

# LAMENT

A NOVEL

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By

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## ABSTRACT

When the peaceful life she built for herself is shattered, T’Rayles returns to the streets of the colonial city, Seventhblade, to hunt down the woman who put its destruction into play. The daughter of an Indigenous Ibinnashae and an immortal who walks the north, T’Rayles is considered an abomination, a halfsoul, and is shunned by both the First People and the colonizers of her homeland. Set in a high fantasy world, the colonization of Kaspine in *Lament* and the treatment of the Indigenous cultures and communities are written as an analogy to the colonization of North America, with focus on the French and British mercantile and colonial powers, as they vied for control of the natural resources of the vast “New World.”



Figure 1: Ecrelian Map of Kaspine and Surrounding Countries.

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## ARTIST STATEMENT

In a 2017 interview with the international edition of *The Guardian*, Claire G. Coleman, author of the dystopian novel *Terra Nullius*, states, “Speculative fiction is one of the most powerful political tools in fiction...”. Fantasy and science fiction genres have always been filled with political critique, and my novel, *Lament*, is no different. Born out of a mix of personal experiences and interests, creating *Lament* has not only aided to decolonize my way of thinking and interacting with society, but my writing itself. Building a high-fantasy world through an Indigenous lens has allowed me to explore the vital differences and similarities in societal values and perspectives between multiple cultures, religions, and familial structures. As well, using the Michif language in *Lament* is an important step towards reclamation of the language for myself and my people.

To know my writing is to know me. I am the daughter of a fifth generation European settler and a Métis man with roots going back to the Northwest Rebellion and the Red River Resistance. I grew up in rural Saskatchewan and was a nerdy farm-goth raised by a loving settler family. I was surrounded by European descendants.

Living on a farm outside a small town in the middle of the prairies, there was little available to me in terms of speculative fiction. As a young teen, I tore through the local library’s very tiny fantasy section, reading J.R.R Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Anne McCaffery’s *Dragonriders of Perth* series, David Eddings’ *The Belgariad* series, and R.A. Salvatore’s *Forgotten Realms* books. I also absorbed as much Stephen King, Dean Koontz, and Anne Rice novels as I could.

Gas station grab bag comic books were also a main escape for me. I rarely was able to finish a storyline thanks to the randomness of what was available, but those comics opened up my world. I was inspired to draw from those books and devoted much of my free time to learning all I could from them.

My mother, who is an artist herself, encouraged me to follow my interests. My stepdad didn't really understand it all, but he was supportive, just the same. One of my favorite memories is when I first started working at the video game company, Bioware. My parents were in line for a movie in Saskatoon, and behind them a couple of guys were talking about video games. My stepdad spun around and asked them if they knew Bioware. They did, so he proceeded to tell them his daughter worked there. Mom said he was very proud. I can't remember how the guys he talked to responded, but that part doesn't really matter. Hearing how my old-school farmer stepdad was bragging about my artistic accomplishments meant more to me than whatever they had to say.

My biological father left us when I was four. All in all, it was for the best. My father's side of the family has been subjected to a lot of trauma over the years, and that trauma pushed them to deny their heritage as a defense mechanism in order to survive. From there, denial turned into self-hatred. My paternal grandparents were known to celebrate their children and grandchildren who looked more "white," while treating the children who "looked or acted Indian" as lesser. There were multiple abuses visited upon all of the children, but the brunt of it fell on their "lesser" kids. As you can guess, this caused a tremendous amount of PTSD and trauma, creating more self-hatred, racism and substance abuse within the family.

Yet, there were still some glimmers of pride in being Métis in that family. I would hear stories about how we may have been related to Gabriel Dumont (spoiler alert, we aren't), and how my father, grandfather and uncles had traplines and sold coyote pelts to the government back in the early 1980s. My father's family was still tied to the land; they hunted and fished and knew the histories of Buffalo Pound and Pile O' Bones and the forests around Prince Albert. They embraced that part of themselves. But they tried hard to hide it in settler society.

So as a child, I knew I was Métis, but had no idea what that meant. It was only after high school, when I moved to Saskatoon, that I started researching the community and the people in it. My mom helped me join the Métis Nation, and I've been on a journey of self-discovery ever since.

Still, I didn't feel like I really belonged. I had no Métis friends or contacts. The disconnect was overwhelming. Remember, this was before any type of social media, and being the terrifically superb introvert that I was, I would avoid gatherings like Back to Batoche, and other social events. And with no Métis family whom I felt safe to contact, I was beginning to feel like a fraud. I stopped identifying as a Métis woman for a few years. I moved across country to Halifax, where being Métis wasn't really a thing in 2004. There were definitely people with mixed ancestry there, but no one who seemed to identify as Métis—at least, as far as my limited introvertness allowed me to see. It made sense, the Métis are a specific group of Indigenous people who, while being of mixed heritage, share the common homeland and history of either the Red River Settlement, the Northwest Rebellion, or both.

It wasn't until I moved back to Saskatoon that I was drawn to learn more about my heritage again. When my maternal, settler grandparents died in 2005 and 2006, I began researching their histories. In a way, it made me feel more connected to them. And if that could make me feel connected to my settler ancestry, why couldn't it work for my Métis side? I stayed away from researching my paternal family at the start; I just wasn't ready to learn about them yet. Instead, I concentrated my learning on the Nehiyawak and the Métis themselves.

Even with my limited knowledge, I knew I wasn't going to like much of what I read, but even so, learning the personal stories regarding the forced trauma and cruelty of the residential schools and the broken treaties and the slaughtering of the buffalo and the forced conversion to Christianity opened my eyes. The events went from something in a dry, Euro-centric "Manifest Destiny-esque" high school history textbook to personal stories and shared pains. It made me sad. It made me angry.

I ended up following Idle No More, a grassroots organization started in 2012 that spreads awareness and fights for Indigenous rights. My Facebook page changed from dumb jokes and science facts and cat videos, to dumb jokes and science facts and human rights. And still, yes, cat videos. I started following Native and Métis Twitter as well and found a community there. I follow artists, musicians, writers, and activists, and even though I've never met any one of them in person, I feel more part of the Indigenous community than I ever had before.

When I applied for the MFA in Writing, I knew I wanted to write something inspired by my heritage. I thought a graphic novel would be an excellent way to tell the

story I wanted with the skills I had. After I was accepted into the program, I quickly learned that prose was much more appropriate for the story I wanted to tell. I was lucky enough to have Métis author, Katherena Vermette, as my MFA in Writing mentor. She was probably the best thing that could have happened to my writing career. Even with all her professional suggestions and advice, it was her support that pushed me to believe in my story and myself as a Métis writer. She never questioned my validity. She just supported me. I don't shy away from calling myself Métis anymore, and it is the community that makes me feel like I can own it.

I've worked as a professional storyteller since 2004. I started off as a stop motion animator on a children's show called *Poko*. Animators have a different kind of storytelling; they use action and body language to tell their tales. From there, I moved into writing. I took my Bachelor of Arts with a Concentration in Creative Writing from Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, B.C. During my time there, I interned at Bioware for the game *Dragon Age 2*, and was able to move into a full-time writing position for the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Unfortunately, before that game was finished, I found the fourteen-hour days at Bioware were just too much after my husband finished his paternity leave, and I left to focus more on my son and finish my degree. It was a difficult time, since I always believed that working at a company like Bioware would be the pinnacle of my career. But I was wrong. Since then, I have been the lead writer on the interactive novel, *Everlove: Rose*, by the studio Silicon Sisters, and have sold my own interactive novel, *Poster Girl*, to the studio, FableLabs.

So why did I decide to dedicate my Master's thesis to writing an Indigenous High Fantasy prose novel? Well, I wanted to create a hero my son can look up to, and I wanted

to tell a story that I, as an Indigenous woman, could have complete creative control over. I didn't need to change anything to boost monetization, nor did I have to change anything to make gameplay more enjoyable. I could just write. Lastly, high fantasy and world-building are where I live as both a reader and a writer.

As mentioned earlier, I've been an avid consumer of fantasy works since I was a child, but when I look back at the stories I've read, watched, or played, there is a very common thread woven throughout them. Indigenous people are not main characters. They are the helpers or the haters. As helpers, they'll save the protagonist from certain death, nurse them back to health, provide the protagonist wisdom, and usually, die at the hands of the antagonist to provide the main character an emotional reason to return to the fight. When they're not helpers, Indigenous characters are the exact opposite: they are the haters. They are the first or second act excitement in a story, a minor conflict for the protagonist to overcome, either by stealing an artifact, or by saving the leading lady from their "uncivilized" clutches. A good example of both the "helper and the hater" is the Dothraki in the *Game of Thrones* series. They are cruel and slaughter both enemies and innocents for fun, and women in their society are treated like chattel. But they also help and follow one of the main characters, the white-haired and fair-skinned Daenerys Targaryen, when she proves her might to them. In a response to a question on his own author blog, *Not a Blog*, George R.R. Martin states that, "The Dothraki were actually fashioned as an amalgam of a number of steppe and plains cultures... Mongols and Huns, certainly, but also Alans, Sioux, Cheyenne, and various other Amerindian tribes... seasoned with a dash of pure fantasy." When non-Indigenous writers create Indigenous societies like these in their books and other media, they're not only perpetuating harmful

stereotypes, they also create a “false narrative” of the culture they take their inspiration from. Indigenous peoples in North America have been lumped into a monolith by the non-Indigenous population because movies, books, and multiple other media indulge in this. The West Coast Haida communities are far different than the plains Nehiyawak or the Hopi in Arizona, therefore, by combining these different communities together, the individual cultures and cultural practices are lost.

Many writers use other writers and media as their historians because writers are storytellers, and they use story as ways to learn and share histories. Unfortunately, when it comes to respecting other cultures and traditions, using unsourced material to represent them is as dangerous as it is lazy and disrespectful. When creators don’t do their research, when they don’t take the time to learn about the cultures they are drawing influence from, they are doomed to rely on stereotypes and hand-me-down narratives from writers who did the same thing themselves.

Of course, Indigenous people who live in North America don’t live in a vacuum. We’ve learned from and lived amongst western storytelling techniques all our lives. We employ them in our own storytelling, art, and teachings. However, in order to break away from the stereotypes and tropes, it is incredibly important for a people to own their own stories in order to see their culture reflected in creative work. Many Indigenous writers create speculative fiction based on their own myths, legends and experiences. They are built on the histories and communities that already exist.

Indigenous literatures have one particularly powerful thread woven through them: kinship. Understanding and valuing kinship is one of the most important parts of

decolonizing literature and creating truly Indigenous high fantasy and speculative fiction. Traditionally, Indigenous kinship lies far beyond the Euro-centric view of the patriarchal nuclear family. In his essay, “Go Away, Water,” Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee) explains how “the principles of kinship can help us be more responsible and, ultimately, more useful participants in both the imaginative and physical decolonization and empowerment of Indigenous peoples through the study of our literatures” (154-55). The importance of kinship is further supported in his book *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* when he speaks to how kinship is the “chosen connections and commitments, as well as political, spiritual, and ceremonial processes that bring people into deep and meaningful affiliation” (75).

*The Marrow Thieves* by Anishinaabe and Métis writer Cherie Dimaline is an excellent example of how Indigenous kinship is employed as a strength, a way to forge community not through blood, but through shared experiences and motivations. The novel follows a group of Indigenous people trying to survive a dystopian future tied together through circumstance. The bonds between the characters strengthen as they teach each other survival and artistic skills, share experiences, and pass down cultural teachings. It becomes apparent early on that the characters in the novel not only survive thanks to their kinship, but they also begin to thrive.

Allison Mills, who is of Omushkego (Cree) and settler descent, artfully displays the basic need for kinship in her paranormal young adult novel *The Ghost Collector*. When the novel’s protagonist, Shelley, loses her mother, she uses her familial ability to sense, speak with, and capture ghosts, to build her own family. Although this building of a family is unhealthy for both Shelley and the ghosts she captures, Mills shows the reader

how a loss of kinship can cause one to act irrationally, to ignore others' pain and their own self-harm in order to have a sense of belonging. That feeling of kinship. It is only when Shelley's grandmother, her caregiver after her mother died, is able to create a true bond with Shelley through their shared grieving and experiences that Shelley realizes the damage she is doing and moves to heal not only herself, but also her grandmother by helping the elder release the ghosts she captured.

Rebecca Roanhorse, an Indigenous writer of Puebloan and Black descent, shows how Indigenous kinship can affect character and story in her book, *Trail of Lightning*. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, the story follows the Navajo monster-slayer, Maggie Hoskie, who has cut herself off from her community. She has convinced herself it is for their own good, but it becomes apparent quite early that Maggie has also isolated herself to avoid coming to terms with the emotional and physical trauma she has endured since her grandmother was brutally slain, making her powers manifest violently in response. It isn't until Maggie is forced to rely on others, both Indigenous and Black characters, that she finds her kin.

These three examples of Indigenous characters finding their identity, finding their strength in their kin, support Justice's notion that kinship is an important marker of Indigenous literature. But what about high fantasy? What about creating an entirely new world, with new cultures and new geography and new history? Can it still be considered Indigenous fantasy? Or is it fantasy, written by an Indigenous writer? What would make it Indigenous?

Daniel Heath Justice is one of the only Indigenous people I know of who has been published as a high-fantasy writer. His trilogy, *The Way of Thorn and Thunder*, follows the Kyn, the Indigenous people of his fantasy world, as they are forced into another way of life, into another religion, by the invading humans. The characters in the story navigate the loss of traditional kinship, even as they build another. The spirituality and strife he displays build an amazing world. The reader doesn't have to look far to see the connections he's making between the cultures of the Kyn, and Justice's own nation, the Cherokee. Justice also writes the Kyn as a completely different species than their human invaders which could create dissonance for an uneducated reader. Readers are not "rooting" for another human culture, rather, they are rooting for an alien one. Therefore, readers may not see the correlation the writer has set out, which, in a way, could be beneficial. The reader can step back from their own experiences, their own society, and see how certain actions can affect other cultures and people. A settler reader can learn about colonization without fear of judgement or feelings of guilt. However, media like this can also give a settler reader feelings of absolution as they empathize with a colonized "species" while still not recognizing the effects of colonization on real-world peoples and culture.

So how can I build a fantasy world that holds our own colonizing government and society accountable for their privilege and actions while still being accessible to a broad audience? How do I not alienate a large part of my intended readership? I had to find a good balance between entertainment and political commentary. And to do that, I needed to start from the ground up.

As an illustrator, most of my ideas come to me as still shots and scenes. It's the writer in me that has to thread them all together. So, to begin my planning, I research, research, and research the visuals. Back when I was in animation school, I had physical folders full of photos cut out from magazines or badly photocopied comics or, once we got a colour printer, printed pages. But now, I use Pinterest, as it's one of the best places in the world to find amazing visual references. As I research, I sketch. I create characters, designs and scenes. After I create my main characters, I create the relationships they hold. The experiences, the trauma, and the joy they've seen in their lives. For each of the characters, I build a culture, including the geographical landscapes in which they were reside. Geography influences culture and clothing design and can inform how characters interact within their environment and with each other. A great real-world example are the Inuit of the Arctic Circle. Traditionally, they lived as smaller groups in the summer, consisting of one or two families as food was more abundant, and then they would come together in the winter, when larger hunting parties were needed to survive. Socializing and traditions also helped stave off the desolation of the cold, dark winter days and nights. Their community require co-habitation and cooperation. Without it, they would not have survived.

After realizing how my character's society expects them to act, I then figure out which of those expectations my character will follow, and which ones they won't. After all that, I work out how their cultures interact with each other. This can be before I start writing, or on the fly, or both. Nothing stays too rigid, as everything I plan is a rough schematic written in the sand, not an engineering blueprint.

For *Lament*, T'Rayles and Elraiche were created first. T'Rayles' base personality has always been one of a "hot-head," but her age has tempered that a bit. T'Rayles is in her sixties, and while she's sometimes incredibly emotionally mature, that's usually only when it comes to giving others her wisdom. She doesn't always keep much for herself. Her reactionary nature is exacerbated by Jung's memories and her mother's sword as she moves through the story. Elraiche was my favorite character to write. His scenes unfolded so easily. There was something so freeing about writing a character that knows exactly what he wants and doesn't care about societal expectations for how he gets it. He is intensely comfortable in his own skin, and that puts many other characters on edge. He is definitely my "trickster" character, as he knows almost instinctively how and why another character can be manipulated and positioned. I was very careful, however, not to base him on any specific nation's trickster god or spirit.

However, it seems not to matter if it's Raven or Coyote or Loki or Elraiche, all these figures and characters share the ability to think eight steps ahead, and have five different responses for each step. Their minds are incredibly nimble, making them extremely dangerous when they want to be.

The addition of the Broken Fangs to *Lament* truly embraces the threads of kinship in the novel. The Broken Fangs mercenary guild roughly follows the traditional Ibinnashae societal structure, with one leader who speaks for the community, but is influenced by the wisdom and experience of the elders therein. When T'Rayles returns to them after decades of absence, their leader, Cedaros, has embraced the colonial ways of rule and commodity and denies her Ibinnashae heritage. She pulled the Broken Fangs out

of obscurity and amassed impressive wealth and power, but turned her back on the kinship of the community, causing strife amongst their people.

It's a big job, creating a new world. A bigger one still, if you're trying to base it off of the colonial history of Canada while still respecting the First People and the genocide they've experienced. But I felt a strong need to try. In *Lament*, the Ibinnashae aligned with the Ecrelians, much like the real world Anishinaabe who aligned with the British. And like the Haudenosaunee aligned with the French, the *Lament*'s Iqounicha aligned with the Pheresians. The English "won" Canada. The Ecrelians "won" Kaspine. And their Indigenous allies, in the real world and in *Lament*, eventually lost, even after "winning."

Tenshika, the country Jung and Fue are from, takes inspiration from Feudal Japan. In my thesis, the Tenshikan clans, the ruling class, violently expelled the Ecrelians when their attempts at colonization went too far and they instigated a social uprising. After the Ecrelians were expelled, no foreigners have been allowed on their soil. Because this country works on a caste system, it is almost impossible for someone who is "clanless" to succeed and better their lot in life. This is the motivation behind the character Fue, and why she goes so far as to have Jung assassinated. Assuring his death and the fall of his clan would endear her to a rival power and she would gain social status and wealth.

Elraiche's homeland, Pashinin, is based off of India under British Crown rule. Pashinin was colonized by the Pheresians over 300 years before the story of *Lament* takes place. Elraiche, a Pashini god, was exiled from his homeland due to the colonization, as

he and his followers resisted the industrialization and slave trade that soon followed the Pheresian occupation.

Other than using Canadian colonial history as inspiration, I have also leaned on my Métis heritage to create the aesthetic and language of my main protagonist. Métis flower beading is an important part of reclaiming Métis culture, and bead artists like Lisa Shepherd and Jennine Krauchi are coming out with absolutely amazing works. I used a fairly basic pattern for T'Rayles' costuming as I didn't want to accidentally use another artist's designs, and personally, I know I have so much more to learn about the plants and their medicine used in many Métis bead motifs.

For the Ibinnashae language, I am using Michif, my own nation's dialect. A mix between Nehiyawak and French, it is an endangered dialect, and with only 1,170 fluent speakers, 41.9 percent reside in Saskatchewan. I am grateful for the work that has been done within the nation to revitalize the language and create a writing system for it. The language is even being offered to children in Saskatoon elementary schools starting in 2020. Using Michif in my work is not only my attempt to support the continuation of my nation's language, but to also begin learning it myself. Other than using my own people's art and language to represent the Ibinnashae, I intentionally did not use any other Indigenous nation's mythologies, names, or languages. I feel that I hold no claim to them, and even a "fantasy" version of another nation's cultural markers feels disrespectful when other Indigenous groups are still trying to reclaim their own stories.

As for naming conventions, I understand that many people hate, or at least joke about hating, names with apostrophes in fantasy and sci-fi. I can understand some of

that—it's hard for English speakers to pronounce non-English names. However, fantasy and sci-fi are for everyone. English speakers do not have a monopoly on naming.

Ibinnashae naming conventions take the mother's name, after the apostrophe, and the first letter of the father's name for their first-born daughters. For first-born sons, they are given their mother's name after the apostrophe. After the first born, children are named whatever the parents decide. So T'Rayles' mother is named D'Rayles, and her father's name starts with a T. That's actually all she knows about him.

I began working on this story 20 years ago. It started off as a way to understand the death of a friend but has since grown exponentially. I am truly glad I waited until I was more mature and understood the world better before I attempted to finish this story. The characters are far more nuanced than before, and the story has far more depth. I believe *Lament* has its place in the Canadian literary landscape not only as an Indigenous high fantasy, but also as a representation of how Indigenous kinship, be it through blood, community, or found family, can give the citizens of a nation a sense of belonging, of dignity, of history, and can be used to deconstruct the colonial patriarchal family structures imposed upon Indigenous societies across North America.

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