

Marcie R. Rendon. *Murder on the Red River*. Cinco Puntos, 2017. 208 pp. ISBN: 9781941026526.

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Marcie R. Rendon. *Girl Gone Missing*. Cinco Puntos, 2019. 208 pp. ISBN: 9781947627116.

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Anyone interested in crime novels will find Marcie R. Rendon's Cash Blackbear books extremely difficult to put down. Rendon (White Earth) is also the author of two nonfiction children's books: *Pow Wow Summer* and *Farmer's Market: Families Working Together*. In addition, Rendon is involved in theater with four published plays and is the creative mind of Raving Native Theater. Her first foray into crime fiction, *Murder on the Red River*, won the Pinckley Prize for Debut Crime Novel in 2018. The novel was also a Western Writers of American Spur Award Finalist in 2018 in the Contemporary Novel category. Rendon's crime novels mix mystery, social commentary, and close character study with a deep attention to place.

In the canon of American detective fiction, most series featuring Native American characters and settings have been written by non-Native authors. However, there are a significant number of Indigenous authors who are embracing the crime fiction genre. Writers such as Sara Sue Hoklotubbe (Cherokee), Thomas King (Cherokee) writing as Hartley GoodWeather, and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl (Native Hawaiian/Samoan) to name a few, are using the detective series format to provide important self-representation of Indigenous lifeways and cultures. Rendon's depiction of Cash Blackbear is a welcome addition to the genre.

There is a lot to like about the Cash Blackbear mysteries, one of the most prominent features being the protagonist. At nineteen years old, Renee Blackbear, who goes by Cash, is wise beyond her years. After being separated from her White Earth biological family at age three and forced into the child welfare system, where she was shuffled from one white foster home to the next, Cash's life has not been easy. Since the age of eleven, Cash has regularly performed farm work for cash—the origin of her nickname. Because Cash doesn't know where her biological family is, her biggest supporter is Sheriff Wheaton, a seemingly unlikely ally. Over the years he's consistently been there for Cash, and rescues her from an abusive foster father, securing her an efficiency apartment so Cash can exercise her independence.

Although Cash is quite young, she's extremely smart, resourceful, and brave. As a result, she's an engaging and likeable character. She bucks stereotypes about femininity as well as stereotypes of the time period in which the novels are set: the early 1970s. Cash refuses pot, but will drink endless amounts of beer and smoke carton after carton of Marlboros. She's a pool shark with a reputation that precedes her, and she's the only girl working the farm jobs. Her appearance is simple, and she's usually dressed in jeans, a t-shirt, and her jean jacket. She's not into free love, bell bottoms, or any of the things her white peers seem so passionate about; for example, she's critical of her professors because "rather than talk about the day's assigned reading material, class discussions often veered off into anti-war discussions or debates about civil rights. Cash wasn't sure what either of them had to do with her" (*Girl Gone Missing* 30). Cash is pragmatic, trying to survive in a world that has been so cruel to her in her short life. And she not only survives, but she thrives. Cash shows her smarts when she tests out of her English and Science

classes freshman year at Moorhead State in *Girl Gone Missing*, and she even wins a state award for an essay she wrote about Shakespeare and Langston Hughes. But there are also a lot of things Cash doesn't know, which rounds out her character as a sheltered girl from rural Minnesota. She's confused by the idea of prostitution, wondering why anyone would pay for sex, especially when "make love, not war" is the mantra of so many of her college classmates.

Both *Murder on the Red River* and *Girl Gone Missing* are as much diurnal catalogs of Cash's life as they are mystery stories. Because the reader spends every moment of each book with Cash—we know when she bathes, when and how she brushes her hair, the countless cigarettes she smokes, her large consumption of beer, and her sparse diet of coffee, tuna sandwiches, and Bismarck donuts—it's impossible not to root for her to succeed. She is incredibly endearing. And perhaps this could be a criticism some readers might have: that the mysteries seem secondary to Cash's daily life. However, the primacy placed on Cash is what propels each story.

In focusing on Cash's day-to-day activity, Rendon embeds in each novel a subtext that raises awareness of particular issues that face Indigenous communities. In *Murder on the Red River*, intergenerational trauma, particularly from boarding schools and placement into the state child welfare system, is highlighted. Because Cash's mother attended boarding school and because Cash herself was moved from foster home to foster home, Rendon conveys the lasting impacts that being separated from family and culture have done to Indigenous people. In *Girl Gone Missing*, while the main mystery revolves around the disappearance of blonde-haired, blue-eyed white girls, Rendon underscores the "worldwide epidemic" of the "trafficking and murder of women and children, of all races," and, in particular, how this issue impacts Native women and girls. In addition, Cash's brother, whom she hasn't seen or talked to since she was three, shows up at Cash's apartment; Cash learns he had been adopted by a white family, treated as one of their own until he returned from Viet Nam, and the family disinherited him. Through this character, Rendon again portrays the mistreatment of Native children as well as the imperative role of Native soldiers, particularly in Viet Nam.

One of the other prominent features of the books is place. Set in the Fargo-Moorhead Red River Valley, details and descriptions of the various North Dakota and Minnesota settings make the Cash Blackbear mysteries deeply regional. Throughout the two books—and hopefully there will be more, as the ending of *Girl Gone Missing* suggests—great attention is put into illustrating locality. Ada, the Red Lake reservation, Halstad, and the Twin Cities are just a few of the places the reader travels to with Cash in her quest for the truth. Topographic information and geographical elements round out the depth of the descriptions of place: "All of this land, as far as the eye could see was flat because some giant glacier had shaved it flat while moving north. And every year it flooded" (*Murder on the Red River* 20). As a result, the settings are far from being empty backdrops. In addition, because the Red River Valley is where Cash has spent her entire life, she knows this place extremely well.

While Cash has an intimate knowledge of the land and a close relationship with Sheriff Wheaton, her dreams and out-of-body experiences are what spur her investigations. For example, after seeing the body of a murdered Red Lake man in *Murder on the Red River*, in her mind Cash "saw a gravel road with a stand, almost like a food stand where one would sell berries, but this one had a basket of pinecones on it" (39-40). She follows these clues, which lead her to the home

of the Day Dodge family on the Red Lake reservation—the family of the man who was murdered. Some readers may take issue with Cash’s investigative process and proclaim that it perpetuates stereotypes about “mystical Indians.” However, Rendon’s characterization of Cash is anything but mystical, and like all the other characteristics of Cash, her dreams and visions are part of her. They are not exaggerated or overplayed; they appear sporadically but do help Cash solve the mysteries. Furthermore, her visions are primarily about place; she must visit these places to get the information she needs.

Some may argue that the resolution of each novel is too easy or oversimplified. In each book, at the climax, Cash finds her way out of nearly impossible situations, saving the day just in time. With that being said, these high intensity moments are part and parcel of the crime fiction genre, and provide satisfying, closed-case endings that are the hallmark of detective fiction. It is good to see Cash succeed. Moreover, while these books could be read as standalone stories, Rendon makes connections to Cash’s previous investigations, ultimately showing that Cash is growing and evolving. Cash is not a static character and at the end of each book, readers want to know what’s next for her.

In all, *Murder on the Red River* and *Girl Gone Missing* are excellent novels, so compulsively readable that they are difficult to put down. They contain less gore and violence than other crime novels, but this does not prevent the texts from presenting compelling and engaging narratives that also touch on issues that face Indigenous peoples and communities. As Rendon states in the author’s note in *Girl Gone Missing*, “It is my hope that you, reader, will search farther for the truths once you have read this story.” Rendon’s storytelling places her as a prominent contemporary Native American crime novelist, and there is no doubt that Cash Blackbear has many more mysteries to solve.

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