
Carole laFavor. *Evil Dead Center*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017. 219 pp. ISBN: 9781517903565.

<https://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/evil-dead-center>

The untimely death of Ojibwe activist and author Carole laFavor in 2011 brought to an end any hope for a third novel in the writer's Red Earth mystery series. Best known perhaps for her work as an activist on behalf of Indigenous people with HIV/AIDS, laFavor as a novelist left as her representative work only the 1996 mystery *Along the River* and its 1997 sequel *Evil Dead Center*. Both works focus on the amateur tribal sleuth Renee LaRoche and her involvement in solving murder cases both on and off the reservation, but it is the latter novel that is the focus of this review.

Perhaps the real mystery is how these two novels could have easily disappeared into the shadow realm of out of print books had it not been for the University of Minnesota Press rescuing them from obscurity. By republishing both titles, the academic press has done a tremendous service for not only the scholarly reader, but the general reading public as well, including those who favor genre fiction.

Like many works of popular fiction, laFavor's writing builds on the heavy use of dialogue as a storytelling device. It is an engaging approach, one that captures the distracted reader's attention and enables them to more easily slide into the narrative as it unfolds to reveal murders, conspiracies, and corruptions that shake a tribal community to its very core. Dark secrets are brought to light through the right mix of active investigation and flat out luck.

It might be argued that the novel is actually at its weakest as a mystery, as the primary suspect and the main motive are uncovered within the first third of the novel, leaving the remainder of the drama over to the search for evidence strong enough to win a conviction in the courtroom. The novel draws to a close with a manhunt for the killers set in the dangerous environs of a deep forest as a powerful blizzard bears down on the two amateur detectives. While it starts off as a mystery, *Evil Dead Center* shifts toward becoming a thriller.

The "thrill" attached to laFavor's *Evil Dead Center* comes not only from the unfolding of the story but from the unwrapping of truth at the center of the fiction. As novelist Jack Ketchum says, "Really good fiction is always an attempt at total honesty" (Loc. 298), and laFavor uses her fiction to tell truths about the contemporary Indigenous experience that are both beautiful and dreadful.

Much of the novel's beauty, and to some degree its mystery, comes through laFavor's presentation of an Anishinaabe approach to life that has long been available to the non-tribal world via academic programs, but which is much less accessible to the general reading public — a shortcoming in the industrial society's shared imagination that leaves the average reader more vulnerable to stereotypes and outright racist readings of the metaphysics of indigeneity. Fortunately, laFavor's fiction avoids the pitfall of satisfying those readers who thirst for these outlandish and even imperialist ideas of tribal spirituality.

laFavor also addresses dark truths about the contemporary experiences of Indigenous people, most notably the disappearance of Native women. Her novel begins with the discovery of a dead woman just outside reservation borders and the white coroner's dismissal of the death as an alcohol-related accident. A phone call sets in motion the involvement of amateur Anishinaabe sleuth Renee LaRoche and members of the tribal police, eventually leading to

not only the identification of the dead woman as a murdered investigative activist, but the uncovering of a conspiracy that is poisoning the very lifeblood of the tribal community.

In the real world far too many Anishinaabe women face similarly dark circumstances, with thousands going missing every year in North America, and statistics on the number of murdered Anishinaabe unavailable, although preliminary studies funded by the U.S. Department of Justice suggest that tribal women are murdered at an extremely high rate — in some communities, more than 10 times the national average (Domonoske). In Canada a 2015 police study found that First Nations women account for as much as a quarter of the number of women murdered nationwide (Gray). Contemporary activists are “calling for their voices to be heard, to have increased representation and for romanticised, patronising stereotypes to stop” (Gray). The current republication of *Evil Dead Center* may well be a part of this movement to help end the invisibility of Native women, alongside recent nonfiction such as Sarah Deer’s *The Beginning and End of Rape* and such initiatives as the Indigenous-led Sovereign Bodies Institute’s mapping and data collection projects.

laFavor’s *Evil Dead Center* addresses as well the real-world issue of adoptions that place tribal children into non-Indigenous families, effectively separating them from existing relations and cultural origins. The topic of white adoptions and the placement of children into non-Native foster homes remains controversial, as demonstrated by the outcry arising from an October 2018 ruling by a U.S. District Court judge that the Indian Child Welfare Act discriminates against non-Native adoptees. Signed into law in 1978, the Indian Child Welfare Act had been designed to stop the removal of children from Native families, a practice that had begun in earnest in the late Fifties and resulted in almost a third of all Native children being adopted out to “nonfamily, non-Indian” homes (Goodwyn).

The fact that a nexus exists between laFavor’s fiction and some of the sad realities of contemporary Anishinaabe experience might potentially expand interest in this text among academics in the field of Native Studies, but *Evil Dead Center* should find a greater appeal among readers of genre fiction, especially those who enjoy engaging reads within the mystery and thriller categories.

The novel begins with Ojibwe social worker Renee LaRoche meeting police chief Hobart Bulieau at the off-reservation site where an unidentified Native woman’s body had been found. The white coroner with jurisdiction over the case has not done a full autopsy, choosing instead to write the death of “Jane Doe” off as accidental overexposure due to alcoholic intoxication. Renee has asked for help from the tribal police chief after receiving a somewhat cryptic telephone call from her former lover Caroline Beltrain. With political activism as the lifeblood of their relationship, the breakup some 18 years earlier between the “two-spirit” women had also been the end of Renee’s full engagement as a political activist within “the Movement.” Caroline, however, had remained as an “underground” activist on the run from the FBI. Renee and the tribal police come together to reveal that “Jane Doe” was not an unidentified drunk, but an activist who had been secretly investigating a child pornography ring, working in cooperation with individuals within the Ojibwa community. By the novel’s end, two more Native people are dead, and Renee’s own life is hanging by a thread after she is targeted by a young killer who turns out to be more powerful, psychologically traumatized, and dangerous than expected.

Unlike other contemporary works such as settler novelist William Giraldi’s *Hold the Dark* that set much of the narrative within northern forests and make nature a dark and dangerous

protagonist, laFavor's *Evil Dead Center* envisions the natural realm as an ally in a quest for harmony and justice. Renee "didn't just love nature," but found in it a "sensuality... as though the environment enveloped her in the emotions of a lover" (30). Renee sees her love for nature as something in common among all Ojibwe who can recognize "the awesome abundance of Mother Earth's living things." For Renee this connection to the forest results in "a passion for how so many different living things survived in unity." This recognition gives Renee the hope that "two-leggeds could do the same" (198).

Though she has the full support of the tribal police force, Renee is not a professional detective or sheriff. Her involvement in proving that the unidentified Jane Doe was a murder victim stems in large part to Renee's sense of justice, a spiritual calling that she sees as inspired by "the spirits" of the Bear Clan, her ancestors. This sense of the ancestral and spiritual is largely what informs *Evil Dead Center* as a work of Anishinaabe writing. It is a book that few could have composed with the degree of honesty and boldness that laFavor, herself a "two-spirit" political activist struggling for women's rights who helped get healthcare and respect for Native people with HIV/AIDS, brings to this writing. Readers can easily see in Renee the tribal values and worldviews that were likely central to laFavor's own understanding of herself as an Ojibwe.

laFavor's amateur sleuth is for readers the spokesperson for an Anishinaabe understanding of the world that is unabashedly bold and respectful, even as it addresses darker systemic realities within the Indigenous nation. *Evil Dead Center* portrays tribal traditions and spiritual beliefs in a way that is beautifully stirring, though the author strives to avoid the pitfall of writing fiction that can be widely marketed to a non-Indigenous readership eager to satisfy their shallow stereotypes and notions of Indigenous spirituality.

Renee is deeply spiritual, but her belief in the stories of her elders and her respect for tradition are not unaccompanied by doubt. She is supported by many teachers around her, not the least of which are her grandmother, her aunts, and even police chief Bulieau. It is the latter who reminds Renee that the strongest value is family, with all Anishinaabe qualifying as one family. "If any of us go off half-cocked, or refuse to work as a team, we're gonna be in trouble," he says (83). When one of the deputy sheriffs expresses doubts about the applicability of tribal values in a world of "new predators" who "seem to be a breed all their own" and asks how "the old ways" can guide the Anishinaabe forward in such a world, it is Renee who passes along what she has learned: "Maybe... that's the mistake we're makin' ... thinking the times now are so different that we can't learn anything from the old ways" (95).

If laFavor refuses to satisfy an uninformed reader's expectation of exotically drawn tribal traditions and metaphysics, she likewise pulls no punches when it comes to the erroneous assumption held by some non-Indigenous readers that "progressive" white Americans deserve to be automatically welcomed into the embrace of the tribal community. The author is straightforward in her depiction of antagonisms and troubled relations between the Ojibwa on Renee's reservation and the surrounding white community, although she is always fair in not painting all whites as enemies and admitting to corruptions within the "Red Earther" society itself. Indeed, this internal corruption is likely a source of the novel's loaded title, *Evil Dead Center*.

If there is a common ground between whites and Anishinaabe in *Evil Dead Center*, it is the shared recognition of loss and the difficulty of getting through the everyday struggles of life. This is most clearly seen in Renee's recognition and acceptance of a white retailer whose

eyes betrayed his melancholy: “They were dark—some said brooding, others said haunted. Elders believed the look spoke of a pain nearly as deep as their own, and thus a man to be trusted, no matter what color he was” (23).

The sense of pain arising from both historical and contemporary injustices and imbalances is always at play within the novel, and the feeling that harmony between tribal and non-tribal people is hard to achieve is offered in laFavor’s depiction of Renee’s Auntie Lydia, who though she “moved in the sunshine, dancing and singing through life,” nonetheless harbored within herself a “pain and discrimination” that she purposely “vacated” from her expression whenever she spoke with a white person. “The real Auntie was not seen by many” (13). But laFavor’s novel never despairs that harmony between tribal and non-tribal people is impossible, as Renee’s grandmother soothingly encourages: “Many white folks have forgotten their instructions from Creator, *nosijhe*, forgotten how to act... But be respectful, granddaughter. Many white folks mean well” (24).

laFavor is also daring in her unabashed presentation of Renee as “two-spirited,” and extending that boldness to not only give the Anishinaabe a white lover, but to portray the two lesbians as a family with a teenage daughter. The tribal community is shown as accepting of Renee’s sexuality, but incidents of homophobic slurs thrown at Renee take place in off-reservation settings.

The serious nature of the real-world subjects addressed in laFavor’s work should not discourage anyone from approaching *Evil Dead Center* as a thriller that can satisfy the urge for an entertaining read, a book that can find a welcome place on the bedside nightstand. laFavor dealt with the challenges that all authors face when writing a sequel, and did her best to provide background information on Renee’s experience as an amateur sleuth without slowing the narrative pace with excessive backstory. Nevertheless, there were moments when it felt that reading *Evil Dead Center* would be more satisfying if it had been taken up *after* reading laFavor’s previous work *Along the Journey River*. Fortunately, both novels are available as high-quality paperbacks through the University of Minnesota Press. Both titles are also available as e-books for Kindle and other electronic reading devices.

This reprint includes a foreword by Professor Lisa Tatonetti that provides important biographical information about laFavor, with a focus on laFavor’s contributions as a feminist activist nurse working on behalf of HIV-positive peoples. The book also includes as an afterword a more personal reflection of laFavor by the author’s daughter, Professor Theresa Lafavor. In this afterword we discover that laFavor was often moved to tears by recognition of the beauty and suffering of humans and animals. A woman of great empathy, laFavor was also an optimist who “believed social change was possible and that we owed it to each other to work our hardest for each other” (218). It is from this afterword that we as readers and reviewers are given permission to see in the fictional Renee LaRoche many of the qualities of the author Carole laFavor: “There are many parallels,” the author’s daughter notes. “I have no doubt that Renee LaRoche personified the values and ideals my mother held dear,” she says (219). These are values that the reader may likewise come to cherish after reading *Evil Dead Center*.

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