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DINÉ LEGEND COMES TO LIFE IN REBECCA ROANHORSE'S *TRAIL OF LIGHTNING*

Review by Madelyn Marie Schoonover

Roanhorse, Rebecca. *Trail of Lightning*. Saga Press, 2018. Novel.

Rebecca Roanhorse's first foray into the publishing world, her short story "Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™" (2017), was met with much critical acclaim and earned her the Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Short Story, as well as several other nominations and accolades. Roanhorse's second publication and debut novel, *Trail of Lightning* (2018), first instalment of The Sixth World series, continues to impress. Nominated for a Nebula Best Novel award in 2018, this Young Adult offering should not be overlooked simply because of where it is shelved in the bookshop. Roanhorse's excellent worldbuilding, her artistic vision and ambition, and her depictions of an almost entirely Diné (Navajo) universe breathes life into a story that manages to go beyond being just another trope-filled Young Adult adventure/romance.

The action takes place in Dinétah, the land that was formerly the Navajo Reservation, but which was closed off by a magical Wall before the calamity referred to as the Big Water. Wiping out the vast majority of the United States, including even the Midwest, the Big Water devastated life outside Dinétah, completely destabilising the United States government and further exacerbating the gaps between socioeconomic classes. However, that is not the focus of Roanhorse's story. The people and legends of Dinétah in the first Sixth World novel are far more interesting than what is outside the Wall. As the trickster Coyote character Ma'ii states: "This last flood, the one you call the Big Water, ended the Fifth World and began the Sixth. It opened the passage for those like myself to return to the world" (101). With the Big Water and the Wall came the rebirth – or perhaps re-invigoration – of Diné legends of old.

Trail of Lightning is told from the perspective of Maggie Hoskie, a monster hunter imbued with supernatural power thanks to a horrifying encounter with band of yee naaldlooshii (skin walkers). This encounter killed her grandmother, but the trauma activated Maggie's clan powers – an invention of Roanhorse's which draws upon Diné naming conventions, literalising the meanings of Diné family names. Since Maggie is "Honágháahnii [Walks-Around], born for K'aahanáanii [Living Arrow]," her clan powers manifest as super speed and blood lust (6). While others without clan powers can fight monsters to a point, Maggie's abilities turn her into a literal killing machine who takes pleasure in the carnage that follows her. Before the events of the novel, Maggie's former mentor – Neizghání, a mythical figure in Diné legend and the son of Changing Woman – left her in part because of her monstrous K'aahanáanii bloodlust. Hurt and alone, Maggie's life is changed yet again when she takes a contract and finds that a new kind of monster, one unlike anything out of Diné legend,

has begun terrorising Dinétah. She must team up with a mysterious and charismatic young man named Kai Arviso, who also happens to have clan powers, in order to find out who is creating these monsters and why.

As it should be abundantly clear even from this short synopsis, *Trail of Lightning* is steeped in Diné culture and language, fitting it strongly into the creative tradition of Indigenous Futurism. The text abounds with Diné words that are not set apart stylistically from any other word in the novel and are often translated several pages (if not several chapters) after their initial usage. Some are not directly translated at all. In doing so, Roanhorse makes both Diné and English seamlessly entwined in the eyes of her characters and her readers. This also helps highlight Diné culture. The novel is composed almost entirely of Diné people telling Diné stories with Diné words – something unheard of in mainstream American fiction, Young Adult or otherwise. Although some aspects of Diné legends are explained, such as Neizghání's relationship to Changing Woman and the trickster nature of Coyote/Ma'ii, most are not. The only non-Diné characters in the novel are the Goodacres, a black family that owns the prosperous All-American bar. However, focusing on the lack of white characters in the novel would be to put more importance on their absence than the novel does. Roanhorse does not highlight their non-existence and so, it seems, neither should readers. Clearly, there are far more interesting elements to focus on.

There are many strengths to *Trail of Lightning* beyond its use of legend and language. Roanhorse's website quotes literary agent Sara Megibow as stating that "the book was pitched [...] as 'an indigenous *Mad Max: Fury Road*'" (Roanhorse, "My Novel is Coming! Trail of Lightning"). This indeed feels aesthetically apt. Readers follow Maggie and Kai across vast, sandy stretches of wasteland, while they are harassed by the unsavoury police force called the Citizens' Watch and Guard (CWAGs) and detained by a gang called the Thirsty Boys. Much like *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015), Roanhorse's pacing keeps readers racing to the finish line while her charming characters, intriguing hints at larger mysteries, and genuinely disturbing monsters keep them dreading the end.

Not everything about the style is perfect, of course. Most predictable, and glaringly unoriginal in the face of all Roanhorse's otherwise deeply innovative narrative, is the romance between Maggie and Kai. The night after meeting Kai – and being propositioned by him – Maggie muses on her physical and emotional scars and feels suddenly "ridiculous for even thinking Kai and I could be friends, more than friends" (124). Like so many other Young Adult novels, it seems that Kai – with his stylish clothes, "more than just handsome. Movie-star boy-band handsome" face, and easy-going demeanour – will never see our flawed, first-person narrator protagonist as anything other than pimply and wrongly proportioned (39). Their will-they-won't-they flirtations even features a Cinderella-meets-Mad-Max style transformation when Maggie must don a skimpy leather top to infiltrate a nightclub and, upon revealing the new look to Kai, leaves him speechless and staring.

However, these pulpier moments should not discount Roanhorse's ingenuity which is apparent throughout the novel. Indeed, they rather show her ability to adhere to genre expectations while giving new life to tired tropes. Yes, Maggie is a lanky, theoretically undate-able heroine, but the

vivid horror of her backstory (along with some of her deeply questionable and violent choices) gives a depth and complexity to her character often missing in other mainstream Young Adult offerings.

Additionally, while Maggie and Kai certainly have their own internal struggles, neither of them is afflicted with a confused sense of identity that is a predominant theme in so many Native American stories – and indeed in Roanhorse’s own “Welcome to Your Authentic Indian Experience™.” Because Roanhorse’s protagonist grew up in Dinétah, surrounded by Diné culture and largely cut off from white colonising influence by the Big Water, Maggie’s conflict is not so much about who she is but *what* she is and how she fits in with the world around her. Unlike other works of Indigenous Futurism that can depict Indigenous culture as a haunting presence that ultimately overcomes Western colonising hegemony despite its status as a cultural and ideological underdog, the total exclusion of white characters and their voices from the novel makes Diné culture, tradition, and values the sole focus of the text and the mechanism through which the audience and the characters assess the morality and meaning of their actions. In this way, Roanhorse is not so much ‘talking back’ to the coloniser in the sense Homi K. Bhabha describes, but rather talking over the coloniser by ignoring their culture completely. Although identity – and especially its relationship to colonisation – is undeniably an important theme for any culture to explore, it is refreshing to read a novel centred on Native Americans that does not seem haunted or antagonised by any white presence. Roanhorse’s characters simply exist in their own, all-encompassing, complex, and complicated culture and world.

For those interested in Young Adult and Horror literature, Diné legend, or just looking for a fast-paced and enjoyable read that is a bit on the bloody side, *Trail of Lightning* is a wonderful choice. Fans of the novel will certainly be eager to dig into the second installment in the Sixth World series, *Storm of Locusts*, published April 2019.

WORKS CITED

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BIONOTE

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