

Book Review: EDEN ROBINSON. Son of a Trickster. (2017)

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EDEN ROBINSON. *Son of a Trickster*. Knopf. (2017). 319 pp. \$32.00 (hardback). (ISBN 978-0-345-81078-6)

“Life is hard,” Eden Robinson’s new novel states. “You have to be harder.” This repeated line, which punctuates the novel, is an ambiguous moral lesson for protagonist Jared. The line is one that is repeated by his mother, and remembered over and over by Jared as the book unfolds. His mother is definitely harder than life; she is a wild, violent, hard-partying mother whose boyfriends are anything other than father figures or role models for Jared (one of them gets nail-gunned to the floor at one point by his mother for his misdeeds). Is the line about hardness, in its repetition, one of this novel’s lessons? Or is it, instead, a false lead, a mistaken approach to life that will, in turn, bring down all of life’s duress?

Robinson’s novel takes readers into complex scenarios with no easy answers. In that respect, she builds on her previous novels *Monkey Beach* and *Blood Sports* and her short story collection *Traplines*, all of which have had very strong critical reception and have found their way onto syllabi and into classrooms. *Son of a Trickster*, in this reviewer’s view, increases the complexity of Robinson’s writing, leading readers down a path in which Indigenous spiritual and supernatural worlds collide with the everyday world of pop culture and high school coming-of-age narratives. In other words, alongside the trickster, Jared sees magical fireflies and ape men / spirits, all the while discussing the merits of Nickelback and A Tribe Called Red. Given its complexity and language, it is likely a novel that will resonate with readers in post-secondary contexts, and particularly with critics invested in ongoing discussions in the fields of Indigenous literary and cultural studies.

Jared lives in northern British Columbia. He is a high school student trying to avoid failing his classes while negotiating his mother’s unpredictable moods; his mother’s boyfriends’ violence; his wayward father’s ineptitude; his sister’s neediness and poor parenting; his classmates’ assortment of teenage drama; his neighbours’, the Jakses, decline in old age; his girlfriend Sarah’s emotional

challenges – and the dawning awareness that he is linked to a larger-than-life world in which he may or may not be the son of a foul-mouthed trickster. Receiving very little support, but many demands from every side, Jared attempts to negotiate entering a world in which very little seems to make sense in realist terms, yet in which the reality of the situations that he has faced – and will continue to face – may finally start to make sense.

The denizens of Robinson's novels are tough characters: they steal trucks, drink a lot, curse each other through text messages, are frequently high, and place countless obstacles in Jared's path. Their goals are as murky as can be and they often seem to be trapped by their poverty and addictions (though it is, of course, and as Robinson makes clear, much more complicated than that). Jared himself, however, makes many foolish choices, and is hardly an innocent. The demands on him as the "cookie guy" – the baker of the region's finest pot cookies – don't exactly help him out, either. From page one, where his mother calls his grandmother a "fucking cuntosaurus," readers are invited into a world of conflict, strife, and difficult negotiations.

Robinson's writing, with this novel, becomes evermore challenging. The novel's resolution – if it can be claimed as such – provides an ending where events are far from settled. Her depictions of Indigenous characters – many of the characters in the book are Indigenous, as is Robinson – do not provide readers with tidy images of Indigenous life where anything like reconciliation is ever achieved. Instead, *Son of a Trickster* provides readers with an unruly world of human and non-human actors – like a pack of blood-thirsty otters – who, for the most part, seem to be doing their best just to get the better of each other. In considering this book in the context of Indigenous writing, I would argue that it is a book of resurgence rather than reconciliation (with my ideas here being influenced by Anishinaabeg writer and thinker Leanne Simpson's [2011] *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*) this novel does not set out to make peace with anyone, but it features a strong cast of deeply resilient characters. It highlights the challenges facing northern communities and puts conflicting cosmologies into contact with each other. The toll that this drama takes is very human in nature, with Jared's survival remaining far from certain. The result is a novel that demonstrates the stakes in Indigenous life lived for itself, rather than for the sake of reconciling the colonial nation.

Life is hard, as the novel states. It is harder for some people than it is for others. It is definitely hard for Jared and his community in *Son of a Trickster*. Whether it follows that one has to be harder, though, seems, to this reader, to be the debate. It is also a debate that has been played out, in its own version, within theories of affect. Judith Butler (2004) has argued (in *Precarious Life* first and foremost) that interpersonal ethics can derive from recognizing and acting upon the ways in which humans are vulnerable – as embodied, fragile beings. For her, our vulnerability is an index of the ways in which people need

to care for one another, and announcing this vulnerability can become the site for the beginning of this process. On the other hand, Lauren Berlant (2011) (in *Cruel Optimism* in particular) has argued that there is nothing to compel ethical actions once we recognize each other's – and our own – vulnerability. She posits, instead, that admissions of vulnerability are just as likely to prompt those humans who bear witness to such admissions to strike first, lest they be struck. In other words, letting down one's guard, as a sign of a very real and frank weakness that we share with one another, can give one's opponents an opportunity to attack.

In many ways, this conundrum is one of the central ones in *Son of a Trickster*. What would the results be if Jared were able to demonstrate and act upon how scared, isolated (even among many people), and vulnerable he is? Throughout the novel, he seems to wish to show his soft side, perhaps especially in his nascent relationship with Sarah. Time and again, however, the hardness of life announces itself. But do the community members' responses to each other, which seem to lead to more and more hardness, simply escalate the stakes? Or are they the only possible recourse in a world in which vulnerability too often leads to suffering rather than healing?

Offering few answers, but many provocative openings for further thinking, Eden Robinson's new novel is a strong one. I anticipate that it will be taken up with deep interest by the readership that has eagerly awaited this book.

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