

"This heart-stopper of a book reached out, grabbed me, and did not let go. Read it—and be healed."

—MARIE MYUNG-OK LEE,
AUTHOR OF *THE EVENING HERO*



a novel

A COUNCIL OF DOLLS



MONA SUSAN POWER

READING GROUP KIT



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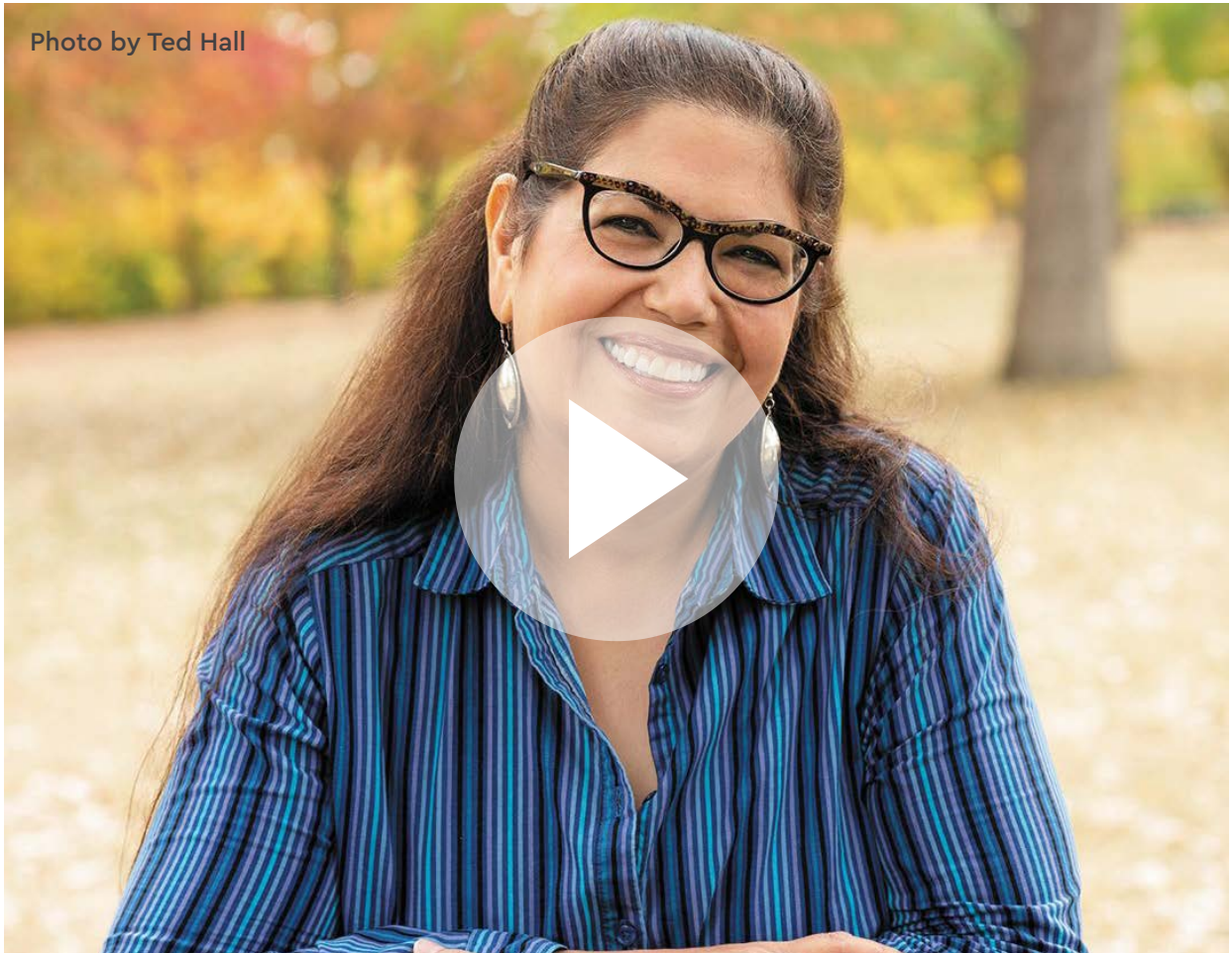
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A MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

MONA SUSAN POWER

Photo by Ted Hall



MONA SUSAN POWER

ON THE STORY BEHIND *A COUNCIL OF DOLLS*

A Council of Dolls began as a short story project. I often write stories—this one meant to explore a childhood dream of becoming a ballerina like my idol, Maria Tallchief. I desperately wanted pointe shoes as a little girl, even though they're not safe for children younger than twelve and our family operated on a pinched budget. Some nights as I lay awake, I would pray and pray for the miracle of finding pink pointe shoes under the bed the next morning. I wholeheartedly believed that such glorious magic was possible! Of course, the shoes never materialized, but a fiction writer can manifest anything in our pages! So I outlined a story about a little girl very much like myself when I was seven years old, who has an emotionally distant mother. She shares her dream with the mother and is scolded for being so fanciful. Yet the next week, the girl wakes to find the beautiful shoes tucked beneath her bed, nestled in a crumpled box. The girl wonders whether the gift arrived via magic, or through the actions of her mother. I pulled out a notebook and began to write . . . but as my hand moved across the page, the pointe shoes never made an appearance. Instead, there was Ethel, a chubby-cheeked adorable baby doll, the Black version of Ideal's Tiny Thumbelina. My father had gone through a bit of a struggle to be allowed to purchase her from a Sears clerk in 1960s Chicago. The clerk steered him to a shelf full of white Thumbelinas. I was so glad he insisted on the doll who became my Ethel, because from my earliest memory I was keenly aware of racial prejudice, and felt Ethel would be a closer ally, given my Native American heritage. I carried her with me everywhere, told her my deepest secrets and fears, until soon she became a mother figure rather than playing the part of my child. I wrote this story about a girl and her doll, which was ultimately published in the *Missouri Review*, then moved on to

other projects. A year later a dear friend read the story and mentioned that it could be spun into a novel. My imagination was once again caught up with a baby doll named Ethel.

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Early on in the process of crafting the book, I realized that while I was unquestionably writing fiction, the world of the novel was very much informed and inspired by some of the actual dynamics and experiences of my family. I was raised hearing stories of my mother's childhood in Fort Yates, North Dakota, on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. She, and her siblings and parents, had all attended Indian boarding schools. Many of their experiences in these schools were deeply traumatic. The children always preferred being home with their families, and left for the distant institutions with heavy hearts. The entire system of attempted cultural and spiritual genocide couldn't help but damage young ones. Sometimes they

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were directly shamed, even brutalized, for mistakes or infractions, for not already speaking English. But the entire *purpose* of the school—to eradicate all traces of Native American heritage and lifeways—was in itself a devastating repudiation of who they were. My mother's stories were by no means always harrowing. Memories she shared of my ancestors instilled great pride in my Dakhóta lineage—descended as we are from a long line of hereditary chiefs, including Two Bear, my great-great-grandfather, who was renowned for his wise counsel and desire to make the path easier for his people. She and my grandmother kept his spirit alive through their own dedicated community service and activism.

Originally I'd planned to write the novel in chronological order—beginning with the character of Cora, born in the late 1800s. Upon reflection, I realized that it could be more powerful to move backward in time: I hoped that readers who perhaps judged a parent in an early section of the book would look upon this same character with greater compassion, even admiration, seeing them as a

child. Had I presented the story chronologically, by the time we arrive at Jesse's section in more contemporary times, the reader might be left with a lingering distaste for some of the parents. In my view, none of the parents in the story are villains, rather wounded survivors who love their children the best they can, preserving as much of their Native American heritage as possible in a world determined to obliterate it.

I completed the novel on May 26, 2021. Days later, in early June, news broke of the discovery of buried remains of Indigenous children near a former Indian residential school in Kamloops, Canada. This development reinforced my faith in the guiding impulse that pushed me to write *A Council of Dolls*. The act of writing stories so close to the bone was a healing, though highly emotional process. As I typed some pages, I didn't notice I was crying until after I completed the work session. I felt supported by ancestors whose legacy is a rich, sustaining foundation, still alive within me despite the assaults of colonization.

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THE DOLLS OF THE COUNCIL

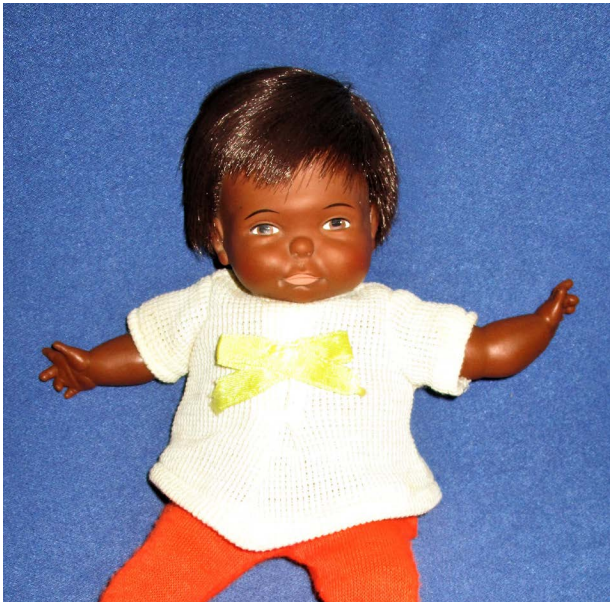


Photo credit: DeeBeeGee's Virtual Black Doll Museum

Ethel was born in the 1960s, inside Ideal Toy Company's manufacturing plant in Queens. She is a Black baby doll, a preemie who wriggles with joyful energy when you pull a string attached to her back. Surrounded as she is by a world of white dolls who sell in greater numbers, she's aware of prejudice. Ethel is insightful, loving, and fiercely loyal.



Photo credit: Theriault's Doll Auctions

Mae was born in the 1930s, during the Great Depression in America. Her birthplace, like Ethel's, is an Ideal Toy Company plant in Queens. She is crafted to look like child film star Shirley Temple, and carries echoes of the real Shirley's Hollywood memories. She is curious, talkative, and protective of the girl she believes is her true home. She loves to dance!



Winona was birthed near the Upper Missouri River in the 1830s, created of deerskin and beads to bring comfort to a grieving Dakhóta mother. She has witnessed the attempted genocide of those in her community. Her body was destroyed by fire at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School when she was tossed into a burning bin of students' belongings. But her spirit lives on via a small stone sewn inside her chest to operate as a heart. She is cautious, haunted by traumatic memories, and determined to give good counsel to generations of girls who love her.

Photo credit: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution 13/7839. Photo by NMAI Photo Services.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Sissy's dad says of her beautiful but violent mother: "Your mama is great at fighting for us, fighting for our community. Sometimes people take their anger and use it in a good way." How does Sissy's mama channel her rage in a positive way? Does it compensate for the damage her anger does otherwise?
2. What role does Ethel the doll play in Sissy's life? In the final climactic scene of Sissy's narrative, she hears Ethel say "I took care of it. Somebody had to." How did you interpret that? Do we gain any additional insight at the end of the book, when we hear Ethel explain her own version of events?
3. As you learned more about Jack's and Lillian's childhoods, did that change your understanding of who they became as adults? Did you feel differently about them when you saw them as children versus how you saw them as parents?
4. Blanche asks their father, Jack, why he speaks English with her and Lillian, even though he hates it. He tells her: "Cora and I got into the practice once you started school, because you didn't understand us so well anymore. We know firsthand how that works, how you're punished for speaking our language. The constant policing of our ways and our words interrupts the ability to think fluently. Our thoughts get chopped up. We don't want that to happen to you." Was this the right decision? How might things have been different for his children if they had been raised speaking only Dakhóta?
5. Jack tells his daughters: "Maybe English is safer to me because it doesn't mean anything, because its words are empty to me. No heart. Sometimes when you lose a lot, you have to put your heart away to keep it ticking." Does this ring true to you? Do you know people who have experienced similar losses—of language, of culture, of community?
6. Had you heard about America's Indian boarding schools before you read this book? What new information or perspective did you gain while reading stories of children who were forced to attend them?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

7. At the Indian boarding school, Cornelius tells his friends that at the back of a closet "a cold rush of air brushed our faces and the light clicked on again. Then off. We heard crying from the darkest corner way in the back." He found scratched on the closet walls the words "HELP HOME HELP HOME HELP HOME." How did you interpret that experience? What do the children make of it?
8. Why does Lillian feel obligated to give Mae the doll to her dying friend Ada? How did you interpret Mae's return into Lillian's life even after she was buried with Ada? Is Mae now a ghost? A figment of Lillian's imagination? A manifestation of her trauma?
9. Winona, Cora's doll, tells her, "Everything I see is colored by my eyes. When they were sewn of dyed black porcupine quills, the world was dark, and now that they are indigo glass beads the vision is clear but always twilight. We don't see the truth. But our heart feels it if we listen." How does this square with what Cora's mother tells her: "I just want you to know that what strangers make of you means nothing. Your heart knows the truth"? What ultimately becomes of Winona's heart?
10. In the final section of the novel we meet Jesse, in the present day. Why is she compelled to reunite the dolls that we have seen throughout the story, carried by her forebears? How did you, the reader, feel as you witnessed each of the dolls reappear in Jesse's apartment?
11. Who are the three women who appear to Jesse at the end of this story? Why are they there? Why have they arrived now rather than earlier? How will that experience inform Jesse's life as she moves forward?
12. Author Mona Susan Power based this novel on aspects of her own family's experiences with Indian boarding schools. She wrote: "The creation of this novel was both emotionally intense and liberating, and also educational. I was able to see how generational trauma works, how pain and dysfunction echo in a never-ending cycle of various kinds of abuse until someone finally heals." What form does the healing take in this novel? How do we know that it's happened? Have you seen examples of this kind of healing from trauma in your own life?

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER READING

The National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition <https://boardingschoolhealing.org/>

American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings by Zitkala-Ša (Penguin Classics, 2003)

Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900–1940 by Brenda J. Child (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2000)

Indian School Days by Basil H. Johnston (Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1990)

Kuper Island, podcast about the experiences of Indigenous children at a residential school in Canada (CBC Podcasts, 2022) <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/podcastnews/kuper-island-transcripts-listen-1.6622551>

Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors by Denise K. Lajimodiere (North Dakota State Univ. Press, 2019)

They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School by K. Tsianina Lomawaima (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995)

They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School by Bev Sellars (Talonbooks, 2012)