

Terese Marie Mailhot. *Heart Berries: A Memoir*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 126 pp. ISBN 9781526604408.

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Indigenous pain is, let's face it, a saleable commodity. 101-year-old Chief Red Fox makes up stories about Buffalo Bill and mourns the passing of a dying race. Tears trickle down Italian-American actor Iron Eyes Cody's face as he stares sadly at the flotsam of civilization. Faux Navajo writer Naddi squeezes three increasingly terrible books from his imagined damaged boys and increasingly graphic descriptions of brutal child abuse. Nothing better for wide sales to a settler audience than confirmation of Native peoples as fucked-up beyond repair, fading out a little slower than originally projected (they're not in those robes on that lone horse staring out at the prairie any more, nor did they wend their slow way into the hills leaving only Kevin Costner to tell the tale), but inevitably crushed by the oncoming of brute white reality nonetheless. Gerald Vizenor, patron trickster saint of this journal, wickedly mocks such representations in the work of David Treuer, noting that "Any sentiments of native survivance are overturned by woe and mordancy" ("Aesthetics of Survivance" 15).

So when Diana Evans in the *Guardian* [reviews Terese Mailhot's book](#) by saying "This is a slim book full of raw and ragged pain, the poisonous effects of sexual abuse, of racial cruelty, of violence and self-harm and drug addiction," the praise for the author's ability to striptease her damage sets off warning bells. Not that the pain was not (is not) real. Not that the author is undeserving of wide, full, deep, unstinting applause simply for being able to get up in the morning, after enduring a childhood of neglect and abuse both physical and sexual, not to mention the PTSD, the bipolar disorder, the loss of a child taken away by court order for his own protection. Not even that there is no value to forcing the reader to understand the viciousness and ugliness of the lives of many women of colour. But – look. I'm a white cisgendered man who tries to think about and promote First Nations and other Indigenous writing for a living. There's a reason I have to be suspicious and interrogate texts that appeal to my European heart, and in particular those texts that draw on deep wells of pain, just as I need to be suspicious of my own reactions to Native-authored texts that adopt mystical tropes. Heaven forbid I should enact the stereotypical unthinking liberal audience.

Here's another red-flashing-light-klaxon-alarm-bell moment: the book is actually addressed to a white liberal male audience, the author's real-life partner, Casey Gray. If there's one thing that might truly scare a reader off, it's promoting the father of your child as some form of white saviour. Real-life or not, such a narrative is toxified by the figure of Harper Lee's well-meaning Atticus Finch, his story overwhelming the narrative of Tom Robinson (and all the other Tom Robinsons), and further toxified by all Finch's many descendants, played by Sandra Bullock or Daniel Day-Lewis, nobly helping the hapless sacrificial lambs on the altar of a better America.

Any alert reader will have guessed this isn't building to a condemnation of Mailhot's book. Far from it. This is a love letter. Rather, I want to sketch some of the obstacles Mailhot needed to

avoid in writing in the currently popular form of the agony memoir, a form which has roots in American literary culture that stretch back way, way past Oprah, past Dave Pelzer's [Ayn Randian](#) self-help in *A Child Called "It"*, through Allen Ginsberg's "scribble down your nakedness," through Lowell and Plath, and into the impact of Freudian psychoanalysis on a Protestant culture. The game, always, is to explore scar tissue that is entirely individual to the writer but in such a way as to avoid a parade that comforts the reader, allowing wild flowers to grow in strange formations from spilled blood, like the bear in Mailhot's book who "put her claws into a strawberry patch and produced ripe berries" (13). Elissa Washuta managed such a trick a couple of years ago in *My Body is a Book of Rules* (2014) by varying her style and subject from chapter to chapter, deconstructing her own rape and bipolar condition in such a way that only the most determined reader could make it out with a simplistic narrative of obstacles transcended. Casting herself as the subject of a *Law and Order* episode, annotating every medication prescribed over a year, placing her own story alongside the media narratives of Kurt and Britney, Washuta's text defies the reader not to notice the craft at work, the intelligent mind guiding the story.

Terese Marie Mailhot's craftsmanship is less ostentatious than Washuta's: no complete changes of style from chapter to chapter, here. And there *is* a redemption narrative of sorts buried beneath the veneer, of a violent father, a shower, a recollected image of his pubic mound, a memory finally confronted and brought to light. A child lost, another child conceived and eventually, fiercely, loved. A broken girl brought to tragic wisdom through self analysis and writing classes at IAIA, through a final accounting of the love and wreckage of parents rendered inadequate by the aftermaths of colonialism and their own demons.

But what marks this book out from so many agony narratives is the sheer dexterity of its writing, the product of much hard work and skill. Sentences lull you into thinking you know where they will end, then reach out and shock you with the wrong word, a sudden swerve into indirect metaphor or simile, an unexpected verb.

(Of Casey) "The man I had been conditioning was not happy with me" (10).

(Of her new baby) "His skin is milk, and his body feels electric and unforgiving" (80).

(Of food) "My mind is overwhelmed with breakfast alone" (25)

(Of bad sex) "I remember that I was wearing black lace and new stockings. I wasn't stable, but men don't usually care about that" (15).

This book is already on Hollywood actress-sponsored book club lists, the New York Times bestseller list, Native American Literature 101 syllabi, and on the bedside table of just about every literary critic and scholar I know. It doesn't really need a review in a minor online academic journal (even if we were honoured to run [an early version of one chapter](#) in a previous issue, which you should read right now if you're still on the fence about the incredible artistry of this writer). It will in years to come be analysed to death for the subtle ways it employs Stó:lō storytelling, for the ways it explores a trauma specific to First Nations women in an era of #MMIW, for the sense of survivance it profoundly embodies in refusing either to sugar-coat the

author's own prickly messed-upness or to pretend that chaotic childhoods lead eventually to stable adults, no matter the amount of therapy. It will hopefully be recognised for its sabotage of white saviour narratives – Casey turns out to be mostly a selfish if sometimes loving jerk – and the ways in which the author insists on the specificity of her narrative, refusing the reader the right to call this anything so banal as a generational statement of Indian pain. My hope is that in amongst all such thematic readings there will always be space to discuss the craftsmanship of the sentence in Terese Marie Mailhot's work. Mailhot truly shakes up the English language, makes it strange, in the way that only the most talented writers can. For a first book, this is an extraordinary achievement.

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