

# Book backgrounder: **THE MARROW THIEVES** by **CHERIE DIMALINE**

## Note for teachers

**PLEASE NOTE: This document contains spoilers!**

If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on Curio.ca with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.

If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.

## Literacy strategy

If you are using this book backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words they find and research their meaning.



Watch Cherie Dimaline discuss her book:  
[www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads)

## Book Description

*The Marrow Thieves* is a survival story set in a Canada where “recruiters” harvest the bone marrow of Indigenous people. They do so to serve a non-Indigenous clientele that has lost the ability to dream, and hopes to restore their dreams by consuming Indigenous marrow. The speculative fiction begins with the protagonist Frenchie evading capture while watching his brother Mitch fall into the hands of Recruiters. Frenchie is left alone, until he finds a passing group led by Miigwaans (a.k.a. “Miig”), an Anishinaabe man who lost his husband to the Recruiters. Miig rescues Frenchie from the wilderness and invites him into the group, which becomes a family. Throughout the novel they continue to flee from their enemies, stopping only for the night to rest and reveal the events that brought them together. These moments are told through flashbacks. Each character in the group participates in sharing accounts from the life they led prior to joining Miig, while Miig himself reveals “Story” — the oral history of how the world collapsed into its dystopian state.

Along the way, they meet other Indigenous characters, some of whom betray them and others who help them reunite with some of the group members they lose. Frenchie comes across a familiar face among these strangers when he finds his father. Shortly thereafter, they head to the residential school where Minerva, an elderly member of Miig's entourage, was being held captive. After her ancestral singing overpowers her captors and destroys the school, Minerva is relocated. During the group's second rescue attempt, they fail to save Minerva and she dies from a bullet wound.

The novel ends with Frenchie finding Isaac, Miig's husband whom many presumed dead, among a group of survivors, inspiring Frenchie to never abandon hope: "And I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream" (p. 231).



## Primary Characters

**Frenchie.** The novel's Métis protagonist and first-person narrator. At 16, he has lost his brother, Mitch, and his mother to Recruiters. He presumes he has also lost his father until they meet again towards the conclusion of the novel. He cannot resist the allure of Rose, another group member, and they become inseparable at the end of the story. Another turning point for Francis comes at the moment he kills Travis to avenge RiRi's death at his hands.

**Rose.** Frenchie's love interest. She joins the group shortly after him when group members catch her trailing them. Rose comes from the White River reserve and grew up with her grandmother after her

parents were captured. Her grandmother's brother taught her to hunt. Together with Frenchie, she helps Miig find Isaac.

**Miigwaans (also known as Miig).** One of the two grown-ups in the group. He believes he lost his husband, Isaac, to the authorities at a residential school, but they meet once again at the very end of the novel. Miig introduces the younger members of the group to Story, an account of the events leading up to the post-apocalyptic world they know.

**Minerva.** The group's elder. Throughout most of the plot, she remains silent except when she teaches Rose words in her native language. In another instance, she uses her voice and song to cause a marrow-extracting machine to break. She dies caught in gunfire from the Recruiters.

**Chi-Boy.** A Cree 17-year-old member of the group.

**Tree and Zheegwon.** The 12-year-old twins of the group.

**Slopper.** A nine-year-old group member from the East Coast.

**Wab.** An eighteen-year-old member of the group. She is also a rape survivor.

**RiRi.** A seven-year-old Metis girl and the group's youngest member. She stands in for the readers, offering Frenchie pragmatic advice. Her strangulation by a pair of imposters in the group, Lincoln and Travis, leads Frenchie to kill one of her attackers.

**Isaac.** Miig's Cree husband. He is found by Frenchie and later reunited with Miig.

**Frenchie's father.** Frenchie believes he lost his father, but meets him towards the last third of the novel. He was living near Espanola among an Indigenous council. He lost his wife to the marrow extraction program.

**Recruiters.** A type of truancy police that captures Indigenous people and extracts their marrow to acquire their dreams. They hold prisoners in residential schools and their hierarchy resembles that of the Catholic church.

**Travis and Lincoln.** Bounty hunters that infiltrate the group secretly, but are ultimately abandoned once their motives become apparent (pg. 132). In a standoff, Travis strangles RiRi and is shot by Frenchie

## The Ending

At the end of the novel, Miig and Isaac reunite as Frenchie and Rose vow to keep each other company as they move through Ontario's wilderness as a group.



## Key Themes

### INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

In *The Marrow Thieves*, non-Indigenous peoples try to commodify the knowledge Indigenous folks possess, above all the ability they have to dream. Minerva's knowledge as an elder is particularly valuable and brings about the destruction of one of the Recruiters' "schools" where captives are housed and their marrow is harvested. These schools are in turn a symbol of Canada's history of trying to appropriate Indigenous knowledge, while assimilating (and often killing) Indigenous people.

### BODIES

In the hostile setting of *The Marrow Thieves*, bodies are the last resource characters have. They are mined by recruiters for the marrow that stores dreams, but they also serve as repositories of memories. Minerva personifies this function as the keeper of language and Indigenous song. Bodies also carry indelible marks of violence. Wab reveals to her fellow travelers that the scars on her face came from an encounter that resulted in her rape (pg. 85). Having to carry an external reminder of this episode turns a wrongdoing into a lifelong injury. Psychologically, it also debilitates Wab as she gives up running, having previously depended on this skill to earn her living as a messenger. Wab's body is a living reminder of the suffering she has endured. Memory by way of the body is both a gift and a curse.

### THEFT

The theft of Indigenous marrow is, of course, central to *The Marrow Thieves*, but the nomadic group also have to contend with the theft of the security and stability they once knew. Living in a constant state of uncertainty and fear alters the way characters embody their Indigenous identities. *The Marrow Thieves* depicts weary travellers who seem resigned to living as prey. The moment Frenchie decides to abandon the security his father offers in favour of travel with Rose illustrates the degree to which he has embraced a life of peril (pg. 218). They remain on the run because they have been robbed of land and forced into this existence.

## Contextual information

- Cherie Dimaline is a Georgian Bay Métis author.
- *The Marrow Thieves* is Dimaline's fourth book.
- The novel won both the 2017 Kirkus Prize for Young Readers' Literature and the 2017 Governor General's Literary Award for Young People's Literature – Text.



## Notable Quotes from Reviews

"Though the novel tackles some heavy subject matter, *The Marrow Thieves* feels lighter as a result of Dimaline's graceful, almost fragile, prose. Dimaline thrusts readers into the complex lives of rich and nuanced characters forced to navigate a world that too closely resembles our own. At first glance, the book appears to be dystopian fiction swarming with adventure and danger; however, readers with an interest in social justice and a grasp on colonial history will extract much deeper meaning. The book is, above all, a cautionary tale, revealing an exaggerated version of what could happen to Earth in the not-so-distant future. It is a timely and necessary read referencing pipelines, melting northern territories, rising water levels, and the consequences of government policies that don't protect the environment. Powerful and endlessly smart, it's a crucial work of fiction for people of all ages." – Jessica Rose, Quill & Quire

"*The Marrow Thieves* is speculative fiction with a chilling immediacy. Its unflinching narrative resonates in our disturbing times. Cherie Dimaline's exceptional writing and authentic characters pull you into a story that lingers and unsettles."

– Governor General's Literary Awards peer assessment committee

## CBC / Other Links

The message YA novelist Cherie Dimaline has for young Indigenous readers (CBC Books: How I Wrote It blog post): <http://cbc.ca/1.4195036>

What gets Cherie Dimaline through the tough parts of writing (CBC Books: Magic 8 questionnaire): <http://cbc.ca/1.4391668>

How Cherie Dimaline found hope in a dystopian future (The Next Chapter interview): [www.cbc.ca/1.4313264](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4313264)

Cherie Dimaline: Hopes and dreams in the apocalypse (Toronto Star): [www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2017/11/06/cherie-dimaline-hopes-and-dreams-in-the-apocalypse.html](http://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2017/11/06/cherie-dimaline-hopes-and-dreams-in-the-apocalypse.html)

Cherie Dimaline: 'My community is where my stories come from and it's also where my responsibilities lie' (The Globe and Mail): [www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/cherie-dimaline-my-community-is-where-my-stories-come-from-and-its-also-where-my-responsibilities-lie/article35509226/](http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/cherie-dimaline-my-community-is-where-my-stories-come-from-and-its-also-where-my-responsibilities-lie/article35509226/)



## Critical Thinking Questions

Students may need to do some research to help them create and organize an answer.



1. Look at the title of the novel. What could the story be about?
2. What can a novel about an undesirable future tell us or emphasize for us about the world we live in today?
3. The theme of dreamers is a major theme in this novel, and it is reflected in this quote: *“And I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream”* (p. 231). Who are the dreamers of today? What are their dreams?
4. *The Marrow Thieves* explores the idea that our physical bodies serve as a storage for our memories. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the human body?
5. Who is Cherie Dimaline? Why do you think she has written this story?
6. How is the future depicted in *The Marrow Thieves* informed by the actual history of Indigenous peoples in North America?

## Activities

1. Students can create a KWL (i.e. **Know**, **Want to Know**, **Will Look/Learn**) chart on the subject of Indigenous peoples in Canada.
2. Teachers can invite an Indigenous community member into the classroom. For example, a First Nations or an Inuit elder, or Métis senator. Teachers should ask the invited speaker about any protocols they would like to have observed during the visit. Many schools boards have an Indigenous education resource lead or consultant, and teachers can contact this individual to ask for advice and help in organizing such an endeavour.
3. Students should be introduced to the following terms: Indigenous, First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Residential Schools and Colonization.
4. Working in pairs, students can create an interview for one of the characters. One student can take on the role of the interviewer and create the questions, and the partner can answer the questions in the role of the character.
5. Students can create a T-Chart outlining positive and negative impressions of the content in the backgrounder, as well as any questions the backgrounder inspires them to ask.

