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**Sara Sue Hoklotubbe's Sadie Walela Mystery Series**

Titles under review:

**Hoklotubbe, Sara Sue. *Deception on All Accounts*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2003. 240 pp. ISBN: 0816523118.**

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/deception-on-all-accounts>

— ***The American Café*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2011. 256 pp. ISBN: 0816529221.**

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/the-american-cafe>

— ***Sinking Suspicions*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2014. 224 pp. ISBN: 0816531072.**

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/sinking-suspicions>

— ***Betrayal at The Buffalo Ranch*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2018. 232 pp. ISBN: 0816537275.**

<https://uapress.arizona.edu/book/betrayal-at-the-buffalo-ranch>

Sara Sue Hoklotubbe (Cherokee) is the recipient of the 2012 WILLA Literary Award for Original Softcover Fiction by Women Writing the West, the 2012 New Mexico-Arizona Book Award for Best Mystery, and the 2012 Mystery of the Year by Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. She was also a finalist for the 2012 Oklahoma Book Awards, as well as the 2011 ForeWord Book of the Year. Her Sadie Walela series is based in the place where she grew up: Cherokee country in northern Oklahoma. It mixes mystery, social commentary, and romance, and uses Regionalist characteristics while introducing Cherokee language and culture. Anyone interested in mellow crime novels depicting the life of ordinary Cherokee in rural Oklahoma will find Hoklotubbe's series delectable.

Within the American tradition of crime and detective fiction, too many series depicting Native American characters and settings were written by non-Native authors. Best-of lists citing popular crime novels presenting Native Americans never fail to mention Tony and Anne Hillerman, Craig Johnson, or William Kent Krueger, but still tend to overshadow actual Indigenous authors. Hoklotubbe's representation of Cherokee life matters greatly within the scope of the genre. Her voice deserves to be heard, and it is time the American detective fiction canon begins to incorporate more authors like her.

Do not judge the Sadie Walela books by their tacky covers: there is a lot to like in Hoklotubbe's mystery saga. Sadie Walela is a Cherokee from mixed ancestry who struggles to find her place between her family life on the reservation and the White town where she works. Sometimes a bit stereotypical, the horse riding, wolf-dog owning heroine is nevertheless completely endearing. Alongside her search for clues, we can read between the lines a valuable social commentary on modern Cherokee life in Euro-American society.

Protagonist Sadie Walela embodies Cherokee values of kindness and respect. She often goes out of her way to help neighbors, colleagues, and even customers of the bank where she works. She is hurt and discouraged to witness greed being put before humanity and always strives to do better while representing her community. She is a strong-willed, independent woman who finds comfort in spending time with her elders or horse riding on her family's land. She is at the junction between Cherokee and Euro-American societies. From the first volume, *Deception on All Accounts* (2003), Sadie operates as a liminal character, capable of navigating as well as bridging both worlds. Despite racism and hardship, she constantly remains a symbol of hope and reconciliation in the novels.

Although her plots might seem simplistic, Hoklotubbe maintains suspense by alternating voices and intertwining storylines from each chapter to the next. She skillfully inserts twists and masters the typical mystery fiction structure, in which each section ends on a palpable tension climax. She also maintains this rhythm from one volume to the next: although they can each be read as stand-alone works, she punctuates the investigations with remarks linking them together and informing us of Sadie's reflexion on past events. Not only does this demonstrate good character building, it also represents the Cherokee characters' ability to evolve and grow, and therefore avoids the stereotypical trope of Native Americans as static figures of the past.

Sadie Walela starts the series as a disenchanting bank employee, who leaves the business with the hopes of finding a different position that would allow her to bring good to her community. By the third volume, *Sinking Suspicions* (2014), she becomes a travel agent; the book alternates chapters between a murder investigation at home in Oklahoma, and Sadie's trip to Hawai'i. These elements echo Hoklotubbe's biography, who herself left a career in finance in Oklahoma City to follow her husband when his job relocated him to Maui.

With each volume, the quantity and depth of remarks concerning Cherokee life in America increase. Hoklotubbe tackles racism and domestic violence with the same ease as she does the treatment of Native American veterans or discrepancy in economic and professional opportunities for Indigenous people. For example, *Deception on All Accounts* starts with the racism and gender discrimination that management inflicts on Sadie, a bank employee whose loyalty and honesty cannot be accepted as synonymous with her "Indianness" by her Euro-American boss and colleagues. There are also repeated allusions to domestic violence and spousal abuse throughout the saga, specifically when Sadie discusses her failed marriage. In *Sinking Suspicions*, we are confronted with the legacy of the Allies' presence in the Pacific during WWII and with the treatment of Hawai'ian and Japanese Americans by the federal government.

In *The American Café* (2011), Hoklotubbe alludes to the multiple adoptions of Native American children into White, Christian, Euro-American families. She traces back the emotions of her characters – such as depression, feelings of inadequacy, or struggles with addiction – to the intergenerational trauma too often suffered by the adoptees, the same children whose Native identities and biological families were suppressed or even hidden from them. Like many scholars, the author affirms that renewing ties with the original community, learning the language, and becoming knowledgeable in family relations and genealogy are keys to healing.

In her latest novel, *Betrayal at The Buffalo Ranch* (2018), Hoklotubbe addresses land dispossession and settler encroachment on Native land with a very modern twist. She uses the investigation of a mysterious murder to center the readers' reflection on gentrification and Western obsession with mapping and fencing private property, particularly on unceded tribal land. It is also in this latest volume that Sadie actively becomes the detective, conducting research herself and visiting the crime scenes on her own. In the previous texts, she was always secondary to the action, hearing about clues from other characters or accompanying them and staying behind. Whether it is the duty to protect Cherokee lands from the greedy White ranch promoters which pushed Sadie to take matters into her own hands, or a long due development of a protagonist who had been quite passive for three volumes, it is a new element that makes the latest novel the most interesting of the series so far.

Locality plays a major role in Hoklotubbe's mysteries. Details and descriptions of the various Oklahoma settings make the Sadie Walela series a great example of Local Color crime fiction. Throughout the four volumes, great attention is put to accurately situate Sadie and the action. Lake Eucha, Sycamore Springs, and Liberty are some of the spaces the reader travels to while following Sadie in her quest for the truth. Topographic information and geographical elements add veracity to Sadie's comments on her surroundings. The settings are far from being empty background décor, however. Detailed portraits of people's particularities, such as accents or dialects, outfits, and even diet, make the Walela series a vivid image of contemporary life in Oklahoma. With this mystery series, Sara Sue Hoklotubbe leaves her mark not only on Cherokee modern literature, but on Regional literature as well.

Although the Sadie Walela series might not appear to take as strong an activist stance as other Native American crime novels, this does not prevent it from holding a valuable position within the genre. It contains less suspense and violence, which some crime readers are after, than Sherman Alexie's *Indian Killer* (1996) or Stephen Graham Jones' *The Least of My Scars* (2013). It alludes much more discreetly to the gender and sexual abuse that threatens Indigenous women than Katherena Vermette's *The Break* (2016). The Oklahoma settings are more elements of Local Colors tropes than characters in itself, such as Santa Cruz and the Monterrey Bay area are in Louis Owens' *Bone Games* (1994). However, Hoklotubbe's attention to respectfully engage the reader with Cherokee values, language, and culture, as well as contemporary issues, absolutely places her as a contemporary Native American crime novelist to follow. There is no doubt that Sadie Walela has many more stories to tell.

*Léna Remy-Kovach, University of Freiburg*

#### *Works Cited*

- Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer*. New York: Grove, 1996.  
Jones, Stephen Graham. *The Least of My Scars*. Portland: Broken River, 2013.  
Owens, Louis. *Bone Games*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994.  
Vermette, Katherena. *The Break*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2016.