

## ABOUT LOOKING FOR SMOKE

This young adult thriller follows four teens on the Blackfeet Reservation who find themselves the suspects of a murder investigation during the annual Indian Days celebration. If they don't find the true culprit and get justice for their murdered classmate themselves, they know they'll take the fall—or worse, become the killer's next victims. This novel casts a light on the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women epidemic and its impact on the lives of those affected by it.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.A. Cobell, *Staa'tssipisstaakii*, is an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Nation. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest, where she spends her time writing books, chasing her kids through the never-ending rain, and scouring the inlet beaches for sand dollars and hermit crabs. She spent half her childhood in Montana, where her father shared his love of the tribal land, history, culture, and stories. Natives have rich oral traditions and pass down stories through generations. K.A. has storytelling in her genes and wanted to use that avenue to help spread awareness of the issue her tribe and all Indigenous people are dealing with. *Looking for Smoke* is her debut novel.

## TEACHER PREPARATION

### FACT GATHERING

While the cases in *Looking for Smoke* are fictional, there are hundreds of real-life cases that are not. In an October 2021 update, the National Congress of American Indians Policy Research Center provided United States data trends for American Indians/Alaska Natives (AI/AN).

- Homicide was the third-highest cause of death among AI/AN girls aged 15 to 19 and AI/AN women aged 20 to 24 in 2019 (Heron, 2021).
- Homicide was the fourth highest cause among AI/AN women 25 to 34 in 2019 (Heron, 2021).
- More than 4 in 5 AI/AN women (84.3 percent) have experienced violence in their lifetime (Rosay, 2016).
- More than half of AI/AN women (56.1 percent) have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (Rosay, 2016).
- The murder rate of AI/AN women is almost 3 times that of non-Hispanic White women (Petrosky et al, 2017).
- AI/AN women face murder rates more than 10 times the national average in 11 counties. In one county, Bon Homme, SD, the rate is more than 100 times the national average (555.6 per 100,000 in comparison to the 2018 national average of 5.0 per 100,000) (Bachman, Zaykowski, Kallymer, Poteyeva, & Lanier, 2008).

- AI/AN women are over-represented among domestic violence victims in Alaska by 250 percent (Indian Law and Order Commission, 2015).
- In Montana, AI/ANs are four times more likely to go missing, comprising over a quarter (25.5 percent) of missing persons, but are only 6.6 percent of the state population; 60 percent of missing AI/ANs in Montana are women (Montana Department of Justice, 2020).
- AI/ANs comprised 48.5 percent of missing persons in Farmington, New Mexico, with 66 percent of those cases being AI/AN women. AI/ANs made up 10.5 percent of missing persons in the much larger urban core of Albuquerque, New Mexico, with AI/AN women representing 43 percent of the total missing AI/ANs (New Mexico Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Relatives Task Force, 2020).

Read about these data trends, and others, at:

[https://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/pre-publications/NCAI\\_VAWA\\_Data\\_Update\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ncai.org/policy-research-center/research-data/pre-publications/NCAI_VAWA_Data_Update_2021_FINAL.pdf)

### WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

The MMIW crisis is a complex issue. A lack of resources and funding, gaps in communication and coordination between intergovernmental agencies, and the pipeline of vulnerability are all possible explanations that feed into this devastating issue.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, a powerful advocate for this issue, said, “Violence against Indigenous peoples is a crisis that has been underfunded for decades. Far too often, murders and missing persons cases in Indian country go unsolved and unaddressed, leaving families and communities devastated.”

On October 10, 2020, two bills were signed into law to help combat this crisis:

- Savanna’s Act clarifies the responsibilities of federal, state, tribal, and local law enforcement agencies in regards to missing or murdered American Indians and improves tribal access to federal resources and federal crime information databases. It also requires statistics on missing or murdered Native Americans and recommendations on how to improve data collection.
- The Not Invisible Act creates an advisory committee composed of law enforcement, tribal leaders, federal partners, service providers, and survivors. They will make recommendations to the Dept. of Justice and Dept. of Interior on how to increase intergovernmental coordination and establish best practices.

### READ

- Savanna’s Act  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/227/text>
  - Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind’s Murder

<https://www.niwrc.org/restoration-magazine/october-2017/prayers-savanna-lafontaine-greywind-and-community-actions-prayers>

- The Not Invisible Act  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/982/text>

## **BEFORE READING**

### EXPLORE

Students can begin to learn about the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women issue by visiting the hashtags #MMIW, #MMIWG, #MMIWG2S, #NoMoreStolenSisters, or visiting these websites to find information, resources, and ways to donate to the cause:

- Native Hope  
<https://www.nativehope.org/missing-and-murdered-indigenous-women-mmiw>
- Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women  
<https://www.csvanw.org/about-us/>
- National Indigenous Women’s Resource Center  
<https://www.niwrc.org>
- The Snowbird Fund  
<https://mtcf.org/giving/our-funds/snowbird-fund>

Activity: Break into groups and have each student discuss the findings from these sources that feel most compelling. Challenge them to share the information with someone outside of the class.

### READ

Introduce students to the bills signed into law to help combat the MMIW crisis:

- Savanna’s Act  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/227/text>
  - Savanna LaFontaine-Greywind’s Murder  
<https://www.niwrc.org/restoration-magazine/october-2017/prayers-savanna-lafontaine-greywind-and-community-actions-prayers>
- The Not Invisible Act  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/982/text>

### Application Questions:

1. Explain how the changes laid out in these two bills will impact the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Persons.
2. Do you think other changes to the bill are still needed? If so, what would you suggest?

### WATCH

- Dateline Full Episode: *The Secrets of Spirit Lake*  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/dateline/video/full-episode-the-secrets-of-spirit-lake-119805509808>
- *Say Her Name*  
<https://www.somebodysdaughter.com/say-her-name-the-film>

### Discussion Questions:

1. What elements and circumstances discussed in these videos combine to cause the tragic disproportion of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women?
2. What changes do the speakers in the video wish for? Which of them can you personally do?

### CURRENT EVENTS

Invite students to find a recent news article or video relating to the MMIW issue. Challenge them to share the information with the class or with someone who may not have heard of the plight.

## DURING READING

*Looking for Smoke* contains the following literary devices. Find two examples of each and explain what is being compared and/or the visual effect the description creates.

	Quote	Explanation
Metaphor		
Simile		
Personification		

Challenge: Write two of each of the literary devices listed above on your own, creating strong visual effects.

## SUSPECT TRACKER FOR *LOOKING FOR SMOKE*

As you read *Looking for Smoke*, keep track of which characters you are suspicious of at different times. Who could be the culprit? In each section of the book listed, provide an example from the text that makes you believe this person could be guilty.

Chapter Section	Suspected Character	Quote from Text
1-6		
7-12		
13-18		
19-26		
27-33		
34-39		
40-44		

In mysteries, authors utilize Foreshadowing and Red Herrings. The term *Foreshadowing* refers to all the ways the author gives hints to what is coming—this can include symbolism, dialogue, setting and description details, character reactions, omens, etc. They are real clues to the mystery’s resolution. On the other hand, *Red Herrings* are meant to distract and mislead the reader. They create suspicion in the wrong areas and keep the readers guessing until the end.

Activity: After you finish reading the book, look over the quotes above that caused you to suspect certain characters and analyze which were Red Herrings and which were Foreshadowing. Compare answers with a partner and discuss the different ways the Red Herrings swayed you.

Assignment: In small groups or individually, write a short mystery story using Foreshadowing and Red Herrings.

## READING QUESTIONS

### Chapter 1-17

1. After tragedy strikes the two girls closest to her, Loren feels many different emotions. Describe three of her emotions and the actions in the text that show them.
2. The discovery of Rayanne's body means something different to each of the four main characters. Describe what feelings and worries it may bring up with each of the four characters.
3. The author utilizes foreshadowing throughout the story. Pick a line from the book that could be a hint and guess what you think it could be foreshadowing.

### Chapter 18-33

4. Smoke is mentioned several times in the book. Explain possible symbolisms with examples from the text.
5. Reread the dream Loren had in Chapter 21. Why did the author use this imagery? How did the dream change Loren's thoughts moving forward?
6. Brody finds himself caught in a few predicaments. Choose one and describe the conflicting emotions and goals he has.

### Chapter 34-53

7. Why doesn't Eli want to help Mara in Chapter 43? What things would he be risking if he did help?
8. At the story's beginning, the main characters aren't sure whom they can trust. Choose two characters and explain how their trust in each other grows through certain events in the book.
9. Mara felt out of place and unsure of herself at the beginning of the story. Which moment do you see a change in her? What facilitates that change?

### Post-read

10. Why do you think the author included media sections, and what do we learn about the Unknown perspective they are included in?
11. The book ends with a few new mysteries and questions. What are your best guesses for their explanations? If there were a sequel, what would you hope would be answered?

## JOURNALING PROMPTS

### Chapter 1-17

1. In Chapter 1, Mara struggles to feel like she belongs. Think of a time when you have felt like an outsider. What things did you do to try to overcome that feeling?
2. In Chapter 12, Eli wins his race, but the happiness is overshadowed by his feelings of worry. Think of a time you accomplished something meaningful, but something else took away from the positive feelings. How do you wish it had gone instead? What did you learn from those experiences?

3. In Chapter 17, Loren states she has withdrawn from her friends. Have you ever been through a challenge that made you feel like pulling away from others like Loren? Did that help or hurt the situation?

#### Chapter 18-33

4. Imagine you're Mara in Chapter 20. Would you trust Eli? Why or why not?
5. In Chapter 25, Eli explains why he felt Mara needed help. Has anyone ever made a choice for you that you didn't appreciate? Why did it bother you?
6. Which main character do you like the most? Why? Would you be their friend?

#### Chapter 34-53

7. In Chapter 38, Brody believes he has made the best choice in a bad situation. Think of a time you have felt like there wasn't a "right" choice, and you had to make the best choice anyway. How did that feel? Did you see another decision in retrospect?
8. Which POV character do you connect with the most? Why?
9. Imagine you know someone has wronged the person you love most in the world. How far would you go to make sure they were held responsible? Do you think the current law's punishments would suffice?

## AFTER READING

### IN-CLASS DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

#### Characters

1. How did each of the four main characters react to the death of Samantha? How might each of their unique life situations have affected their thoughts and feelings in the aftermath?
2. The book starts with Mara expressing she usually felt like an outsider. What gaps in communication and incorrect assumptions led to this?
3. Many characters felt justified in keeping certain secrets to themselves. Discuss which reasons you empathize with and which ones you don't, and why.

#### Theme

4. Reread the Napi story Eli told his sister in Chapter 25. What similarities can you draw from his story to the plot of *Looking for Smoke* and its culprit?
5. Family relationships are shown to be extremely important in *Looking for Smoke*. Discuss some pivotal moments that showed this between any characters.
6. How did each character deal with their adversities? How did these challenges impact their personal growth throughout the story?

#### Real-life Application

7. A common thought in the MMIW movement is that the victims disappear in more ways than one. What do you think this means? Besides disappearing physically, what other ways are there?



8. In what way did Loren support the MMIW movement? Geraldine? Do you think these ways are helpful? What other ways can you think of that would help?
9. Community is a significant pillar for Native Americans. What scenes in the book showed this?

### WRITING PROMPTS

1. Choose any scene with multiple characters and write it from a different character's perspective. How could that change in perspective impact how the rest of the plot unfolds?
2. Choose one of the four main characters and think about their growth through the story (character arc). Then, write an essay analyzing how they changed from the story's beginning to the end, citing which plot points propelled that change the most.
3. Write an essay analyzing the motives of the killer. What are the inner and outer lies this character believes to be true, and what are the reasons from their past that cause them to believe these lies (the character's ghost—A character's ghost is an emotional injury that, though suffered long ago, continues to haunt them into the present day. It's an internal scar that has never fully healed, an experience they bear as an ongoing burden)?
4. Write an essay focusing on a main character's family relationships and how they affect the character's choices. In the text, find three decisions the chosen main character made that were in part because of a member of their family. Analyze whether the relationship was ultimately an influence for good, bad, or both.
5. Think of possible themes found in *Looking for Smoke* (MMIW, overcoming adversity, finding belonging, fighting for your loved ones, etc.), and write an essay discussing its importance in the book.

### EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. As a class or in groups, prepare to spread awareness for MMIW. It could be any day, or on May 5<sup>th</sup>, the National Day of Awareness for Missing And Murdered Native Women and Girls. Wear red to support MMIW and share statistics and resources to learn more about the issue. Design an infographic to place on posters or fliers to spread awareness at school.
2. Research organizations aimed at combating violence against Indigenous women, such as the Coalition to Stop Violence Against Native Women ([www.csvanw.org](http://www.csvanw.org)) or the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center ([www.niwrc.org](http://www.niwrc.org)). Organize a fundraiser to raise money to donate to their efforts.
3. There are 574 federally recognized tribes in the United States. Choose a tribe to research and give a presentation in class about their unique culture. This may include their original and present-day region, language, traditional ceremonies, pivotal events in their history, or passed down myths and stories (like the Blackfeet's Napi stories.) Use Native sources.
4. Create a "Say her Name" wall or collage to honor MMIW victims using photos, artwork, and thoughtful design.

## **BOOK CLUB SUGGESTIONS**

### BY INDIGENOUS AUTHORS

*Summer of Bitter and Sweet* by Jen Ferguson  
*Harvest House* by Cynthia Leitich Smith  
*Warrior Girl Unearthed* by Angeline Boulley  
*Elatsoe* by Darcie Little Badger  
*Apple: Skin to the Core* by Eric Gansworth  
*Manmade Monsters* by Andrea L. Rogers  
*Rez Ball* by Byron Graves

### UNRELIABLE NARRATORS

*Silent Sister* by Megan Davidhizar  
*We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart  
*Allegedly* by Tiffany D. Jackson  
*That Weekend* by Kara Thomas  
*When Mimi Went Missing* by Suja Sukumar  
*All Your Twisted Secrets* by Diana Urban  
*What Kind of Girl* by Alyssa Sheinmel

### MULTIPLE POINTS OF VIEW

*Promise Boys* by Nick Brooks  
*One of Us is Lying* by Karen M. McManus  
*Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo  
*This is Where it Ends* by Marieke Nijkamp  
*The Agathas* by Kathleen Glasgow and Liz Lawson  
*The Cousins* by Karen M. McManus  
*The Young Elites* by Marie Lu

### MIXED MEDIA FORMAT

*The Weight of Blood* by Tiffany D. Jackson  
*Illuminae* by Amie Kaufman and Jay Kristoff  
*Sadie* by Courtney Summers  
*Good Girl's Guide to Murder* by Holly Jackson  
*Rules for Vanishing* by Kate Alice Marshall  
*Message Not Found* by Dante Medema  
*Hollow Fires* by Samira Ahmed