DOUGLAS COLLEGE Library

Book Club Kit

Discussion Guide

The Strangers by Katherena Vermette

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Biography

katherena vermette (she/her/hers) is a Michif (Red River Métis) writer from Treaty 1 territory, the heart of the Métis Nation, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

In 2013, her first book, ***North End Love Songs*** (Muses' Company) won the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. Since then, her work has garnered awards and critical accolades across genres. Her novels ***The Break*** (House of Anansi) and ***The Strangers, The Circle*** (Hamish Hamilton) and most recently, ***real ones*** (Hamish Hamilton) have all been national best sellers and won multiple literary awards. Her work for children and young adults includes the picture book ***The Girl and The Wolf*** (Theytus) and graphic novel series ***A Girl Called Echo*** (Highwater). She also co-wrote and co-directed ***This River***, winner of the 2017 Canadian Screen Award for Best Short Documentary.

Her third book of poetry, ***procession*** (House of Anansi) will be out Sep 30/25.

Born in Winnipeg, her Michif roots on her paternal side run deep in St. Boniface, St. Norbert and beyond. Her maternal side is Mennonite from the Altona and Rosenfeld area (Treaty 1).

She holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia, and an honourary Doctor of Letters from the University of Manitoba.

katherena lives with her family in a cranky old house within skipping distance of the temperamental Red River.

Review by Steven W. Beattie

Katherena Vermette's new novel 'The Strangers' is a 'searing indictment of the pressures and travails placed on Indigenous women'

September 30, 2021

"No one messes with Strangers," thinks Elsie, one of the central characters in Katherena Vermette's second novel, "The Strangers." In Indigenous cultures, naming practices hold a special significance, and Vermette has not chosen her characters' surname casually. In addition to its obvious relevance as a family name, the uncapitalized word connotes people who are unfamiliar and potentially threatening; the root word "strange" carries implications of otherness and deviance from some predetermined norm.

In the world of the novel, that norm is whiteness, and the white supremacist culture that exerts its force on Indigenous peoples to keep them oppressed and subservient. It's a dynamic that Vermette mined in her debut novel, "The Break," a book for which "The Strangers" — which has already been nominated for the Giller prize and the Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust prize for fiction — forms a kind of sideways sequel, taking up the stories of a quartet of women who occupied secondary places in the earlier volume. Both novels take place in Winnipeg. In addition to Elsie, a grieving mother who struggles with drug addiction, there are her living daughters, Phoenix and Cedar Sage (along with the ever-present memory of dead daughter Sparrow), and her mother, Margaret. Each of the four women serve as central characters in alternating sections of the novel.

As "The Strangers" opens, Phoenix is incarcerated in juvenile detention for the crime that served as the precipitating incident in the previous book; she is pregnant and about to give birth to her son, whom she names Sparrow, after her deceased sister. Cedar is living with her father, stepmother and stepsister in a tony house after spending time in foster care. And Margaret is tending the family home, caring for her invalid mother Angélique and nursing her resentment at the circumstances that have prevented her from achieving her dream of becoming a lawyer.

Vermette, who lives in Manitoba, follows these multi-generational women over the course of five years as they struggle against the consequences of their own actions and those imposed upon them from without. Phoenix's child is immediately removed from her, a mirror of Phoenix and Cedar's own experience being taken from their mother and placed in foster care. This, Vermette implies, is emblematic of a history of Indigenous children being separated from their families and their cultures by a careless and indifferent institutional machine.

Cedar will eventually break away from the constraints in which she finds herself, redeeming her mother by following in her dream to go to university. Phoenix, meanwhile, is befriended by an elder named Ben who tells her traditional Métis stories and performs a naming ceremony, in which she is dubbed G'wichikwaanakwaadook, which in Michif means "appearing from behind the clouds." Like the Western myth that undergirds Phoenix's English name, this would appear to set up a redemption arc for the character, though Vermette is adept in frustrating readers' expectations.

Taken as a whole, “The Strangers” is a searing indictment of the pressures and travails placed on Indigenous women both within their own families and from outside forces. The novel’s five sections are given over, in order, to Phoenix, Cedar, Elsie, and Margaret — except for the final section, which shoehorns in a kind of epilogue featuring Cedar’s departure for university, presumably to end on a more upbeat note than would have been the case if the novel closed on her abandoned and embittered grandmother.

This note of uplift, welcome though it may be, feels artificial, like a cop-out, given all that has gone before. “Margaret used to think this was normal, that all families were made up of so many sad stories,” Vermette writes. “But as she got older, it seemed only Indians, Métis, who had sorrow built into their bones.” The various stories in “The Strangers” excavate this condition, examining the various ways sadness bleeds into anger and violence. Cedar’s sections — the only ones that collapse the psychic distance by allowing a first-person presentation — provide a corrective to an otherwise fairly single-minded focus on intergenerational trauma. But selling out her own narrative scaffolding by appending a happy ending onto an otherwise sober and unhappy story feels like an author’s capitulation to market demands rather than an honest and organic conclusion to the novel.

Source: **The Star**

Katherena Vermette’s new novel ‘The Strangers’ is ‘a searing indictment of the pressures and travails placed on Indigenous women’.

Beattie, S.W. (2021, September 30). Katherena Vermette’s new novel ‘The Strangers’ is ‘a searing indictment of the pressures and travails placed on Indigenous women’. The Star.

Review by Dory Cerny

The strangers by Katherena Vermette [Review]

October 13, 2021

It should come as no surprise that *The Strangers*, Katherena Vermette's companion to the multi-award-winning novel *The Break*, garnered a spot on the Scotiabank Giller Prize longlist and the Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust Fiction Prize shortlist. Revisiting the character of Phoenix, arguably the strongest of the characters in her previous book, *The Strangers* is a devastatingly beautiful dive deeper into the girl's story, and that of her family.

The Strangers follows a similar path and structure to *The Break*, with chapters shifting focus between female members of the Stranger family: Phoenix, her younger sister, Cedar Sage, their mother, Elsie, and their grandmother, Margaret. Each is tragic in her own way, and the truths revealed through their individual stories serve to inform those of the others.

Themes of multi-generational trauma, racism, misogyny, colonialism, and abuse permeate the story. Vermette guides the reader along the edges of her characters' suffering, often revealing the full scope of the traumas only after we've been coerced into picking up the breadcrumbs she has left as a trail for us to follow. It's a masterful technique that allows the reader to focus on how each woman deals with her pain and disappointments rather than dwelling on the events themselves. The characters' reactions mostly fall into one of two camps – rage or sadness – though there is a fair amount of bleed between the two.

Vermette deftly manipulates her narrative to showcase the patterns that emerge over the course of generations. Margaret felt unseen and unloved by her mother, Annie, and was distant to her daughter Elsie (and Elsie's brothers) in turn. Deprived of a loving relationship with Margaret, Elsie ironically finds an ally and warm berth with Annie, who softens toward her granddaughter in a way that only serves to enrage Margaret all the more.

Though Margaret describes her as weak and spoiled, Elsie comes across as simply sad and needy in flashbacks that trace her trajectory from teen mom to homeless drug addict. When it is revealed that Margaret unwittingly cast the stone that rippled out into circles of devastation for her daughter and granddaughters, it is one of the most heartbreaking moments in the book, and it serves to underscore how seemingly small acts of cruelty can have as much impact as blunt force.

It's a message illustrated not just in the relationships between the Strangers but also in their interactions with the world around them. The racism that feeds the attitudes of various characters runs the gamut from overt to subtle, but its effects are equally damaging in every case, as Vermette expertly demonstrates.

"Margaret used to think this was normal, that all families were made up of so many sad stories. But as she got older, it seemed only Indians, Métis, who had sorrow built into their bones, who exchanged despair as ordinarily as recipes, who had devastation after devastation after dismissal after denial woven into their skin. As if sad stories were the only heirloom they had to pass on."

Source: **Quill & Quire**

The strangers by Katherena Vermette [Review].

Cerny, D. (2021, October 13). The strangers by Katherena Vermette [Review]. Quille and Quire. https://quillandquire.com/review/the-strangers/

Video Interview with Rhonda Douglas

The Strangers with Katherena Vermette
September 28, 2021

View and listen to this interview on The Writers Festival YouTube channel.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9bSAzJodsU

Source: The Writers Festival YouTube Channel

The Writers Festival. (2021, September 28). *The strangers with Katherena Vermette* [Video]. YouTube. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9bSAzJodsU**

Video Interview with Catherine Hernandez

The Giller Book Club: The Strangers

March 24, 2022

View and listen to this interview on YouTube: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbcAnHMJjLI**

A transcript is also available at the Giller Prize website: **https://gillerprize.ca/the-giller-book-the-strangers-video/**

Source:

Giller Prize. (2022, March 24). *The Giller book club: The strangers* [Video]. YouTube. **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbcAnHMJjLI**

Discussion Questions

1. This title is billed as a companion novel to Vermette's earlier book, *The Break*, though the author has said each book can stand alone. Were you able to read that title? If so, how did the experience of the books compare? If this was your first experience of these characters, were there any questions it left unanswered?

2. In the interview with Rhonda Douglas, Vermette says, "I think setting done right is its own character…" (The Writers Festival, 2021, **8:33**) How did you find the novel's depiction of Winnipeg as a setting?

3. In the Giller Book Club video interview, Vermette talked about liking genealogy. How do you think that played into the novel's depiction of family and intergenerational trauma?

4. What do you think about the novel's use of multiple perspectives and point-of-view shifts? Whose perspective did you enjoy the most? What did you like about them?

5. How does racism play a part in these characters' lives?

6. Did you have a favourite line or favourite scene in the book? Why did it resonate with you?

7. Has this novel broadened or challenged your perspective about Indigenous lives or about the juvenile justice system in Canada?

8. How did you feel about the ending? Would you want to read the next book in the series?

Discussion Themes

Intergenerational trauma | *Youth incarceration* | *Addiction* | *Motherhood and family dynamics* | *Racism*