

GLOBE 100 CONVERSATIONS

Cherie Dimaline and Eden Robinson explore the intersection of science fiction, fantasy and Indigenous storytelling

WAUBGESHIG RICE

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED 1 DAY AGO

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Authors Eden Robinson and Cherie Dimaline.

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The Globe 100 books of 2020 comes out Friday, Dec. 4. Subscribers can join Books Editor Judith Pereira and guests for a behind-the-scenes look at the list on a live webcast Nov. 27 . Over the next week, we'll be publishing conversations between authors about the different genres on the list, starting with Ann Cleeves and Louise Penny talking about mysteries. Coming up: Travel writers Bruce Kirkby and Wade Davis dispel myths about other cultures, Margaret Atwood and Ian Williams recall the poems they first read and wrote, and more.

Eden Robinson and Cherie Dimaline are on top of the science fiction and fantasy world. Robinson's 2018 novel, *Son of a Trickster*, got a major boost in 2020 with a six-part screen adaptation broadcast on CBC Television. And the buzz around the Haisla and Heiltsuk author will continue into 2021 with the third and final book in her Trickster Trilogy, *Return of the Trickster*, set for a March release. Métis author Dimaline is also preparing for a big 2021, while her highly acclaimed recent novels, 2017's *The Marrow Thieves* and 2019's *Empire of Wild*, continue to inhabit bestseller lists. Fellow author Waubgeshig Rice recently spoke with Robinson and Dimaline about bringing the stories from their communities into genre fiction, and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted them and their writing.

WR: You've both written what I and many people would consider canonical books in the science fiction/fantasy/speculative fiction realm. What's it like for each of you to be considered leading voices in this genre?

ER: When you're just doing straight literature, there still seem to be boxes around what you can talk about and what you can write about if you're Indigenous and using Indigenous characters. Whereas if you're writing one of the books that I write with tricksters, you can just go so many places. It just lets you play in ways that straight literature doesn't let you play. Especially with Indigenous characters – especially with, you know, everything that non-Indigenous people bring to how they view what you should be writing [laughs]. If you don't write what they expect, it's really hard to get it out there. Whereas with fiction that is playing in the genres, there was a lot more

freedom. So I had all these crazy trickster stories that I wanted to put in the book, and you know, speculative fiction, goth fiction – all the things that I'm interested in – fit very nicely.

CD: When I was writing *The Marrow Thieves*, I was coming from a place of real anger, to be honest. I mean, there were all these discussions going on about whether or not residential schools should be called genocide, like it was some part of a national poll. Like it was up to Canadians to decide if they had actually committed genocide. And so, I mean, I wrote it as a love letter to Indigenous youth, and I was really [mad] when I wrote it. And I didn't really think it was going to go anywhere. I thought, well, this is right off the deep end, but let's just get it out there, at least for our kids. You know, so they would have a future where they were the absolute answer. They were the heroes. They were everything. They were everything we need globally to survive, as a global community, which I firmly believe. But you know, then this crazy thing happened where a lot of people read it, and I wasn't burned at a stake anywhere. So that was cool!

It's hard to write things without the politics of everyday survival creeping in. But I think for me, speculative fiction and science fiction and all those sort of titles they give to our work – and Eden and I have talked about this, like I guess that's what our work is, I don't know? We're just writing what we know. But it really allows you – if you want it – to write without burden if we choose, right? It's the last decolonized space there is: imagination.

WR: With European or North American mainstream storytelling or literature, there's this tendency to compartmentalize everything, right? Like you're in one genre – Eden, you hinted at this – you're literary or you're not. But with a lot of Indigenous cultures, I think, our stories are naturally speculative or fantastical or even wade into the sci-fi. So do you see it – not necessarily as a natural extension, but just a natural way of telling stories, to sort of explore these other realms?

ER: A lot of the stories I was telling in *Trickster* that dealt with traditional characters were variations of stories that I heard growing up. And because I'm

from a potlatching culture, I had to consider which stories were owned, and which stories weren't. The Trickster is fully in the public domain. He was always the character that taught you what to do by doing everything wrong and badly [laughs]. It was the bad example that you were never supposed to follow. So his stories were always incredibly crazy, and they went to the weirdest places. And that's what I grew up with, and that's the kind of experience that I wanted to put in a novel. When the story went wild, it was a lot of fun, because that was what I had heard around the dinner table. And just you know, I myself am not a particularly good oral storyteller, and I grew up with some amazing ones. So what I love about writing is that you can edit until you sound really good [laughs]. You can't do that when you're sitting around the kitchen table and you go, "Wait a minute, forget everything I just said, I thought of a better way to say it!" [laughs]

CD: You can try. They'll ask you to leave, though!

[All laugh]

CD: When I think about Indigenous literature and genre ... I mean, I don't, really. I sort of leave that to my editors and publishers. Indigenous stories were here before any western sort of literary cataloguing system came along. And what I know of story is this: The stories that we're told from when we're young quite literally shape the way that our brains worked. So it creates pathways and roads for all those neurons and thoughts in our brains, so it shapes the way your brain works. And Indigenous stories shape the way that the land moves – the way that we move on the land – and vice versa, the land shapes our stories. So I think this is why it's so critically important. Aside from genre and how we're going to catalogue things and what the nomenclature around our stories are, is that if you are going to be on this land and you want to know the right way, if you want a true map, then what you need is Indigenous stories. As long as no-one in my community is mad at me for doing something wrong with my stories, I'm good!

ER: Yeah, mine are pretty clear when they don't like something! [laughs]

WR: That's so important to highlight, though. We are all influenced and inspired by our communities and our culture, and we sort of let the story go forth. We follow the story. We write it, and it ends up in whatever genre. So obviously 2020 is always going to be known as the year of the global pandemic. What's changed for both of you over this past year?

ER: I did not travel six months out of the year. Normally for writing, you're just always going to some conference. And this was the year that I was forced to sit my [butt] down, and I actually got my draft done! Apparently terror is my muse. Who knew?

CD: 2020 made my job a lot harder, as somebody who likes to come up with apocalyptic timelines and stories. I was like, I really need to do a better job, because the universe was just like, "Hold my beer, watch this!" But also this great thing happened out of it, where it made my job harder, but it also made me really lean in to what was important in these times. And so a lot of the work that's been coming out lately, or will be coming out of this time, really is about – I mean, you know, absolutely there's a lot of darkness and struggle – but it's about that idea of living in every cell, of multilayered, of really being present in every moment, even if they're difficult. And finding ways to have community, to really have self-preservation, and to have joy. To have love in these times.

WR: Speaking of books, what were some of your favourites from the past year?

ER: This was a year – I think we were both reading a buttload of CanLit. [Robinson was on the Giller Prize jury, Rice on the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize jury]

WR: Yep.

ER: So when I was reading all of that, what stuck for me was just how many different worlds there are in Canada. Like, all the different places. And you know, when you're talking about shortlists, it's like the Olympics. It's like

there are micro-millimetres between some of the books. If that was an Olympic sport, it would be like 10.2 versus 10.4. What I got out of that was that I need to be in more book clubs! Because talking about the books was one of my favourite parts of the whole experience. I didn't realize I was hungry for that.

CD: Some of the books that I read was *Crosshairs* by Catherine Hernandez that just came out, which was another one of those like, you know, okay, postapocalyptic, but for some people who've lived through an apocalypse, this is just a different version of it and here's the ways in which we've survived. It was ultimately terrifying, but hopeful. I loved *Black Water* by David Robertson. I love anything that David Robertson ... and also, how can David Robertson write that many books? Like, it's not fair!

ER: Him and Billy-Ray Belcourt need to be stopped! They're making us look like slackers!

CD: Maybe they're on the same timeline as Beyoncé, where they sleep for just like 45 minutes. There's also Jael Richardson's new book that's coming out next year, but I read the ARC [advanced reader copy] for it. And man, have I been waiting for that, because Jael Richardson's just been such a champion of all of our work, and it's so brilliant.

WR: I read Jael's ARC too, and yeah it's deadly. I'm looking forward to that coming out into the world. Last question, what are you looking forward to in 2021?

ER: I am looking forward to the third book of the Trickster series coming out, and to horrifying many fans.

CD: Maybe this will be the first time it's announced, but here you go: I'm looking forward to the *Marrow Thieves* sequel coming out, and hopefully the *Marrow Thieves* TV show that we're going to be in development for next year. But book two will definitely be out!

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