Writer Tracey Lindberg outlines the Cree idea of caring for all

Birdie Tracey Lindberg HarperCollins

Tracey Lindberg bought me a bottle of water before we met. By the time I recognized her, sitting at a small table near the front, it had turned out we had more than we needed. It was the kind of minor generosity that feeds into the broader rhythms of her work.

Lindberg, a Harvard grad and professor of law at the University of Ottawa and the centre for World Indigenous Knowledge and Research at Athabasca University, where she is a Canada Research chair, has an electrifying demeanour.

A citizen of Kelly Lake Cree Nation in Alberta, Lindberg’s day job also sees her working with spiritual leaders and elders from several Indigenous nations to record and translate laws for and by the community. Birdie, her first novel, unfolds as a kind of weeklong vision quest undertaken by a young Cree woman, Bernice, who retreats into herself in order to reconcile her own personal history and the larger historical forces at play with her continued existence.

All people, Lindberg says, are still reeling from what she calls the colonial bomb.

“Somebody referred to residential schools as the bomb that went off in your community. I think that colonization is a bomb, and now that that bomb’s gone off, Bernice, as a protagonist — she’s sort of somewhere back here, but her great-grandmother was hit first.” In Birdie, as in life, Bernice and other Aboriginal people are not alone with having to contend with the aftermath of trauma.

In the book, Bernice lives in an apartment above a bakery, where she is employed by a white woman named Lola. Lindberg says that Lola, too, is affected and this is borne out in the novel. Lindberg weaves Cree poetic aesthetics throughout the novel.

In some scenes, Lola has sublimated parts of Cree culture, humming traditional songs or suddenly being able to say something to Birdie in the language. Because of the way the story unspools, and given Bernice’s troubling experiences, it’s occasionally not clear which parts of the story take place in a dreamscape and which in waking life. Bernice’s memories rise toward the narrative’s surface, but nothing quite breaks through. It’s memories all the way down.

Cree law, Lindberg says, is relational. One very important tenet is that all human beings treat each other like relatives. We have an obligation to take care of one another. When she brought wa-
ter for me to drink during our conversation, she was taking care of me, a woman she’d never met.

“The law to Cree peoples is well known in many corners, and it’s called the Wahkohtowin,” she explains. The novel, she explains, was an important way to explore Wahkohtowin from an intimate, human perspective. “I didn’t intend to say ‘Let’s look at what Cree law looks like,’ and write that down — if I did, I’d write the Cree criminal code — but to piece it together,” she says. “What do reciprocal obligations look like? What happens when they’re broken, and how do you rebuild? Well, that is a narrative.”

Narrative is an effective way of continuing the work Lindberg does in her professorial capacities. “A lot of the conversations that I have as an academic, or that I had as a full-time lawyer, are sort of like little tiny stories,” she says, “and you get to tell the little tiny stories between a select or privileged audience. You also have all the space in the world to put your arguments and time together beforehand.”

A work of fiction has an unknowable audience likely to interpret the story in personal, unique ways.

“You can be very directive as a lawyer and very directive as a professor, and the goals that are achieved are most often your own,” Lindberg says, whereas with a novel, you must “let go of your control, in a certain way, because an audience decides for themselves what it means for them.

“The reason that I wrote this novel, rather than write it as an academic article,” she says, “is that I’ve seen, along the way, it’s really quite easy to make decisions in law about indigenous peoples as a category. It’s really easy to lecture about indigenous peoples if it’s a topic.” The problem, of course, is that one doesn’t experience the world as a category; neither can we empathetically experience each other as topics.

Bernice is a fictional character, but her wry observations about the world, and her enduring adoration for a certain character on the The Beachcombers paints her as fully realized.

Her relationships with the women in her life — her distant mother, her promiscuous auntie Val, her hard-bodied boss, Lola, her nervous cousin, Skinny Freeda — give shape to her life; her relationships, even where they break down, illustrate how important keeping Wahkohtowin is in the age of Cheezies and OutKast, just as in the ancient past. She’s a contemporary hero, smart and funny even as she reaches her breaking point, and through Lindberg’s thorough imagining of her, she becomes easy to know, even to love.

“It’s really difficult to dismiss or dehumanize indigenous peoples if it’s a person,” Lindberg says. “So what I hope that the book does — that good stuff — is to humanize us, humanize indigenous woman, indigenous girls, so that, in a way, we’re thought of as relatives. Because you care about your relatives,” she says. “You don’t let your relatives get murdered or go missing.”