought to mind every woman Alice had ever known: her aunt with her seed beads and bruises, her mother with her bloodshot eyes and constant work, her friends with her push up bras and

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pushy boyfriends. Herself. Women like porcelain dolls with hairline cracks trying to smile and smile as hammers came down all around. When Alice thought about it, even the Haudenosaunee Creation Story wasn't free from this grief; in some versions Sky Woman only fell to earth because her angry husband had pushed her. Was it always like that for women? (Elliot 18)

The themes of Indigenous women's erasure, displacement, and misrepresentation become core threads throughout the novel, and Alice contemplates how dominant versions of the Haudenosaunee Creation Story might also be wrapped up in patriarchal thought. Alice, a fictional character, who much like in her reflections on Pocohontas, offers resonance to many Indigenous women, especially those entering the early days of motherhood. Through the character Alice, Elliot offers a humbling connection to the varied experiences of Indigenous women and new mothers. As a Haudenosaunee scholar of Indigenous maternal theory and Indigenous women's literatures, my reading of *And Then She Fell* can be understood through Dian Million's (2009) Felt Theory, a "model that understands emotional knowledges and analysis as informed by lived experience" (54). I was not unlike Alice, in the days of early motherhood where I felt constantly judged as both Indigenous woman and single mother. Similar sentiments are threaded throughout other Indigenous women's fiction such as Katherena Vermette's *The Break* (2016) and Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983). Indeed, these narratives offer gentle places for Indigenous readers to land, holding them softly by offering empowering stories that demand the humanity within literary representations of Indigenous women. Like the felt experiences of reading Vermette and Culleton's novels, my journey alongside Alice in *And Then She Fell* was simultaneously affirming and empowering.

My experiences as an Indigenous student, young mother, and Haudenosaunee scholar were also not unlike Alice, whose struggles with self-doubt were justified by the anti-Indigenous racism and sexism that seemed to follow her every move. Alice was married to a non-Indigenous professor studying Mohawk culture and language, who was seemingly extractive in his need for Alice's support. Requesting she attend faculty gatherings with him, Alice found herself in non-Indigenous settings where respectability politics and anti-Indigenous sentiments were intertwined. One such gathering was a dinner party hosted by the Chair of the English Department. In a move to test Alice's knowledge about Haudenosaunee literature, Alice is asked about Pauline Johnson's essay "A Strong Race Opinion: On the Indian Girl in Modern Fiction," an essay that I introduce to supplement lessons on Indigenous feminist praxis. While this scene showcases the epistemic violence that is familiar and felt among Indigenous women scholars, Elliot uses the character of Alice to support us through what Million refers to as a "literature of experience." By drawing on the literary legacy of Pauline Johnson, Elliott invites readers to consider the past-present-future continuum of Indigenous women's literature as both an act of refusal and an act to recall authentic representations of Indigenous womanhood. In this way, Elliot refuses the deficiency narratives that overshadow Alice by reclaiming powerful, women-centred narratives and proposing closer attention to the



matrilineal lessons for upholding Indigenous women's power and place in contemporary spaces.

This legacy of refusal can be understood as a counternarrative that serves as a 'talking back' to Indigenous women's erasure. More than a counternarrative, however, *And Then She Fell* is about survivance storytelling. Drawing from Vizenor's work on survivance "an active sense of presence merging both survival and resistance" (vii), Leilani Sabzalian theorizes survivance storytelling, explaining that "survivance stories intervene into discourses that have long pathologized Indigenous lives" and "refuse colonial scripts of erasure or victimization, and instead creatively confront, resist, decenter, disrupt, and transform those scripts in various ways" (4). Elliot's work aligns with survivance storytelling by rejecting deficit theorizing and pathologizing narratives through a reclamation of stories that centre Indigenous womanhood.

Moreover, extending the sentiment that Indigenous literatures are not defined by colonization but certainly do not ignore the colonial violences that shape contemporary realities (Justice 2018), Elliott engages with Haudenosaunee intellectual thought in ways that acknowledge the lurking presence of colonial violence but recentre Indigenous feminisms through a powerful telling of Atsi'tsiakà:ion, also known as Sky Woman or Mature Flowers. For instance, Elliott offers a story that demonstrates the effects of anti-Indigenous racism and pathologizing interactions, while weaving in Haudenosaunee memories that remind Alice (and readers) of the worldviews that honour the role of Indigenous womanhood in matrilineal societies. Alice wonders, "What if it's Mature Flowers advising me?" (148)

*And Then She Fell* wraps up in a final portal of the space-time web where Alice understands that Mature Flowers is not only guiding her but that she is guiding all Haudenosaunee women. The sentiment "*We are all Mature Flowers*" (148) becomes a final revelation highlighting the "unspoken covenant of Native women" (326) that ensures we are all caught within the soft landing of Indigenous womanhood.

Finally, as lessons for all readers, Elliot re-stories the Haudenosaunee creation story offering reminders of what it means to uphold the matrilineal protocols of Haudenosaunee societies that honour the power of the maternal and honour kinship relations. These protocols ensure the protections of Indigenous women and girls through clan systems that follow the maternal line. Indeed, Indigenous women-centered stories about histories of Indigenous womanhood reveal important layers of a collective story about the power and place of Indigenous women and girls within matrilineal society, a powerful legacy inherited by Alice and her baby daughter Dawn.

As a justice-oriented call for returning to the matrilineal traditions of Haudenosaunee societies, Elliott offers the character Alice as a way to recentre maternal agency in the story of *Mature Flowers*. In doing so, Elliot creates a story that empowers all Haudenosaunee women, reminding us of the matrilineal teachings where women not only give birth in the physical sense but are culturally “tasked with birthing revolutions and new worlds” (206). Indeed, *Mature Flowers*, as Elliot reminds us, resides within all Haudenosaunee women. This story expresses the essence of what I refer to as Matriarchal Worlding, an ontological orientation that is understood within a process of spiraling backward and forward alongside Haudenosaunee creation stories, languages and ceremonies. Matriarchal worlding, as a refusal to heteronormative violence, serves as an intervention and rupture, and as an Indigenous feminist ontology it gives rise to a renewal and rekindling of Haudenosaunee governance that honours the sacredness of the maternal (Brant 2024).

Matriarchal visions of birthing new worlds are interwoven throughout the re-telling of *Mature Flowers* and offer profound lessons about our past-present-future continuum. *And Then She Fell* delves into Indigenous brilliance and, as a wonderwork, transcends realist fiction and fantasy in ways that confront the horrors of our current world and inspire a birthing/renewal of new worlds. Finally, through unapologetic Indigenous writing, *And Then She Fell* inspires readers, especially Indigenous women, to retrace old steps as they journey toward anti-colonial Indigenous futures.

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