



## REVIEW

**Lillie, Vanessa. *Blood Sisters*. Berkley, 2023. 384 pp. ISBN 9780593550137.**

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/721055/blood-sisters-by-vanessa-lillie/9780593550137>

In a novel that is, at its core, about the pressing issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Relatives (MMIWG2S), *Blood Sisters* (2023), by author Vanessa Lillie, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma, strikes the impressive balance of conveying the true horrors of the disproportionate violence facing Native American women and offering readers a page-turning mystery-thriller plot, all while resisting the trap of spectacularizing gender-based violence. The result is a text that reads as deeply mindful of the social, cultural, and political stakes of the topic at hand. As such, Lillie produces in *Blood Sisters* a work that is as educational as it is entertaining. *Blood Sisters* will resonate with Indigenous audiences all too familiar with the realities of gender-based violence, who will find themselves touched by Lillie's insightful reflections on seeking justice, healing intergenerational trauma, and the meaning of home. For the broader public just learning about the movement for the missing and murdered, the novel offers a human story that personifies and makes real that which is often abstracted by news headlines or worse, overlooked altogether.

A gripping murder scene laid out in the first pages of the text sets the tone for the fast-paced action to come throughout the novel and introduces readers to protagonist Syd Walker, a Two-Spirit, Cherokee archaeologist working for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). A child at the time of this bloody crime that forever shapes the trajectory of her life, Syd attempts to escape her trauma by fleeing her hometown in northeastern Oklahoma and seeking refuge in Narragansett territory in New England. As she establishes her career and builds a new home with a wife and baby-on-the-way, the hundreds of miles of distance and fifteen years separating her from the inciting event fail to rid Syd from unwanted visits by "Ghost Luna," liberate her from the refrain she plays over and over in her mind--"only one bullet"--or free her from the guilt of abandoning her family during their times of need. When the discovery of a skull and the disappearance of her sister, Emma Lou, compel her to return to her hometown, Syd confronts her past only to learn that her haunting experience was only one part of a much larger mystery.

Land emerges as a central thread in the novel that enables Lillie to weave together a story that is as much about loss, displacement, and destruction as it is about belonging, responsibility, and connection. Syd's trauma-induced move to Rhode Island mirrors the Cherokee Nation's forcible removal from their homelands on the Trail of Tears, while her return home calls forth the memory of the Cherokee people's resilience and strength as they created community anew in Indian Territory, which later became the State of Oklahoma. Following the Indian Removal Act, allotment policy further dispossessed the Cherokee Nation from lands promised to them--a historical legacy that continues to reverberate in the contemporary moment through the pressures on Syd's community to sell their land. The environmental devastation discussed in the novel, specifically through mining on Quapaw land and the toxic chat that remains, also speaks to the violence facing Syd's friends and family, as Indigenous peoples have long identified that "what happens to the land happens to the women," as Lillie's epigraph states. Finally, as an archaeologist, Syd looks to the land for answers: our protagonist fearlessly sinks her hands into the land as she digs for truth, and, in her pursuit of justice, dusts the dirt and soil off of the bones of Indigenous women to shine the light of truth on that which was hidden from sight.

Lillie reveals in the epilogue that *Blood Sisters* took inspiration from the true story of two unsolved disappearances, as well as a landscape shaped by drugs and corruption.



As she deftly navigates this subject material throughout the text, the author calls the reader's attention to the many pitfalls that often characterize MMIWG2S cases. Indigenous scholars have long noted that media coverage of MMIWG2S cases, for instance, places blame on the victim by alleging or emphasizing substance abuse as a contributing factor to the situation. In the case of Syd's missing sister, Emma Lou, Lillie tackles this very issue through Syd's own internal questioning about Emma Lou's sobriety and its potential role in her disappearance. Lillie's strategy in raising such critiques, as readers will discover, encourages us to think about violence systemically and forces us to question our assumptions. "Like all the other Native girls around here," Syd laments after the Oklahoma State Police declined to look into Emma Lou's missing persons case, "Saying they left is a lot easier than accountability" (245).

Much like Syd conceptualizes her role--"I see myself as a midwife to the past for the future. To support the tribes by advocating for what they need to continue traditions that honor their thousands of years of history as they carry this knowledge into the future" (8)--Lillie's publication is a significant vehicle for advocacy for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit Relatives, as well as their families, their communities, and their Indigenous Nations. In telling the story of Syd Walker, Lillie's authorial voice incorporates an often-marginalized Two-Spirit perspective, honors Cherokee cultural elements, and calls forth Indigenous histories to speak to the Indigenous present and fight for a just Indigenous future: "As with justice as is with the earth," Lillie concludes, "there can always be a balance returned. There is healing in the very pursuit" (366). For its critical contributions to the movement for missing and murdered Indigenous relatives, *Blood Sisters* takes its rightful place next to recent literary successes such as Angeline Boulley's *Firekeeper's Daughter* (2021) and Marcie Rendon's *Where They Last Saw Her* (2024), and among such important works as Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* (2012). Readers will also find *Blood Sisters* an enthralling artistic accompaniment to Rebecca Nagle's new non-fiction investigation, *By the Fire We Carry* (2024). *Blood Sisters* brings one of the foremost issues affecting Indian Country today to the public reader, grabbing our attention on the first page and keeping us hanging onto every word through to the end, tornado and all.

Elizabeth Rule, American University