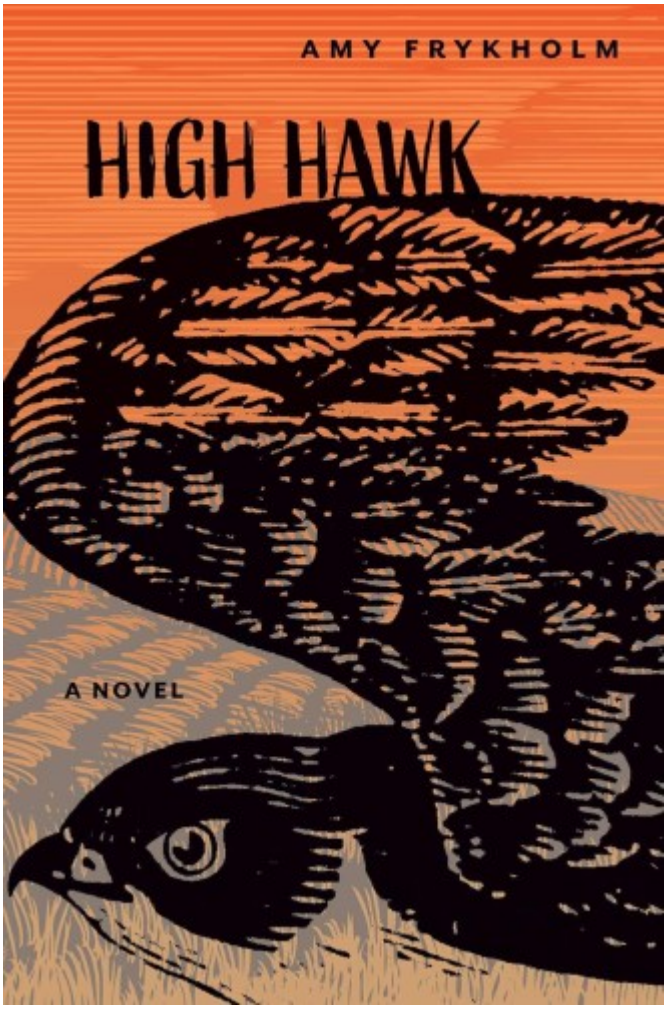
A fictional reservation that feels real

Amy Frykholm’s novel creates a fascinating interplay of Native people and settlers whose lives are complicated by intergenerational trauma.

by Martin Kelsey Brokenleg in the December 2024 issue
Published on November 12, 2024

In Review



High Hawk

A Novel

By Amy Frykholm
University of Iowa Press
Buy from Bookshop.org ›
RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Amy Frykholm's ***High Hawk*** is an unusual novel in portraying a setting unfamiliar to many people: a Native American reservation. It is also unusual in being a story set in the recent past. In the American mind, Native Americans existed long ago and in faraway places. (I have even seen books dealing with contemporary Native issues cataloged in the "Old West" sections of bookstores.) *High Hawk* is filled with both the tension and nuance of what could be my own Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota today, even though the story is set in the 1970s. This is a contemporary environment Frykholm understands and a reservation community she portrays with skill.

The setting, the fictional Windy Creek Reservation, is rife with contrasts: environmental beauty and personal suffering, high hopes dashed to despair, a strong Indigenous identity entwined in a struggle for basic rights, and a deep craving to belong frustrated by a sense of profound personal abandonment. The detail and character development easily resonate with me, as I grew up on a reservation and taught Native American studies in the city portrayed in the story. Having worked as a psychologist, I see the tension and ponderings of Frykholm's Lakota characters as deep and consistent with Native people I have known. The realism she creates fills out the Indigenous characters as real people.

The novel's central character, Father Joe, is a White Roman Catholic priest who serves on the reservation. This, too, is plausible: the 1874 Quaker Plan assigned the Episcopal Church as the official mission to the Lakota Nation, but later, Roman Catholic missionaries were added. I am impressed with how deeply Frykholm understands Father Joe's inner world. As he leads his congregation through crises and sharpens his own sense of calling, his thinking and emotions are consistent with those of Episcopal clergy colleagues and Catholic clergy friends I have known on reservations over the years. Frykholm easily crosses barriers of gender and ordination to explore the humanness of a Roman Catholic priest.

In short, as I read *High Hawk*, I found myself turning pages and saying to myself, "Yes, that character is like someone I know." The storyline mirrors situations I have encountered among both former clients and former students. On several occasions

Father Joe’s thinking reminded me of the predicament of one clergy friend or another. The genius of this novel is found in the authenticity of each character’s development. In their specificity I see the traits of many, to such a degree that the characters are virtually universal.

In my 40 years of teaching Native American studies, my favorite courses have been those that make use of fiction as the tool for teaching the student. Many Native American writers use their own experiences as the basis of their stories. Lesley Silko and Tomson Highway come immediately to mind. Some non-Native American authors have made career-long uses of fiction to teach about Native American ways. Dana Stabenow teaches about Athabascan and Aleut culture and connections to the Russian Orthodox Church. Tony Hillerman, whose fiction is the basis of the recent television series *Dark Winds*, plumbs the depths of the secretive world of the Navajo and Hopi and their occasional contact with the Roman Catholic missions on their reservations.

In writing about the Windy Creek Reservation, Frykholm focuses on the relatively small percentage of the Lakota who live on a reservation, and she writes ably about them. But 85 percent of Native Americans live in urban settings, drawn by economic need and educational opportunities. I wonder if in the future she will follow any of these characters into the more varied and urban locations they might find?

Currently in North America, the arc of justice is progressing toward reconciliation between Indigenous nations and the settler populations who came from Europe and elsewhere. The first step in this process is truth telling. In Canada, where I live, the destructive forces of the residential school era have been the focus of much truth telling. Boarding schools in the United States are also now being examined to understand the harms that those institutions forced on Native people. Non-Native people can refuse to turn away from the pain and harm these church-related institutions caused. Moreover, becoming active participants in righting wrongs is a noble action for settler peoples.

Truth telling and working for justice require real contact between Native and non-Native people. In the absence of such contact, reading can at least provide non-Native people with a snapshot of Indigenous life. *High Hawk* goes a long way toward providing a glimpse of what reservation life can be like. The storylines show readers the lives of Native American and White people who interact both on the reservation and off.

Frykholm creates a fascinating interplay of Native and settler people as their lives are complicated by intergenerational trauma. Readers familiar with a reservation and its inhabitants will be entertained by the people they meet. Readers with limited or no exposure to reservation life will be shown the nuances and the familiarity of that life. Every reader with a sense of fairness will want this book to be a part of their movement along the arc of justice and positive values.