

PoshRat? Whereto (Self) Publishing?

Author Note:

This is a work of academic creative non-fiction, a rarely read genre produced for no pay. Thus, none of the names have been changed, nor have the setting and places. The author hopes that will make it more interesting to you, gentle reader...

Editor via Author Note: Or, an Answer to the Reviewer's Seemingly Eternal Question:

All for you, my friend. I want your honest opinion - as in, if these are bad books, or non-books, that's still interesting in terms of this no-gatekeeper stuff. And I guess it might be fun to talk about genre - zombies, erotica, sci-fi - and how that might provide an outlet for transgender Native writing. But really, I just want whatever comes out of your brainsss.

Welp. Here we go. Time to check those brainsss, anyway. Semester is about to start.

Paul Mason writing for *The Guardian* wakes us up with a *Guardian* essay about e-books, -writing, and -publishing.¹ After giving a reason or two for our collective shorter attention span (and stories, with their “searchable digital text... being read on devices we use for other things”), he tells us: “Every major publisher has experimented with short stories, serialised (do I write *sic* because I spell with American “z’s” but am quoting a British-penned piece even though I suppose my final will be published internationally by a place in England and at least a couple of the editorial types will be all “hey that’s the way you spell that, Mister,” whilst their eyes are filled with Old-World humo(u)r and well, can we say, sparkle?) fiction, anthologies and mid-range “e-only” books.”² Surprisingly, there’s no list given (you had *one* job, internets), so we must avail ourselves of implied knowledge of these things. Just so you know, I’m not going to provide you with one either, but then again that’s not really the point of this essay. We’re here to examine a bit of self-published work, not the cagey attempts of bigshot publishing houses to be on some imagined “edge” of writing. And remember, our ambitious aforementioned editor is looking for fun—“Fun with Genre,” perhaps. Erotic zombies sexily shuffling through short sci-fi tales would likely fit that bill. Today we’ll go in search of that rich and surely elusive conglomerate, and I’ll report back with what I find. The couple thousand or so words allotted won’t likely get us too far, but I’m hopeful it will put us further down a path of discussion. There’s a single author in mind for this beginning, so let’s get introduced.

Choctaw writer Cheryce Clayton's series of short books for Kindle have made their way onto my device of that name (well, not really just that name; set up by the guy in the store—thanks for nothing, there, Clerk Man—it’s called “Theodore’s Kindle2” like a nerdy b-boy tag), as well as my laptop and now phone. That’s no humblebrag, kids, that’s how these things work now. No more just-a-book-on-the-shelf. Dynamic, son. In particular, we’re interested in her work that directly engages Native characters, so I’ll be

looking at one of the e-books (do we need that e-qualifier[©]?) briefly, and the other more in depth. Let's meet her <http://www.amazon.com/Cheryce-Clayton/e/B00O07C20K/>.

If you know anything about Amazon writer pages, this seems to be where they've asked for a "brief biographical paragraph."

She replies:

"Cheryce Clayton, writer"

and then:

Oh, more?

I once named a company PoshRat, it means half-blood and out of culture in Romani. I can remember my great grandfather speaking Choctaw, I've spent more years living on Reservations than off, I speak a few words, I go to a couple of PowWows a year, and I know how to bead. And yet I always feel like I'm on the outside looking at a circle of old friends gathered around a fire, not quite sure how to join in and feeling too tall to blend in.

She continues

As a writer?

I am not defined as a writer by the facts that that I am a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, that I have spent my life as a trans / bisexual woman, that I write speculative fiction, horror, and erotica, that I live with chronic pain, or that I am a survivor of violence.

I am defined as a writer by the stories I write and my first book "Obligations" is a gender confused story of crossed cultures and the myths of childhood that haunt and hold us back, my webcomic "Tales from the Zombpocalypse: Living in the Quarantine Zone" starts seven years after the hyped zombie apocalypse as life goes on in a new normal, and the story "LowRez" is as much a coming of age tale on a future Reservation as my attempt to look forward and project the current Idle No More stand into the cultural vanishing point.

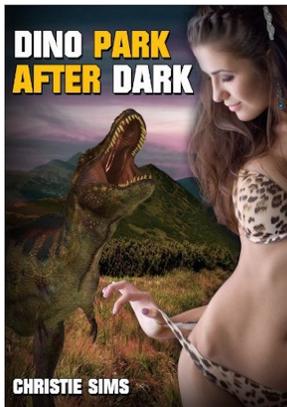
<http://zombpocalypse.cartoonistsleague.org/>

I can be found on fb as cheryceclayton and my webcomic page is TalesfromtheZombieApocalypse

Yes.

And I have done that finding, so for this review, well; I'm trying really hard not to just send Cheryce a note. Maybe I'll write most of it, and then do that... Please reflect on what her work might look like as we discuss more of this self-(i)e-publishing ("©", folks?) and what it might mean for Native American / American Indian / First Nations / Aboriginal / Indigenous literature.

The democratization of data via the Internet gets kicked around quite a bit (and begs questions like the one that opens this essay). For myself, I suppose that means it's just a matter of time before I can 3-D print that maroon '65 GTO I've wanted ever since I saw an ad for it on the back cover of one of my Grandpa's *National Geographic*s when I was a kid. For others, it might mean the nanotech printing of our food (see Neal Stephenson's *The Diamond Age: Or, A Young Lady's Illustrated Primer* [1995] for more on that coming delight). For us, obviously, it means we need to talk about the inevitable self-publishing of books, gatekeeping, quality (or should we say "e-quality[©]," as I go ahead and copyright that one, too), and just maybe *those covers* that kind of publishing produces (you know, the ones that look like outtakes from the earliest builds of photoshop platforms, but if they were run by sarcastic teenaged monkeys):



I'd mention other tales, like *Taken by the T-Rex*, and *Ravished by the Triceratops*, but that seems unnecessary, so Trump-style, I won't.

What are people saying about digital self-publishing?³ It's been around for a bit. If you have some time to spend, go ahead and wiki that question for yourself; the leads you'll get are fascinating.⁴ Quotes to note, though, include this one from a January 2011 Amazon press release: "Amazon.com is now selling more Kindle books than paperback books,"⁵ and (sad trombone) this one:

The Big Six publishers became the Big Five on July 1, 2013, when the Penguin Random House merger was completed. The publishers are: Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, and Simon & Schuster. Together these companies control roughly two-thirds of the U.S. consumer book publishing market.⁶

That's an awful lot of concentrated control. One of the features of "democracy," at least in its classical sense, is that it tends to resent things like oligarchy and monopoly. 'Twould appear that some sort of e-revolution (no "©" on that one) could/should/would be at hand. And as with every "revolution," there are bound to be some...kinks, to work out. Mason argues, for instance, "But a novel such as Donna Tartt's Pulitzer-winning *The Goldfinch*, subtly derided by the literary world for its readability, is not the product of the

Kindle—but of a new relationship between writer and reader.”⁷ This is an important insight—in Native lit, we are often (good or bad, but for another conversation, to be sure) particularly invested in the identity of the author (and quite frequently, there is already a relationship between writer and reader)—which leads us down another path our editor has asked me to illuminate. Here he is: “I’d also really like to get your thoughts on the future of Indigenous literature in an era of self-publishing without gatekeepers. After reading your foreword to *Off the Path* (that’s *Vol. 2*, btw), I know you’ll have more thoughts about it.” Well, dang. No pressure. But yes. Thanks, James. As they say, the future is here. If you haven’t yet read *Off the Path, Vol. 2* (Off the Pass Press, 2015), I cannot suggest it strongly enough. In that foreword I attempt to address a question directed by an interviewer to the writer Sterling HolyWhiteMountain: “Why are you telling this?”

I reply,

Too often (and here I’m thinking of some films that were refused screenings at certain festivals due to content and other “concerns”) Native artists are told what to do, what to show, what to say. It reminds me of the issues experienced by African American intellectuals and artists related to concepts of “racial uplift” beginning in the early twentieth century (and on through the Harlem Renaissance). Here we are, a hundred years or more later, and, well, here we are.

Indeed. I should’ve also asked, “Why is this Native literature?” along with “Is this Native literature?” Investigating that category, tag, “genre” (lol), bookshelf, is the stuff of dreams and nightmares. And part of many of our missions, so let’s continue the quest. Charlyce (Chy) Clayton has given us something to work with, no doubt. When I was first asked to delve into this author’s work, I picked up *Rabid Run*, and waited for *Low Rez*, which we’ll look at as well.

Rabid Run opens up in a world that’s vaguely different. There’s a quarantine zone, tobacco is at a premium, and cigarettes are “salvaged or hoarded.” OK, I’ve been there, so maybe not that unusual. And the only “NDN” thing I’m seeing right now is the Jeep Cherokee and the Marlboro Reds.⁸

The work is bookended with quiet and similar sex scenes. The first is “fast and...desperate,”⁹ and the other is, I suppose, recreative rather than procreative: “‘I don’t want kids yet,’ was all she said before looking up to accept his kiss.”¹⁰ Both use the same position; the first one lets us know: “He accepted her lead when she turned her back to him and pulled his arms around her like a blanket,”¹¹ the other tells us, “I thought I lost you,” Alec said from behind her in the shower. Tia held his arms around her as the hot water hit her in the face.”¹² The story itself is a good entry in the post-zombie-apocalyptic genre—firefighter/EMT’s turned bio-containing dispatchers of the unfortunate victims of “Dead Fever”—zombie slayers somewhere near Tacoma falling in and out of love and camaraderie. It treats the presence of the undead in a matter of fact way that gives the reader pause as they follow along with the characters. Subtitled “TZA: Rabid Run Book 1,” it lets us know there is more coming from the zone, and that’s encouraging. Clayton is a thoughtful writer who pays extra attention to craft, a welcome alternative to what one

finds too frequently in the low/no cost world of e-pubs—something like, wait, I can't think of the name of that low-key misogynist, racist p.o.s. story I read to the end because even though it was free, well, #OCD, and I'm committed to finishing things like it or not, and hold on, I'll go to my Kindle library and hope I didn't drop it like the literary murder weapon that it is and three or four minutes of online searching because I did in fact wipe it from my reader... got it. It was called "Chop Suey" [imagine] starring a truly unlikeable character named, "Darby Stansfield.") There are more than a couple of moments though, working through *Rabid Run*, when the text is awash in acronyms like KME, NFPA, ALS, PD, BLS, MVA, KED, ET, BLS, HBW, UHF, and MRSA, and I feel like Mary, The Girl Who Couldn't Fly, when she hears, "Military guys speaking some weird language of abbreviations I couldn't understand..."¹³ It's not that we can't figure them out through context (and I appreciate the writer crediting the reader's intelligence), but that we shouldn't have to, particularly if the specialization is refined enough to distract us from the story. If it's intentional, it narrows the audience, showing the writer's knowledge, but limiting the reader's. It's a fine, fine line treading between a specialized audience (NDN paramedics zombie hunters) and a generalized one (NDN paramedic zombie hunter enthusiasts), but *Rabid Run* does it fairly well. Is it interesting and insightful and well written and do I want to read "Book 2" and will I pay for that, too? You bet. Unless I friend her online and I can get her to send it to me for free ;)

Speaking of free, I received a pdf sneak preview of Clayton's *Low Rez*. This work also pretty quickly announces a world slightly changed, and is up front that we're about to read Native-penned work with this introduction to one of the main characters (whom we'll shortly find out, is Puyallup), who phones it in at the Emerald Queen Casino paddleboat:

Patricia Tilgard worked the midnight til nine am shift on weekends where she sat at one of the entrances to the busy parking lot calling in license plates, not to turn stolen or out-of-tag cars in to *na hullo's* authority, but so that tribal lawyers could offer their services to those in need with cash.¹⁴

Her girlfriend Angie, who says "Christ" a lot, is "Oklahoma Choctaw, born in Navajo-centric Northern Arizona."¹⁵ Clayton quickly sets the parameters of the tale, letting us know that Patty (nickname "Low Rez," not so much for being from the poor side of the reservation as for being "Low Resolution—out of tune"¹⁶), as a tribal member, can work at the casino, but Angie cannot. The rez (sovereign land well-placed after massive global floods), tribal descent (Native eggs are at a premium), and sovereignty (personal and political) underpin much of the work, a tale somewhat evocative (and maybe it's related to the Pacific Northwest setting as well) of early cyberpunk worlds created by William Gibson (*Burning Chrome*, 1986) and Neal Stephenson (*Snowcrash*, 1992), but centering around two teenage girlfriends and their personal and familial woes. The character of Angie, in particular, is possessed of a certain fury:

Angie took a deep breath and wondered what it would be like to be from a calmer people, instead of being Choctaw and Dine. Desert fire seemed to burn inside her, with every breath she tried to push down the anger that

seethed and bubbled deep in the back of her mind. It was always easier to let her mind wander and tune out than to live with the pain that colored everything red.¹⁷

The anger in *Low Rez* is explosive and abrupt, but like the violence it likely arises from, the two are brother and sister in arms, well made and well met.

In addition to strong emotions and story, there is a Ladder¹⁸ in *Low Rez*; it's like the ladder in so many sci-fi movies, the one that leads to the starship, though this one leads to a train, (a reappropriation of that "Iron Horse" we know so well?) that leads off-world. Here is its introduction:

Across from her, on the false smoke stacks of the casino paddleboat, a large two-toned hummingbird was painted hovering at a stylized flower, ... The paint was faded green and red, and when she squinted the bird seemed to hover in front of the now pink flower. From behind the large river boat, the Ladder rose into the sky, all rust colored and shiny, and the bird seemed to move from the flower upwards as the Flotilla balloons lifted the morning train toward space. Another boatload of emigrants, abandoning everything for the hope of something new.¹⁹

When you're done picturing yet another boatload of American emigrants, you can find an image of that Emerald Queen Casino paddleboat, likely not then the glamorous host to the likes of Sinbad, and Rob Schneider, and Whitesnake (but not Led Zeppelin and their own Stairway to Heaven), as it is now, but far removed, for some perhaps, from its earlier, "humbler" days: <http://postdefiance.com/wpcontent/uploads/2012/02/sign.jpg>, though I see the hummingbirds she describes more in the Louie Gong vein rather than some strange post-industrial M. Stewart homemaker hideousness.

We can go into colonization (re- / de- / neo, and otherwise), but that, I think, would spoil much of a story I'd prefer you read for yourself. I'll say finally that The Ladder is an interesting feature; I had to spend some time thinking about that ladder, and I thought I'd do a bit of research on it (very perfunctory, so please pardon any shallow insights). My efforts returned a Choctaw²⁰ story:

"All of the prayers went up to Sandlephone who sat on a great ladder high in the sky. As soon as the prayers had come into his hands, they were changed into lovely flowers. He closed the blossoms and dropped the seeds upon the earth while the perfume was carried on into the heavens where Great Spirit was.

"The Little Folk cared for the seeds as they fell and from them sprang the wild flowers. They watched and tended the flowers. The Indians loved them but never hurt them. They called the flowers 'Tokens of Love from Great Spirit.'"

"Oh," said Josephine, "after this I shall not break them.

In the end, when it comes to self-publishing, we gotta Pete Rose this thing (without the gambling, I suppose—sorry, Pete); we gotta hustle, get our voices out there, disseminate some knowledge. Bark this carnival of indigenous voices. Social media platforms, meet and greets, conferences—AWP and otherwise, indiginetworks, friends & family, support. Support. And if we have to publish ourselves, well, then, let’s make it good. Cheryce Clayton is certainly giving it a go.

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Notes

¹ Mason, "Ebooks Are Changing the Way We Read, and the Way Novelists Write."

² Ibid, n.p.

³ For more on standard self-publishing, fiction of course takes the cake. I could read *Foucault’s Pendulum* right now, if I didn’t have a deadline or two.

⁴ Before you do the wiki-groan (remembering, of course, it’s usually a good place to look for sources on subjects, not the definitive citation), read this bit from Mason: “And while the academic study guides to major novels are usually worthless, the Wikipedia pages devoted to them can be invaluable. That is because study guides are often the work of a single, low-paid hack and the Wikipedia page contains the real-time wisdom of crowds: often wrong, but rarely worthless.” Hmmmmm. How...democratic.

⁵ “Amazon.com Announces Fourth Quarter Sales.”

⁶ “Frequently Asked Questions Regarding E-books and U.S. Libraries.”

⁷ Mason, “Ebooks Are Changing the Way We Read,” n.p.

⁸ Kindle Location 17

⁹ Kindle Location 54

¹⁰ Kindle Location 457

¹¹ Kindle Location 53

¹² Kindle Locations 453-454

¹³ Jones, P.T. *Floating Boy and the Girl Who Couldn’t Fly*, 119

¹⁴ Clayton, *Low Rez*, 2

¹⁵ Ibid, 3

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid, 6

¹⁸ Latimer, Josephine. "Why The Flowers Grow."

¹⁹ Clayton, *Rez Run*, 4

²⁰ Or at least “part Choctaw” according to the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma; “Mrs. Josephine Latimer, part Choctaw, who told the remaining stories,” one of which is “Why the Flowers Grow”: <<http://www.choctawnation.com/culture-heritage/social-life-through-the-years/choctaw-childrens-legend/>>

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