



Book Club Kit

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About Conor Kerr



[photo credit: Jordan Hon]

Conor Kerr is a Métis/Ukrainian writer living in Edmonton. A member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, he is descended from the Lac Ste. Anne Metis and the Papaschase Cree Nation. His Ukrainian family are settlers in Treaty 4 and 6 territories in Saskatchewan. He grew up in Saskatoon, Edmonton, and other prairie towns and cities. In 2022 he was named one of CBC's Writers to Watch. He is the author of the poetry collections *An Explosion of Feathers* and *Old Gods*, as well as the novel *Avenue of Champions*, which was shortlisted for the Amazon Canada First Novel Award, longlisted for the 2022 Giller Prize and won the 2022 ReLIT award. Conor is an Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta where he teaches creative writing.

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/authors/2271288/conor-kerr>

Synopsis – Prairie Edge



The Giller Prize-longlisted author of *Avenue of Champions* returns with a frenetic, propulsive crime thriller that doubles as a sharp critique of modern activism and challenges readers to consider what “Land Back” might really look like.

Meet Isidore “Ezzy” Desjarlais and Grey Ginther: two distant Métis cousins making the most of Grey’s uncle’s old trailer, passing their days playing endless games of cribbage and cracking cans of cheap beer in between. Grey, once a passionate advocate for change, has been hardened and turned cynical by an activist culture she thinks has turned performative and lazy. One night, though, she has a revelation, and enlists Ezzy, who is hopelessly devoted to her but eager to avoid the authorities after a life in and out of the group home system and jail, for a bold yet dangerous political mission: capture a herd of bison from a national park and set them free in downtown Edmonton, disrupting the churn of settler routine. But as Grey becomes increasingly single-minded in her newfound calling, their act of protest puts the pair and those close to them in peril, with devastating and sometimes fatal consequences.

For readers drawn to the electric storytelling of Morgan Talty and the taut register of Stephen Graham Jones, Conor Kerr’s *Prairie Edge* is at once a gripping, darkly funny caper and a raw reckoning with the wounds that persist across generations.

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/713328/prairie-edge-by-conor-kerr/9780771003578>

Reviews

Kirkus Book Review

Prairie Edge

By Conor Kerr

Reviewed: June 4, 2024

A slow-moving, quietly furious portrait of two Indigenous Canadians and their attempts to ignite a protest movement.

Grey Ginther and Isidore “Ezzy” Desjarlais, 20-something distant cousins living in Edmonton, share a history and a culture—they’re both members of the Métis community—but little else. Grey, a recent graduate of the University of Alberta with a degree in Native studies and a job lined up at a nonprofit, is an eager participant in protest movements for Indigenous rights, eventually organizing her own events and gaining a following on social media. Ezzy, who never went to high school and grew up in and out of foster homes, embodies the apathy that Grey fights against. His days filled with booze and petty crime, Ezzy is mostly focused on the daily struggle of existing as a Métis man in contemporary Edmonton, where discrimination is commonplace: “All I knew was survival mode.” When the two meet at a protest, Grey takes an interest in the aimless Ezzy, who shares her belief in “Land Back” reconciliation for Indigenous communities, if not her idealism about the possibility of meaningful change, and a cautious friendship begins. After Ezzy is released from a stint in prison, he reconnects with Grey, and the two hatch a plan: to steal a herd of bison and move them to a river valley in the center of Edmonton. While the stunt inspires new protests and increased public attention on Indigenous rights, Ezzy’s troubled past and proclivity for violence eventually envelop them both, with devastating consequences. Narration alternates between the two protagonists, though the difference in perspective isn’t always clear; the novel’s measured tone can also feel at odds with the intensity of its plot, particularly in one scene where Grey is threatened with sexual violence.

A powerful, if meandering, tale of friendship and hope in the face of intergenerational trauma.

Source: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/conor-kerr/prairie-edge/>

Chicago Review of Books

Prairie Edge by Conor Kerr

Reviewed: June 21, 2024

If you travel west on Tramway toward I-25 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where I'm from and where I live now, you may be surprised to find a herd of buffalo grazing on the fenced-in land just on the border of the city. The land is in fact a 107-acre preserve "established by the Pueblo of Sandia to promote the resurgence of the American Bison," according to its website, which adds, "[The buffalo] were all but exterminated during the mass slaughter of the eighteen hundreds."

I have often marveled at how powerful, strong, and indomitable they seem to be, and I'm sure I haven't been the only person who drives past the reserve to wonder what it would be like if they roamed freely again, as they did centuries ago, in vast numbers throughout the country. Perhaps this is why I was so drawn to *Prairie Edge* by Conor Kerr, a novel in which two Métis cousins abduct bison living in a national park and release them in downtown Edmonton, the capital city of Alberta, Canada. (Buffalo and bison are very similar, by the way, but bison have bigger heads, a thicker coat, and can survive much colder conditions than buffalo.)

Grey Ginther plans it out, at ease with handling animals and using farm vehicles and equipment. With a background in activism and known in the community as an adept public speaker, she has grown increasingly burned out by her work and skeptical of what activism can accomplish. Her bachelor's degree in Native Studies hasn't provided her with much fulfillment or hope, either. "You can get arrested for just existing as a Métis man. You know that better than anyone," she tells Isidore "Ezzy" Desjarlais, who spent time in jail for petty crimes and struggles with alcoholism. "So what difference does it really make in the long run? It's either do something monumental or just fade into an inevitable jail cell." Ezzy, who seems to float through life but finds purpose in his connection to Grey and to his Métis heritage, agrees to help her more out of boredom than anything else.

Kerr, who is Métis-Ukrainian, lives in Edmonton, won the 2022 ReLIT Award for his novel *Avenue of Champions*, and is also the author of two poetry collections. He was inspired by a real event that occurred in Alberta in 2010, near the city of Camrose. Nearly forty bison escaped from a farm after trespassers, according to the farm owner, left a gate open on the property. As in real life, the bison released by Ezzy and Grey at first cause a commotion, but the news dies down and no great cultural shift or other real, significant response happens. In fact, as Kerr explores with wry humor, it's perhaps just another example of an opportunity for exploitation and misguided, if not naive, intention. A pro-bison protest movement grows. Merchandise appears. Grey turns on the radio one day and listens to a news report:

“Local ally Erin Green has made shirts and bumper stickers with the hashtag #bisonstrong. . . . So, Erin, can you tell us a little bit about what you’re hoping to accomplish with your shirts and bumper stickers?”

“. . . When I first saw the bison, I thought, ‘Oh my god, they must belong in the River Valley.’ This is, like, their home. And we took it from them. So, like, we should do everything that we can to help them stay here, you know? . . . From every shirt or sticker that’s sold, I’ll donate ten percent back to the activist group. It’s my way of moving forward with reconciliation and letting the bison know that they have a home here.”

“Amazing work, Erin. And I’m sure the protestors thank you for your generosity.”

Kerr drops in such gems with precision, exploring the complexities of indigenous modern life in this particular part of the world but also in more universal terms. *Prairie Edge*, at times witty, satirical, and funny, is also tragic, brutal, and intense. The chapters switch from Ezzy’s to Grey’s perspective, infused in their own way with themes of identity, hope, legacy, healing, and what it means to survive. The prologue expands the book’s time range: the opening pages take place in the late 1870s and are told from the point of view of an unnamed young female Métis narrator on a bison hunt. Her tribe follows the bison, but they must stop at the prairie edge, the Medicine Line, the border between modern-day America and Canada. As she watches the bison move beyond reach, the narrator understands that an enormous shift has just occurred for her people and their traditions. Their lives will never be the same again.

And yet, the bison do return, as do the buffalo in New Mexico. Somehow, against great odds, this life persisted and persists still. *Prairie Edge* is an acknowledgment of this persistence, a study of how life can keep going, and how the story of survival can also be a uniquely personal one.

In a recent CBC interview Kerr says, “If we’re waiting for Western institutions to make change for us, [then] we’re going to be waiting forever. . . . [Change is] going to come from future generations of youth who know themselves, who know what it means to be Indigenous, to embrace that, and there’s so much hope for that future.”

A thought-provoking novel filled with complexity and beauty, *Prairie Edge* is cinematic with many memorable scenes, intriguing characters, and sharp dialogue. Movie industry folks take note: as enjoyable as it was to read this novel, it would be outstanding on the big screen.

Source: <https://chireviewofbooks.com/2024/06/21/the-persistence-of-life-in-prairie-edge/>

Interview

How an escaped Albertan bison herd inspired Conor Kerr's latest novel about resisting colonial structures

CBC Books · Posted: Apr 19, 2024 2:40 PM MDT | Last Updated: October 9, 2024
Ali Hassan

The idea for Conor Kerr's latest novel spurred from the story of a herd of bison that broke free from a farm and ventured through the Albertan city of Camrose in 2010. In *Prairie Edge*, two Métis cousins seek to reclaim Indigenous knowledge in part, through the bison and their historic ties to the land.

Isidore "Ezzy" Desjarlais and Grey Ginther live together in Grey's uncle's trailer, passing their time with cribbage and cheap beer. Grey is cynical of what she feels is a lazy and performative activist culture, while Ezzy is simply devoted to his distant cousin. So when Grey concocts a scheme to set a herd of bison loose in downtown Edmonton, Ezzy is along for the ride — one that has devastating, fatal consequences.

Kerr is a Métis/Ukrainian writer who hails from many prairie towns and cities, including Saskatoon. He now lives in Edmonton. A 2022 CBC Books writer to watch, his previous works include the novels *Old Gods* and *Avenue of Champions*, which was longlisted for the 2022 Scotiabank Giller Prize, and won the ReLit award the same year. Kerr currently teaches creative writing at the University of Alberta.

Kerr spoke with *The Next Chapter's* Ali Hassan about how Indigenous and non-Indigenous people learn more about the land they live on.

You open with a prologue and it's the late 1870s during the Métis bison hunt. Take me back to that moment and describe how significant that hunt was for the Métis in that time.

I've heard some stories from some elders who had direct family members who were participants on some of these last hunts where Métis hunting parties would leave on these hunting expeditions where they'd join in with other communities along the way and they'd follow the bison herd south. One of the ways that I thought about the idea of the *Prairie Edge* was with this creation known as the Medicine Line, the American and Canadian border, and how back in the day you could free flow across all of that and then with the inception of the American Calvary's push against the Sioux in the West as well as more North-West Mounted Police coming in on the Canadian side, this line became more pronounced and you weren't able to necessarily cross this. As the bison herds dwindled, I thought, what a depressing idea that as this group of Métis are following this bison herd south, the elders know that they'll never see the bison again?

By the first chapter, you've jumped to contemporary time and you introduce us to these two Métis characters who propelled the story forward, Ezzy Desjarlais and Grey Ginther. Ezzy in particular, he grew up in the city in foster care, hasn't graduated high school, steals to get by and done a short stint in prison for minor offences. Why did you give Ezzy that lived experience?

I think that's a pretty common experience for a lot of young Métis men who have gone in and out of basically systems their entire life, these colonial systems, whether it's the child welfare system which essentially then becomes a pathway into the prison system. People who are like Ezzy in particular, who's not a bad guy but he's been placed into this world where he's essentially been told that he's less than constantly within this space and that he's waiting to try to figure out what is going on. He doesn't know how to really take that initiative himself, he's never been granted that type of confidence – he's essentially just hanging out and seeing what life brings him.

For Grey, who's charging ahead with this plan to release the bison into the streets, what do the bison symbolize to her?

The bison are a return to a different governance structure, they're a return to the idea of – there's also kind of a joke in there around this "#BisonBack", but really what I'm writing in is the idea that we talk about in Indigenous community around LandBack. Our idea of a concept of LandBack from my understanding is a return to a governance structure that institutes Indigenous knowledge and the matriarchal and two-spirit ways of knowing and running a space. So when you have bison return to a landscape, especially in urban space like Edmonton, there's a return back to an Indigenous governance structure and a lifestyle in a society that we necessarily haven't seen yet. For Grey, this is actual LandBack in action by the restoration of bison in the spaces that they would have historically always been in.

What did Ezzy, who's a descendant of the Papaschase Cree, learn about his ancestors and their story at this rally?

Yeah, I feel there's a lot of that context and talking in Edmonton, especially as someone like myself. My great, great grandmother was born on the Papaschase Cree nation and then had to leave to the Bush north of Saint Paul, Alberta after. Then they came in and burned down all the homesteads and got everyone out of there. There's a constant growing up and learning about this knowledge because you don't hear about this still. It's still a very under-talked about thing and even in Edmonton itself where there's a bit of talk about it but really like the vast majority of people have no concept that the majority of the south side of Edmonton was a First Nations community after the treaty negotiations and of course before it was always the First Nations community... I feel like a lot of people grow up in these spaces, whether they're Indigenous or non-Indigenous and don't have knowledge of the land and what really exists here.

Ezzy ends up in rehab, he befriends an elder there who teaches him Métis beading, shares stories about Ezzy's family and grandfather. How do these cultural knowledge and traditional practices contribute specifically here to the character's journey of self discovery and healing?

There's kind of an interesting component behind a lot of this because for a lot of Indigenous people the only place that you can actually learn about some of your own culture and history and knowledge is in Western institutions, whether that's rehab, whether that's jail, whether that's post-secondary. There's just way more access within these Western institutions than for a guy like Ezzy who's just growing up all throughout these kinds of spaces and the access that he gets to learning more about his culture and knowledge is framed within these Western contexts.

I was thinking about how much activism and the forms of protests that are in Prairie Edge. How effective are they in creating lasting change?

The idea behind a lot of this is really that sense of a collective movement whereas people are taking up more of these ideas around like LandBack, working together to make a significant change, to show how we can actually press against policy, to press against the government-imposed restrictions and those kinds of things. Honestly, if you think about where Indigenous relations and this work was 30 years ago comparatively to today, it's changed a lot. But at the same time, I remember an elder telling me one time that if we're waiting for the government to make change for us, if we're waiting for Western institutions to make change for us, that we're going to be waiting forever.

That's not going to happen, real change isn't going to come from the University of Alberta or the government of Alberta, the Canadian government. It's going to come from within community. It's going to come from future generations of youth who know themselves, who know what it means to be Indigenous, to embrace that and there's so much hope for that future, but there's a lot of work that's been said in the groundwork behind this from generations and generations of matriarchs, of two-spirit peoples, of men who fought constantly for a future for us, for me to be able to talk to you today around all this.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Source: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/how-an-escaped-albertan-bison-herd-inspired-conor-kerr-s-latest-novel-about-resisting-colonial-structures-1.7178861>

Discussion Questions

1. This novel is marketed as a “crime thriller.” Do you think that is accurate?
2. In the novel Ezzy hears stories about his family from an elder. What stories and cultural practices are important in your family? Why are these stories important to the novel?
3. Conor Kerr is also a poet. Would you have guessed that from this novel? Do you see any poetry/poetic elements in the text?
4. The character Grey is an activist although she is becoming disillusioned about her ability to make meaningful change. Do you feel protests can be effective in making change?
5. Did you learn anything about Indigenous history in this novel? Did anything surprise you?
6. The relocation of bison from nature to a busy city is an important aspect of the novel. What do you think the bison represent?
7. What did you think of the two main characters, Ezzy and Grey? Did you relate to one more than the other? If so, why?
8. Ezzy’s Aunt May is an important character in the novel and a support to Ezzy. What do you think she represents?
9. This novel explores the intergenerational effects of colonialism where trauma is passed down through the generations. Did anything change for the characters by the end of the novel? Did it leave you feeling hopeful for future generations?
10. What did you think about the ending of the novel?