

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2017  
**DISCUSSION GUIDE**



# **MONKEY BEACH**

BY **EDEN ROBINSON**

RECOMMENDED BY **KATHERENA VERMETTE**

EDEN ROBINSON

# MONKEY BEACH

Finalist for the GILLER PRIZE  
Nominee for the GOVERNOR GENERAL'S AWARD

Call on Canada to uphold the  
*UN Declaration of the Rights of  
Indigenous Peoples*

—See page 12

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our September/October title *Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson. This title has been recommended by guest Katherena Vermette, with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about the human rights of Indigenous peoples, an area of work that Amnesty has long campaigned for.

In this guide, you will find Vermette's reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take urge the government of Canada to keep its promise to fully uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

*Monkey Beach* combines both joy and tragedy in a harrowing yet restrained story of grief and survival, and of a family on the edge of heartbreak. In the first English-language novel to be published by a Haisla writer, Eden Robinson offers a rich celebration of life in the First Nations community of Kitamaat, on the coast of British Columbia.

The story of *Monkey Beach* is relayed through the eyes of Lisamarie Hill, a strong young woman with supernatural abilities. Lisamarie's brother, Jimmy, has gone missing at sea under questionable circumstances. We watch Lisa leave her teenage years behind as she waits for news of her younger brother. She reflects on the many rich episodes of their lives – so many of which take place around the water, reminding us of the news she fears, and revealing the menacing power of nature. But Lisa has a special recourse – a “gift” that enables her to see and hear spirits, and ask for their help. Perhaps in reflecting on these formidable events, a new light will be shed on the ominous circumstances in her life, and within the community of Kitamaat.

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.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

Happy reading!

## About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.



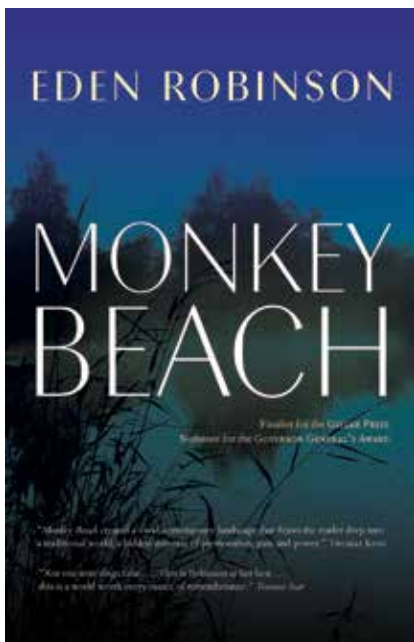
About this month's  
featured author,

**Eden**

**Robinson**

Eden Robinson is a thirty-one-year-old Haisla woman who grew up near Kitamaat, BC. Her previous collection of stories, *Traplines*, was awarded the Winifred Holtby Prize for the best first work of fiction in the Commonwealth, and was a New York Times Editor's Choice and Notable Book of the Year.

Robinson has become one of Canada's first female Native writers to gain international attention, making her an important role model. She has used her celebrity to draw attention in Time magazine to the Canadian government's chipping away at Native health care, and to the lack of subsidized housing for urban Natives. She enjoys travelling, and supported herself with travel writing in Europe before the publication of *Monkey Beach*. She lives in North Vancouver.



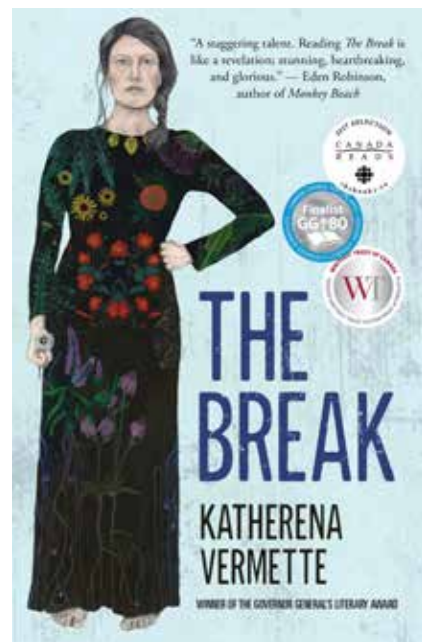
About this month's  
guest reader,

**Katherena**

**Vermette**

Katherena Vermette is a Métis writer from Treaty One territory, the heart of the Métis nation, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Her first book, *North End Love Songs* (The Muses Company) won the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. Her National Film Board short documentary, *this river*, won the Coup de Coeur at the Montreal First Peoples Festival and the 2017 Canadian Screen Award for Best Short.

*The Break*, her first novel, was bestseller in Canada and won the Amazon.ca First Novel Award, the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award, the Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction, and the Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award. *The Break* was also shortlisted for a Governor General's Literary Award, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and was a 2017 Canada Reads finalist.





## Katherena Vermette's reflection on *Monkey Beach*

*Eden Robinson's first novel came out in 2000 to critical acclaim and was longlisted for the Giller (a very big deal!). But I didn't read it until about 2003 when I returned to university after having my daughters (and living under a baby rock for a few years). I will forever be in debt to that prof because Monkey Beach was the exact book I needed at the time.*

*Before Monkey Beach, I had very limited knowledge about CanLit, never mind Indigenous Lit in Canada. Before Monkey Beach, I had vague ideas about wanting to publish stories and poems but no idea where to go or how to start. Unbeknownst to her, Eden Robinson was one of my first, great teachers in this field. Her novel taught the balance of great storytelling - how to describe a place, a home, with such beauty, never turning away from the undesirable things but*

*knowing how to talk about them in the greater context of community and love. She gave us a great heroine in Lisamarie Hill, a strong young woman who we watch grow and thrive. When I was a young woman, she inspired me, and when I read her now, she makes me proud like an old aunty.*

*Monkey Beach is also full of magic! It's the organic sort of magic, or medicine, if you will, that seamlessly blends and binds traditional stories, but here, also stays contemporary all the way. As a reader, you believe it, and are fully invested. I, for one, loved all the sacred creatures in this book, if nothing else, then to know that they are around, watching out for us, helping us.*

—Katherena Vermette

**Our next  
guest reader  
is going to  
be you!**

**SEE PAGE 13**

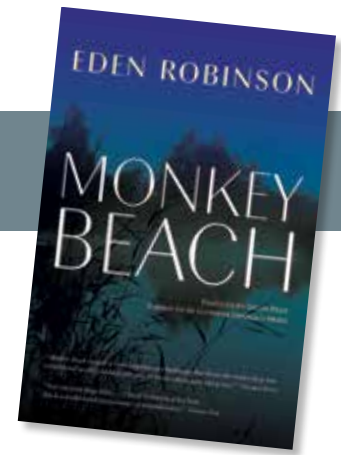
**READERS'  
CHOICE  
2017  
VOTE!**



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS ON *MONKEY BEACH*

### Discussion questions from guest reader Katherena Vermette

1. The book is set in Kitamaat Village, a First Nations community on the West Coast of British Columbia. What, if anything, did this story teach you about life on reserves in Canada?
2. The book clearly situates the reader in the first few pages. It even includes visuals of maps and coastlines. Why is that important? Why is this place so integral to this story?
3. As a younger person, I really connected with Lisamarie. Reading the novel again with teenagers of my own, I saw things in her mother's character that I missed when I was younger. I also think I appreciated Ma-ma-oo's ass-kicking love all the better too. Which character felt most real to you? And why?
4. The novel is heavily set in flashback/back story with less emphasis on the present arc than many contemporary stories, why do you think the author did that? Does it always work in the story?
5. As a poet, I really liked the narrative interludes, like when the heart is described, or how to make oolichan. How do you feel these added to the story, if at all?
6. Sasquatch, Sabe, B'gwus, most cultures across the globe have stories of these types of creatures. Did this story make you think of any others?
7. What do you make of that little person who kept visiting Lisamarie? What role did he serve in the narrative? Did he help or hinder?
8. Ok, the ending, we have to talk about that. As a reader, did you feel fulfilled? Was it complete or too open-ended?



### Discussion questions from the Amnesty International Book Club

1. Did you enjoy reading *Monkey Beach*? What were your thoughts on the book?
2. How did the people around Lisa influence her? Does the influence show in her character?
3. In the novel's opening scene, Lisa's gifts are pathologized—treated as if they are a medical condition—by her mother. What other ways of understanding Lisa's supernatural encounters are presented in the novel?
4. What is the role of crows in the book?
5. How and why does Mick's death affect Lisa?
6. How does Robinson contrast depictions of modern Haisla life with older ways of living? In what ways does this relate to her community's and more generally, Indigenous peoples' connection to the land?
7. How has Lisa's community adjusted to changes in the surrounding environment? In what ways does Robinson portray cultural knowledge being passed down from generation, aside from the oolichan rituals?
8. What is your interpretation of the ending? How does Robinson reveal the mystery of Jimmy's disappearance? Why might Robinson have left Lisa's fate unclear?

## BACKGROUND



© Darryl Dyck/The Canadian Press

First Nations activists hold hands and dance in a circle during a demonstration at the Douglas-Peace Arch crossing on the Canada-U.S. border near Surrey, B.C., on Saturday January 5, 2013.

# Indigenous Peoples in Canada

For decades, high level government inquiries, federal audits and international human rights bodies have repeatedly and consistently pointed to an unacceptable gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the enjoyment of basic human rights. Despite living in one of the world's wealthiest countries, First Nations, Inuit and Métis families and communities in Canada continue to face widespread impoverishment, inadequate housing, food insecurity, ill-health and unsafe drinking water.

Indigenous peoples have demonstrated extraordinary resilience in the face of historic programs and policies such as the residential school program that were meant to destroy their cultures, but they must still live with the largely unresolved legacy of the harm that was done.

# Amnesty International's work with Indigenous peoples in Canada

Amnesty International has long been concerned about violations of the human rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples in Canada. We recognize that the most effective movements for the protection of human rights are led by the rights holders themselves. We work in support of Indigenous human rights defenders through research and documentation, promotion of international human rights standards, and by encouraging our members and the general public to speak their conscience on these crucial issues.

Over the last decade, we have worked alongside Indigenous peoples' organizations and activists to document the unacceptable impoverishment and marginalization of Indigenous communities, which among other tragic outcomes, has exposed Indigenous women to horrendous levels of violence in their homes and on the streets of Canadian cities. We have stood with Indigenous peoples in demanding fair and equitable access to basic services like clean drinking water that

most Canadians take for granted. We have spoken out against the discriminatory double-standard in which land rights of Indigenous peoples recognized in the Canadian Constitution and in historic and contemporary Treaties are casually swept aside by governments and corporations. And we have campaigned for Canada to set a much-needed, positive example for the world by implementing international standards for the protection of Indigenous peoples' rights, including the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Around the world, Indigenous peoples are consistently among the most marginalized and most frequently victimized members of global society. Our experience working alongside Indigenous communities and activists around the world underlines the importance of international human rights standards – and the need for all governments to support and fully implement these standards.

Supporters in Vancouver promote the Site C / Peace River Valley action during Write for Rights 2016



# INDIGENOUS RIGHTS ISSUES TODAY

## Discrimination Against First Nations Children In Canada

The federal government's underfunding of services for First Nations children living on reserves has created a crisis situation for these children and their families.

Today, more First Nations children are being taken away from their families than at the height of the residential school era. This is happening because their families may not have the resources to meet all their needs, and because child welfare services in First Nations communities also don't have the resources that are urgently needed to support these families.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that the federal government's budget for children's services in First Nations communities is at least 22 less per child than what the provincial governments dedicate for child welfare services in other communities. This is despite often greater needs and the higher costs of delivering services in small and remote First Nations communities. As a result, the removal of children from their families – something that is only supposed to happen as a last resort – has become commonplace for underfunded child welfare services that lack the resources to intervene in other ways.

In 2007, the Assembly of First Nations and the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society filed a complaint that the underfunding of child welfare services is a violation of Canadian Human Rights Act. After a lengthy process in



The Elder Jimmy James Polson and his grandson Odin Maranda walk nearby Long Point First Nation.

which federal officials repeatedly sought to have the case thrown out on technical grounds, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruled in January 2016 that the systemic underfunding of First Nations child and family services was discriminatory and must end. More than a year later, the federal government has still not complied with the Tribunal's orders for ending discrimination.



# Violence Against Indigenous Women and Girls



Grassroots community activists organize a Sisters in Spirit candlelight vigil in Fort St. John every year to honour the lives of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

Indigenous women and girls face pervasive violence including a homicide rate at least 6 times higher than all other women in Canada. The scale and pervasiveness of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada is nothing less than a national human rights crisis. The federal government has launched a national Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. That Inquiry came about as the results decades of efforts by Indigenous women who have had to struggle even for acknowledgement of the violence they face. As the Inquiry moves forward, First Nations, Inuit and Métis women's organizations continue to call for immediate actions to reduce the risk of violence and ensure that Indigenous women and girls have the support they need to escape violence. This includes addressing the inaccessibility of emergency shelters and other supports for most women living in Indigenous communities in Canada.

## The Land Rights of Indigenous Peoples

First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples control only tiny portions of their traditional territories. All too often they are denied a meaningful role in government decisions that can have a profound impact on their ability to provide for their families and practice their cultures and traditions. Historic court decisions like the Tsilhqot'in title case have made it clear that the rights of Indigenous peoples to their lands and territories did not simply disappear with the creation of Canada. But every day Indigenous peoples are forced to struggle to assert and defend these rights.

Amnesty International is standing with Indigenous peoples in some of the defining, unresolved land struggles of the day including: the ongoing fight to halt the Site C dam.

The \$8.8 billion plus Site C hydroelectric dam would flood more than 80 km of the Peace River Valley, stretching west from Fort St. John. The severe impact on the Valley, on Indigenous cultural sites and on Indigenous peoples' ongoing use of this vital landscape is beyond dispute. Federal and provincial officials have acknowledged that construction of the dam was approved without consideration of whether it would violate an historic Treaty with the Indigenous peoples' of the Peace River Valley.



Site C dam threatens Indigenous rights in Canada. The province of British Columbia pushed ahead with construction of a massive hydro-electric despite opposition from Indigenous peoples who rely in the waters and shores of the threatened Peace River Valley to hunt, fish and conduct ceremonies.

# Hidden Impacts of Resource Development on Indigenous Women

Decades of studies have linked large-scale resource development to social strains in the communities that host the workers brought in for projects like mines, large dams and oil and gas development. These unintended side-effects including inflated costs of living, strains on social services, and rising drug and alcohol abuse. All these factors increase the risk of violence against women and girls. Failure to consider these impacts in the decision-making process means that safeguards and mitigation plans aren't put in place when projects are approved.

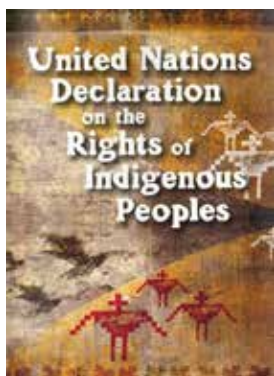


Drum given to Amnesty International in honour of the organization's work in support of Indigenous women in Canada

This is especially concerning given the existing crisis of violence facing Indigenous women and girls.

Amnesty International is calling for Indigenous women's voices to be heard and respected in the decision-making process around resource development. This includes incorporating requirements that impact assessments look at how a proposed project might affect women

differently than men, a formal requirement in Canadian international development programs that has not been applied at home.



## The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

On September 13, 2007, the United Nations adopted an international Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples – the first international human

rights instrument drafted with the direct participation of the very people whose rights are at stake. Indigenous activists and leaders from Canada played key roles in advancing this ground-breaking tool for the protection of human rights. Amnesty International has been honoured to work alongside Indigenous peoples and other partners in ongoing work to raise awareness of the Declaration and promote its full implementation in Canada.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples sets out minimum standards for the “survival, dignity and well-being” of Indigenous peoples around the world. The Declaration builds on existing human rights standards, many of which represent established, legally-binding obligations of states, and

applies these standards to the specific needs and circumstances of Indigenous peoples. Today, momentum for implementation of these standards is building as the Declaration is increasingly used by Indigenous peoples, courts, international agencies and advocacy groups.

Amnesty International members work in collaboration with Indigenous peoples across Canada and around the world to campaign for political and legal reform to end discrimination and uphold the rights guaranteed in national laws, historical and contemporary Treaties and international standards such as the Declaration. It is vitally important that these minimum standards -- so urgently needed by some of the world's most impoverished and marginalized peoples -- be fully implemented, without discrimination and without further delay.

Take action on page 12 to urge the government of Canada to keep its promise to fully uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

# 10 Facts on the 10th Anniversary of the Adoption of the Declaration

1. The United Nations adopted the Declaration in 2007, after more than two decades of negotiations and deliberations in which Indigenous peoples from around the world participated as experts on their own rights.
2. The Declaration was adopted by a vote of the overwhelming majority of the UN General Assembly.
3. The only four states that voted against the Declaration have all reversed their positions and endorsed the Declaration.
4. The Declaration affirms both collective rights of Indigenous Nations or Peoples and the individual rights of Indigenous persons.
5. Like other international human rights declarations, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides an authoritative source of guidance for all institutions of society, including legislators and government departments, courts, human rights bodies, and public institutions such as universities.
6. All governments have a responsibility to respect, protect and fulfill these rights.
7. The Declaration builds on decades of expert interpretation of existing international human rights laws and standards. It does not create new rights.
8. Canadian courts and Tribunals have already applied the Declaration in the interpretation of Canadian law.
9. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada called the Declaration “the framework” for reconciliation.
10. Canada’s House of Commons endorsed the Declaration without condition or qualification in a resolution dated 8 April 2008. The federal government formally endorsed the Declaration in November 2010. The Trudeau government has made numerous public commitments to fully implement the Declaration.



## Achievements of Indigenous Peoples Movement Honoured By Ambassador of Conscience Award

Every year, the Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award celebrates individuals and groups who speak out for justice. The recipients are people who have used their talents to inspire others to fight for human rights. The award also aims to create debate, encourage public action and raise awareness of diverse human rights issues.

This year the Ambassador of Conscience Award is shared between leaders and activists from the Indigenous rights movement who have shown remarkable courage in leading important equality rights battles, defending land rights, speaking out for the safety of Indigenous women and girls, and inspiring non-Indigenous and Indigenous people to action, and celebrated global music artist and activist Alicia Keys. Accepting the award recognizing the Indigenous rights movement of Canada are six individuals representing the strength and diversity of the movement, which has bravely fought to end discrimination and ensure the safety and well-being of Indigenous families and communities. They are Cindy Blackstock, Delilah Saunders, Melanie Morrison, Senator Murray Sinclair, Melissa Mollen Dupuis and Widia Larivière.

**“Receiving such a prestigious international award is an acknowledgement of the work done by thousands of people who have, in their own way, stood up every day for the rights of Indigenous Peoples in a spontaneous and peaceful citizens’ movement.”**

**-Melissa Mollen Dupuis and Widia Larivière**

**“To be given this great honour, and to be in the presence of the Indigenous rights movement is a humbling experience.”**

**-Alicia Keys**



## TAKE ACTION NOW



Rosalyn Mathias goes to a site near the dam. In Algonquin culture, women were responsible for water.

### **Call on Canada to uphold the *UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples***

***Sign the petition at:  
<http://bit.ly/2voYeQp>***

The federal government has repeatedly promised that it will fully uphold and implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. It's crucial that the government now work with Indigenous peoples to develop a comprehensive plan of action to turn these promises into action.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples provides a way forward in finally addressing the marginalization and oppression that has caused so much harm to Indigenous peoples. Fully implementing the UN Declaration requires governments to work respectfully with Indigenous peoples and eliminate discrimination in Canada's laws and policies.

#### **Canada: Keep The Promise.**

Urge the government of Canada to keep its promise to fully uphold the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples or sign the petition online at:  
**<http://bit.ly/2voYeQp>**



## MORE ABOUT THIS ISSUE

**LEARN** more about Amnesty's work on Indigenous rights at: <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/indigenous-peoples/indigenous-peoples-in-canada> or Contact our Campaigner for the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples Craig Benjamin at [cbenjamin@amnesty.ca](mailto:cbenjamin@amnesty.ca)

**READ** The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: [http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS\\_en.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/documents/DRIPS_en.pdf)

**READ** more about the Ambassadors of Conscience award: <https://www.amnesty.ca/ambassadorofconscience>

## Share the Amnesty International Book Club online

- Check us out on Facebook at **Amnesty International Book Club**, Twitter at **@AmnestyReads**, Instagram at **@AmnestyBookClub** and join our discussion group on **Goodreads.com**



READY, SET, VOTE!

## COMING UP IN NOVEMBER 2017 Readers' Choice 2017

Our November/December book will be chosen by you! The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce that your nominations have been collected, and a shortlist is now ready for voting. Head to <http://bit.ly/2wTgkvu> to vote for your selection! Voting will close September 30th, 2017.

The short-listed nominees include:

The Break by Katherena Vermette, Medicine Walk by Richard Wagamese, In the Skin of a Lion by Michael Ondaatje, The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood, The Parcel by Anosh Irani, The Beauty of Humanity Movement by Camilla Gibb, The Best Laid Plans by Terry Fallis, Lullabies for Little Criminals by Heather O'Neill, Where The Air Is Sweet by Tasneem Jamal, Fifteen Dogs by André Alexis

**The discussion guide will be sent out November 2017.**

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

