
Grover, Linda LeGarde. *The Road Back to Sweetgrass: A Novel*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014. 208 pp.

<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/the-road-back-to-sweetgrass>

The Road Back to Sweetgrass tells the story of how Margie Robineau came to be “the hands-down best frybread maker on the entire Mozhay Point Indian Reservation” (5), which is the story of how young Margie coped with unrequited love, overcame her insecurities, and, over the years, became an upstanding member of her Ojibwe community. It is a coming-into-maturity novel rather than a coming of age story. And like other Indigenous variations on the bildungsroman, it is not simply the story of an individual. Grover also tells stories about and from the perspective of others with ties to Mozhay Point, all of whom are essential “ingredients” in Margie’s life (11). The narrative shifts among characters, switches between third and first person, and jumps back and forward through time with such grace and power that readers are never lost. The different parts add up to a satisfying and coherent tale that nonetheless leaves much unsaid, just like the well-mannered Ojibwe refrain from prying despite their obvious curiosity or from speaking aloud their ill-tempered thoughts. Grover says just enough to show us how Margie approaches elderhood without telling us exactly how she got there. She provides a straightforward surface story with depths to ponder.

For example, “the road back to Sweetgrass” is literally the road to the family land and cabin where Margie lives at the chronological end of her story, the road the Dionne sisters take in the first chapter to bring their mother for a visit. But Sweetgrass is also elusive. The scent arises from the old LaForce allotment (Margie Robineau is a LaForce, but if the novel explains the lineage, I missed it), but there is no patch of that plant on the land. Zoo Wash, who is not a LaForce but lives in the cabin, brings Margie sweetgrass and teaches her how to make baskets (only after Margie and her friend Theresa, back in the 1970s, the chronological beginning of Margie’s story, mention they do not know how to make them). The scent arises in the prologue, wafting over the ricers who gather at Lost Lake: “the scent reminds us that we have been blessed by the Creator in all ways, understood or otherwise, here during our time on Mother Earth, and so we accept the mystery for what it is” (1). Margie finds her way back to the Sweetgrass cabin on the LaForce allotment in the 1970s, and over the next forty years she travels the road of acceptance to embrace the blessings in dropping out of college, loving with no hope, and moving back into a “wreck” of a cabin. This sounds awfully earnest, but the novel is not. The misunderstood blessings are the source of much humor. Those Dionne sisters had me laughing out loud as they fumed over their mother’s favoritism and insisted that Margie must be withholding the secret of her perfect frybread.

Margie’s maturation and her renovation of the tiny Sweetgrass cabin parallel the revitalization of the Mozhay Point reservation. Superficially, the economic development made possible by the building of first a bingo hall and then a casino would appear to be the source. But the narrative structure of *The Road Back to Sweetgrass* suggests otherwise. Michael turns his back on the American Indian history professor who seeks validation from her first Indian student (because she doesn’t see Theresa—history is about warrior men). Michael returns to Sweetgrass, his father, and his traplines. Dale Ann returns to Mozhay Point from her relocation placement in Chicago and slowly establishes herself as the beloved daughter. The characters survive forced

sterilization, children being adopted outside of the tribe, and insults and stereotypes of all stripes. They return home and become solid people, not the images outsiders project upon them. Through the careful attention and selective truth-telling of the elders, the young people are guided to tend to themselves and their community. Out of the careful cultivation of relationships, the economic success arises. Throughout *The Road Back to Sweetgrass*, Grover acknowledges larger historical forces, but the pain or blessings they bring carry no more significance than the everyday blessings of which characters take note, like a child's touch or ice crystals glittering in the sun that shines through a break in the clouds.

There's much in Grover's novel that will seem familiar. The setting on an imaginary Ojibwe reservation with ties to an urban area is like Erdrich's novels. An English language novel sprinkled with Ojibwe words, many but not all translated, reminds me of Treuer's use of names in *The Translation of Dr. Apelles*. Satirical descriptions of a white professor who claims to be an expert on Indians and of the bumbling behavior of an outsider remind me of Vizenor's biting humor. The emphasis on the seasonal activities that mark the Ojibwe year echo Jim Northrup's stories. Yet Grover's voice is hers alone, one that clearly has a place in this growing body of contemporary Ojibwe literature.

There's a reason Linda LeGarde Grover has won prizes for her short story collection and her first novel. Like Margie Robineau's light and golden frybread, Grover's prose is "so tasty that the very thought" that the stories will come to an end creates "an undertone of sorrow" that adds to the pleasure of reading (5). In *The Road Back to Sweetgrass* and in *The Dance Boots*, Grover has already brought to life a large cast of characters whose lives are only partially revealed. I can't wait for the next tale about the goings-on at Mozhay Point.

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