

Book Review: The Seed Keeper  
By Diane Wilson

Some books are important to read.

It was nearly 30 years ago when I read “Snow Falling on Cedars” by David Guterson. That was my first glimpse into the U.S. internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, when thousands were forced to leave their homes and property and live in camps. We never learned that in school.

“The Seed Keeper” by Diane Wilson falls into the same category with respect to Native Americans. It’s an important read.

The book, while a work of fiction, is built around many historical events, including the 1862 U.S.-Dakota War, and the removal of indigenous children from their families.

The story spans multiple generations of Dakota women in Minnesota from 1862 to 2002, but the focus is on Rosalie Iron Wing who, at age 12, is taken from her home after her father dies and placed in the foster care system. The one bright spot during these years and through several placements is Rosalie’s friendship with Gaby Makespeace, who is also Dakota.

Rosalie’s dream to move away and get back to her family’s roots takes an unusual turn when, following a summer working for a young farmer named John Meister, who has inherited his family’s farm, she marries Meister on her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. And soon, particularly after the birth of her son, Tommy, she realizes her dream of finding and learning about her family has been upended by life on the farm.

Rosalie and Gaby remain close, and this is part of where Wilson’s strength as a writer comes through. The character development is excellent, and we can feel not only

who these people are (Gaby eventually goes to college and becomes a lawyer), but what drives them as well.

Wilson also intersperses the main narrative with a glimpse of life for the Dakota in 1862 through the eyes of Marie Blackbird, one of Rosalie's great descendants. It becomes clear that the problems facing present day Native Americans – substance abuse, teen pregnancies, and broken families – haven't changed much more than a century and a half later.

So what do seeds have to do with this story? Here's where Wilson's writing prowess is on full display. We learn how the Dakota women passed their treasured corn seeds from generation to generation. The seeds represent life. They represent growth, and the passing down of a people's heritage.

This becomes evident when Rosalie cultivates her own vegetable garden on the farm. But her son Tommy, taunted at school for his heritage, rejects his mother's culture and instead focuses on learning the financial aspects of running the farm. And when Rosalie's husband John dies in 2002, Rosalie, then age 40, decides it's time to return to the long abandoned cabin where she grew up and attempt to reconnect with her heritage. Not coincidentally, one of the first things Rosalie does at the cabin is plant a garden.

My only issue with the story is its abrupt ending. Very abrupt. Right in the middle of an apparent important development, Wilson closes the door.

That aside, "The Seed Keeper" is a finely written and beautifully descriptive story of Dakota culture and history. And that's not surprising. Wilson is a Dakota writer and a descendant of the Mdewakanton sub-tribe. So she's not just writing from history, she's writing from her heart.

I give “The Seed Keeper” 4.5 out of 5 stars. It’s a book that was published three years ago, but its story is timeless. I welcome your feedback.