



Monkey Beach

Eden Robinson

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Five hundred miles north of Vancouver is Kitamaat, an Indian reservation in the homeland of the Haisla people. Growing up a tough, wild tomboy, swimming, fighting, and fishing in a remote village where the land slips into the green ocean on the edge of the world, Lisamarie has always been different.

Visited by ghosts and shapeshifters, tormented by premonitions, she can't escape the sense that something terrible is waiting for her. She recounts her enchanted yet scarred life as she journeys in her speedboat up the frigid waters of the Douglas Channel. She is searching for her brother, dead by drowning, and in her own way running as fast as she can toward danger. Circling her brother's tragic death are the remarkable characters that make up her family: Lisamarie's parents, struggling to join their Haisla heritage with Western ways; Uncle Mick, a Native rights activist and devoted Elvis fan; and the headstrong Ma-ma-oo (Haisla for "grandmother"), a guardian of tradition.

Haunting, funny, and vividly poignant, *Monkey Beach* gives full scope to Robinson's startling ability to make bedfellows of comedy and the dark underside of life. Informed as much by its lush living wilderness as by the humanity of its colorful characters, *Monkey Beach* is a profoundly moving story about childhood and the pain of growing older--a multilayered tale of family grief and redemption.

Monkey Beach Details

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From Reader Review *Monkey Beach* for online ebook

Lindsey says

This book I picked up randomly in a used book exchange in an airport just before I flew out to BC. Since this book took place in BC, I thought it would be a fitting companion for my trip. I'm so glad I stumbled upon this book.

This is a beautiful story of a Haisla Native Canadian girl growing up in a BC Indian reserve with a unique gift of being "connected to the spirit world".

We meet Lisa Hill as she finds out that her champion swimmer brother has been lost at sea while on a fishing rig. While she is dealing with this news, she thinks back to her childhood growing up with her brother and we gain insight into her relationships with her family (her activist and angry uncle, her traditional Ma-ma-oo) and what it's like growing up on a reserve. We get an idea of Lisa's "visions" and "visiting spirits" and how she learns to interpret them.

Throughout the book, Lisa struggles with fitting in with her family and friends, struggles with alcohol and drugs, and struggles the most with guilt about failing to listen to her gifts to help the ones she loves. It seems to me that this gift she has, while it is sometimes based in truth, is often confusing and incomprehensible and almost seems like a form of schizophrenia.

The book ends with Lisa leaving in a skiff to look for her lost brother on her own. She stumbles upon Monkey Beach when almost running out of gas, and there faces some demons of her own making as she struggles to tell hallucinations from reality.

A haunting and touching story.

Liviana says

MONKEY BEACH is one of those books where I am honestly unsure about how I feel about it. I suspect Robinson prefers it that way. MONKEY BEACH slips and slides between the past and the presents, tying the disparate parts of heroine Lisamarie's life together in unexpected ways. The nominal driving force of the novel is the disappearance of Lisamarie's older brother, Jimmy. He was on a fishing boat that disappeared; however, he is a great swimmer and there are tons of islands, so there's a small chance he died. At first it seems odd that Lisamarie would disgress so much, pondering her uncle Mick (for example) instead of focusing on Jimmy. But it all works together, in a rough sort of way.

This is a hard novel to describe, because nothing much happens in MONKEY BEACH, yet it is a very tumultuous novel. Life is enough to provide humor and tragedy without big events. MONKEY BEACH is also a very dark novel. Education in boarding schools looms over the heads of the previous generation. Other injustices against the Haisla and other First Nations people continue. The heroine is date raped, in a thankfully non-explicit scene. Secrets bubble out of every corner. Death, drugs, alcohol, sex - they're never far. At the same time, Lisamarie has an incredible, loving family, a real shot at the future, and a few good friends.

I really loved Lisamarie. She's angry, prickly, and too foolhardy for her own good. She also sees things - a little man who foretells deaths, for instance. Lisamarie never has much hope of Jimmy's survival. It's a power she seeks to learn more about, but she's still not the type to bear it with grace.

I may not entirely know how I feel about the novel, but MONKEY BEACH was an absorbing reading

experience. I felt a little like I was in Kitimaat, especially when Lisamarie described fish grease in detail.

Linnea says

Just read this book again and confirmed my admiration for it. Robinson's prose is as chilling as the creatures who lurk just beyond the tree-line at Monkey Beach. Offers an honest yet understated inquiry into the viral effects of abuse, whether via residential school, between relatives, or self-inflicted through substances. When a book can make me cry, I revere it; but Robinson's greatest strength lies in this - she somehow captures the most arresting moments between broken individuals without losing the pitch or tone of voice, or even silence, we expect to hear from these characters who have become part of our world (or whose worlds have become our own) over the days we read this book. In other words, Robinson knows people - well. Temperamental but needy Lisa is as convincingly real as her street-wise, myth-savvy Ma-ma-oo. And when the novel draws to a close, we barely need reminding that death is often more confusing than any other emotion it might evoke. We find ourselves, tumbling, through kelp and murky waters alongside Lisa, trying less to make ends of the novel meet, than to put together the pieces we have let wash astray in our own lives.

Geoff says

This is a good example of what I've been looking for: First class contemporary Canadian literature first published sometime since the 80s. It's a refreshing break from all of the usual suspects, and a great literary debut. Very clean, beautiful prose and rich with style. My only complaint has more to do with Canadian fiction as a whole - it seems like northern life has become ground all too frequently tread, and the cliches can get a bit thick at times. Wilderness, reserve life, Vancouver itself. It'd be great to see someone break some new ground in Canadian fiction. But it's not Robinson's obligation to do so, and the book was thoroughly enjoyable.

Maciek says

Find a map of British Columbia...

Eden Robinson's debut *Monkey Beach* is set in the north coast of BC, just where the Alaskan Aleutian Islands and the province's own Charlotte Islands begin. There lies the city of Kitimat, surrounded by picturesque mountains and pine trees of the Pacific Northwest. "Kitimat" comes from the Thshimian language, and means "people/place of the snow" - an answer that they gave to European explorers when asked about the place and people who inhabited it - the Haisla.

Monkey Beach is narrated in the first person by Lisamarie Michelle Hill, a teenage girl growing up in Kitimaat village, a Haisla reservation south of the city. The wilderness five hundred miles north of Vancouver is demanding, but enchanted: Lisa isn't afraid to swim or hunt, and she feels a connection with the world of the spirits. However, everything changes the day when her younger brother goes missing at sea. The novel opens on the morning after his disappearance.

Monkey Beach is the first English-language novel written by a Haisla writer; and it couldn't be a better debut. Eden Robinson is terrific and beautifully captures the essence of living in a small, tightly-knit community

which despite its remoteness cannot ignore the events of the country - and world - which slowly, but surely, will influence also their way of life. Lisamarie Hill is a great protagonist - she's a feisty terror but is ultimately very likable and one that we'll care and root for, and her voice is believable, honest and authentic. The rest of the cast doesn't drag behind - especially Lisa's paternal grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, who teaches her about the ways of the Haisla and the spirit world, along with her uncle Mick - her paternal uncle, a seemingly jovial bachelor who just recently returned home after many years in the American Indian Movement. All this is enveloped by the sights, sounds and smells (and apparitions!) of Robinson's native BC. One can almost see the ocean and breathe the fresh air.

If I had to specify one complaint, it would be this - I wanted more! I grew attached to the story and its characters, and the places they inhabited, and wanted to stay there for a while longer. Like Louise Erdrich, Eden Robinson has a great ability to create interesting characters and tackle on a multitude of themes, and I wished to experience more of her skill. The novel does seem to run out of steam by the end, which seems to be contrived when compared to the easy, natural flow of the rest of the text; but it's a small flaw of a really quite lovely and underrated book. I'd definitely like to read more of Eden Robinson's work and would like to return to this novel in the future.

Carrie Kellenberger says

This was a beautiful book to read, and one that I will read again. Eden Robinson does a wonderful job of capturing the essence of Northern British Columbia's indigenous people, the Haisla. The story, which is narrated by 19-year-old Lisamarie Hill, opens with the news that Lisa's 18-year-old brother has gone missing. Her brother's disappearance triggers Lisa's memories of the deaths of her uncle and grandmother. As the present story develops, Lisa relives those moments in her childhood and reveals how she deals with death, grief, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexuality. She carries on living with her anger and uses her rage as a way of coping with life. During these revelations, we learn that Lisa has inherited spiritual powers from both sides of her family, and her visions and sightings of supernatural beings such as ghosts and sasquatches lend a thrilling psychological edge to the novel.

Shawn Mooney says

I was surprised and disappointed to find the prose and the sitcom-esque happy-family-with-too-cute-kids tone of this off-putting from the get-go. Abandoned at the 12% mark. I am pretty sure I tried this novel a decade or so ago with the same result, so I guess I shouldn't have been all that surprised.

Shelby *trains flying monkeys* says

Books like this are exactly why I love Netgalley. I never would have found this book except for through that website. You have to wade through a whole lot of not so good books and then you find one..like this one..that just makes your heart sing.

Monkey Beach-that magical place that b'gwus (Sasquatches) are.

"Jimmy," Dad said. "Sasquatches are make believe, like fairies. They don't really exist."

Or do they?

This book follows Lisa Marie Michelle Hill on her journey through her memories after her brother Jimmy is lost from a fishing boat. It's based on her stories of her family and growing up on a Haisla reservation.

Weaved through Lisa's pain and terror of losing her brother is stories of her childhood. This is some of the very best blending of mysticism and reality that I've read. Lisa's Ma-ma-oo and Uncle Mick became characters that came to life under this writer's hand. I thought I could smell the ocean and taste the fish as she described each detail.

Lisa is visited by a small red haired man that usually brings hard times in her life. She also has the gift of seeing ghosts..this is not a ghost story though..just the best kind of storytelling. Lisa is not the typical main character either. Her nickname is "Monster" because she is fearless. A group of boys are circling her taunting her and she frigging attacks and comes out the better..that's the type of character this is.

I'm giving it four stars only because the ending left me wanting more. I can't wait to see if I can find more of Eden Robinson's writing.

I received an arc copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Jaylia3 says

I could not resist the narrative voice of this earthy, augury filled, family rich story set in the First Nations Haisla community of western Canada. Nineteen year old Lisamarie is generally fearless and never takes guff from anyone--she'll launch herself at a gang of bullies without hesitation and her uncle affectionately calls her monster--but the nighttime visits she receives from a small, wild, red haired man terrify her because they always precede a death or tragedy. It's a visionary "gift" she discovers runs in her family, though no one talks much about anymore so she's mostly on her own with it.

When her younger brother Jimmy is lost at sea Lisamarie embarks on a solo speedboat trip up the Pacific coast driven by guilt, fear and grief, determined to find him or his body. Her vivid memories and visions along the way take the story all the way back to her early childhood and into the land of the dead.

The ending? It's somewhat hallucinatory, not something I could confidently articulate, but I was swept along anyway. With writing that's beautiful and raw, this book is a colorful, sometimes dizzying odyssey, filled with ghosts, poverty, kinship ties, Haisla culture, Sasquatch monkey men, and the grit and wonder of the natural world.

Many thanks to BrokenTune who brought this book to my attention. Her review is here:
<http://brokentune.booklikes.com/post/...>

Jennifer (aka EM) says

Intriguing but inconsistent. I couldn't get a grip on the main character (Lisamarie) or the stages/phases of her development; there was something off for me in terms of the timeline. Events - shocking, sudden deaths of important characters, for example - seem to happen "off-stage" with only their longer-term impacts discussed (again, intriguing, but the style left me disconnected from the narrative as a whole). A lot was mentioned in passing or so indirectly that it lost its impact (e.g., Mick and Trudy and the residential schools, (view spoiler)). These were defining moments, and what we actually saw in the narrative were their effects playing out, primarily on Lisamarie but on others as well. It is, in many ways, absolutely fantastic: it really isn't the event itself that defines us, it's our response to it, right? But the more I think about it, the more I like it as an *idea* in the novel; I'm still troubled by its execution.

Also, passages intending to be slightly experimental (all the stuff about the heart) were dropped in and never really came together as crucial pieces of the story - adding the poetry or metaphor that I think was Robinson's intention. They were stylistically so different from the rest of the text they were hard to really integrate with the overall reading experience.

There were so many great ideas in this book - and while the cumulative effect of all of them swirling like the fog on the ocean which Robinson describes so well, or the night lightening to a grey dawn (another frequent image) is in fact the defining style of the book, it just doesn't make it over the line from great idea(s) to great execution of great idea(s).

Still, there is LOTS here to love. *Monkey Beach* paints a vivid portrait of what it must be like growing up on a northern BC First Nations reserve. It's beautifully atmospheric, and there's a really strong sense of the landscape and its importance, as well as its degradation. There's a strong sense - yet another great idea - that the community/culture is holding on by a hair, much like the Sasquatch/b'gwus myth, which features prominently.

The East Vancouver section, although brief, was really telling in terms of the details it reveals about the community, the culture, the incredible difficulty of reconciling the northern Native links to the land and sea and the lure of the city for kids caught between two worlds.

And speaking of two worlds - the physical and the spiritual - Lisamarie's 'gift' and passages related to it were gorgeously rendered in that magical realist way that First Nations writers seem to be able to pull off with such dexterity. I loved **all** of the magical sections in this work. I think they may be Robinson's great

accomplishment here.

Lisamarie's relationship with Mick and Ma-ma-moo; her feelings and presentation of numbness, desperation and sadness; and her frequent dissociation were also all quite powerful. The numbness and dissociation and the many types of imagery attached to them especially, work on a physical, emotional, and spiritual level. They resonate with individual, collective, and cultural isolation and death.

Lisamarie was lost and traumatized, like the Haisla tribe, like the First Nations culture overall. It's almost what all contemporary First Nations literature is about. It's the essential commonality in so much of this work. And this book makes an important contribution to it.

This novel would have benefitted from some focus, maybe. I wanted Robinson to really dig in to one story line, one idea and follow it all the way through. The only constant was the search for Jimmy, but it wasn't perhaps the strongest one to provide the structure that was needed.

So, I'd say this is a 3.5. A worthwhile read, not least because female First Nations novelists are under-represented in the canon.

Roberta says

Reading for a neighbourhood bookclub. Probably wouldn't have picked it up on my own.

I'm so glad I read this book. It's one of the best I have read for a long time. Even though it was sad in places and death was always present, the book had a strong sense of life. It was vivid. I loved so many things about it:

The story was powerful and engaging from the first page. I wanted to know what happened next and hated putting it down. All the different elements that were introduced throughout the story were woven in by the end without the feeling that everything was tied up too neatly. It feels like a story that will go on.

The characters were fully realized, each with a distinct and believable voice. I especially liked the main character, Lisa. She grew from a young child to a young adult and her voice and observations changed as she grew. The relationships between the characters were always clear and close and the dialogue was sharp and lively.

The sense of place was strong. Her descriptions were lush and her appreciation for the world around her meticulously detailed. I found reading about this part of the world especially poignant now that it is under threat from the Northern Gateway Project and its potential to destroy irreplaceable and beautiful coast.

I loved the inclusion of the spirit world and the myths. They gave the book another dimension and rooted it firmly in a time and place.

Highly recommended to everyone who likes a powerful, well-written story about the coming of age of a feisty and real heroine.

Angela M says

3.5 rounded up to 4

Originally pub in 2002 and , nominated for multiple awards, this coming of age story is a powerful story of place, of family, of grief, of one's roots. The setting is the amazing geography of the Pacific Northwest on the coast of British Columbia. It is the land of the Haisla Indian in Kitamat Village ,

At the start of the novel, we meet 20 year old Lisa Marie Hill, who is struggling along with her family in trying to deal with the disappearance of her younger brother Jimmy. Lisa's story unfolds through a series of flashbacks to her child hood years and then her troubled teens. It is through these flashbacks that we learn more about the Haisla history and traditions, kept alive by Ma-ma-oo her grandmother, a wonderful wise woman. We see Lisa trying to come to terms with her gift , her ability seeing beyond into the spiritual world - ghosts and ominous predictions.

The story was a bit too dark for me at times and it had more of a young adult feel, but I found Lisa's journey to find her brother gripping, as she looks for Jimmy and in the end finds herself. Recommended to those interested in this area and its people .

Thanks to Open Road Media and NetGalley

Jennifer says

2.5-stars, if we could.

there was much about this novel that was appealing, particularly the aspects of native culture, and the settings. lisa's relationship with ma-ma-oo was my favourite piece of the book, and the knowledge lisa gained from her grandmother was so interesting to me. robinson deals with some very difficult themes within native culture. given the current unacceptable and heartbreaking situation in canada concerning the murdered and missing indigenous women, this is a very timely read.

unfortunately, there's a 'but' coming... but i just didn't feel like this book pulled everything it was trying to do together well enough. some of the characters were very thinly developed and some situations seemed without purpose. by the end of the book, i just felt disappointed, as though the book didn't quite reach its potential.

i do think this is an important book for the canadian canon, and there were definitely parts i thought were quite strong. i just didn't feel the overall quality of the writing was mind-blowing, and it was inconsistent. i am sorry! i really wanted to love the book.

(as an aside -- i am wondering how my reading impacted my feelings of the novel? i read this as part of a group read, and stuck to the reading schedule, which is hard for me to do. normally i would read a book of this length in a couple of days. in keeping to the group read, i read it over 3 weeks. i do feel my experience with the book may have been stronger if i had not drawn it out so long, with long pauses between reading session.)

BrokenTune says

"Weegit the raven has mellowed in his old age. He's still a confirmed bachelor, but he's not the womanizer he once was. Plying the stock market - instead of spending his time being a trickster - has paid off and he has a comfortable condo downtown. He plays up the angle about creating the world and humans, conveniently forgetting that he did it out of boredom. Yes, he admits, he did steal the sun and the moon, but he insists he did it to bring light to humankind even though he did it so it would be easier for him to find food. After some spin control on the crazy pranks of his youth, he's become respectable."

Now this was a realistic coming of age novel with a twist. What a ride!

The story is set in Kitamaat, north of Vancouver, and follows young Lisamarie growing up in the Haisla community. Lisamarie is different - she's pretty tough, taking no nonsense from anyone, but she also has a very sensitive side which allows her to fully experience the beliefs of her people - from the close ties with the natural surroundings to the manifestations of the supernatural.

It is difficult to describe this book. It's a mystery really. It is not a book about the supernatural as such, but Robinson does spin this web that links myth and reality and that makes it very easy to suspend disbelief and slide from one world of facts into the world of folklore.

Absolutely loved it!

CaseyTheCanadianLesbrarian says

This is one of my all-time favourite books that I've read probably four times. It was the first book I read that really brought the area of the world I grew up in to life and made me realize that it could be the setting for amazing literature. Robinson is a fiercely talented writer. I would read anything that she's written.
