Power Short Guide

Power by Linda Hogan

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Power was published in 1998, and is the story of sixteen-year-old Omishto, her strained relationship with her mother and stepfather, and her closeness to her relative Ama.

Omishto is visiting Ama the day a hurricane hits. She and Ama survive the storm, but afterwards Ama feels a mysterious compulsion to track an endangered Florida panther, and Omishto feels equally compelled to accompany her. The aftermath of their encounter with the panther is painful for everyone, but Omishto learns how to deal better with her biological family, and she also grows closer to the few tribal elders who are left at Kili, their place above the swamp.

About the Author

Linda Hogan was born in 1947 and is of mixed Native American heritage, primarily Chickasaw. She was born in Colorado but grew up on a reservation in Oklahoma, and her native heritage is a strong and pervasive influence on her writing.

Traditional Native culture honors the sacredness of family, of tribe, and of connectedness, not just among people, but between people and the environment they inhabit and the animals they co-exist with.

Traditional Native culture also honors storytelling, and sees at least some stories as being sacred, as being more than entertainment. The sacredness of story is linked to the oral tradition in Native culture and literature. No Native language had a written alphabet until after the white man came to this hemisphere: a tribe's history and culture and even survival depended upon the ability to remember and transmit long and complicated stories of origin and of history. This oral tradition has had a major effect upon the kinds of narratives Native American writers invent, and often leads to stories that are shaped differently than stories arising from western cultural traditions.

All of these elements have had an impact upon Hogan. She began her writing career as a poet, and the title of her first collection of poems, Calling Myself Home (1979), suggests the book's concerns with themes of family and connectedness and of the nature of "home" for Native Americans. Her 1981 volume, Daughters, I Love You (1981), is a collection of poems against nuclear proliferation, a theme of concern to many Native writers because much of the uranium used in these weapons was mined on Native lands. Her first novel, Mean Spirit (1990) is a fictional account of the historical theft of oil lands from the Osage in Oklahoma by the white man. The novel intertwines generations of family history with the history of oil and its exploitation. Solar Storms (1997), her second novel, is a story of connections and re-birth among five generations of Native women who, in contemporary times, take a canoe journey they hope will heal both them and their land, under threat of development for hydropower. Power deals with the similar issue of the hope to revitalize the land and culture through the development of the main character, a sixteen year old girl.

Hogan has a long and passionate interest in the environment and with wildlife, and has worked as a volunteer with wildlife rehabilitators. She is at home in the natural world, in the Native world, and in the literary world. She counts among her influences other important Native writers such as Paula Gunn Allen and Joy Harjo, as well as non-Native writers such as Jamaica Kincaid.

Her interests in tradition, in the environment, and in wildlife pervade her poetry and her fiction.

Setting

The setting of Power is crucial to the story, and in fact can almost be seen as another character in the story. Power takes place along the Gulf Coast of Florida, among a group of Native Americans and mixedbreeds known as the Taiga. The land is as endangered as the small tribe is: where there once was swamp, lake, and forest, there are now concrete roads, strip malls, and resorts. The land is being mowed under by development just as the remaining Native peoples are being mowed under by encroaching white culture.

The Florida Hogan describes here is not the Florida of beach resorts and retirement communities, but rather what remains of the wild Florida, a land more water than earth, a land with tangled trees and vines, filled with dangerous snakes and still home to the endangered and seldom-seen Florida panther. This is the Florida a visitor rarely sees, except perhaps in deep parts of cypress forest and in isolated patches of preserved swamp. This is a natural Florida endangered by invaders. Some of the invaders, like the kudzu vine that overgrows everything, are hard to recognize. Kudzu appears to be just another tropical plant, but it was introduced to the United States from Japan in an effort to control erosion, and as a non-native invasive plant, it attempts to overgrow everything, growing inches per day. This plant, part of the natural environment Hogan describes, can also be seen as a metaphor for the "non-native invasion" of white settlers into Florida, beginning in the sixteenth century. Just as kudzu is overgrowing trees and buildings, the infrastructure of white America is overgrowing and transforming the native Florida environment. The white people, Omishto tells us, have a road they call State Road 59, which the natives refer to as Fossil Road because beneath the asphalt lie the bones of "sabertooths and mastodons," which leads Omishto to think that the Taiga people are like these extinct animals: "We barely have a thing, a bit of land, a few stories, and the old people that live up above Kili Swamp."

The sense of time and slow change is everywhere in this novel. Omishto is aware of the faster pace of change in the twentieth century, but also knows that Florida itself once lay beneath the sea and will someday retreat again beneath the water, and even those things that seem permanent are only temporary. The novel symbolizes this in the ancient tree known as Methuselah, a European tree planted by the first Spanish settiers that lives hundreds of years before finally being felled by a hurricane. The tree, a natural being, is strong, but not as strong as the cyclic forces of nature and weather, and its death signals changes for Omishto and all her people.

The novel is filled with references to specific animals and plants native to Florida. The panther is the most important, but there are also the egrets, the snakes, the cypress and mangrove trees, the palm thatch covering Ama's roof. Layered over the remaining wild plant and animal life are the signs of white civilization. There are roads and cars, but there are also pigs and a neighbor's "Spanish" horses, domesticated animals that, like the kudzu, are invaders from elsewhere. There are the institutions of law and school, both of which have an impact on Omishto's life, although neither is as important to her as her life with Ama and the survival of her people.

The natural world, not the human world, is the most powerful element in the novel, expressed most vividly in the hurricane that strikes in the opening pages of the novel. The hurricane is violent, uprooting Methuselah and ripping Omishto's dress off her body; killing horses, blowing Ama against the side of her house, and causing snakes to climb trees for safety. The hurricane is stronger than white people, stronger than the Taiga. Its coming transforms not only the physical world around Omishto, but also her family world and her perceptions of her place in the white world and in the Taiga world. It has profound implications for the survival of the Taiga and for Omishto's place as an adult in a changing world.

Social Sensitivity

Hogan is sensitive both to Native beliefs and to environmental concerns. One of her strengths as a writer is that she is not didactic about her beliefs, but rather lets them speak for themselves through the power of her story. Her novel is not only about a Native girl trying to make her way in an unsympathetic world, but it also uses Native narrative techniques to tell that story.

Hogan also does not stereotype or vilify white people. Omishto's mother, for example, is treated sympathetically. Omishto may not approve of her mother's marriage to a white man, nor of her beliefs in a fundamentalist religion that demonizes snakes, but she (and therefore the reader) understands why the mother has made the choices she has, and that she, too, is trying to find her way in the white world. Like her daughter, she is in search of a loving family, and in the end must leave her angry and destructive husband, as difficult as that choice is for her. Omishto's sister Donna has made a more successful accommodation to the white world, and is not condemned by her sister for having done so: she has simply chosen a different route, one that is right for her.

Environmental concerns are also presented in an organic way in this novel. The panther is endangered and protected, yet white society does not seem willing to take the steps necessary to protect the panther's habitat so that it may live healthily. Society values the idea of the wild panther more than the panther itself. As Hogan shows, this attitude can have negative effects upon the panther and upon the entire environment.

And although Native culture is presented as having at least equal, if not greater, value than white culture in this novel, it is not romanticized in any way. The tribal elders living above Kili Swamp live in poverty and have hard physical lives. They have chosen a difficult way to live because it is right for them, but Hogan never suggests that life above Kili Swamp is a Utopian alternative to life in white society.

All in all, Hogan is fair-minded towards all in this novel, although her sympathies are clearly with the endangered panther and with the endangered Taiga clinging to their traditional lives.

Literary Qualities

Hogan's novel is beautifully, even poetically written. Her protagonist's name, Omishto, means "she who watches," and Omishto is an astute observer. She is a solitary child, one without many friends, and thus spends much time thinking about the world she inhabits. There is little dialogue in the novel—everything is filtered through Omishto's thoughts, and we are given her perceptions of the world, rather than being asked to draw our own conclusions from the action.

The language of the novel allows the reader to see, feel, and even smell Omishto's Florida. When Ama fires the gun at the panther, "the world breaks apart in the terrified screams of small animals," but then everything goes quiet, "a great silence spreads over the place. It is bleeding silence." Earlier, during the hurricane, there is a "heavy moment of silence dark gray with weight," "the silence before [the storm] hits, the time it takes to inhale, to gather itself." Deer and fence posts fly through the air in the hurricane's winds.

The novel also gives us information obliquely, and often mysteriously. Before the hurricane hits, Omishto is sitting on Ama's porch and thinks she sees four Native women dancing down the road, shaking their turtle-shell rattles. These same women show up several other times in the novel, in dream-like sequences, and to the reader it is unclear whether they are real or whether they are visions. From Omishto's perspective—from the Taiga perspective— it does not matter. In Native thought, the boundaries between life and death, dream and reality, are much more porous than they are in white thought. It does not matter whether the women are real or not: they have a real effect upon Omishto.

Omishto's story is structured in a way that might seem odd to western readers: the single most dramatic event, the hurricane, is over in the first thirty-eight pages of the novel. A scene that might be equally dramatic, the shooting of the panther, happens in the dark and Omishto can barely see what is happening. The bulk of the novel is concerned with the effects of both hurricane and panther death, and thus is both more introspective and more realistic than many novels. Many people experience dramatic and even traumatic events—a car crash, for example—but oftentimes the event itself is not as dramatic as the effects it has on the participant's life. This is true of Omishto's experiences. The psychological after effects of both storm and hunt are what matter, and what are given the most weight in this novel.

Power also asks that the reader be introspective and thoughtful. There are no easy answers given in this story, as the epigraph suggests. The epigraph reads, "Mystery is a form of power," a phrase that can apply to the panther, to Ama, to Taiga beliefs and customs—but not to the white world, which can always be explained. Hogan seems to be suggesting, both in the epigraph and throughout the novel, that the Taiga, and Native peoples as a whole, may have more power than they are given credit for.

Themes and Characters

Omishto is a sixteen-year-old Taiga girl whose name means "she who watches," and indeed throughout the novel she is a witness to profoundly important and mysterious events. She is still in high school and lives with her mother, stepfather, and sister in a small house in a subdivision. Omishto's mother has turned her back on Taiga culture and wants to pass as white. She has given up on Taiga beliefs and has joined a fundamentalist Christian church. Her husband, Herm, has a temper and also desires Omishto, although she successfully fends him off. Omishto's sister is almost completely assimilated into the white world, concerned with her boyfriend, her school friends, and with her boyfriend's car.

Omishto prefers to spend time with Ama Eaton, a woman of her mother's age and a kind of distant cousin. Ama lives in a ramshackle house on the boundary between Taiga and white land, and she herself lives a kind of border existence. She still speaks the Taiga language, can track animals, knows the old stories and lives by many of the old beliefs, but she lives apart from the older traditional Taiga peoples. She is a pivotal character, the one upon whom the entire future of the Taiga may rest, but in order to perform her role in their survival she must live apart from them and, apparently, violate some of their deepest beliefs.

Omishto likes being with Ama because Ama does not judge her, does not dwell on superficial things, but instead simply enjoys being with Omishto, telling stories, brushing hair, making tea. Ama respects Omishto for who she is and does not force her to try to be something she is not.

Omishto's mother is, in many ways, jealous of Ama for stealing her daughter's affection, but Ama's appeal is not only personal, but tribal. Omishto is attracted to the old ways, as her sister Donna is not.

Omishto, in the course of the novel, will grow up and become the woman she is meant to be, but her road to maturity is a difficult one. It begins with the hurricane at the beginning of the novel, the single most dramatic scene in the book, whose effects will echo long after the winds die. The hurricane makes deer fly through the sky, pins Ama to the side of her house, and jumbles the physical world so that it is almost unrecognizable because of downed trees and tangled debris. Omishto is out of doors when the hurricane strikes, gone to pull her boat out of the water, and could easily have been killed by the force of the storm, as could Ama. But both women survive, as does the ramshackle house, miraculously. But Omishto is in a state of shock after the storm, and Ama also behaves strangely. She sees a wounded deer and says that she and Omishto must follow it, or at least that is what Omishto thinks she means. They set off in the dark, through the hurricane debris, with few supplies except a rifle.

Ama is tracking not the deer, but the Florida panther she knows will also be tracking the deer. The Taiga people refer to the panther as Sisa, and in their belief system Sisa is the originator of their world, their sister and mother, and a sacred being.

The panther has a crucial role in the culture and religion of Taiga peoples. Like the Taiga, the panther is besieged, its habitat stolen by white people, its entire way of living endangered. Omishto and Ama both know that the panther has been declared an endangered species and that it is illegal to kill one, but they also know that the white people do not really want the panther to be a part of their daily lives, as the Taiga do.

The panther, when Ama and Omishto first see it, appears to be golden and powerful, although once it is dead Omishto sees that it is starving and ill. Ama has been aware of the panther living near her for years, but after the hurricane something compels her to track the panther and then kill it, violating both white law and tribal law. Omishto is a witness to this act, and later must take the stand at Ama's court trial, then must speak to the tribal elders about what she saw.

The mystery of the novel is why Ama, who values Taiga culture and refers to the panther as "grandmother" even in the act of killing it, destroys the panther. Not only does she shoot the animal, but she makes sure she takes its tracking collar with her to her house, thus ensuring that the authorities will find the culprit with no difficulty whatsoever. She also makes Omishto promise to tell the truth, except for the panther's sickly appearance. Ama has hidden the body of the panther and the gun that killed it, so that the only evidence against her is the tracking collar in her house.

The panther is obviously a symbol of Taiga culture and of Taiga survival, so why would Ama kill it? Omishto tries to puzzle through this, as do the legal authorities and the tribal elders. Ama apparently believes that by killing the panther and sacrificing her own standing in both the white community and the Taiga community, she is performing a sacrifice that will somehow save the Taiga. The white authorities, as well as the tribal leaders, want to believe that Ama killed the panther in order to take for herself some of its power. Only Omishto knows how sickly and frail the panther was. If the tribal elders saw what a state their sacred panther had fallen to, they might give up on themselves and their beliefs. Ama kills the panther to destroy evidence of its weakness, and thus to leave the tribe with its beliefs in its strength and longevity.

Although the plot line of hurricane, panther death, civil trial and tribal trial is linear, Omishto's understanding of these events is not. This is a first-person narrative by a sixteen-year-old girl, and the reader must puzzle along with her and she attempts to see why Ama has done what she has done, and what Omishto's responses to it should be. Some of the effects upon Omishto will be familiar to any young reader: she is hounded at school, rejected by friends, pressured by authorities to speak of issues she barely understands. Her mother tries to pressure her into leaving Ama's house and coming home, her stepfather tries to bully her into behaving, her sister tries to cajole her. Omishto's responses tell us who she is growing into. She refuses to listen to people who want her to conform, whether or not conforming is good for her. She stands by Ama, even when Ama (who escapes conviction by the white court) is banished by the tribal elders and Omishto knows she will not see Ama again for years. Omishto, in some ways, becomes Ama, takes over her place as a gatekeeper between the tribal world and the white world, living in Ama's house until, at the end, she leaves even it and goes to live with the tribal elders.

Omishto, then, grows up and out of the white world and into the tribal world of her ancestors. The panther has been killed and Ama banished, but Omishto's return to tribal ways may signal hope for the survival of the Taiga, since she is young and female and may become part of the rejuvenation of the tribe. Both panther and Ama have been sacrificed, but they have been sacrificed for the survival of Omishto and of the Taiga.

Omishto's survival, and the survival of the Taiga, are inextricably linked to the survival of the environment. After the hurricane Omishto thinks of herself as being "reborn" into another world, another self.

Adolescence, of course, is a kind of rebirthing process, but in this novel the survival of the individual is inextricably linked to the survival of the tribe and the natural world. This is a specifically Native way of thinking. Traditional western literature tends to emphasize the importance of the individual battling against odds for some sort of autonomy, but much native literature sees individualism as destructive and the collective nature of the tribe as a higher good.

This is one of the underlying themes of Hogan's novel. Ama's individualism and sacrifice are destructive for her as an individual, but allow Omishto to become part of the tribe and to find herself through others, not through herself. This is a theme that will be new to most adolescent readers and very different from what is usually presented to them in young adult fiction.

Topics for Discussion

1. Who are the dancing native women who appear several times in this novel?

Are they real, or does Omishto hallucinate them? What do they symbolize for Omishto?

2. Omishto thinks the panther skin is in the possession of the tribal elders at Kili Swamp. If she has given them the skin, she has fulfilled native custom. If this is so, then why do the elders banish Ama?

3. Ama's name reads the same way whether it is read beginning to end or end to beginning. How is this appropriate to her role in the story?

4. Omishto and others believe that the elders killed Abraham Swallow through supernatural means. Why are people willing to believe this of the Taiga elders, who seem so few in number and so frail?

5. Ama's house is ramshackle and being eaten away by termites. What might this house symbolize in the novel?

6. During Ama's trial even the Taiga who understand and speak some English rely on interpreters. Why do you think they refuse to speak English?

7. How important is setting in this novel?

Would the novel suffer if it were placed in a more developed part of Florida, such as an area close to Orlando or Miami?

8. What does the ancient tree Methuselah symbolize in this story?

9. Why do you think Ama first protects the panther from being tormented by local boys, and then goes out to shoot it? Why is it acceptable for Ama to kill the panther, but not for the boys to do so?

10. We hear only once or twice in the novel that Omishto had a brother who died in a fire. Why is it that we do not hear more about this brother? How might his death affect Omishto's decisions about Ama and the panther?

11. Omishto is a Taiga girl, but other things set her apart from girls her age. Make a list of what sets her apart. How does her sister Donna attempt to fit in?

12. Why do you think Omishto likes to escape in her boat into the swampland?

Does she just want to get away from other people, or does going into the wilderness fulfill other needs for her?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the history of Native peoples in Florida. How many tribes were there?

How many are left now?

2. What is the history of the Florida panther? How did it become endangered?

What is being done to protect it?

3. What effects have hurricanes had upon Florida? How destructive are they?

What have people done to lessen their destructive powers?

4. What is the effect of agriculture upon the environment of Florida? Where does the water come from to irrigate crops?

Where does the residue from pesticides and fertilizers go?

5. What is the geography of Florida? How far above sea level is it? What kind of earth and rock is it made of? What are the effects of geography upon human development of the land?

6. What native reservation lands exist in Florida today? How many square miles are devoted to reservation lands out of the total square miles in Florida?

7. Are there other endangered species in Florida? What are they? What laws protect them?

8. What tribal customs still exist in Florida today?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Hogan's earlier novel, Solar Storms, also features an adolescent heroine and is concerned with Native and environmental issues. Its plot is more traditionally Western in shape than the plot of Power. Mean Spirit, Hogan's historical novel, explores an important but little-discussed part of American history, the exploitation of the Osage for their oil rights. Although most of the protagonists in this novel are adults, there is an important adolescent character for young readers to identify with.

There are many good novels written by Native writers that young readers might also enjoy. Susan Powers' Grass Dancer is a coming of age story about a young Native girl; Louise Erdrich's series of novels about an extended family of Native Americans over many generations (beginning with The Beet Queen) will appeal to young readers; Paula Gunn Allen's collection of stories, Spiderwoman's Grand Daughters, contains stories by many well-known Native women writers, and many of them focus on female coming-of-age issues.

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