

Carter Meland. *Stories for a Lost Child*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2017. (American Indian Studies Series.) 157 pages. ISBN: 9781611862447

<http://msupress.org/books/book/?id=50-1D0-3FCD#.WtiyPWT5mKY>

Readers of Carter Meland's novel *Stories for a Lost Child* will find themselves in a dilemma similar to the protagonist's: how to understand the relationship among the various stories being told. Those stories include sermon-like lessons for humanity delivered by Bigfoot, the outer space adventures of two American Indian astronauts trying to return to Earth, and descriptions of some down-and-out native people in or around Minneapolis. These are connected by third-person narration from the point of view of Fiona, a teenager who has received a package of stories written by the grandfather she never knew. A letter in the package states they were written before she was born, and that they are being delivered years after his death. As she reads them, she looks for clues about the experiences and character of her grandfather, and she looks for how these sometimes strange stories can be useful in her own life and to understanding why her mother refused to tell Fiona much at all about her grandfather. This includes her search for information about her Anishinaabe heritage, which she feels was denied to her by her grandfather's absence and her mother's silence. This absence is described as a hole in her life: "... but there was a hole there, too, in her life, one her mom refused to fill and only ever barely acknowledged. Her grandpa. The Indian" (5).

Among the stories written by Fiona's grandfather are monologues by Bigfoot. In chapters with titles including "Swampbreath" and "Feathertruth," Bigfoot, in his peculiar diction, preaches to humanity to be humble and connected to the land, to remain in touch with the immediacy of experience and greater truths embodied in the earth, plants, and animals but not in representations of them. Having found a bird feather on the ground, he instructs humans on how to experience it properly – and how not to experience it.

You say it smells like that angel you find in them words of men? Men, that one soaring in the warm sun, rising from the words of men and away from the earth? Men. I shake my head. I bare my teeth and knock fallen branch against sturdy tree. And knock again. And again I holler at the treeline. No, men, no!

Listen, men!

Smell that feather as it is, not as you wish it were. Don't mistake the words of men for that feather truth. Draw deep, men. (59)

Bigfoot may initially puzzle Fiona, but he is given the last words of the grandfather's package to her, and those words seem directed at her instead of humans in general.

Listen, little one, listen!

Little one, touch dreams, don't measure them. Walk with them. Leave inches to men, leave beaten ground, leave men to scratch their chin.

Come! Step long, little one, step far.

Leave men, live tall. (101)

Other stories involve two astronauts, a Dakota man and an Anishinaabe man, as they explore outer space and then return to Earth. Their return does not go as planned, and they discover they have traveled back in time to an Earth before Turtle Island had emerged from the ocean; this does not alarm them much, as they plan to simply retrace their path and get back to where they were before. Perhaps echoing our recent emphasis on “water is life,” they load their ship’s tanks with this “first water” to take with them to the future – their present – because it is “Powerful medicine” (67).

Still other stories are less fanciful and involve contemporary native people, whom Fiona deduces include her grandfather and other relatives, and people from the distant past, including a French priest who may be her ancestor. Some of the stories require her to determine whether they are fact or fiction, whether the protagonists are her grandfather, someone her grandfather knew, or a fictional character. Initially Fiona is frustrated by the stories. She had hoped for her grandfather’s life story more directly, for clear indications of how his life led to hers, and for how his life could provide answers to her questions: “Sure, they were good enough, if you liked weird nightmare sorts of things, but they didn’t really tell her anything about him.” She had hoped for “some little half-hidden suggestion about her grandma or mom, some notion of what her Grandpa did after he left them – or why he left” (35). As she progresses through the package from her grandfather she gets better at deciphering the stories and their lessons; the stories become more satisfying. She looks up information on the Anishinaabeg online, information her mother has never shared, but that is not impactful as her grandfather’s stories, including those from Bigfoot, also known as Misaabe: “Misaabe’s words told her more about where she came from than any facts, way more than her mom every shared, too” (80).

Eventually the stories overlap – but how they do that is best to not reveal here so readers can discover the connections on their own. Some readers will enjoy the novel’s loose structure, while others may not be satisfied with the degree of closure the novel offers; how the stories help Fiona better understand herself or her dilemmas is not always clear. For instance, the longest unit of the novel ends with a sense of satisfaction for Fiona, but it involves friends of hers who see much more loss than she does. But to describe the stories more would risk giving away surprises or denying readers their own satisfaction in putting the pieces together alongside Fiona.

Two of Meland’s narrative choices present a valuable implication for readers: Bigfoot and the astronauts of NASA (Native American Space Adventuring). When Fiona’s grandfather creates stories about these characters for her, he is reaching simultaneously into an indigenous past and into an indigenous future. He is evoking a very old body of indigenous narratives and indigenizing a body of contemporary narratives. With his native astronauts, the grandfather imagines a future that includes native people. These are valuable images for a young woman trying to understand her native past and dream of a native future.

Manipulations of time and space are important elements for Indigenous Futurism, according to Lindsey Catherine Cornum. The native astronauts in *Stories for a Lost Child* provide this, as they travel through space and time – from the future, into the distant past, into the grandfather’s present, etc. Cornum explains, “We are always going back to the origin, our creation stories, as a starting point for moving forward, or up, or sideways. This mode of thinking can motivate us not only to consider how our actions will reverberate into the future, but also how they build on -- or,

as is all too often disregarded, erased or disrespected -- the historical past.” Meland does this through the grandfather’s stories that weave the historical past, the recent past, and the future into Fiona’s present.

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Cornum, Mary Catherine. “The Creation Story is a Spaceship: Indigenous Futurism and Decolonial Deep Space.” *Voz-à-Voz*.
<http://www.vozavoz.ca/feature/lindsay-catherine-cornum>