

## Book Review

Lucinda J. Kinsinger. *Turtle Heart: Unlikely Friends with a Life-Changing Bond*. Plymouth, MA: Elk Lake Publishing, Inc., 2021. 316 pp.

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Take two women and see how different you can make them. Culture, religion, and personality would be obvious places to start. But to really create barriers, place between them 45 years of age. If you were a novelist who invented best friends like these, you might be accused of stretching the reader's credulity a little too far.

This memoir tells the story of a fierce friendship between two women rooted in their birthplace of Rusk County, Wisconsin. The author, Lucinda, a young, plain-dressing, plain-spoken Mennonite who takes a job transporting patients to medical appointments, but who wants most of all to be a writer, meets Charlene, a 70-year-old self-described "Indian" woman with Ojibway heritage. Charlene is as spicy as Lucinda is plain.

Charlene was only a quarter Ojibway, but she chose "Indian" as her identity. The Ojibway lived on the North American continent for hundreds if not thousands of years but moved west into the Great Lakes region in the sixteenth century and organized themselves into clans, harvesting abundant wild rice and living in harmony with nature. Charlene's knowledge of this heritage came mostly through her grandparents. Much of her tradition had been lost, but she claimed all she knew.

Lucinda's ancestors came to Wisconsin much later, in 1931. They followed the felling of the virgin timber. As Mennonite farmers all the way back to their European ancestors in Switzerland and Germany, they brought a tradition of bending nature to produce abundance. Their first task was to dynamite the massive stumps left in the decimated forest. Other Mennonites joined them and settled throughout the state. Though a minority, the Mennonite culture was never viewed as a threat to the majority. The Ojibway had two choices—be assimilated or be vanquished.

The story that unfolds follows a transactional relationship into a genuine friendship beset by many challenges and ultimately into a farewell. Throughout the two-year journey, both Charlene and Luci learn to respect and love both their similarities and differences.

One of the shared experiences Luci and Char discover is that they both have felt different all their lives—Luci because of her conservative long dresses and head covering, and Char because she was labeled a half-breed from childhood onward. They have not been seen as individuals by others but as part of their respective groups. In one of their many Back Door Café conversations,



they discuss this reality and try to comprehend the experience of the other. Luci observes, “Maybe it doesn’t feel quite the same, though, when you’re different by choice and not by birth.”

From the beginning, Char determines the scope of the relationship. She asks Luci for favors and visits, and even after Luci takes a full-time job in a nursing home, and searches for time to write, Char does not stop asking for her time. Luci feels inner conflict, tries to assert herself, and yet cannot break away or control completely what happens.

Char is a smoker and former drinker who swears. She has had multiple sexual relationships with both men and women. Luci has never been even casual friends with someone like her. As she goes deeper, Char asks Luci to be her “helpmeet.” Luci is aware that this word could take her into lesbian territory. She refuses the word, and she never goes beyond hugs and an occasional innocent (and one unwelcome) kiss, but she also does not run away in fear.

Luci wants Char to be born again. To accept Christ as her savior. To be saved. She plays hymns and contemporary Christian music on the car radio as they drive. She offers Char first one Bible and then another, better one. Char accepts this gift and begins to read the Bible and eventually joins Luci in her family’s Bible study, but she does so on her own terms. One time Luci tries to pray the sinner’s prayer for her, but this approach doesn’t really satisfy either of them in the long run. When Char asks whether she can say she has been born again now, Luci detects sarcasm.

Luci hopes for a conversion experience. Char feels no need for one. Jesus is already in her heart, she asserts. “He’s always been there.” She maintains her love for the Creator and for Jesus all the way to the end of her life, and Luci stays with her to witness it.

As a memoir, this book succeeds in telling a riveting story, and the language of this book sometimes soars. For example, Charlene is first described as “a wren of a general directing her army” (13). The introductory poem and the imagery of the turtle heart (which beats even after being severed from the body) is lovely:

I met an old lady  
wrists fine as bone china  
her eyes black  
and her hair black  
as crow’s wing  
but her heart was red. (5)

Other times the author relies on clichés, such as a “snobby” person (12) and “slop-pig daughter” (155), or on over-used words like “smug” (20, 40, 41, 56).

The author does not force this story into a traditional narrative, either of evangelical conversion or of rejection of either tradition, Mennonite or Ojibway. Instead, both characters sharpen the edges of their values against each other and come out stronger.

The best tribute I can make to this book is that it is honest. The characters learn. Neither dominates. They cherish each other and grow. This is the true nature, the turtle heart, of love.