

# EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

# LOOKING FOR SMOKE

K.A. Cobell

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K. A. Cobell, *Staa'tssipisstaakii*, is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest, where she spends her time writing books, chasing her kids through the never-ending rain, and scouring the inlet beaches for sand dollars and hermit crabs. *Looking for Smoke* is her debut novel.

### DEAR READER.

When I set out to write *Looking for Smoke*, the characters came to me first. I saw their family relationships, their emotional wounds, the baggage they carry. I felt for them before they even made it onto the page, because, while their stories are fictional, I knew they would intertwine with the emotional realities of real families and communities that are dealing with the epidemic of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

The numbers speak for themselves: 84 percent of Native women have experienced violence and 56 percent have experienced sexual violence. The murder rate of Native women is three times more than that of white women, and in some locations the rate is more than ten times the national average. In writing the story of Blackfeet teenagers grappling with the disappearance and murder of their classmates, I hoped to shine a light not only on this issue, but on the strength and hope of the Native communities affected by it.

On its surface, this book is a propulsive thriller in which teenage suspects must clear their names while a killer is still in their midst. At its heart, it's a story of resilience, community, and fighting for your loved ones despite the costs. It's about the great lengths we would go to to protect our family members and the profound sense of loss, anger, and thirst for justice we feel when we fail to do so.

If there's one wish I have for this book, it's that these characters will make you feel something. Like countless Natives today, they want change. They want outrage. They want their voices heard. I hope they stick with you long after the book ends.

*K.A. Cobell*



## ABOUT THE BOOK

When a murder at Indian Days powwow casts four teens as primary suspects, they form an unlikely alliance in hopes of solving the case and protecting their loved ones. Will they be able to save their community before everything comes burning down around them?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mara and her family recently moved to Browning, Montana. How has she been received on the reservation? When is a time you've been made to feel like an outsider? What role can you play in welcoming a new person to your school or community?
2. The story begins at a powwow that includes a giveaway. What is the reason for this ceremony? Who is being honored and why? What is the purpose for doing this?
3. What does the abbreviation #MMIWG2S stand for? According to the *Into the Air* podcast, why are so many of these cases not widely shared with the public?
4. The novel invites us into the minds of the four teenage characters. Which one do you most identify with and why?
5. Each of the characters have put up walls for their own preservation. How are they dealing with their issues to solve the murders?
6. If you're not Blackfeet, how has this novel helped build your understanding of Blackfeet people? If you're Blackfeet, how do the teen characters uphold their traditional Blackfeet ways of living and being in the world? In what ways are they similar to you and your friends?
7. Were you satisfied with how the novel ended? If not, what changes do you wish you could make to the storyline?
8. While the novel includes many instances of sadness and grief, there are also examples of resilience. How do the characters persevere given the challenges they face? What real-life examples of perseverance are part of your local community (among Blackfeet, other Native, or non-Native peoples)?
9. How did your suspicions change the more you learned about and from the characters? What clues, if any, helped you solve the mystery?



## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- **Not Just Horsin' Around:** Watch a video clip about Dancing Boy Express, a group of teens from the Flathead Reservation in Montana, as they set their sights on winning the National Indian Relay Championship. While Brody and Eli in *Looking for Smoke* seem to be in it only for the prize money, what does this video clip teach us about how horse racing can reconnect participants to their values and provide purpose? Clip: <https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/native-americans-changing-world-gallery/video-gallery-native-america/>.
- **Lost Cause:** In *Looking for Smoke*, we read about Geraldine's frustration with the lack of effort in finding Ray Bear. Who decides what missing persons cases are worthy of media coverage? After watching this clip of Tai LeClaire, discuss whether you believe the points he raises are valid: <https://youtube.com/shorts/Hht-ZX9CmW4?si=zDf6QG7Q2lpAZFvY>.
- **Jingle All the Way:** Ojibwe oral history tells us that the first jingle dress was created to help heal from Spanish influenza. In *Looking for Smoke*, character Loren Arnoux wears her jingle dress regalia to help heal not only herself, but her community. Watch the clip Art Heals: The Jingle Dress Project to learn about the dresses, how they provide healing, and their role in building awareness about contemporary Native Americans: [https://youtu.be/phXsi\\_CdJzM?si=sskaFlaVysB8\\_dDM](https://youtu.be/phXsi_CdJzM?si=sskaFlaVysB8_dDM).
- **We're Glad about Gladstone:** Blackfeet actress Lily Gladstone was nominated for an Oscar for her role in the movie *Killers of the Flower Moon*. Watch this clip to learn how she carries her Blackfeet values with her in all she does: <https://youtu.be/7pUxdSP92qs?si=jQXox8Sxmyy2whb2>.
- **Mo' Montana:** How much do you know about Montana? The locations mentioned in the novel are real places. Using a map, find the places identified in the novel and research where the Blackfeet and other tribal communities reside today. For extra credit, identify the traditional homelands of the tribes prior to colonization.

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