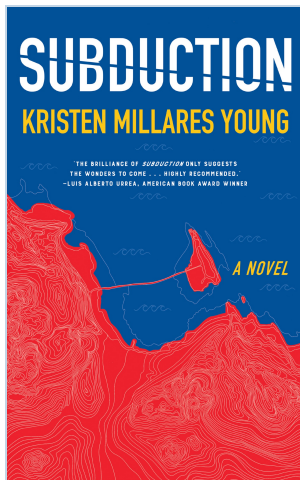




READING GROUP GUIDE

Subduction

Book Club Guide

A novel by Kristen Millares Young

RED HEN PRESS · 2020

Love is a kind of home.

— SUBDUCTION

A note for whoever is leading:

Subduction is set in the Makah Nation at Neah Bay, and it was written by an outsider about what outsiders cost. Several of these questions ask what is owed between people who do not share a history. Answer them about the book first. No one in the room speaks for a nation, a family or a people, and any question can be answered in the third person, or passed.

- 1 What lines did you notice first? Read them aloud, and say why that passage moved you.
- 2 Subduction is the geologic name for one plate driven beneath another, both of them deformed by the pressure. *The Paris Review* wrote that in this novel “the answer to which is which is left beautifully unclear.” Who is under whom here? Did your answer hold to the end?
- 3 Claudia arrives to study songs and stories and, within days, copies a transcript into a new folder she names Drafts, deciding which of her own words to keep. What is she protecting? Have you ever tidied the record of something you said so it would read better later?
- 4 Maggie keeps decades of phone books because “People keep passing on. I can’t bear to throw their names away.” Her son wants the house cleared. When does keeping become hoarding, and who gets to decide?
- 5 Peter comes home thinking, “This place never forgets.” What does a small place remember about you? What would it take to be seen there as someone else?
- 6 Claudia offers to store Maggie’s things in her cabin loft, and Maggie, close to tears, says, “Would you?” Whose need is met in that scene? What would have made the offer clean?

- 7 Maggie wants a potlatch because “We must have witnesses, or the song won’t belong to him.” What in your family or community becomes real only when other people are there to see it?
- 8 In this novel songs are property — inherited, given, withheld, taken. Maggie calls the cousins singing her family’s song “Songnappers.” What does your family own that was never written down, and who is allowed to use it?
- 9 Claudia is an immigrant, a Latina, and a woman in a discipline built by men. She is also the outsider carrying knowledge out of a Native community. Can a person be injured and injuring at once? Where have you held both positions?
- 10 A mink rears up on the road and laughs at Claudia in a human voice. She spends the rest of the book deciding whether she saw a vision or a hallucination. Which was it? What does the novel gain by never telling you?
- 11 Peter has carried what he saw in his mother’s kitchen since he was a boy. What has that silence cost him? What does it cost a family to keep a secret that protects one of them?
- 12 Maria writes to her sister: “I did the unspeakable. I know that. It’s not fair to want you in my life, but I do. Sisters are *para siempre*.” Claudia does not answer. Was she right to refuse?
- 13 Claudia has already survived one overdose when the novel opens, and by Christmas she is measuring the headlands at Shi Shi. What does this book understand about that kind of despair that a summary of her circumstances would miss?
- 14 Peter tells her, “You don’t want to hear that you have to change to be happy.” Is he right? And what is he refusing to hear?
- 15 By the end Claudia is planning a life alone: “If she had to have a family, she would build one, her and her baby.” Is that independence, or one more way of not showing up?
- 16 The novel closes with Peter dancing in the wild man mask, his mother singing and crying, and Claudia seated in the back row where she put herself. Why end here? What would a warmer last page have cost?
- 17 Rick Simonson of Elliott Bay Book Company called *Subduction* “a book of reckoning, full-heartedly told.” What gets reckoned? Is anything settled?

FOR WRITERS AND CLOSE READERS

- 18 Millares Young has said she cut as many words as she kept — about seventy thousand — and read the novel aloud many times in service of a lyric tone. Where can you hear that in the sentences?

- 19 She charted Peter's and Claudia's rising and falling action on a legal pad turned sideways, so their pacing formed sine and cosine waves, each crest feeding the next. Reading the alternating chapters, where do you feel that handoff?
- 20 The novel stays close to Claudia and to Peter and never once enters Maggie's mind. What does that restraint accomplish? What would have been lost if Maggie had her own chapters?
- 21 Millares Young has said she "wanted to study what could happen if a researcher stayed long enough to get involved. Would that be better, or not?" How does the novel answer her question?

FURTHER READING

On the Makah maritime world, from a Native historian: Joshua L. Reid (Snohomish), *The Sea Is My Country: The Maritime World of the Makahs*

On whaling and its revival: Charlotte Coté (Tseshah/Nuu-chah-nulth), *Spirits of Our Whaling Ancestors: Revitalizing Makah and Nuu-chah-nulth Traditions*

On one Makah elder's songs and life: Helma Swan and Linda J. Goodman, *Singing the Songs of My Ancestors: The Life and Music of Helma Swan, Makah Elder*

On being the one written about: Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz), *My Body Is a Book of Rules* and *White Magic*

On the house that holds a family's memory: Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*

On borders, kin, and the long way home: Luis Alberto Urrea, *The House of Broken Angels*



ABOUT THE BOOK

Subduction was published by Red Hen Press in 2020. It was a staff pick at *The Paris Review*, a finalist for two International Latino Book Awards, and named a top 2020 feminist book by *Ms. Magazine*. The cover is by Caitlin Sacks. Tour dates are at kristenmyoung.com/events, and Kristen Millares Young can be reached through kristenmyoung.com/contact.

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