



Windigo Moon: A Novel of Native America

Robert Downes

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It would not be an understatement to say that this should be required reading for anyone with an interest in Ojibwe history.

Windigo Moon is historical fiction infused with research-driven folklore, an important volume of indigenous history unique to northern Michigan and the upper Midwest. While many stories of the native inhabitants of the Americas tend to romanticize or apologize for colonial power and influence, Robert Downes keeps his focus steady, following one husband and wife across their interactions with several tribes and with some of the early diseases and famine brought on by early settlers and hard seasons. Downes's objective is clearly to preserve the beauty and harshness of the traditions and beliefs few know of the Ojibwe.

Ashagi and Misko, husband and wife, are the characters around which Downes's story unfolds. They are not romanticized, or even heroic, protagonists. They are traditional in their roles as they pertain to gender and their place within their tribes—careful and superstitious but never becoming caricatures of themselves. Downes writes without sentimentality, which can lend an academic tone through some chapters. However, he balances this well with some haunting and contemplative moments.

While the overarching tale meanders from one story line to another, building backstories for various characters, it is never tedious, but the pace can feel uneven. So much has been researched, and Downes has conceived so many thoughtful details for each generation, that one book could easily have been multiple volumes. Horrific realities of day-to-day survival illustrate patterns of spiritual beliefs and the manipulations of them. In trying to honor spirits from beyond their world, the characters are guided into acts of revenge, duty, and despair, which are endlessly interesting but sometimes rushed.

Downes's story of the Ojibwe is graphic, violent, even offensive, but it is a story about warriors and their territories—a culture and a time nearly lost to those who live on the same land now. It would not be an understatement to say that this should be required reading for anyone with an interest in American history, particularly in the northern Midwest. There is enough fact to support the fiction and enough lore to sustain generations to come. *Windigo Moon* stays focused and resolves not to rely on anyone's preconceptions. It encourages everyone to identify with and be curious about our human history.

SARA BUDZIK (Winter 2016)

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