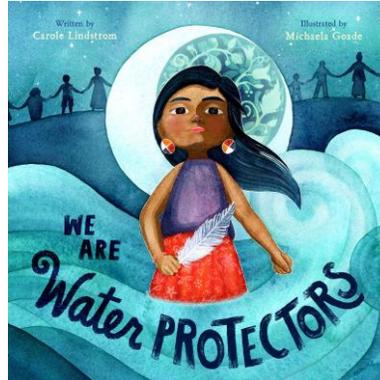


## First Opinion: Water Is Life

Lindstrom, Carole. *We Are Water Protectors*. Illustrated by Michaela Goade. New York: Roaring Book Press, 2020. Print.



*Alisse Ali-Joseph and Darold Joseph*

*We Are Water Protectors* is a strength-based reflection of the courage and vulnerability within Indigenous peoples and communities. Told from the perspective of an Indigenous young woman, this book is grounded in the importance of land, language, culture and history. The significance of this young woman is two-fold. First, we see very few children's books written through the eyes of Indigenous peoples in general, but also less from a female perspective. More importantly, the literary world and more specifically children's literature continues to be limited with presenting strength-based Indigenous female counternarratives. This young woman is not only representing herself, but carries the stories from her grandmother, the land and the water within her. She finds solace in the arms of her grandmother and the flow of the water and the memories they share. Thus, it is her courage (and the historical courage of her peoples) that leads her to fight both the physical and metaphorical enemy, the black snake. For centuries, the eager consumption of natural resources through colonial structures have systematically appealed to the appetite for consumerism, in which the author portrays as the black snake (oil pipelines) finding its way through Indigenous land threatening the existence of life through contamination and the exploitation of natural resources.

The author portrays the raw vulnerability of Indigenous people to Western colonial structures and takes the reader to a place that is not often talked about or revered significant in western society: the spiritual connection with land. Thus, creating opportunities to extend the conversation about correlations between the historical narratives of colonization, assimilation, and removal of Indigenous communities from their traditional homelands with contemporary narratives of resistance. For example, the representation of the protagonist in her fight to protect water not only emboldens the spiritual connection with land, but also, eloquently suggests this work is connected to the rhetoric of empowerment and resilience by acknowledging the fact that “we are still here” (Lindstrom unpagged).

We see how she summons the courage from her people to protect what has always provided for and protected her people: the land and water. The author paints a vivid picture portraying the violence on land is violence on our bodies. Systemic inequities through policy and action at a time where the status of environmental health is of high concern not only for Indigenous people, but for all of humanity. This young, strong Indigenous girl tells of how the environment, land and water have always been sacred and equal within her community, sparking a movement both within and among Indigenous communities across the country and world.

The importance of writing a children’s book on this topic is invaluable, as it engages children to see history through a lens contextualizing systemic inequities through the eyes of a water protector. Reading *We are Water Protectors* to our children (3 and 6), we witnessed our girls making beautiful connections to life through the text and illustrations. Particularly, our six-year-old daughter engaged in critical sense making of the water protector (protagonist) and the black snake (antagonist), and the relationship of this dynamic to her own elders, Indigenous stories and community. This young lady portrays a leader to our Indigenous daughters and for non-Indigenous youth alike. In a desperate time, *We Are Water Protectors*, sheds light on the need for unification of humanity; bringing together the concepts of human rights, environmental rights, sacred history, ceremony, language, and land. It validates the perspective of all youth no matter their origin, toward just and equitable circumstances, in this case the emphasis on protecting a vital life-giving resource...water.

The afterword provided by the author and illustrator provide examples of the contemporary lived realities of Indigenous people embodying the spirit of earth stewards, furthering the rally for unification among not only Indigenous, but all humanity to take

responsibility to journey on the “natural path.” Together the beautifully narrated story and elaborate illustrations provide children, families, and educators rich relatable contexts for developing critical awareness of one’s own relationship to water. We are all water protectors.

### **Works Cited**

Lindstrom, Carole. *We Are Water Protectors*. Illustrated by Michaela Goade. New York: Roaring Book Press, 2020. Print.

### **About the Authors**

**Alisse Ali-Joseph** is a member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. She is an Assistant Professor in the Applied Indigenous Studies Department and Faculty Athletics Representative at Northern Arizona University. She specializes in the importance of sports and physical movement as a vehicle for empowerment, cultural identity, health and educational attainment for Indigenous peoples. Her scholarship addresses how Indigenous-centered history encapsulates Indigenous knowledge, well-being, health and resilience. She also serves on the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Minority for Opportunity and Interest Committee, which ensures the importance of minority student-athlete voice, access and opportunity. Dr. Ali-Joseph has worked with and for Indigenous communities and students for the last 15 years and has dedicated her personal and professional life to enhancing the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

**Darold H. Joseph**, is Hopi and Paa’Iswunga (Water-Coyote Clan) from the Village of Moenkopi. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Specialties in the College of Education at Northern Arizona University. His research is focused on the intersection of disability with sociocultural differences that inform educational inequities for American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) youth. His work aims to advance opportunities for individuals with disabilities to persist in education, health and wellness, and cultural well-being through the lens of resilience. Dr. Joseph’s experience as a father and educator in indigenous communities has contributed to his experience with partnering and collaborating with tribal communities for over 20 years.