
Katherena Vermette. *Pemmican Wars*. Illustrated by Scott B. Henderson. Colored by Donovan Yaciuk. HighWater Press, 2017. 47 pp. ISBN: 9781553796787.

<https://highwaterpress.com/product/pemmican-wars/>

Katherena Vermette. *Red River Resistance*. Illustrated by Scott B. Henderson. Colored by Donovan Yaciuk. HighWater Press, 2019. 47 pp. ISBN: 9781553797470.

<https://highwaterpress.com/product/red-river-resistance/>

It's a massive understatement to say that being Indigenous is a vastly complex experience. Among many other contributing elements, Indigenous existence is made up of varied and disparate groups, points of view, and cultural influences. Thus, *representing* Indigenous perspective is an equally complex endeavor. Given this complexity, the medium of comics has historically struggled with adequately representing Indigenous culture and typically leveraged more stereotypes than not.

Reading and examining comics featuring Indigenous characters, one can view them through the lens of criteria synthesized from Raymond Stedman's *Shadows of the Indian: Stereotypes in American Culture*. The usual tropes, stereotypes, and misrepresentations he explores include *does the Indigenous character speak like Tonto; do they have magic, mystic, or spiritual powers, just because they are Indigenous; are Indigenous characters portrayed simply as either Noble or Savage*; and so forth.

Of Stedman's criteria, a notable item asks if the Indigenous character's *humanity* (or *human-ness*, if you will) presents. Thankfully, the *A Girl Called Echo* series delivers on this, offering a centralized Indigenous—Métis—protagonist imbued with complexity and depth, while also avoiding many of the other aforementioned stereotypes.

With Katherena Vermette at the helm of sequential storytelling, the series offers a unique glimpse of a young girl, Echo, coming to terms with being Métis in modern times as well as the historic events that contribute to that perspective. Echo does not have super- or meta-human powers or abilities, not even the stereotypic ones usually bestowed on Indigenous characters: she doesn't have mystic powers, isn't a great hunter or tracker, and she cannot communicate with the natural elements or animals. Despite lacking any noticeable powers, Echo is not only able to *witness* historic Métis events unfolding first-hand, she is somehow able *interact* directly with individuals from the past.

These visits to, and interactions with, the past offer a fantastic voyage for Echo; they both contrast with her daily life, filled with hardships, and intertwine with them, as many times the adventures coincide with lessons about the Métis history she learns in school. Echo seems to be living two lives: one life is in the present, where she struggles with self-identity amidst a troubled family situation; the other is steeped in exciting historic events of the past and individuals from that time period. While it's not clear whether Echo has a powerful imagination or is actually a time traveler, this juxtaposition of past and present offers an interesting story for readers.

Of course, one could argue that this portrayal of Echo interacting with the past contributes to a common stereotype of comic books, where Indigenous people are consistently shown as a part of history, making Indigenous people seem “immutable, forever stuck in the [past]...” (Kilpatrick 46). Yet, the series upturns this misrepresentation, especially given that Echo is presented to readers as a character from modern, present times. Thus, the series avoids stereotypes of Indigenous people existing only in historic times by demonstrating Métis continuance into a modern-day time frame.

Undoubtedly, this continuance into modernity is not without its own challenges for Indigenous people, especially as individuals try to negotiate Indigenous identity and strive for balance of their personal traditional culture and the complex nuances of modern life. The series highlights this struggle well—Echo vacillates between immersing herself in music from her portable electronic device and being seemingly transported to and immersed within historic Métis events.

Additionally, the complexity of modern Métis identity is explored as Echo and her mother compare cultural notes within the storyline. Within the *Pemmican Wars* storyline, after reaching out and expressing her limitations to what being Métis is, Echo’s mother also confesses that she herself does not know nor comprehend all the cultural significances. In popular media such as film, televisions, and comics, Indigenous “elders” (anyone older or more experienced than the central protagonist) are often portrayed as all-knowing guides of traditional culture. Having this moment between Echo and her mother gives a very poignant and human feel to the story and provides more support to the complexity of being Indigenous, rather than have a ready-made “guide” into it.

As with nearly all representation in media, comics must tread a delicate balance between good storytelling—which typically includes a sense of conflict of some sort—and oversimplifying Indigenous experience as a set of predefined cultural hardships. All too often, comics and other media focus primarily on the *hardships* within Indigenous communities, typically those associated with socioeconomic factors such as broken family structures, lower incomes, sometimes chemical dependency etc., in the same vein of what Vine Deloria, Jr. refers to as the Indian’s “plight” (1). Fortunately, the *A Girl Called Echo* series does a great job of lightly suggesting some of these cultural elements—Echo does not live with her mother, for some yet-to-be-revealed reason in the story, and must go visit her, for example—while still focusing on the main story: Echo’s travel and voyages into the past.

Moreover, the storyline itself has not been “dumbed down” to facilitate those readers unfamiliar with Métis culture and history. The series goes further by providing additional insight to Métis culture, including a timeline of important historic events that deepens the reader’s understanding of being Métis in modern times and focusing on Echo’s particular time-travelling encounters rather than overwhelming the reader by providing a wide survey of all Métis history.

The sequential art, illustrated by Scott B. Henderson and colored by Donovan Yaciuk, is solid and well-executed, with illustrations of stark modernity juxtaposed against beautiful landscapes and vistas within the historical sections. Indeed, the depiction of Echo’s day-to-day life and interactions provide a rich tapestry for readers: the public school system, public mass transit,

“pop culture” references on tee shirts, use of personal electronic devices, and many other elements provide a deepened visual presentation.

These visual nuances, coupled with the main character’s oscillation between personal adversity and her quests to the past, make for good comic-book storytelling. The series does well to avoid common misrepresentations of Indigenous characters and provides an interesting take on what it means to be Métis, especially for Echo. Left with a cliffhanger in volume 2, readers will look forward to future volumes of the *A Girl Called Echo* series, as her adventures continue.

Michael Sheyahshe

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