

Indian Female Characterization in Larry Watson's *Montana 1948*

Grace Chaillier
Northern Michigan University

In *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, Ann Charters writes, "If you are like most people, plot is what keeps you going when you first read a story, and character is what stays with you after you have finished reading it" (1006). Naturally, some characters stay with each of us more vividly and for longer periods of time than others. Larry Watson's character Marie Little Soldier in *Montana 1948* is such a character. For me, as she is for Watson's protagonist and narrator David Hayden, Marie is memorable. However, I see Marie from a very different perspective than Watson's central character. She is the equivalent positive female in the archetypal binary perception of Indians as either the once-noble warrior (now successfully assimilated) or the ignorant savage. Clara Sue Kidwell maintains that their female counterparts "stand in history as stereotypes such as the hot-blooded Indian princess, à la Pocahontas, or as the stolid drudge, the Indian squaw plodding behind her man" (98). These labels have often come down to us in contemporary times as the good Indian and the bad Indian. This is one of several stereotypes that Watson includes and, therefore, perpetuates early in the novel.

David begins the first-person account of his haunting childhood memory forty years after the story he is about to tell occurs. The first character he refers to in the text is Marie Little Soldier, though not by name. He calls her "a young Sioux woman," revealing nothing about why this woman would be sick in his home (11). This vague disclosure of information about an Indian woman will become the norm in the text. The end of the next sentence (only the third sentence of the novel) foreshadows Marie's fate. The twelve year-old David, whose voice is indicated within the prologue by italics, is afraid that Marie will die, which indeed comes to pass (11). In the last line of the prologue David states that no one loved Marie and his parents more than he did (12). This line standing alone and ending the prologue prompts deeper consideration of character portrayals throughout the text, particularly those of female Indians. I argue that Indian readers would question why the fifty-two-year-old David would assume in the non-italicized section of the prologue that no one loved Marie more than he did as an adolescent. He knew that she came from a reservation community and that those communities were inclined to be close-knit. Why would he believe that his love for her was greater than her own people's love? Why does Watson choose to imbue the adult David with this presumptuous opinion? It is presumptuous because of the specific language that David chooses. Watson might have chosen to write "And no one loved them more than I did at age twelve," or something similar. Thus, the first few pages create a confusing point of view for some readers who may be inclined to judge this voice to be either that of David at twelve experiencing Marie's murder and the fallout in his family that her death precipitates, or David at fifty-two recounting the story.

It is clear as the novel progresses, alternating between the viewpoint of the younger David and his older counterpart, that the young David is aware of the presence of the local Indian community, even though Marie is not originally from that community. David has a dream of "all the Indians of our region, from town, ranches, or reservation,

gathered at the top of Circle Hill to do something about Marie's death," after his Uncle Frank kills her to silence her testimony about his sex crimes (101). However, David's dream does not conjure the Indians as potent doers. Even though he wonders in his half-asleep, half-awake dream state if they will turn savage and "rampage the streets of Bentrock, looking for [Marie's] killer," they do not. Rather they are visualized as "simply milling about, talking low, mourning Marie" (102). Complex interstices of family and community are typically much more well-rendered for the Hayden family and their friends, and less so for Marie's family and community. Once again, as so often happens in novels written by non-Indians that include Native characters, Indians are less multi-dimensional, habitually marginalized and stereotyped, and generally less distinct when compared to white characters. The Indian female characters, in particular, with the exception of Marie to some degree and, to a much lesser degree and much later in the text, her mother, are a little known group, important only as silent, referential victims.

Marie Little Soldier seems to be rendered positively, but Indian female readers may not perceive her portrayal favorably. Choctaw historian and author Devon Mihesuah writes,

Some stereotypes appear complimentary but are actually damaging. Disney's *Pocahontas*, for example, portrays the title character as a woman who wears minimal clothing, sings with animals, and is shaped like Barbie. The film angers many Native women, who argue that the character's unrealistic body image contributes to feelings of inferiority among Native girls. (102)

Watson's portrayal of Marie appears complimentary too. But, like Disney's *Pocahontas*, Marie is portrayed as the object of the male gaze. She is watched and/or desired by three male characters – David, his uncle Frank, and her boyfriend, Ronnie Tall Bear. Depicting Marie as sexy and desirable suits the plot since she is one of Frank Hayden's sexual assault victims and, because he has a beautiful wife, it is unlikely that he would abuse an unattractive Indian woman. As Native women are angered by Disney's choice of body image for their film version of *Pocahontas*, so is this Native woman angered by Marie's typecast rendering as the sexy victim and by Doris Looks Away and Mrs. Little Soldier's lack of direct voice. I am an Indian woman who feels that we have been portrayed as prey, as casualties, and have gone unheard long enough. So many Native American women have evolved into bright, learned, contemporary Indigenes; we expect to be represented as the empowered women that so many of us are. More and more often, Indian women themselves are managing these depictions. They are writing who they, their tribal sisters, mothers and daughters really are. The avid readers of more positive portrayals can't get enough since Native women's depictions are so rarely satisfying when construed by White males. This lack of satisfaction is true with regard to Marie Little Soldier. Marie is the Indian woman that we learn most about, though not enough.

Marie is a strong, somewhat rounded, though static, character. From the point of view of David, she is very nearly perfect, and since she is murdered before she has any opportunity for growth, she is static. Though she is pivotal to the plot, very little page

space is actually devoted to her. Marie's nature is revealed enough for readers to be moved by her death, but not enough to know who she really is outside the Hayden home. As the catalyst for an enduring Hayden family schism, a deeper characterization of Marie could have been a natural textual inclusion. Some Native female readers are certainly left craving to learn more about Marie.

A significant portion of the information concerning her appears in the epilogue when David relates an incident that he qualifies as his "happiest memory of Marie" (172). He reminisces an afternoon of play, running and chasing one another while tossing a football back and forth that involved him, Marie, and Ronnie Tall Bear, who is also a nearly perfect male counterpart to Marie. Ronnie is the contemporary noble warrior, seemingly happy to have been "one of the finest athletes that the region had ever produced," even though that accomplishment could not earn him a college scholarship in prejudicial 1940s America (26). The end of this two-page reverie reveals David's conflicted thoughts about family:

I believe I remembered that incident so fondly not only because I was with Marie and Ronnie, both of whom I loved in my own way, but also because I felt, for a brief span, as though I was part of a family, a family that accepted me for myself and not my blood or birthright. (173)

The narrator's point of view discloses what kind of people Marie and Ronnie are. They treat David with an inclusive kindness, pulling him into their circle of play like a cherished younger brother. Though it is difficult for this reader to muster the sympathy that David seems to desire in the passage quoted above, since his family is the closest thing to royalty in the town of Bentrock, Montana, it is fascinating that David feels like Marie and Ronnie are family, particularly Marie, considering the background she is given by Watson.

Marie is a transplant in Bentrock, having relocated from the Fort Berthold Reservation in North Dakota. The Fort Berthold Reservation is the home of the Three Affiliated Tribes which consist of the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara combined tribes. Since Marie is Hunkpapa Sioux, a division of the Seven Council Fires of the Sioux whose ancestral homelands are either the Standing Rock Reservation or the Fort Peck Reservation, this history would indicate that the author chose to situate Marie as a person displaced from her people's native soil even before she arrived in Bentrock, in contrast to the narrator's own family who have deep familial roots in the town. However, the details of her background remain unexplained. David's feelings of closeness to Marie and Ronnie are a testament to their treatment of him. Even when Marie is ill, she is still solicitous of David, performing her role as the good Indian and cementing her persona in David's memory.

The last verbal exchange between David and Marie comes at the end of a day when David has been riding his horse Nutty and shooting a box of .22 cartridges while looking for coyotes that his grandfather considers a nuisance. When the family returns to town that evening, Marie asks David if he rode, and then if he saw a coyote. Of coyote

Marie states, “He’s hard to see when you look for him” (86). She refers here to the trickster qualities of coyote, who is more often seen unexpectedly. And, of course, an animal who has been relentlessly hunted knows not to show itself to a human being shooting up the landscape for target practice.

While Marie is portrayed as kind, wise, strong, and sensual, desirable to Indian and white males, the other two Indian women in the text are represented as stereotypically negative, particularly in the first half of the novel. Marie’s friend Doris Looks Away drinks coffee with Marie in the Hayden’s home until the Haydens return and then, uncomfortable in their presence, she leaves almost immediately (86). Depending upon the reader’s individual interpretation, this behavior might be judged as nervous shyness, as feeling out of place in the town sheriff’s home, or as the justifiable need to quit the company of a family who through its lack of action has enabled one of its own to continue to violate and abuse female members of the Indian community for an extended period of time. We learn less about this minor character, Doris Looks Away, with her ironic last name, than we do about Marie’s mother.

Mrs. Little Soldier (no first name given) serves a number of stereotypes associated with Indian women. As the wife of an owner of “a dirty, run-down cowboy hangout [bar] at the edge of town,” Marie’s mother is assumed to be a barfly and possibly a hard-drinking one at that, a drunken Indian (24). The rumor has gone about Bentrock that she is a cheap prostitute working out of a storeroom connected to the bar, a loose, fallen Jezebel (25). Though David refutes this titillation with his own impression of Mrs. Little Soldier, his sense of her as floor-staring and uncommunicative functions to portray Marie’s mother as a stoic Indian. If, as Joanne Frye maintains, “the idea of the novel has centered in the individuation of its characters,” we read little individuation in the surviving Indian female characters in *Montana 1948* well beyond the halfway point. Rather, both Doris Looks Away and Mrs. Little Soldier are flat stereotypes, portrayed as voiceless, incapable, and weak until page 105. It is in Part Three, in the last seventy pages that the most negatively portrayed Indian character, Mrs. Little Soldier, rises out of the abyss of labels, and even though readers never gain access to her words or her world, she grows and rounds as a character by setting an example that is followed by members of the most gentrified white family in Bentrock, Montana, the Haydens.

Wesley Hayden, David’s father, tells his wife Gail that the family won’t have an opportunity to attend Marie’s funeral as they had expected. He says, “I tried to tell Mrs. Little Soldier that this was Marie’s home also and that we thought of her as a member of the family, but she didn’t want to hear. She wants to get out of Montana as quickly as possible” (105). Marie’s North Dakota family is coming to take her body back to Fort Berthold. I imagine how angry Sheriff Hayden’s words must have made Marie’s mother feel. She probably seethed at the statement that Marie was thought of as a member of the family who, in actuality, relegated her to a downstairs bedroom off the kitchen, situating her like the domestic worker they really considered her to be, and at her lack of protection and safety in the home of her surrogate family where she was murdered by one of them in broad daylight while ill. Also, although Marie is the only Indian woman given voice in the novel, she is not heard, not actively listened to when she asks to be seen by a

doctor other than Frank Hayden. Her wishes are not respected by this family who is accustomed to giving orders and having things go the way they want and expect them to proceed. Suddenly, Mrs. Little Soldier comes alive and rounds as a character, upsetting the Haydens' expectations and snatching Marie away from them, effectively thwarting their intentions to publicly mourn her. Readers unexpectedly perceive the formerly hidden source of some of Marie's strength. Watson expands Mrs. Little Soldier and moves her character beyond Indian stereotypes. Joanne Frye maintains, "The novel is continually bending its conventions to include issues at stake in the culture in which it is written" (258).

Though American Indian women are portrayed often as ineffectual victims in *Montana 1948*, Mrs. Little Soldier knows that Frank Hayden's past will never be openly revealed in Bentrock, Montana, and she chooses to make a statement about that by leaving the state of Montana permanently. Her character sets a precedent that David's immediate family follows when they move away from Montana themselves, separating permanently from David's grandparents and his Uncle Frank's widow. And Mrs. Little Soldier makes it clear to everyone in Bentrock how much she loved her daughter in her refusal to continue life in the community that protects the reputation of Marie's murderer by not revealing the truth of her death. As her character shifts and expands, so does the narrator's.

David Hayden's description of his love for Marie and Ronnie later in the novel reads very differently than does his assertion in the prologue. The adjusted pronouncement "both of whom I loved in my own way" is more qualified, more realistic, far less a sweeping generalization and, therefore, more believable (173). Storytellers gain some additional credibility late in the novel; the narrator becomes more convincing in his qualified statement of love, just as the author's rounding of Mrs. Little Soldier serves to deepen and develop the last seventy pages of *Montana 1948*. As disappointing as his Indian portrayals are, Watson does redeem himself somewhat and deepen the appeal of the novel for indigenous readers, thereby gaining a wider audience.

Works Cited

Charters, Ann., Ed. *The Story and Its Writers: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. "The Elements of Fiction." New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 1003-1015.

Frye, Joanne S. "Politics, Literary Form, and a Feminist Poetics of the Novel." *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*. 3rd ed. Ed. Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. 255-273.

Kidwell, Clara Sue. "Indian Women as Cultural Mediators." *Ethnohistory*. 39.2 (Spring 1992): Durham: Duke UP. 97-107. *JSTOR*. Web. 21 Sep. 2009.

Mihesuah, Devon Abbott. *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Watson, Larry. *Montana 1948*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1993.