

REVIEWS



A Council of Dolls: A Novel. By Mona Susan Power. Boston: Mariner Books, 2023. 304 pages. \$30.00 cloth; \$18.99 paper; \$14.99 e-book.

Within the last several decades, Indigenous studies and literature have gained significant traction and recognition, particularly alongside the rise of the Native American Renaissance. By bridging the gap between literature and history, Mona Susan Power joins historical fiction authors such as Tommy Orange, Leslie Marmon Silko, Margaret Verble, and Stephen Graham Jones. These Indigenous authors confront similar themes in their haunting stories of identity, generational trauma, and cultural violence. Power's novel, *A Council of Dolls*, is a powerful and moving piece that challenges the boundaries between the historical past and the modern day. As an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Ihąŋkthūŋwaŋna Dakhóta) and having grown up in Chicago, Power is more than equipped to contribute to the discussion of Indigenous history through a literary form.

A Council of Dolls spans from the nineteenth century to the present day as it recounts the generational trauma of three Yanktonai Dakota women, Sissy, Lillian, and Cora, along with their dolls Ethel, Mae, and Winona. The characters' lives and stories are enhanced by the doll's ability to emotionally connect with the girls and convey their own histories. From unique perspectives, each doll shines a light on the devastating and long-lasting damage generated by American Indian boarding schools and the historical massacres of Indigenous people.

American Indian boarding schools were historically used to strip Native American children of their cultural identity, language, and way of life. *A Council of Dolls* describes three women who have been permanently altered by the assimilation and "reeducation" of Native American children at government-run boarding schools. This is evident in the novel through the characters' memories as trauma is carried by ancestors and their descendants, often leaving the characters mentally and physically affected.

Each section of the novel follows a woman in a different generation and seamlessly flows into the previous generation. Power begins with Sissy in Chicago in the 1960s and describes her as a young child of parents who are American Indian boarding school survivors. Sissy has a complicated relationship with her parents, mostly viewed through her beautifully terrifying mother, Lillian. Lillian carries her trauma from the boarding school as an adult and often projects it onto her daughter through emotional and physical abuse. Sissy and her father, Cornelius, have a closer and loving relationship but he is somewhat closed off because of his own boarding school trauma and experiences in the Korean War. Soon into the story, Sissy is given a doll whom she names Ethel. She forms an immediate bond with Ethel, who becomes her most trusted friend. Like the other dolls in the novel, Ethel is seemingly magical;

she has independent thoughts and abilities, which leaves the reader questioning if the doll is simply an entity that Sissy has made up to cope with her feelings or if Ethel is something more.

The following section is set in the 1930s. It describes Lillian's childhood on her ancestral land as she is forced to attend an American Indian boarding school away from her family. Her home life was already volatile; her parents, Jack and Cora, were also boarding school survivors. Jack turns to alcohol to soothe the never-ending pain, but this ultimately only adds to the abuse and trauma that Lillian holds inside. While away at school, Lillian loses her sister Blanche at the hands of the nuns in their efforts to punish students for speaking their Native language or acting "Indian." Her doll, Mae, finds ways to defend Lillian and comfort her in her suffering, inflicted by the school's abusive nuns.

The last woman accounted for in this family saga is Cora, with her doll Winona, set during the 1900s. Cora was born into the devastating times of the American Indian Wars. Like her daughter, she was forced to move across the country to attend the Carlisle School. Power draws significance to this theme by referencing the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, one of the most prominent American Indian boarding schools in the United States. Along with their cultural belongings that the teachers burned upon the student's arrival, Winona was also burned as they attempted to rid Indigenous identities from the children. Despite this, the spirit of Winona is carried within Cora, serving as a confidant and the embodiment of a murdered ancestor as Winona describes that she has witnessed massacres and trauma herself.

Last, the novel returns to Sissy, now called Jesse, in 2010 as she reflects on her family's generational trauma and the effect it has had. The writing style shifts and becomes meta as Jesse rediscovers all three dolls and begins to write her own stories, focusing on the oral stories from the dolls and their experiences with the women. Each story becomes entwined by the three dolls that bring the girls companionship and hope. Love and healing come alive through the dolls and their storytelling, leading to the reclamation of Indigenous identity and heritage for Jesse, Lillian, and Cora.

Written in a reverse chronological order until the last section where Power returns to the "present" day, *A Council of Dolls* has a reasonable and flowing structure. However, the last section presents a shift in this flowing writing style as it becomes realistic in its slow, expository-styled writing. In addition, the author also seems to leave some of the secondary characters underdeveloped, such as Sissy's father and godmother, leaving a void in the story. A deeper conversation surrounding these characters would have been welcome, as they become powerful, important characters in Jesse's healing within the last section. Despite these minor criticisms, Jesse's section was beautifully written and felt very autobiographical to Mona Susan Power. The author's note confirms that this novel was based on factual historical events and Indigenous experiences that were closely linked to Power's family history. Though it is not an autobiography, Power wrote in a way that stayed as close to the truth of her ancestors and Indigenous community as possible. The language within the novel elicits empathy through its intimate and realistic nature, working as an homage to Indigenous suffering, strength, and endurance.

Through its harrowing depictions of heartache, loss, and suffering, *A Council of Dolls* provides an outlet of healing for Power, her ancestors, and the readers. She skillfully approaches and examines the implications of American Indian boarding schools and the massacres inflicted upon Native American communities for centuries. Power frames the generational trauma in this novel in such a way that complicates the historical and fictional narrative by relying on firsthand accounts as the basis of her characters and their lives. Staying true to traditional Indigenous culture, oral storytelling from the dolls leads to internal healing and reconciliation for Power, Jesse, and the ancestors.

For those interested in learning more about Indigenous family history stories or American Indian boarding schools, I would recommend reading or teaching Powers' novel alongside *American Indian Stories* by Yankton Dakota Sioux author Zitkála-Šá and *Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors* by Denise K. Lajimodiere, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa. In conversation with these texts, *A Council of Dolls* becomes much more than a fictional story about magical dolls. It contends with the emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual toll that these brutal systems had on Indigenous peoples.

Katie Hiler

University of California, Santa Cruz