

*Hold Your Tongue*  
an Engrossing Cultural Immersion

Rebecca Chambers

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Tétrault, M. (2023). *Hold your tongue: A novel*. NeWest Press. 270 pages.

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*Hold Your Tongue* enters a new prairie-literature space somewhere among Miriam Toews and Katherina Vermette. The debut novel by Matthew Tétrault explores a shifting Métis landscape as seen through the eyes of Richard, the surefooted but directionless adult son of a changing but resolute Métis way of life near Ste. Anne, Manitoba.

Richard has learned of his great-uncle Alfred's stroke and sets off to find his father, Emile, to summon him to the bedside at St. Boniface Hospital. Emile has left his cell phone at home, and in a wide prairie landscape dotted with family members, we are along for the ride to find him. As Richard's old Buick traverses Ste. Anne, Ste. Genevieve, Richer, and the roads between, we are introduced to not only the geography, but the history and deep familial roots holding the layers of soil together. The memories and stories are land-based, and a tour of the land is necessary to truly understand the people that live upon it.

The pace of this tour, through languid bars, cafes, farms, and roads, is driven forward by the low-rumbling stakes of a race against time, an urgency to draw the community together for an elder patriarch. Like floodwaters and settlers slowly encroaching, the stories, memories, lies, and alliances are washed ever nearer and to Richard, demanding attention.

This tour through land and memory is told in English, French, and Michif, the latter two languages translated only by context, and not consistently. This patois evokes a sense of belonging, delineating insider-ness and outsider-ness. Tétrault's mastery of language creates an intimacy between reader and page, and solidifies our own commitment to the characters he's brought to life by ensuring our careful attention to their every word. This immersion in language makes us a participant in the story, propelling us throughout the landscape.

The colloquialisms don't end with dialect; even in his use of English, Tétrault uses an untranslated prairie vernacular that only we who know this place will understand. Windbreak. Sorels. Two-four. Loogie. Empties. Gitch. There are farmer's wives with the names of Manitoba dairy companies and a dog named Chains. These words provide another layer of reader access and belonging in the story. In many ways, the novel invites the reader in as a participant and character. Each of us will bring our own stories, history, and language, participating in Richard's journey in unique ways.

Tétrault has a shining ability to transport the reader imperceptibly through time and perspective. Each confusion or crisis encountered by Richard is mirrored in the writing itself. This novel feels cinematic, immersive, and participatory, as the narrative and dialogue shift along with Richard's understanding of the present moment. We are as helpless or as active as the words on the page.

The duelling Métis personae of shame and pride—and the inevitability of change—runs deep through every character in *Hold Your Tongue*. This theme of brittle pride and lingering shame is seeded through sad tales of animals punished for trying to adapt to changed landscapes, just as the people are punished for occupying their homeland. The not-so-newly arrived Mennonites are met with confusion and resistance by Tétrault's Métis on the ball diamond and the hockey rink, who anticipate an “imminent religious and linguistic invasion.”

Through time and relationship, we travel with Richard as he pieces together his own story and the stories of his family through half-comprehensible encounters and half-truthful stories. Just like the reader, he is unsure that he's grasping the full picture at any time. The stakes, like floodwaters, continue to rise, and more snippets of truth are half-mentioned over time, demanding Richard confront his own passivity and the sad truth that much of Métis identity has been defined by violence.

In *Hold Your Tongue*, the layers of Richard's identity lie one upon another like settled earth, and with each tilling, new treasures and horrors are brought to the surface for him to confront and try to make sense of. For the Métis, the past is always just below the surface.

Tétrault, who holds a PhD in Métis literature, employs English, French, and Michif to give access to a culture and a family on the edge of colonial progress. With one foot still firmly in a traditional Métis life, the younger generation finds itself the unbidden caretakers of culture and family in ways they aren't always prepared for.

The shimmering use of language alone is enough to propel one through this book. But the narrative, the absolute truths of Métis life and storytelling, and the seamless yet jarring layering of past on present, leave the reader breathlessly tripping through both in an effort to keep up. This gift of cultural immersion in a shifting franco-Métis landscape is evocative but contrapuntal to Miriam Toews works, set in the same region of Manitoba. *Hold Your Tongue* is a compelling prairie exposé, an introduction to a family you didn't know claimed you, and a book that will stir restlessly within you for days after reading.

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## Biography

Rebecca Chambers is Red River Métis from Winnipeg, Canada. She is a graduate student in Education Administration at the University of Manitoba, a high school teacher, school trustee, and bi-weekly columnist in the Winnipeg Free Press. Rebecca researches equity in teacher hiring and retention, and in her editorial writing, explores how community events, history, and the resulting co-built epistemology define who we are in this place and time.

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