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Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*

(Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2017)

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After the publication of Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* (2008), authors and publishers flooded the literary marketplace with young adult dystopian novels. The list includes, among others, James Dashner's *The Maze Runner* (2009), Veronica Roth's *Divergent* (2011), Marie Lu's *Legend* (2011), and Lauren Oliver's *Delirium* (2011). Few of these books—or their numerous sequels—are as powerful or original as Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), however. Set in an indeterminate but near future, the opening portions of the novel describe a North American landscape devastated by climate change, pollution, epidemic disease, and global warfare. Ecohorror, indeed! Amidst all this destruction, Canada's human and nonhuman survivors struggle to eke out a living, competing with one another for slim advantages and scarce resources. In this new world, North America's Indigenous people are particularly vulnerable because they possess an ability that other humans do not, namely the capacity to dream. They are hunted by Recruiters, uniformed officers who work for the Canadian government's Department of Oneirology. Equipped with special vehicles and silver whistles, these men and women relentlessly pursue their human quarry, capturing and keeping First Nations people in facilities modeled after the residential schools of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At these institutions, scientists conduct a series of horrific medical experiments on their subjects, all in an attempt to extract their ability to dream from their bone marrow.

Narrated by Frenchie, a sixteen-year-old Métis boy from Southern Metropolis City (Toronto), the novel follows the adventures of a small band of Indigenous survivors, most of whom range in age from nine to seventeen and all of whom hail from different tribal backgrounds. As the only adults in the group, Miigwans, a middle-aged Anishnaabe man, and Minerva, an elderly Anishnaabe woman, serve as leaders, shepherding their charges through the wilderness, preserving their history by telling stories, and providing instruction in various First Nations languages. The younger children—Tree, Zeegwon, Slopper, and RiRi—sing songs, play games, and learn survival skills. Meanwhile, the teenagers—Chi-Boy, Wab, Frenchie, and Rose—tend camp, practice woodcraft, and flirt with one another.

Over the course of the novel, the group travels north through Canada's deciduous and boreal forest towards James Bay in search of food and freedom from persecution. They find a few moments of joy and happiness, as they enjoy each other's company in the relative luxury offered by an abandoned hotel. They also endure a period of tremendous loss and hardship, as they experience betrayal at the hands of two Indigenous men—one Anishnaabe and one Cree—working for the Recruiters. The violence which erupts during this encounter costs Frenchie and his companions dearly, but it does not leave them defeated. In the ultimate act of defiance, they decide to join the 'resistance', a group of First Nations freedom fighters, living near the town of Espanola. As they come to realise, they possess special powers related to their traditional songs and dreaming ability, which just might enable them to defeat the Recruiters and the government scientists for whom they work.

Although written for young adults, older readers will also appreciate *The Marrow Thieves*, especially insofar as its thematic density is concerned. Throughout the book, Dimaline deftly juggles a number of different but important ideas and concepts. She emphasises that kinship ties do not necessarily depend upon biology, explaining that the members of Frenchie's group constitute a tight-knit family even though most of them are not related. She stresses the power of romantic love in all of its various forms, describing the tremendous grief Miigwans experiences when he loses his husband to Recruiters and fails to rescue him from the 'school' in which he is imprisoned. And she depicts strategies of what Anishnaabe writer and scholar Gerald Vizenor would call 'survivance', showing possibilities for resisting the forces of oppression and creating new cultural traditions (some of which involve Pearl Jam!).

Perhaps most importantly, Dimaline tackles issues of social and environmental justice, demonstrating that they are hopelessly convoluted and inextricably intertwined. As she makes very clear, environmental catastrophes—like the Water Wars and pollution problems which occur in the book—can worsen the oppression experienced by historically marginalized human populations. As she also makes clear, these peoples sometimes possess powerful survival strategies that their non-marginalized counterparts do not. Therein lies the importance of dreams, language, culture, and tradition to the novel.

Although *The Marrow Thieves* addresses important themes, Dimaline's real strength is characterisation. Miigwans is a complex individual—and perhaps the true hero of the novel—

but Frenchie deserves special consideration, because he is a maze of contradictions, just like an actual teenager. At times, he is jealous and angry, immature and impulsive, awkward and anxious. At others, he is generous and kind, considerate and contemplative, confident and courageous. Nowhere is this strange, contradictory mixture more apparent than in the following passages, which describe what happens when Frenchie embarks on a solo hunting expedition and encounters a bull moose deep in the Canadian wilderness:

> 'Just then he raised his head, so massive that I wondered at the blood it must take to animate, and he saw me. He blinked a long, slow blink and faltered for only a second or two before he began chewing again. He turned a bit so that I knew he knew I was there. I swallowed hard, aiming, fingers exact and stiff. He was so frigging big. It was like he was a hundred years old, like he had watched all of this happen. Imagine being here through it all—the wars, the sickness, the earthquakes, the schools—only to come to this?
>
> He exhaled, long and loud like the wind. This was food for a week. Hide and sinew to stitch together for tarps, blankets, ponchos. This was bone for pegs and chisels. This was me, the conquering hero, marching into camp with more meat than all of us could carry, taking the others back to field dress this gift. This was Rose looking at me with those big eyes so dark they shone burgundy in the firelight. This was my chance.' (p. 49)

Here, Frenchie realises that he must choose between his respect for this animal, a fellow witness and survivor, and his desire to provide for his family (and impress Rose). Ultimately, in a particularly poignant moment, Frenchie adopts a less anthropocentric attitude toward the moose and decides not to shoot him. As he explains, 'I couldn't do it. I couldn't let it come to this, not for him and not for me' (p. 50).

Not insignificantly, *The Marrow Thieves* has received several prestigious awards in Canada and the United States, including a Governor General's Literary Award and a Kirkus Prize. It has also proved to be quite popular, finishing third in the 2018 Canada Reads competition, a 'battle-of-the-books' contest sponsored by Canadian Public Television. The book is certainly worthy of all of these accolades. More than just another young adult dystopian novel, it is a compelling, thoughtful, and well-written novel about the current state of the natural world and the future of the human race. For all of its pessimism and darkness, it is also a hopeful

book about the power of perseverance, generosity, and love. If humans are to survive the ecological and social crises currently unfolding across the globe, they are going to need a hefty dose of all three.