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DAUGHTER OF STRANGERS. By MARJORY GORDON. Ottawa, Ontario: Oberon Press, 2001. 144 p., glossary, two maps. Hardbound, Cdn\$31.95; Softbound, Cdn\$15.95.

For years I have wished that Canadian archaeologists would follow the practice of some of their international colleagues and write accessible stories based on their fieldwork. Peter Schledermann's recent novel, *Raven's Saga*, opened the doors on his Norse and Inuit discoveries; now Marjory Gordon presents the results of husband Bryan's 30-odd years of work in the Barren Grounds.

Time travel stories are hard to get right. H.G. Wells and Diana Gabaldon created credible situations involving distant times and people, but at least both were dealing with people presumably of their own culture. Gordon adds another twist with her novel *Daughter of Strangers*. In this story, an adolescent girl from Ottawa is thrown into a world nearly 2000 years earlier but also many worlds away from the language and culture of her friends and family. That Gordon pulls it off in thrilling style in her first novel is a credit both to her imagination and to her in-depth knowledge of this territory and its prehistory.

A reluctant Amy has been brought by her parents to work on her father's archaeological dig in the Barrens of the Northwest Territories for the summer. She has spent many of her school holidays in this manner and, like a typical 13-year-old, has decided she hates both the isolation and the physical work. Nor is she interested in learning about her heritage as a part-Native Dene. Her adoptive father is far more interested in her ancestry than is Amy.

But she secretly loves the Barrens—its clear sight lines, its pristine lakes, and its magnificent, colourful life.

Gordon wisely does not waste a great deal of time trying to set up or explain the phenomenon of travel through time. After an outburst, Amy has wandered off from the archaeology camp and is watching a group of migrating caribou through her binoculars:

On the left flank of the herd, in a shadow too deep for the lenses to penetrate—another motion—a tern soared in front of the lenses, blocking her view. Her head went spinning, like it did when she swam a long way under water. Her body seemed to fling itself as through water and space.

Amy finds herself 1600 years in the past, on the opposite side of the river from her parents' camp and the archaeological site, in the midst of a caribou hunt by the Middle Talthelei ancestors of the Dene. To The People, she appears suddenly in the midst of the herd, and her arrival in this manner creates a mystery around this "daughter of strangers," which is exacerbated by her strange clothing and appearance and her near-complete lack of necessary survival skills. Her Dene looks and her apparent magical power, which brings hunting success, save her from death or slavery.

Thrown into such a situation—with hostile, suspicious men watching every move, strange, foreign food, camp discomforts taken to prehistoric levels, unable to understand the language or to exhibit skills she is expected at her age to have mastered—most people would despair, let alone a teenager. But as the resilient daughter of field researchers, Amy has been brought up to deal with situations as they arise. Her natural strength of character surfaces and eventually gains her the admiration and confidence of several of the women, especially her adopted "grandmother," who seeks to protect the girl and undertakes her tutelage in tribal ways.

Amy tries to escape, of course, and is rescued by a young hunter in a canoe as she is immobilized by cold while trying to swim across the freezing and rapid waters of the river to her family. Her near-success wins her further respect and admiration, and she is anointed with a new name. Now *Nombeeae*, the Otter, she is no longer the "daughter of strangers," but an heiress of the spirit of a highly respected animal. She is accepted.

Amy spends several months with the tribe, joining in the caribou hunt, the butchering activities, and the making of new clothing for the winter. Along with her, we learn the skills necessary to survive. When an elder dies, she witnesses the ceremonies honouring the dead and helps her people move the camp away from the now-dangerous spirit. Gordon brings us into these scenes as participants and observers, both of Amy and of The People, who no longer seem so distant from us. Along with Amy, we feel the irritation of the hordes of blackflies and mosquitos, we squirm with the nuisance of lice, and learn the pain and exhaustion of eking out a living in an unforgiving environment:

The afternoon was almost past when Amy put Setsuna's load on her own back and they continued. The old woman walked each step as if she could not take another, but she refused help. As for Amy herself, sores on her feet were bothersome and the itch on her head close to unbearable.

Gordon's descriptions of Amy's experiences are mesmerizing. She knows the archaeology and ethnology of this region, she knows its natural history, and above all, she understands camp life in the Barrens. Her background, combined with her love for the people she describes and for the region where she has spent so many seasons, shines through this tale and brings it vividly to life.

I had a few minor quibbles with the book. The grainy, indistinct black-and-white photograph used as the cover image, while of historical interest, is neither inviting nor informative to potential readers. The maps of Amy's travels accurately show real places in the Northwest Territories and add greatly to the story, but are placed at the back of the book, where the reader is unlikely to find them until the book is finished. However, the book is strongly bound and nicely printed on lightly tinted, easy-on-the-eyes paper. The writing style is occasionally awkward, jumping ahead of events too quickly, and sometimes overly didactic. Overall, though, Gordon offers us a smooth ride over this rough territory. A way of life that begins as thoroughly foreign, both to Amy and to the reader, is gradually clarified and brought into clear focus as *The People* become familiar.

The only substantial change to camp life on the Barren Grounds in 2000 years is the knowledge that one can be whisked out of trouble with the assistance of radios and planes. This is no small improvement, but even so, Amy's experience in a world 1600 years earlier does not seem as much an ordeal as an opportunity. The young girl learns the value of studying archaeology and the importance of her parents' work, the advantages of being part of a family group and conforming to expectations, and above all, she learns to trust her own strength. Gordon's understanding of Amy and her family stems directly from her own experiences.

I couldn't put this story down. For those who know the Barrens, or the Dene, or archaeology, this will be a joyous and relaxing return to the field. For those who just like a good tale with strong characters: put it on your list for winter reading. Once you've enjoyed it once or twice, pass it along to your favourite 'tweens and teens—they'll love it.

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