

Book Review

The Peacekeeper

By Brooke Blanchard (47 North, Seattle, WA, 2022)

Reviewed by Scott Fulton, November 11, 2024

From an early age I have been an enthusiastic reader of both speculative (science) fiction and mysteries. Both genres often provide a great deal of food for thought – speculative fiction in considering how the world might be different if something in the past, present or future were changed in some way, and mysteries both in solving the puzzle of the crime itself and in exploring how different people might behave under extreme emotional circumstances. Interestingly, many Native American fiction writers have adopted both these genres in recent years and have produced some really excellent work. *The Peacekeeper* by Brooke Blanchard is a wonderful example of both at once – a mystery wrapped in a piece of speculative fiction. For Friends, this book is perhaps more interesting for its deep consideration of the consequences of restorative justice.

The book takes place in a world of the present day, but one in which North America was never colonized by Europeans. The Great Lakes area is the sovereign nation of Mino-Aki (Good Land in the Ojibwe language), composed of the Ojibwe and other tribes from the region. Traditional cultures have been largely preserved, but are overlaid with modern technology, such as smartphones and the high speed “Arrow Train” powered by renewable energy. One of my favorite touches is that in the large city of Shikaakwa (Chicago), the locale for much of the story, both the city streets and every floor of every building include large numbers of trees and other forest plants.

The story centers on Chibenashi, a young man from the small town of Baawitigong (Sault St. Marie, on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in our world) whose life was utterly shattered two decades before when he was 17 years old. His mother was murdered while Chibenashi believed he was passed out drunk at the Manoomin (Wild Rice) Festival. His father quickly confessed to the murder and was taken away. Chibenashi was forced to abandon his life plans to care for his younger sister, who rapidly became highly fearful of the world and totally withdrawn at home. In part to atone for the guilt of his failure to protect his family, Chibenashi becomes a local peacekeeper (the equivalent of a policeman), whose job in this time and place is largely limited to finding lost children and gently dealing with the problems of tourists.

Chibenashi's stable but hollow life is upended when his mother's best friend, who had become the caretaker and support for Chibenashi and his sister after they lost their parents, is found murdered at the same Manoomin Festival exactly 20 years after his mother's death. Chibenashi, over his boss's deep (and well-justified) objections, insists on leading the investigation into the crime, which takes him on a harrowing journey into both his past and his present. In the interest of avoiding spoilers, I will only say that the twists and turns are enthralling and the solution to the case is a real shocker.

What makes this book of potential interest to Friends, however, is the nature of the justice system Chibenashi operates within, and how it addresses and resolves the case. The police work is very similar to what we would see in our world – advanced forensic science coupled with old-fashioned detective work to uncover the full truth of what happened. Once the truth is established however, the justice system in this Indigenous American world focuses almost entirely on restitution and recovery for the victims rather than punishment of the perpetrator. Prosecutors and defense attorneys are replaced by advocates who work with the perpetrator and victims to negotiate the best possible recovery for the victims. The final decision is rendered by Mediators rather than Judges, whose goal is to protect the safety of the public (when that is deemed necessary) and, most importantly, make up for the victim's losses as much as is reasonably possible. Seeing how such a system might play out in detail with such a complex and utterly tragic case is fascinating. Our own punishment-focused justice system has obvious flaws and failings, but this story shows both the strengths and significant limitations of an alternative that many of us might seek.

The author was raised in and is an enrolled member of the Sault St. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians. She is a graduate of UC Davis creative writing program and was a writing fellow at the Boston University School of Law. She is currently a practicing attorney and lives in San Diego. *The Peacekeeper* is the first of two novels she has published (so far). I recommend it as a good read, a look at what might have been, and a very interesting study of how restorative justice might actually work.

Reader's Note – Many modern Native American books of fiction make extensive use of the author's and characters' tribal language in telling the story. Like most authors who do this, Blanchard does a good job of defining Ojibwe words when they are first used and provides an excellent glossary at the end of the book. As a learner of the Ojibwe language, I find this to be a wonderful way to utilize and expand my vocabulary, but many readers may find this aspect of Native American fiction to be rather annoying. Bear in mind, however, that revitalization of their own languages is a critical part of cultural renewal for Native Americans and using at least a bit of their language in popular fiction is an important part of this revitalization effort that we all should support.