



READER'S GUIDE

READ THE SAME BOOK
SHARE THE SAME STORY



North End Love Songs

by Katherena Vermette

2014/15 SELECTION

About On The Same Page

Manitobans have selected *North End Love Songs* by Katherena Vermette as this year's featured book for the 7th annual On The Same Page, a province-wide reading initiative.

On The Same Page, a project of The Winnipeg Foundation and Winnipeg Public Library, encourages all Manitobans to read, and talk about, the same book at the same time. The program includes book giveaways, author appearances and special events inspired by the themes of the book.

"Once again, the public has selected an exceptional book for this year's program", says Rick Walker, Manager of Library Services. "Winnipeg's North End is rich with history and cultural diversity, and Katherena Vermette's *North End Love Songs* will allow the library to celebrate these themes in the programs and events being planned."

"On The Same Page is a great example of community building. Through stories we gain perspective, understanding and compassion. We are very pleased to partner with Winnipeg Public Library on this initiative that creates common ground," says Rick Frost, CEO of The Winnipeg Foundation.

On The Same Page was launched in 2008. In previous years, the program has featured:

2009



In Search of April Raintree
by Beatrice Mosionier

2010



Reading by Lightning
by Joan Thomas

2011



Juliana and the Medicine Fish
by Jake MacDonald

2012



*The Setting Lake Sun/
Le soleil du lac qui
se couche*
by J.R. Léveillé

2013



*Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings
from the Land of Water* edited by
Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair &
Warren Cariou

2014



*The Lucky Ones: African
Refugees' Stories of
Extraordinary Courage*
by Anne Mahon

For Katherena Vermette, Winnipeg's North End is a neighbourhood of colourful birds, stately elms, and always wily rivers. It is where a brother's disappearance is trivialized by local media and police because he is young and aboriginal. It is also where young girls share secrets, movies, cigarettes, Big Gulps and stories of love -- where a young mother full of both maternal trepidation and joy watches her small daughters as they play in the park.

"In spare, minimalist language, *North End Love Songs* attends to the demands of Indigenous and European poetics, braiding an elegant journey that takes us from Winnipeg's North End out into the world. We enter the undocumented lives of its citizens and celebrate them through Katherena Vermette's beautiful poems."

- Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry, Judge's Note 2013



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About The Author



Katherena Vermette is a Métis writer of poetry, fiction and children's literature. Her first book, *North End Love Songs* (The Muses' Company) won the 2013 Governor General Literary Award for Poetry. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in several literary magazines and anthologies, including *Manitowapon: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water*. She holds a Master of Fine Arts from the University of British Columbia.

A proud member of the Indigenous Writers Collective since 2004, Vermette helped organize the Manitoba Indigenous Writers Festivals in 2012 and 2014. She is a sought-after instructor and workshop leader, and has experience teaching creative development, indigenous culture and literature, and writing to groups big and small, and of all ages. She used to be a kindergarten teacher. When not being a writer or educator, she coordinates arts programs in Winnipeg. She is also working on a new collection of poetry, a novel, and perfecting her moon salutations.

Vermette has two teenaged daughters, two cats, a small dog, a fiancé and they all live together in a cranky old house within skipping distance of the temperamental Red River.

Content Warning

This is a Trigger Warning: *North End Love Songs* discusses some very hard things – sexual exploitation, depression, shame, missing relatives, loss and grief.

The book also talks about strength, resilience, survival beyond victimization and some of the beautiful things I've found in our amazing community, so even though it goes to some tough places, it doesn't stay there too long.

As a writer, I want people to have an emotional connection to my work, but the very last thing I want is for readers to have such an emotional reaction that they feel unsafe or re-live trauma. If you do feel triggered in some way, I encourage you to seek help, keep talking and always remember you are never ever alone.

All the best to all of you, k

Bird Poems:

saskatoon
all the pretty birds
egg
blackbird
blue jay
go
redbird
yellowbird
brown bird
cedar wax wing

Park Poems:

pritchard park
parkgrl
swinging lessons
peanut park

Tree Poems:

treegrl
bannerman avenue
seed
window
summer
winter
family
green disease
under a shroud of trees

River Poems:

mixed tape
almost instantly
in winter when
found
the end
Indians



blue jay

poised for flight
one small foot
on the curb
like a sprinter
this girl
with such rough skin
the colour of concrete
in the rain
this girl
is ready
to fly

her eyes pierce
the wind pulls
her hair back
like a mother's hand
making a ponytail
she looks
for a break

falls into
a clumsy run
dodges cars with more
luck than precision
lands triumphant
on the other side

pushes the open
sides of her windbreaker
together
and falls behind
a thin line of orange
patrols just leaving
their posts

not far off
a school bell rings

family

elms around us
like aunts
uncles
cousins
all different
but with the same skin

the tall one with
thinning foliage
sticking straight up
branches scratching
at the sky

the wide one
split in two
half way up
looks like scissors
or two legs
bent and kicking

the gnarled one with
warts all over its face



nortendluvsong

the one with
the swirled branch
curved out over
cathedral avenue
looped like hair
around a finger

but her favorites
are the ones by the river
they spread low
and stay close
to the earth

those ones she can
climb into
lean against
the strong dark bark
rest her small body
within their round arms

their sharp leaves
reach out over the river

she watches how
the waves fold
into each other
like family

her house has
a large veranda
off the back
an addition
like an afterthought
the roof flat
like a balcony
just under
her bedroom window

sometimes she
unhooks the screen
sits out on
the grey shingles
listens to the cars pass on
salter street
loud tvs in nearby houses
dogs bark
sirens wail
get close
fade away

in the room
next to hers
her brother plays
heavy metal
the sound muffled
far away
inside his loud music
gets into everything
but out here
it is almost soundless
soft
as a love song

Author Interview

The Toronto Quarterly: What inspired you to start writing poetry and who were some of your early influences or mentors?

Katherena Vermette: I started writing poetry when I was about 10 years old. I have no idea what prompted me to want to write, only that I wanted to fill my Hilroy notebooks with pretty, little words. And I just kept doing it. I have always been fascinated with poetry. It is at once easy and very, very difficult. It keeps things interesting.

TTQ: What's the most exciting thing happening in poetry today?

Katherena Vermette: Call me biased, but I am so excited by what's happening in Indigenous poetry in Canada today. So many writers are coming up with such brilliant work. Louise Halfe, Joanne Arnott, David Groulx, Neal McLeod. Amazing, amazing new work is in the offering. There are so many stories to share.

TTQ: In your opinion, what constitutes a great poem?

Katherena Vermette: I like to use the word 'sticky.' I like it when a poem sticks with me and echoes in my head after I've put the book down. To do this a poem has to make me think, or give me an image that I can't resist looking at.

TTQ: How would you best describe your latest collection of poetry, *North End Love Songs*, and is there a particular message you hope your readers will take away with them?

Katherena Vermette: Well, gosh, I hope they're sticky. I really wanted to show beautiful things in a place not always considered beautiful. I wanted to show the beauty of broken things. The activist in me wants people to consider the marginalized people in this country and to be moved to change what we are doing and not doing to people living in poverty, people who go missing, and people who live in a constant state of risk.

TTQ: The 'November' section of *North End Love Songs* deals with the disappearance of your brother and how the local police and media trivialized it because he was young and aboriginal. What were the circumstances behind your brother's disappearance and how frustrating was it for you and your family when it seemed police were doing very little to find him because of his ethnicity, and do you feel that these same stereotypes are still as prominent today concerning aboriginals?

Katherena Vermette: My brother went missing on November 13, 1991. He was newly 18 and hanging out at a bar across the river. He had several things working against him – he was indigenous, he was indigenous and he was admittedly drinking, and he lived in the bad neighbourhood. The police took the report but told us he was probably just on a bender or staying with friends. At one point, they told us to stop trying to make such a fuss because he was probably embarrassed now and that's why he wasn't coming home. His body was found in May 1992 about 100 kilometres north of the city. The theory is that he tried to cross the not-so river, fell in and was washed into the lake.

Frustration is not the word. It was an incredibly painful and unbelievably damaging experience to live through. Anyone who has lost a family member knows how excruciatingly difficult it is, and that pain is compounded when the people who are supposed to help you actually work against you. As a family we were belittled, ignored and eventually destroyed. You can't be normal after that. I wasn't normal for a long time (arguably still am not).

I think people are more empowered than they used to be, and have great tools like social media to help us look for our lost ones. I would like to think that things are getting better, but there are 600 unsolved murdered and missing women in this country, and Shawn Lamb will be eligible for parole in 9 years. So no, I don't think things have changed that much or at least, they haven't changed enough. *

Author Interview Continued

TTQ: You moved away from the North End for a time, but eventually moved back with your two daughters. What kinds of trepidation did you feel moving back and was it a difficult transition for your daughters adjusting to life in the North End?

Katherena Vermette: Not so much trepidation as intense fear! The girls were fine. They loved everything. I was irrationally scared that they would grow up like I did, and that they would have to be rough, street-worn, exploited and misused. It was a really sad time for me and caused me to confront all my childhood stuff all at once. The places I used to see as a tough (my friends will laugh at that, I was never really all that tough), desensitized kid, I was now examining with my raw, protective mama eyes. It was hard. These poems were born there, when I saw my home anew.

TTQ: How arduous was the editing process on *North End Love Songs*, and who helped you get through that process and how important was their input to completing the book?

Katherena Vermette: Clarise Foster was my editor and was instrumental in making this book make sense. She red penned everything that wasn't working and challenged me to separate the poet from the activist (I can get pretty rant-y if you couldn't tell). She really saw the fragility in the sad anger, and I wrote more after each conversation we had. A lot of poems came from that process, and without them, I don't think this book would have made sense at all.

TTQ: What were you doing at the time and how surprised were you when you heard *North End Love Songs* had won the 2013 Governor General's Literary Award in Poetry, and in what ways do you anticipate your life changing?

Katherena Vermette: I was eating breakfast when I read the nomination announcement on my phone. I was shocked and still am shocked. I have no idea how this will change my life. I'm just trying to enjoy the ride and remember to take pictures and stuff.

TTQ: In terms of writing, what would be a perfect day?

Katherena Vermette: Waking up to nothing and no one, no distractions, nothing to clean! Coffee freshly brewed and all for me, a sunshiny corner where the sun is angled just so to not glare on my computer screen, a fresh story singing in my head, and time, glorious amounts of time.

* Since this interview, the research around murdered and missing indigenous women has been significantly updated, and the most recent RCMP report lists 1181 cases since 1980. Many people believe that this is still not a complete picture and continue to push for further action and inquiry. – k

Originally published online in The Toronto Quarterly

<http://thetorontoquarterly.blogspot.ca/2013/12/katherena-vermette-north-end-love-songs.html>



Katherena Vermette's *North End Love Songs* is a debut collection from an emerging Winnipeg poet, a book that combines elegiac and fiercely ecstatic melodies to sing of a complicated love for a city, a river, and a neighbourhood. It is deeply rooted in its location, yet will reach out to readers everywhere with its harsh and beautiful tunings of growing up female in Winnipeg's North End.

The multicultural mix of the North End has provided a backdrop for many works of literature set in Winnipeg, with Adele Wiseman's examination of the Jewish community in *Crackpot* and John Marlyn's Hungarian community in *Under the Ribs of Death* offering two prominent examples. The North End in those books, as in Vermette's, presents young people who are nobody's fools: tough when they need to be, tender when they can be. Vermette's stripped-down lyrics draw on that tradition as they note the realities and dreams of the young female citizens who live and work there. *North End Love Songs* is aptly titled, and Vermette earns her street cred with clear-eyed poems about young women in love and in trouble, in motherhood and in mourning, girl children left alone and young women on the stroll on Selkirk Avenue. The latter are eyed by other young women who drive by determined to pretend that their car windows are "only tv screens / and the other girls / on the street / are only a show" (15).

This struggle for distance and search for a viable way of looking return through the poems as do the motifs of escape and entrapment. The opening section, "Poised for Flight," notes the avian qualities of the young women who populate and repopulate *North End Love Songs*, and Vermette handily re-appropriates the metaphor of woman as bird to reconsider women as creatures of flight. Noting that birds are both delicate in their bones but enduring in their ability to weather storms and endure harsh conditions, Vermette's women as birds are as strong-voiced as blackbirds, as small and watchful as finches, as daring as shrikes. These woman-birds need all their wits and strength to weather the tragedy at the core of this book. Planted in the centre of the book like a beating heart, the collection's title poem, "nortendluvsong," offers a scene of deceptive simplicity. A girl sitting on the roof of her house's

back veranda listens to her brother's heavy metal music and discovers the importance of perspective:

inside his loud music
gets into everything
but out here
it is almost soundless
soft
as a love song. (59)

This moment of observation becomes the core of memory as the brother goes missing one night and the heavy metal music he loved becomes iconic to the brother's position as a young Métis man whose disappearance devastates the family but receives little police attention. In "heavy metal ballads 1," the brother loves "screaming guitars / head banging music" while his sister "only likes the ballads / tough guys with long hair / and hard faces / singing / love / loss / tears" (77). The ballads become an ironic counterpoint to the brother's disappearance, and the perspective the sister discovers by listening to the brother's music muffled by the walls of the house becomes his legacy to her.

The book ends with a mixture of voices of young women declaring passionate allegiances for each other, their children, and their men, and Vermette notes that faith and grief require the same resilience:

I've never
not once
not for one second
looked away. (105)

This is a collection that offers the gift of looking closely and without pretension at beauty and grief in a community. Dare to read from its perspective; dare to not look away.

Tanis MacDonald

Prairie Fire Review of Books, Vol. 12, No. 4 (2012)

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the recurring themes, or streams, woven through this collection? How does reading these poems thematically change the reading experience, versus reading the collection straight through?
2. How does the poet build character and place in these poems?
3. Based on these poems, how do you see the North End of Winnipeg? How does this compare with your own experience of the neighbourhood, or how it's portrayed in the news?
4. What is the role of nature – birds, trees, plants – in these poems and in the neighbourhood they describe?
5. What is the role of music in these poems?
6. Why do you think the author used poetry to tell the story of a missing boy? What does poetry allow her to do that fiction or non-fiction do not?
7. These poems manage to bring out hope and beauty against a backdrop of tragedy. How?
8. Does this collection change the way you think about poetry?



More Poetry by Indigenous Writers:

City Treaty by Marvin Francis
819.16 FRA 2002

The Duke of Windsor by Duncan Mercredi
819.154 MER

Indigena Anry by Annharte
819.154 BAK 2012

A Night for the Lady by Joanne Arnott
819.154 ARN 2013

A Really Good Brown Girl by Marilyn Dumont
819.154 DUM

this is a small northern town by Rosanna Deerchild
819.16 DEE

More Indigenous Stories:

The Inconvenient Indian by Thomas King
970.00497 KIN 2012

Islands of Decolonial Love by Leanne Simpson
FICTION SIMPSON

Just Pretending by Lisa Bird-Wilson
FICTION BIRD-WILSON

Ravensong by Lee Maracle
FICTION MAR

Slash by Jeanette Armstrong
FICTION ARMSTRONG

They Called Me Number One by Bev Sellars
371.829979 SEL

Further Reading continued

More North End:

Crackpot by Adele Wiseman

FICTION WISEMAN

Markings: Scenes and Recollections of Winnipeg's North End by A.J. Paquette

709.712743 PAQUETTE

The Mosaic Village: an Illustrated History of Winnipeg's North End by Russ Gurluck

971.2743 GOU 2010

The North End by John Paskievich

971.2743 PAS 2007

A Place Not Our Own: North End Winnipeg by John Paskievich

779.997127 PAS

Under the Ribs of Death by John Marlyn

FICTION MAR

Voices of the North End ~ Collected interviews with many present and former residents of the neighbourhood.

<http://pastforward.winnipeg.ca/cdm/landingpage/collection/voicesofne>

More for Teens:

Little Voice by Ruby Slipperjack
J FICTION SLIPPERJACK

7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga by David Alexander Robertson & Scott B. Henderson
YA GRAPHIC FICTION ROBERTSON

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian by Sherman Alexie
YA FICTION ALEXIE

Lightfinder by Aaron Paquette
YA FICTION PAQUETTE



Watch for appearances by the author and other special events from January to April 2015.

Community Resources

AYO Movement

www.ayomovement.com

Ka Ni Kanichihk

www.kanikanichihk.ca

Ndinawe Youth Resource

www.ndinawe.ca

North End Women's Centre

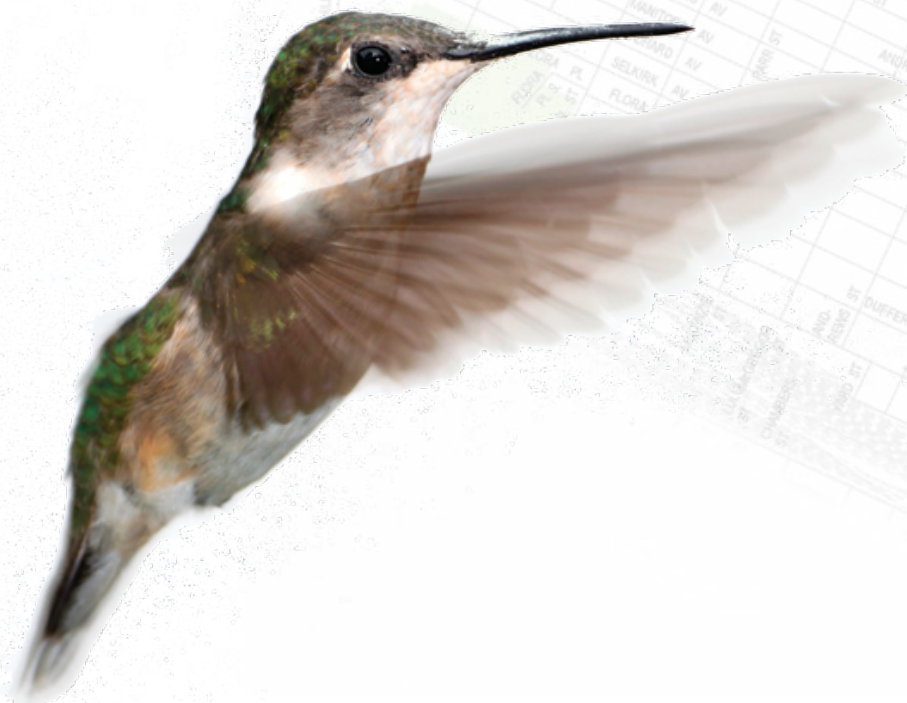
www.newcentre.org

North Point Douglas Women's Centre

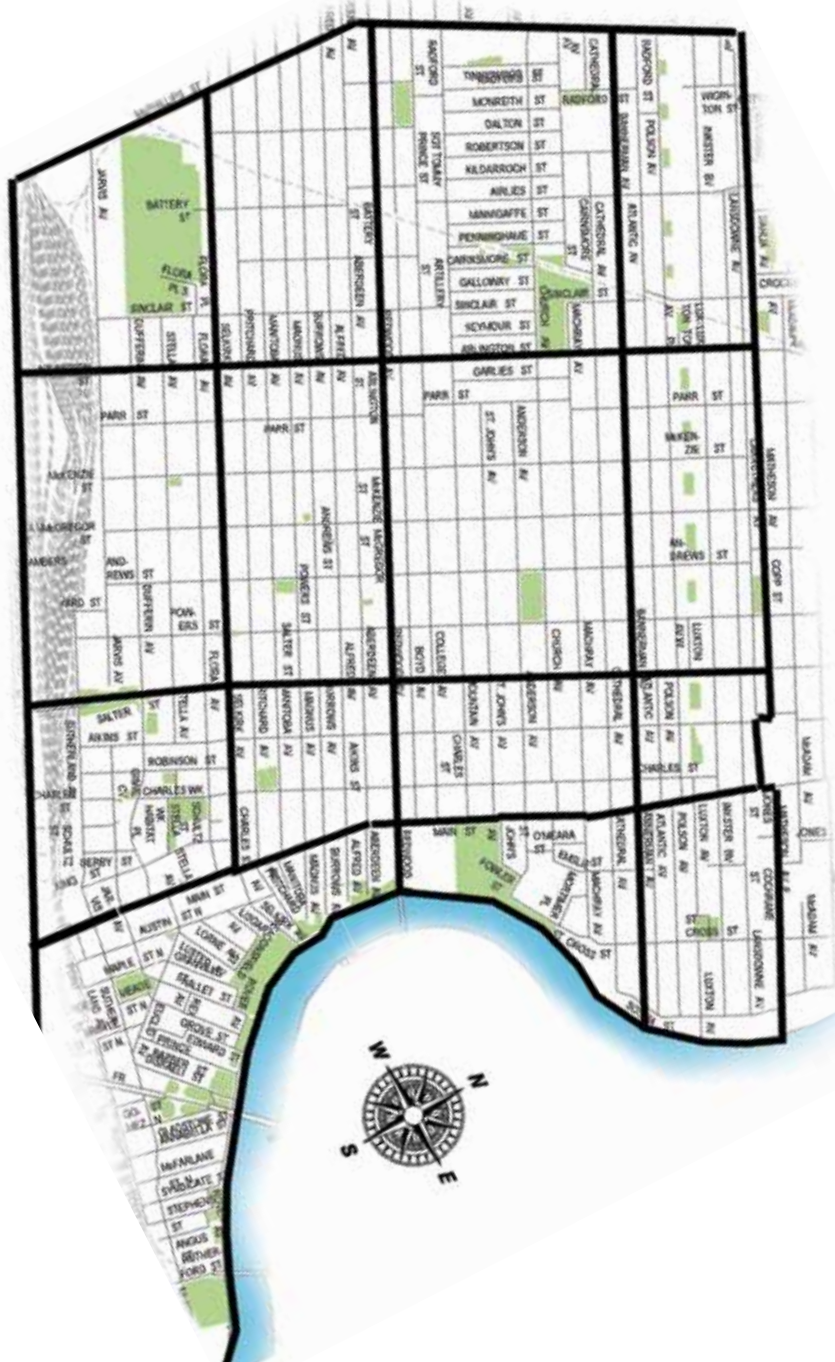
www.northpointdouglaswomenscentre.org

West Central Women's Resource Centre

www.wcwrc.ca



Map of the North End



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