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No Sense of an Ending: Trickster Logic and Survivance in the Dodson School's e-Magazine

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Abstract: Scholarship on Indigenous trickster narrative has focused overwhelmingly on canonical oral traditions and adult Indigenous authors, leaving largely unexplored how trickster epistemologies and survivance emerge in stories Indigenous children compose. This study addressed that gap through close readings of three narratives written by middle school students at the Dodson School on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana and published in the school's 2025 e-magazine. Drawing on Michael Armstrong's method of reading children's writing as literature rather than developmental evidence, together with Vivian Paley's account of children's storytelling as social world-making, the study argued that these narratives demanded literary interpretation rather than psychological or pedagogical reduction. To account for the culturally specific traditions informing the stories, Armstrong's framework was placed in conversation with Franchot Ballinger's theory of the trickster, Gerald Vizenor's concept of survivance, and Amy Elias's theorization of coyote aesthetics. The close readings suggest that these young writers did not merely reproduce familiar Indigenous themes but organized narrative according to Indigenous epistemologies that resisted Western expectations of plot, closure, and individual heroism. Across the stories, survivance functioned not simply as a recurring subject but as a narrative grammar through which communal relationships, sacred landscapes, and ancestral presence structured meaning. Although a broader sample would be needed to draw conclusions about the Dodson School or Fort Belknap as a whole, the study proposed that close reading can reveal narrative features and possible cultural meanings that remain obscured when children's writing is treated primarily as evidence of developmental progress.

Keywords: Trickster Narrative, Survivance, Indigenous Epistemology, Children's Literature, Coyote Aesthetics, Close Reading, Fort Belknap Reservation, Dodson School

Introduction

It is worth noticing what we do with children's stories before we read them. We date them. We categorize them by developmental stage. We decide, in advance, what they can and cannot be about, as if the child who was writing were primarily evidence of childhood rather than a person doing something specific and strange with language. What follows from this, as an interpretive practice, is less a failure of generosity than a failure of attention: we arrive at the story having already determined its value. In the spring of 2025, twenty middle-schoolers at the Dodson School on the Fort Belknap Reservation in Dodson, Montana, composed original stories during a series of remote creative writing sessions delivered through The Happiness Initiative by Peers, a New York-based organization focused on mindfulness, empathy and emotional awareness. Each session ran sixty minutes, and the students produced handwritten narratives that the school then digitized

and published as an e-magazine. Principal Wendy Hopkins granted permission for this cultural artifact to serve as a primary source for scholarly research, and it is explored here for the very first time. These are stories that, when closely read with the attention reserved for so-called canonical writers, turn out to be doing something more interesting than demonstrating the young authors' developmental competence. What is interesting is not whether the stories are good, though they are, but that they seem to already know things that Native American scholarship has not yet thought to ask indigenous children of their age to know: specifically, the trickster's logic, the comic worldview's resistance to tragedy, and the ways survivance (a term Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor coined to represent an active sense of presence and survival over victimry) moves through a narrative like weather moves through a landscape (Squint, 2012).

Because "trickster" can name a character, a genre, and a way of thinking, it is worth defining. This paper does not claim that the Dodson stories contain trickster figures in the sense of the trickster characters of Aaniiih and Nakoda oral tradition; none of the three does. In this paper, trickster logic refers to a specific narrative method characterized by three features: (1) obliqueness, in which problems are approached indirectly, through improvisation and chance rather than planning or force (Ballinger, 1989); (2) relationality, in which agency is distributed among ancestors, community, animals, and land rather than concentrated in a single heroic will; and (3) a comic rather than tragic orientation, as described by Vizenor, where endings transmit meaning back into a community rather than enclosing it in loss (Vizenor, 1990). *Survivance* names the political condition this method serves. It is the active assertion of Native presence that Vizenor distinguishes from survival, because it is made in language and story rather than simply endured. Of the two terms, survivance, and the relationality through which it works, are the paper's main analytical lens. The paper uses "trickster logic" only where a story's method shows the features above.

The scholarly field on Indigenous trickster narrative is authoritative and, in a particular way, bounded. It has largely focused on adult writers and canonical oral traditions, leaving the question of when and how trickster epistemology is transmitted, whether it is taught, absorbed, or simply practiced from inside a living tradition, as something the field has not yet shown expansive interest in exploring. Yet inheritance may not wait for adulthood. A child growing up within a living storytelling tradition may not be waiting to learn it; she may, in some sense, already be practicing it. The stories in this e-magazine raise the possibility that a classroom near Fort Belknap can be, among other things, a site of transmission, one that trickster and survivance scholarship is equipped to read if it can be persuaded to look. When Student X, a middle schooler at the Dodson School, has his protagonist ascend on a white cloud so the sacred stones do not fall into the wrong hands, the tribe does not mourn her; they celebrate. When Student Z's soldier survives a desert that kills everyone around him, he does not triumph; he rests in the beauty of a glass tree, with nothing explained. Both endings depart from the conventional school-story model used here as a point of comparison. The stories of Dodson's 2025 e-magazine suggest that survivance, communal logic, and the trickster's resistance to Western tragic closureare useful interpretive patterns within these texts, most visible at the endings in which the pressure to conform is greatest, and at which they simply do not.

This paper argues that the three Dodson stories examined here are organized by survivance and relationality, and in places by trickster logic as defined above. These organizing principles are most visible where Western narrative convention presses hardest: at endings, in the role of the protagonist, and in where a story places its meaning. Read closely, the stories place meaning not in an individual hero's triumph or a tragic loss but in communities, ancestors, and land that come before the plot and outlast it. The argument proceeds in five steps. The Methodology section explains why children's writing deserves literary rather than developmental reading (Armstrong, 2006; Paley, 1990), and why that

framework needs Indigenous theory alongside it (Ballinger, 1989; Vizenor, 1990; Elias, 1999). The next section sets the stories against Western narrative conventions and the history of the Dodson School and Fort Belknap. Three close readings follow, each locating survivance at a different point in the narrative: Student X's "The Rising Rivers" at the ending, Student Z's "The Glass Desert" in the landscape, and Student Y's untitled "Story Four" at the opening. A comparative section then argues that survivance works across the three stories as a narrative grammar rather than a theme. The paper concludes with what this suggests about how scholars read children's writing, and with what so small a sample cannot establish.

Methodology

When a child composes a story, the prevailing academic instinct is to treat the text as symptomatic evidence of the author's developmental stage, cultural conditioning, or psychological formation rather than as a literary object possessing its own artistic integrity and intellectual ambition. This critical interpretive reflex enacts, at the level of methodology, the condescension it purports to describe, preemptively adjudicating what a young writer's work can and cannot mean before the act of reading has properly begun.

These stories were produced in an ancillary class for an enrichment program in which the author participated, and the selection, digitization, and analysis decisions reflect those choices. Details about the specific writing prompts, instructional context, or editorial changes are unavailable, which represents a limitation of this paper. The three stories were selected as the most relevant for analysis in terms of the theoretical frameworks employed, acknowledging the possibility of confirmation bias since their endings align with the main argument. These limitations, as well as the interpretive subjectivity of close reading and the absence of the authors' own perspectives, are discussed fully in the final section.

Literary critic and elementary classroom practitioner Michael Armstrong insists that the proper method for reading children's narrative is "to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event," which is to say, the interpretive pressure one brings to Shakespeare or modernist literature belongs equally, and without remainder, to the eleven-year-old who spent three days on a story (Armstrong, 2006, p. xi). Armstrong's method is explicitly "descriptive and interpretive, based on the close reading of a limited number of stories, informed by a knowledge of the context in which they were composed," and he argues that it is only through this kind of sustained, sympathetic scrutiny that one can recover what he terms children's "conscious creativity," or the deliberate aesthetic design operating beneath the surface of texts that inattentive readers reflexively dismiss as artless (Armstrong, 2006, p. x). Armstrong's framework, in other words, rejects the assumptions that a story produced by a young writer yields less significance than a canonical text. The smaller the corpus of text, the more each formal choice the author makes in the story must bear; and the more each choice must bear, the more the critic's obligation is to dwell on or treat apparent simplicity as the compression that makes interpretation necessary.

While Armstrong establishes the methodological legitimacy of close reading as applied to children's narrative, kindergarten teacher and educational researcher Vivian Paley relocates children's storytelling from the domain of skill acquisition into that of world-making. For Paley, the narrative and fantasy life of children is constitutive of their cognitive and social development, as she argues that fantasy play is "the glue that binds together all other pursuits," the "nourishing habitat for the growth of cognitive, narrative, and social connectivity in young children," through which a child constructs their social reality, negotiating communal belonging and making their interior life legible (Paley, 1990, p. 8). The methodological consequences suggest that if children's stories are the

externalized form of a social meaning-making process, then to read them in this vein is to engage the humanist researcher with heretofore underscrutinized cultural data. Paley argues further that the child's unshared and unenacted story remains what she calls "an empty structure," or a private fantasy that never enters communal knowledge (Paley, 1990, p. 25). A child's story becomes fully realized when it finds its listeners, as the boundary between composition and reception dissolves into what Armstrong, arriving at the same conclusion, describes as "a companionable art" in which "reading or listening is itself an act of composition, a remaking in the company of the storyteller and his tale" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 178). This convergence between Paley and Armstrong reflects a shared theoretical commitment to children's stories as irreducibly social artifacts, and that the critic's primary obligation is not to extract meaning from them in analytical isolation but to restore them to the communal context in which they were originally written.

This convergence, however, also exposes the limits of the existing scholarship for the present study. While children's narrative has increasingly been recognized as worthy of literary analysis, scholarship on Indigenous children's literature has largely concentrated on published works for Native youth or by established Indigenous authors. As American scholar of Indigenous librarianship Loriene Roy observes, "Indigenous children's and youth literature has grown in number, authorship, scope/themes, and format," reflecting how scholarship has documented the rapid growth of Native children's publishing (Roy, 2014, p. 333). Yet this emphasis has left comparatively little attention to the original stories Indigenous children themselves compose.

Across kindergartens in Chicago and primary schools in rural England, Paley and Armstrong developed their respective frameworks in relation to Western childhood narrative traditions in which the literary conventions a child absorbs, internalizes, and subsequently subverts are essentially Euro-American in character. The students of the Dodson School on the Fort Belknap Reservation are operating within a different cultural inheritance, one that places categorically different demands on any methodology brought to bear upon their work. Many of these students are growing up within or alongside the living storytelling traditions of the Aaniiih and Nakoda peoples, in which narrative is not separable from acts of cultural transmission, communal self-defense, and resistance that have sustained Indigenous peoples across centuries of colonial pressure. Franchot Ballinger's concept of the trickster as a figure who navigates social and spiritual life by "living sideways," defined as neither purely transgressive nor purely conformist, but occupying the oblique, productive angle that keeps communal tension generative rather than destructive, supplies the critical vocabulary that Armstrong's framework, for all its analytical rigor, cannot provide, because Armstrong's framework was not built for a tradition in which the formal properties of narrative are inseparable from their cosmological function (Ballinger, 1989, p. 24). Vizenor's insistence that Indigenous comic world-views perform "survivance," or active, creative, linguistically constituted resistance to colonial subjugation, reframes what Armstrong might describe as aesthetic improvisation as something categorically more charged: a young writer speaking a world into being against the specific and ongoing historical pressure to have that world erased from existence (Vizenor, 1990, p. 283). In addition, literary scholar Amy Elias's theorization of "coyote aesthetics," which reads apparent narrative fragmentation as "runes, not ruins [that function as] encoded recuperative postcolonial strategies that play a serious trickster game," equips the close reader to resist the trained critical reflex toward Western narrative coherence and to follow the story on its own terms, attending to what the text is doing rather than penalizing it for failing to do what it never intended (Elias, 1999, p. 206). Existing trickster scholarship has largely confined itself to adult writers and canonical oral traditions, leaving the question of how young Native writers inherit and deploy these narrative strategies largely unexamined. That lacuna is the intervention this

paper addresses. It reads the Dodson School e-magazine as Armstrong insists such texts deserve to be read: closely, contextually, and without condescension, and simultaneously with the theoretical instruments that the narrative traditions informing those stories actually require. What follows are three close readings: 1) Student X's "The Rising Rivers," 2) Student Z's "The Glass Desert," and 3) Student Y's untitled fourth story, each selected because it arrives at an ending Western narrative convention would not sanction, and each illuminating a different narrative location at which survivance and relationality organize the story: the ending, where an individual sacrifice becomes communal celebration; the landscape, which refuses institutional meaning; and the opening, where community is the precondition for meaning before the story has even begun.

Contextualizing the Dodson Stories

Western Narrative Conventions

It is important to first distinguish what is meant by Western childhood narrative traditions that have more pervasively defined scholarship on primary school writing and storytelling. Conventional Euro-American school-story plots typically prioritize linear plot progression with the individual protagonist reaching a definitive resolution by the story's end—in which conflict is explicated, moral order is restored, and meaning is found through a rather neat closure. As literary critic Maria Nikolajeva notes in her study of children's literature, "after the character has been taken through complications in a rising action reaching the climax point, a resolution, a falling action follows… the happy ending is one of the foremost criteria in the conventional definitions of children's literature" (Nikolajeva, 2002, pp. 167–170). Children's literature in the Euro-American tradition has thus often assumed that stories should proceed from equilibrium through disruption toward a satisfying conclusion, with the ending retrospectively organizing the events that precede it (Nikolajeva, 2002, pp. 167–170). Character development is likewise frequently acknowledged as an individual journey, in which agency rests primarily on the protagonist's choices rather than in communal relationships, ancestral presence, or the natural world. Even when these conventions are challenged within modern children's literature, they still remain the implicit narrative framework against which any new experimentation is measured. Armstrong's and Paley's frameworks, then, emerge from educational contexts in which these assumptions are largely taken for granted, making them valuable for understanding children's literary creativity while also limiting their capacity to account for narrative traditions organized by fundamentally different cosmologies.

Dodson Public School, Fort Belknap Indian Reservation

The stories analyzed in this paper emerge from a community with distinct history and culture. Dodson School is located three miles from the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in north-central Montana, the homeland of the Aaniiih (Gros Ventre) and Nakoda (Assiniboine) peoples. Established in 1888 after the cession of millions of acres of tribal land to the United States, the reservation today remains the center of political, cultural and educational life for the two tribes now "united as one federally recognized government called the Fort Belknap Indian Community" (Fort Belknap Indian Community, n.d.).

Like many Indigenous communities throughout the United States, Fort Belknap experienced the pressures of federal assimilation policies during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Missionary activity expanded across the reservation, while traditional ceremonies and cultural practices were increasingly discouraged. The federal government also established the Fort Belknap Boarding and Day School, which operated

from 1891 until 1934 as part of the national Indian boarding school system designed to assimilate Native children into Euro-American society ("List of Federal Indian Boarding Schools," n.d.). Removing children from their families and communities interrupted the intergenerational transmission of language, cultural practices, and oral traditions that had historically sustained both the Aaniiih and Nakoda peoples.

Education at Fort Belknap today reflects both the legacy of federal assimilation policies and ongoing efforts to preserve Indigenous identity through community-centered education. Students attend public schools located on or near the reservation, while certain initiatives like Montana's Indian Education for All (IEFA) reflect the state's constitutional commitment to integrating tribal history, culture, and contemporary Indigenous life into classroom instruction. As the Montana Office of Public Instruction observes, Fort Belknap residents continue to confront the historical consequences of federal policy "in their ongoing effort to create a better life for their people and a brighter future for their children" (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015). Within this educational context, Dodson School's e-magazine can be understood not merely as a classroom assignment but as one expression of that larger commitment to cultural continuance.

The stories that follow, therefore, are not mere indications of childhood development or products, even, of individual imagination. They are written within culturally specific communities whose storytelling traditions have persisted despite historical obstacles like land dispossession, assimilation policies, and educational systems that once sought to disrupt Indigenous transmission. Reading these narratives as literary texts, then, requires recognizing them not only as children's stories, but also as embodiments of living narrative traditions that remain central to community life.

Close Readings

"The Rising Rivers" by Student X

Student X, a middle schooler at the Dodson School, wrote "The Rising Rivers" over a series of three class periods. His story chronicles Macbia Scawia, a Native girl chosen by her ancestors to protect sacred stones that "make the river flow up the mountains instead of down them" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 7). This reversal of natural laws with water flowing upward instead of following gravity immediately marks the landscape as operating under Indigenous spiritual physics rather than Western scientific logic. A scientist wants to steal these gifts from her ancestors, and when he kidnaps Macbia's parents as leverage, she must rescue her family and the sacred stones. The story sets up a conflict between Indigenous and Western epistemologies. The scientist represents extractive colonial knowledge production, as this character wants to possess and study these objects, thereby removing them from their spiritual context. The story only identifies him as "the scientist," making him an archetypal figure who embodies Western rationality and cannot comprehend sacredness. Ballinger claims that genuine communal belonging requires the individual to have "stepped beyond the individual limits of Self, thereby binding self… to the larger community," and contrasts this with "the sterile individual warring within the precincts of Self" (Ballinger, 1989, p. 24). The scientist is not a trickster in this paper's sense. He occupies the self-enclosed position Ballinger describes, the figure that communal narratives define themselves against. The scientist can conceive of the stones only as objects to be possessed and analyzed, never as relational entities whose power inheres in a living covenant between Macbia's people and their ancestors.

The story centers Indigenous spiritual knowledge as Macbia's source of power: when trapped by the scientist, "she stormed in and prayed for her ancestors to help her. As soon as she started walking in she heard clashing and the scientist screaming" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 8). Her ancestors materialize to help her escape, and when Macbia needs a plan,

the narrative resists: "She never liked planning so she decided to play it by ear" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 8). This rejection of Western heroic preparation expected from protagonists suggests an alternative approach in which intuition and spiritual connection matter more than rational planning. Vizenor argues that "comic world views are communal; chance is more significant than 'moral ruin,'" while "tragic modes are inventions and impositions that attend the 'discoverers' and translators of tribal narratives" (Vizenor, 1990, p. 283). Macbia's improvisation enacts this comic mindset: when she "stormed in and prayed for her ancestors to help her," the story's own logic validates her approach, since "she heard clashing and the scientist screaming" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 8). Spiritual relationality succeeds where calculated strategy would only replicate the scientist's possessive logic. In this sense, Macbia's method follows trickster logic rather than heroic logic. She is not a trickster figure, and she does not act as an agent carrying out a plan. She acts as the conductor of a relationship: oblique, improvised, and relational, in the three senses defined in the introduction. This is trickster logic operating at the level of method; that the story's own physics validate her, and that prayer works while planning would not, is how method becomes survivance.

When finally cornered at a cliff's edge with the scientist pursuing her, Macbia does not fight, as the scientist simply gets exposed as someone who is not equipped for the terrain he enters. Instead, "a white cloud came by and it was so easy to get on the cloud." She ascends to the sky with the stones, sacrificing herself "just so the stones didn't get in the wrong hands" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). The story's conclusion resists Western tragic convention, which requires the protagonist's sacrifice to register as loss, anchoring meaning in absence and grief. The tribe's joy refuses that logic: Macbia's death is a fulfillment to be honored, not mourned. Within Vizenor's framework, this can be read as a comic orientation, which is not comedy in the sense of humor, but in the older sense of a narrative whose ending transmits meaning outward rather than sealing it inward. Literary critic Frank Kermode's account of Western narrative closure offers a useful point of contrast: he argues that Western plotting "presupposes and requires that an end will bestow upon the whole duration and meaning," granting the ending the capacity to travel back through the story, organizing everything before it into retrospective significance (Kermode, 1967, p. 46). Student X's ending partially satisfies this model and then breaks from it. The celebration does resolve the threat or confirm Macbia's choice. Yet Student X's ending opens outward: the tribe's joy does not close the story down but passes it forward. Student X writes, "the chief told the tribe the news of what happened to Macbia Scawia. Instead of being sad and depressed they decided to celebrate her because she did something most people wouldn't have done" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 8). Folklorist and literary scholar Mary Magoulick argues that contemporary Indigenous storytellers create "new myths" that "convey continuity with past values and lifeways" while serving as "educational tools to tell and shape experiences, values, and hopes of today's natives" (Magoulick, 2017, p. 65). The river that remains "clear and pretty" provides evidence that Macbia's sacrifice held, that the stones remain protected, and the ancestors are being honored (Dodson School, 2025, p. 8).

Unlike Kermode's sense of an ending that owns meaning entirely, Student X's ending is where the story's significance enters communal custody and is transmitted. Kermode's theory centers on a solitary need. His reader stands alone in time, using narrative closure to manage private anxiety about death. The ending's work in this Western paradigm is interior: one mind's experience of duration, organized into a retrospective sense (hence Kermode's title, *The Sense of an Ending*). Student X's ending solves a different problem: the chief tells the tribe; the celebration is public; the river is a shared landscape. The meaning that Macbia's sacrifice generates disperses into the community that now carries it forward. Paley argues that the unshared story remains "an empty

structure": here, the tribe receiving and celebrating Macbia's story would perform the ending's function (Paley, 1990, p. 25). Student X has produced a narrative whose ending transmits meaning in a community that will carry it past the story's final line, instead of bestowing it on a single reader who will carry it alone.

"The Rising Rivers" shows survivance working at the ending. Macbia succeeds through prayer and improvisation rather than planning or force, which is trickster logic in the sense defined above. Her sacrifice becomes communal celebration rather than tragic loss. Meaning does not close on an individual, as Kermode's model expects; it passes into the tribe's keeping. This is the first of the three locations this paper traces: survivance as what happens to meaning when a story ends.

"The Glass Desert" by Student Z

Where Macbia's trickster logic is a method available to her as an oblique, relational move that conducts rather than commands, McGraw, the protagonist of Student Z's "The Glass Desert" has no such method; he has only institutional purpose. His story dramatizes survivance without a practitioner, as the land performs a refusal of purpose McGraw cannot. The story opens with an institutional anchor that borders on parody: "My name is Sargent McGraw, I was tasked to overtake a mysterious temple from evil with my fellow foot soldiers" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 13). With military rank, the mission-briefing language, and the Apache helicopter that soon follows, Student Z has written the opening of a Western war narrative, and written it correctly, with the confidence of a student who has absorbed the genre's conventions. The temple, however, sits inside a "massive sand storm" of "purple and black sand," a landscape whose color is supernatural, displacing the story's apparent genre before the first paragraph ends (Dodson School, 2025, p. 13). The purple desert argues that the institutional world McGraw represents does not map onto the terrain he has entered. The storm confirms this. When McGraw lands, "it was if the very storm itself was laughing at me" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 13). Here, the landscape operates as a distinct agent with its own judgment of the man the U.S. Army has sent. That the storm kills every soldier around McGraw while sparing him alone suggests the land's agency is selective. Literary critic Kristin Squint's concept of survivance as "both survival and resistance" that produces "postindians, those Natives who have survived European colonial hegemony and its constructed notion of Indianness" locates what the landscape is performing: the military apparatus dissolves while McGraw endures, stripped of the institutional identity the army gave him, which is the only condition under which the land will let him proceed (Squint, 2012, p. 110). The story enacts this stripping, as the institutional voice gets interrupted: "I'm absolutely cert—" BOOM! It was not a dud" ends mid-sentence (Dodson School, 2025, p. 14). McGraw walks until he cannot walk and crawls, reaching the temple only after spending everything the army gave him. Ballinger's image of "the sterile individual warring within the precincts of Self" names what McGraw becomes (Ballinger, 1989, p. 24): a soldier who can only repeat his purpose to himself at the moment that purpose has dissolved. Like the scientist in "The Rising Rivers," McGraw is not a trickster. He is the self-enclosed individual who cannot cross from Self into relation, pressing toward a goal whose only audience is himself. In this story, trickster logic belongs to the land and the story's form, not to its protagonist.

Student Z's choice of the war narrative as his vehicle is also not incidental. The verb "overtake" in McGraw's opening sentence may suggest within this framework an aspect of colonial logic: a soldier dispatched by an institution to seize something sacred from terrain that does not belong to him, authorized by a chain of command whose legitimacy the land has never recognized. Student Z is writing from inside a tradition whose sacred sites have been surveyed, excavated, and legislated over by the same institutional apparatus

McGraw represents, and the genre he selects is the one in which that apparatus narrates its own heroism. The war story is the genre through which colonial power presents extraction as mission. Student Z takes it apart from within, using the land itself as the instrument of refusal.

While Student X's ending transmits meaning outward, Student Z's ending deposits it in the land and leaves it there, untranslated, thereby refusing the transaction Western narrative demands. The story's final image renders this refusal concrete: "Suddenly the storm cleared, all was quiet, and before me I saw a glistening tree made from dark purple glass" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 14). The tree communicates, as McGraw "felt as if it was speaking to me," but it carries no information, no revelation, no explanation of the temple or its evil (Dodson School, 2025, p. 14). Elias developed the concept of "coyote aesthetics" to describe how Indigenous narrative deploys fragmentation not as breakdown but as encoded strategy: the story arrives in pieces because the pieces are doing deliberate, recuperative work that Western coherence would destroy. Her theorization of "coyote aesthetics," which constitutes "runes, encoded recuperative postcolonial strategies that play a serious trickster game," supplies the vocabulary for what Student Z has constructed (Elias, 1999, p. 206). The glass tree serves as the story's central rune: simultaneously natural and manufactured, transparent and opaque, beautiful and entirely resistant to being used. It arrives at the story's end, carrying no explanation and requiring none, as the landscape has been speaking this language since the storm laughed at the first page, and McGraw finally understands it only because the institution that taught him to demand revelation has dissolved entirely. Student Z's ending refuses to generate the kind of meaning Frank Kermode's model requires. Kermode argues that narrative works like a clock: tick at the opening, tock at the close, with the ending's function to "confer organization and form on the temporal structure," traveling back through everything before it and making it cohere (Kermode, 1967, p. 46). McGraw's "tock" arrives when the storm clears and the tree appears, but the organization Kermode requires never follows: the mission briefing, the dead soldiers, the crawling through razor sand do not snap into retrospective significance. The story refuses to tell McGraw, or the reader, what it was all for. The story's final lines confer as much: "Though I may never find the mystery of the temple, I could rest knowing the beauty" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 14). This ending declines the tock's organizing work entirely, as the glass tree speaks, but its communication defeats translation, and the meaning it carries stays in the land, where it preceded McGraw and will outlast him.

"The Glass Desert" thus moves survivance from a character to the land. Unlike Macbia, McGraw has no relational method, only an institutional purpose that the landscape strips away. Trickster logic shows up here in the story's form, in what Elias calls coyote aesthetics. The laughing storm and the untranslatable glass tree withhold the explanation McGraw's mission demands, and the story's meaning stays with the land. Where "The Rising Rivers" passes meaning to a community, "The Glass Desert" shows the land refusing to give meaning up to an institution. This is a second location, and a second mode, of survivance.

"Story Four" by Student Y

If Student X's ending transmits meaning outward and Student Z's deposits it in the land untranslated, middle school author Student Y's story begins where most narratives of restoration end, namely with a functioning community already in place, suggesting that meaning is not a sense the ending confers but a precondition the story inherits. The story's opening sentence foregrounds the community without ceremony: "There was once a wolf named Scarlet who was the leader of the wolf pack" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). Here,

there is no origin story, rise to power, or legitimacy earned through trial, as the leader, the pack, and the governance structure already exist at the story's outset. Student Y's second sentence establishes how each member relates to the whole: "Every other week Scarlet and a few other wolves would meet up with the other animals in the middle of their forest on a big stone which was called the Talking Stones" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). The Talking Stones council is described in the iterative tense, every other week, as recurring practice, meaning the story opens not on an event but on a rhythm. What Student Y has written, without apparent effort, is a community defined by its own deliberative apparatus before a single problem has entered the story. For Kermode, a story's middle only feels meaningful because the reader knows an ending is coming: without that pull, events are just one thing after another, time passing without purpose, and it is the ending that "bestow[s] upon the whole duration and meaning" (Kermode, 1967, p. 46). Student Y refuses this logic. The Talking Stones council represents where the story starts, invalidating the sense of an ending that has nothing to bestow since the meaning of the community is already there.

When a sickness spreads through the snakes, the forest's own sacred protection, the Praying Stones and the Tree of Life, mysteriously fails. Student Y elaborates the story's rising action: "they tried going to the praying stones and praying for health but the stones weren't helping for some reason which was weird. The stones normally work so then they tried going to the tree of life and seeing if maybe that would help. But nothing was working and the snakes all continued to get sick" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). The phrase "which was weird" rewards attention. Student Y knows the cosmological baseline of her world, that "the stones normally work," and registers the deviation (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). The stones have failed as a symptom indicating that something inside the community has gone wrong. Like in Student X's story, spiritual physics in Student Y's telling operates beneath what the surface of the story presents as a simple animal fable. The Talking Stones council meeting that follows demonstrates how the story's communal logic experiences its first real test: the head snake "came to the meeting mad and worried for all of the snakes," and his first move is to blame the other animals, bypassing the council's deliberative purpose entirely (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). Student Y notes that "everyone thought it was because he was very worried for his friends and family," which explains the head snake's behavior as emotionally legible rather than villainous, thereby refusing to moralize what is simply grief and fear under pressure, and also showing Scarlet and the other animals extending the kind of communal generosity the head snake cannot yet extend to them (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). Vizenor's insistence that "comic world views are communal" while "tragic modes are inventions and impositions that attend the 'discoverers' and translators of tribal narratives" illuminates the distinction Student Y has drawn (Vizenor, 1990, p. 283). The head snake's rage is the tragic impulse: individual, accusatory, oriented toward a verdict rather than a resolution. Scarlet's response, in which she "told him to calm down so they could figure it out," represents the comic corrective, pulling the story back from individual blame toward shared inquiry. She does not discipline the head snake's grief; she redirects its energy (Dodson School, 2025, p. 5). The "figure it out" mindset is the story's answer to every problem the sickness raises: problems get solved by collective inquiry, not individual authority, and the council exists to make that possible.

While the bears wished the snakes harm, the more damning violation is weaponizing the community's own sacred apparatus against its own members. The bears "would pray to the stones that the snakes would get sick and die so the stones and tree were corrected in a way and wouldn't help the snakes" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 6). The bears are not outsiders attacking the community from beyond; they are members who have turned the shared apparatus inward for private, destructive ends, and the severity of this violation is that the Praying Stones cannot distinguish between genuine prayer and weaponized prayer,

making the community's own spiritual coherence the instrument of its corruption. The spiritual infrastructure fails because it is indifferent to intent, a vulnerability that only a community member could exploit. Kermode would recognize this as the story's *peripeteia*, or the reversal that charges the interval with crisis, as the community's tools of sense-making have been corrupted from within, and restoring them requires a deliberation. What Scarlet does with this discovery is the resolution the story has been preparing since its opening sentence. She does not punish the bears or call for exile as a consequence: "Scarlet told the bears to take back their prayers or they would have to leave the forest and find their own place to live" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 6). The remedy is retraction, as the bears must restore the Praying Stones and Tree of Life to their proper communal function. This is the logic of repair rather than retributive punishment, and Student Y has built it into the very syntax of the comeuppance: the bears can stay, but only by undoing what they did. Scarlet is not a trickster figure, and the story's crisis is resolved by council rather than by obliqueness. Jay Cox's argument that female tricksters possess the defining ability to "move freely from the margin to the center of the community" is useful here as a contrast, because Scarlet's story refuses its premise (Cox, 1989, p. 19). Cox's formulation implies that female authority begins at the margin and must earn its passage inward, a dynamic that assumes, as its baseline, that the center belongs to someone else. Student Y builds no such dynamic into her story, as Scarlet is never at the margin. Her authority is not exceptional, does not need to be earned or explained, and is never questioned. The story treats female leadership as the natural condition of communal order, which means Student Y has written a world in which Cox's framework arrives too late, describing as an achievement what this story had already assumed before the first sentence finished.

The final sentence sees the bears take "back the prayers and the snakes got healed and everyone lived happily ever after" (Dodson School, 2025, p. 6). Here, Student Y reverses Kermode's tick-tock logic in which the ending produces what makes the middle meaningful. Student Y's ending certifies that the meaning survived the bears' rupture of the community.

The phrase "happily ever after" is not the conventional fairy-tale formula closing down a story into retrospective sense; it is a confirmation that the community the opening sentence described is still intact, still governed by the Talking Stones and the deliberative practice Scarlet embodies. The resolution here follows this pattern: the snakes are healed by the restoration of the community's own spiritual apparatus to its proper use. What this means formally is that Student Y's story has no protagonist in the Western sense, not even Scarlet, who functions as a conduit for communal process rather than an agent of individual will. The story's meaning does not reside in any character; it resides in the community the story describes, its council, the stones, the repair, the restoration. Student Y's story looks, at a glance, like a simple fable with a moral about community. Closely read, it reveals a writer who has so thoroughly internalized a communal narrative logic that she begins her story after the beginning, ends it before the ending requires pathos, and locates its meaning not in a character but in the structure of the community itself, which survives the bears' betrayal and will outlast the final sentence.

Of the three stories, "Story Four" shows the least trickster logic. Its crisis is resolved through deliberation, not improvisation. For that reason it shows most clearly that survivance and relationality, rather than trickster figures, are this paper's central concern. Here survivance sits at the opening: the community and its institutions exist before the plot begins, conflict is resolved through repair rather than punishment, and "happily ever after" confirms continuity rather than creating it. With the ending ("The Rising Rivers") and the landscape ("The Glass Desert"), this completes the three locations the next section compares.

Reading Survivance Across the Stories

The three stories can be read as suggesting that survivance is not only a recurring theme but also an organizing pattern within their narrative worlds. Rather than appearing only in moments of resistance or cultural affirmation, survivance structures where meaning comes through as well as how conflict unfolds and what counts as narrative resolution. Existing scholarship has demonstrated that survivance structures Indigenous literary production and oral tradition, yet that scholarship has almost exclusively examined narratives produced by adult storytellers or canonical traditions. Although the three stories examined above arrive at survivance through different formal strategies, they collectively suggest that survivance functions less as an isolated theme than as the narrative condition from which these young writers imagine their worlds. Vizenor defines survivance not as mere survival but as an active sense of Indigenous presence, a refusal of narratives that reduce Native existence to victimhood or historical disappearance. Survivance therefore operates most powerfully not simply as a theme that emerges during conflict but as the narrative framework that determines what the story assumes about the world (before the story's main conflict is presented). In the stories published in Dodson School's e-magazine, survivance is shown through the choices the writers make which touch on relationships, continuity and community, rather than conquest or explanation.

The three stories distribute this narrative work across different dimensions of storytelling. In Student X's "The Rising Rivers," survivance appears most clearly in the ending, where Macbia's sacrifice is transformed into communal celebration rather than tragic loss. Meaning moves outward into the tribe that continues to honor both the ancestors and the sacred landscape she protects. Student Z's "The Glass Desert" relocates survivance into the land itself. The purple storm, the temple, and the glass tree do not follow the military logic McGraw carries into the desert, allowing the landscape to retain meanings that remain inaccessible to institutional authority. Student Y's story positions survivance even earlier. Rather than culminating in restoration of community, her narrative begins with an already functioning community whose political and spiritual institutions merely require repair rather than invention. The Talking Stones, the Tree of Life, and Scarlet's leadership presume a world whose continuity precedes the story's opening sentence.

Read comparatively, these stories suggest that survivance is not simply a feature of what these three young writers write about; it appears to be built into how their stories are structured. Squint describes survivance as both survival and resistance, a formulation that becomes especially revealing in these narratives because resistance rarely appears as a form of fighting, but, rather, as the continual process of being a community. Communities continue to deliberate; sacred landscapes continue to speak; ancestors continue to intervene; and rivers continue to flow upward. The stories do not show Indigenous life as trying to recover from historical rupture so much as proceeding according to relationships that colonial narratives cannot fully interrupt. Survivance therefore becomes the narrative grammar through which their worlds become imaginable.

Therefore, if children's stories are assessed primarily as evidence of developmental progress, then the literary and cultural knowledge they inherently contain remains underappreciated—and thus undervalued. Armstrong's call to read children's writing with the same interpretive seriousness afforded canonical literature becomes especially significant in an Indigenous context because what emerges through close reading is cultural inheritance, in addition to individual creativity. The stories appear to write from within a communal, relational narrative logic rather than imitating it deliberately, though, as the Limitations section discusses, the texts alone cannot show where that logic comes from. Their departures from Western narrative conventions therefore should not be understood

as immature storytelling or incomplete mastery of conventional plot structures. Rather, these formal choices reveal a different narrative logic, one grounded in relationality, communal growth, and survivance. Instead of asking whether Indigenous children have learned trickster traditions, then, these narratives encourage scholars to ask how literary criticism might better recognize the forms of cultural knowledge children are already practicing. The intervention of this essay is ultimately methodological as much as it is literary: survivance becomes visible not because these young storytellers consciously integrate it, but because close reading allows scholarship to point out narrative practices that have been present all along.

Conclusions

Taken separately, each of the above stories demonstrates something trickster scholarship already knows: that Indigenous narrative resists Western tragic closure, disperses meaning into community rather than bestowing it on a solitary hero, and encodes survivance in formal choices that inattentive critics mistake for simplicity or incompletion. Taken together, they suggest something the scholarship has not yet had occasion to examine: that the narrative strategies of survivance may be at work well before adulthood. Student X deploys it at the ending, where the pressure to conform to Western convention is greatest. Student Z deploys it in the landscape, which laughs at the soldier's institutional identity before he has taken three steps. Student Y deploys it in the opening sentence, before a single problem has entered the story. What these three middle schoolers reveal is that survivance operates at every level of narrative simultaneously, and that, in these stories at least, it is bound up with a prior relationship to community and land. This is what the scholarly field, for all its rigor, has not yet thought to ask: not whether Indigenous children absorb trickster logic, but where, and how early, and in what form. Three stories cannot answer that question, but they suggest the field may have been looking too late, and that what it would find may take forms it is not yet prepared to recognize. Student X has likely never encountered the theory of survivance, yet his story behaves as though its ending belongs to the community. Student Z has likely never read about coyote aesthetics, yet his story lets the land keep its meaning. Student Y has likely never read Vizenor, yet her story assumes the council was already there when it began. What the scholarly field calls theory, these writers appear to treat as the conditions of storytelling. That gap, between what scholarship names and what these children practice, is not a gap in their education; it is a gap in ours.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is limited in scope. It examines a single e-magazine from one middle-school program near the Fort Belknap Reservation and offers close readings of three of the roughly twenty stories in it. Its argument is interpretive rather than generalizable. It does not claim that Indigenous children's writing in general shows survivance or trickster logic. It proposes that these concepts are productive frameworks for reading children's creative work as literary expression rather than developmental evidence.

Three methodological limitations deserve emphasis. The first is selection bias. I chose these three stories because they were the most interesting in light of the theories used, and their endings fit the argument. The study does not report how many of the remaining stories share these features, so it cannot rule out that the patterns described here are exceptions rather than tendencies within the collection. The second is subjective interpretation. Close reading depends on the reader, and these readings reflect my own theoretical commitments and position as a reader who is not a member of the Aaniiih or Nakoda communities. Another reader, especially one from the students' own communities,

might read the same formal choices quite differently. The third is the absence of the authors' own voices. The child authors were not interviewed, and information about the writing prompts, instructional context, or editorial changes made before digitization is unavailable. Claims about what the stories "know" or "assume" are therefore inferences from the texts, not accounts of the writers' intentions.

Importantly, the features read here as cultural inheritance may have other sources. The stories may draw on the students' personal experiences and family stories; on school curricula, including Montana's Indian Education for All; on the Happiness Initiative sessions themselves, whose focus on empathy and emotional awareness may have encouraged themes of community and repair; and on popular media. The military vocabulary of "The Glass Desert" suggests video games or film, and the wolf-pack council of "Story Four" resembles popular animal-fantasy fiction. The tribal affiliation of individual students is also unknown, since Dodson is a public school serving both Native and non-Native students. Communal endings and non-tragic resolutions can be found in many storytelling traditions. The study therefore cannot establish that the patterns it identifies come from Aaniiih or Nakoda tradition specifically, or that they represent broader patterns of cultural inheritance.

Future research could address these limitations by analyzing the full corpus systematically, including stories that do not fit the argument; by interviewing student authors, with appropriate consent and assent, about their choices and influences; by working with tribal educators and community members, whose interpretive authority over these stories exceeds that of an outside reader; and by comparing writing across Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, age groups, and longer periods of time.

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