

The Only Good Indians by Stephen Graham Jones

Kali Simmons

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We are living in a time in which there is a profound desire for justice. Stephen Graham Jones' *The Only Good Indians* is a book in which there may exist a kind of justice, but in which there certainly is no peace.

The narrative of *The Only Good Indians* centers on a group of Blackfoot men: Richard "Ricky" Boss Ribs, Lewis A. Clarke, Gabriel "Gabe" Cross Guns, and Cassidy "Cass" Thinks Twice. Through the course of the novel, these men are relentlessly pursued by a spirit named Elk Head Woman, a manifestation of a cow elk that the group killed in violation of both tribal hunting protocols and proper kinship relations. Elk Head Woman returns ten years after the "Thanksgiving Classic"--the night the men slaughtered a group of elk--seeking revenge not just for her death, but for the death of the unborn calf she was carrying when the four men killed her.

Like his previous work *Mapping the Interior*, Jones seeks to challenge concepts like justice and revenge by telling a story where it is difficult to discern the righteous from the evil. He is careful to present each of the men within all of their complexity: some of the men struggle with addiction, others run away from home to escape feelings of shame. Others feel trapped, culled in like animals on the reservation. Jones does not shy

away from showing the shameful of Ricky, Lewis, Gabe, and Cass' actions against each other, their families, their communities, and their non-human kin, but he does so while carefully showing that these are people that are doing their best to navigate a world that is deeply anti-Indian. It is a world in which they feel destined fail. It is a world that batters Native people down. Frequently, the Elk Head Woman manipulates this world to her advantage, placing the men in situations where they must face off against armed police and racist locals, taking advantage of the men's place in the world in order to dispatch them rather than killing them directly. These choices not only help to develop the men as complex characters, they require that the reader think carefully about who really deserves what they get in the end.

Jones further complicates this slasher story by incriminating the reader. When given access to the thoughts of the Elk Head Woman, they are presented in a second-person narrative:

"Ten years and now you're here at last.

. . . Neither of these last two know you're in the world at all. That day in the snow they shot you, to them it's just another day, another hunt.

That's why it has to be like this.

You could have taken them at any point over the last day, day and a half, but that's not even close to what they deserve. They need to feel what you felt.

The whole world has to be torn from their belly, shoved into a shallow hole” (262)

It's the literary equivalent of that opening scene from John Carpenter's *Halloween* when the viewer must witness, through young Michael Meyer's eyes, his murder of his sister. Gazing through the eyes of Elk Head Woman, the reader is directly implicated in Elk Head Woman's desire for vengeance. Revenge stories can be satisfying for those who see so little justice in the world, and, initially, it seems easy for the reader to identify with her character. Rick, Lewis, Gabe and Cass openly express their shame about “that Saturday,” and it is clear the men's actions were out of balance: They took much more than they needed, and they took something that wasn't theirs to take. Yet Elk Head Woman's reckoning, too, spirals out of balance. Although she begins by hunting the men, her revenge slowly ensnarls into those around them: she kills partners, friends, bystanders and eventually begins to hunt children. It becomes clear that Elk Head Woman has waited to act until these men have something worth taking, something they love, some glimmer of hope.

Drawing from the slasher genre, *The Only Good Indians* re-inscribes horror tropes within a Blackfoot context. I want to be careful to note that this is very much a horror novel: Jones does not shy away from detailing the gruesome ways that Elk Head Woman extracts her revenge through the flesh of the novels' characters. With section titles like “The House That Ran Red” “It Came from the Rez” and “Sweat Lodge Massacre,”--which I personally think all deserve to be made into their own feature-length NDN grindhouse films--it is clear that Jones is closely engaging the horror genre while also remaining in conversation with a long

history of Indigenous literary fiction. The narrative's final girl, Denorah, will be very familiar to those who read Native literature: she's the town basketball hero, tough and disciplined and carrying the burden of her father's failures. Although familiar in many ways, the way that Jones ultimately utilizes Denorah's character is refreshing. Rather than following the normative final girl pattern (monster chases girl, girl discovers something about monster, man arrives and kills monster), *The Only Good Indians* tells a slasher story that troubles notions of good and evil, hero and monster. It is only through an act of reciprocity, a moment of care towards a being radically unlike oneself, that the circle of violence is closed. Ultimately, the novel forces readers to consider the ways that one of settler-colonialism's true horrors is the ways that it implicates all in its violent structures. Thus, to think outside of the narratives that colonialism has normalized and imposed requires acts of unthinkable risk...and hope.

Author Bio

Kali Simmons is an Oglala Lakota descendant and Ph.D Candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, Riverside. Her research examines the ways Indigenous peoples have been represented – and represented themselves – within the genres of horror, science fiction, and documentary/ethnography.