

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL   
**BOOK CLUB**  
DISCUSSION  
GUIDE



# THE BREAK

KATHERENA  
VERMETTE

RECOMMENDED BY  
ANGIE ABDOU

**SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2018**  
**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

*“a series of shifting narratives  
...showcases Vermette’s  
abundant writing talent.”*

## WELCOME AMNESTY BOOK CLUB MEMBERS

Welcome back to the Amnesty International Book Club! We are pleased to announce our September/October 2018 title *The Break* by Katherena Vermette. This long awaited title has been recommended by guest reader Angie Abdou, with whom you will explore the novel and read beyond the book to learn more about some of the pressing human rights concerns facing Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in Canada.

In this guide, you will find Abdou’s reflection on the book, as well as discussion questions, an Amnesty Background section, and an action you can take to advocate for concrete government actions to end violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people.

When Stella, a young Métis mother, looks out her window one evening and spots someone in trouble on the Break—a barren field on an isolated strip of land outside her house—she calls the police to alert them to a possible crime.

In a series of shifting narratives, people who are connected, both directly and indirectly, with the victim—police, family, and friends—tell their personal stories leading up to that fateful night. Lou, a social worker, grapples with the departure of her live-in boyfriend. Cheryl, an artist, mourns the premature death of her sister Rain. Paulina, a single mother, struggles to trust her new partner. Phoenix, a homeless teenager, is released from a youth detention centre. Officer Scott, a Métis police officer, feels caught between two worlds as he patrols the city. Through their various perspectives a larger, more comprehensive story about lives of the residents in Winnipeg’s North End, as well the pervasive violence faced by so many Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in Canada, is exposed.

A powerful intergenerational family saga, *The Break* showcases Vermette’s abundant writing talent and

positions her as an exciting new voice in Canadian literature.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

We think you will find this book to be an important, albeit a difficult read. We are pleased to be able to be part of this conversation.

### About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person’s voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

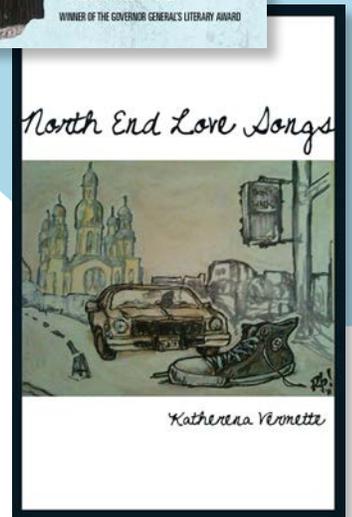
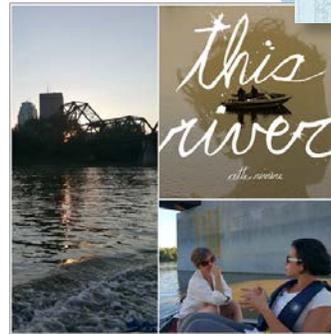
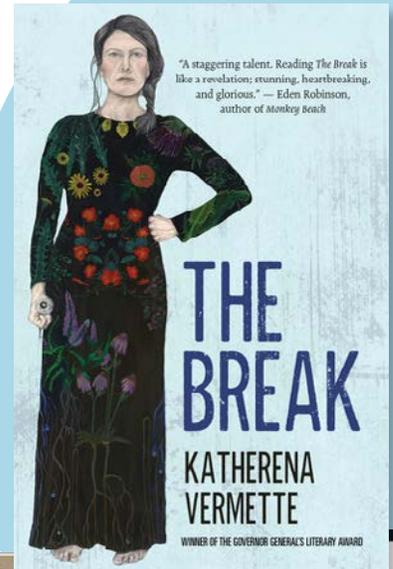
## About this month's author, **Katherena Vermette**

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Katherena Vermette is a Métis writer from Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada which is the heart of the Métis nation and also Treaty One territory. Her first book, *North End Love Songs* (The Muses Company) won the Governor General's Literary Award for Poetry. Her National Film Board short documentary, *this river*, won the Coup de Coeur at the Montreal First Peoples Festival and the 2017 Canadian Screen Award for Best Short.

*The Break*, her first novel, was a bestseller in Canada and won the Amazon.ca First Novel Award, the McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award, the Margaret Laurence Award for Fiction, and the Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award. *The Break* was also shortlisted for a Governor General's Literary Award, the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and was a 2017 Canada Reads finalist.

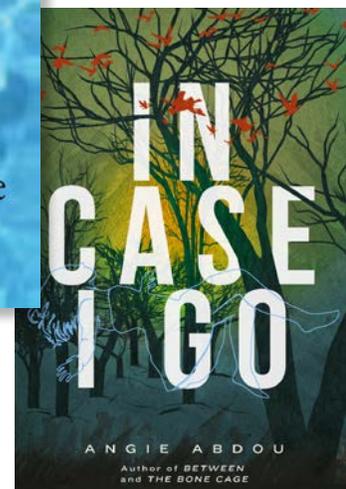
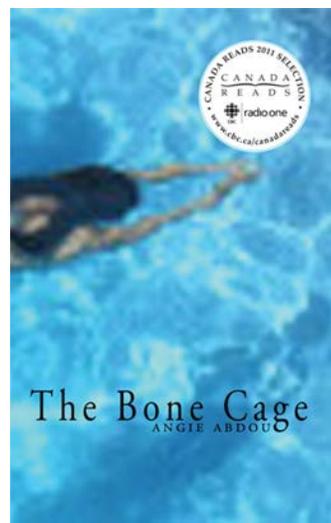


## About this month's reader, **Angie Abdou**



Angie Abdou is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Athabasca University. Her first novel, *The Bone Cage*, was a finalist for Canada Reads 2011. Her most recent novel, *In Case I Go* (2017), was a finalist for the 2017 Banff Mountain Book Award in the fiction and poetry category.

Vancouver Sun called it "a spectacularly successful novel" and Chatelaine Magazine named it one of 2017's most riveting mystery novels. Angie's seventh book and first nonfiction, *Home Ice: Reflections of a Reluctant Hockey Mom*, will be released in September.



## Guest reader Angie Abdou's reflections on *The Break*

### The fine balance of Katherena Vermette's *The Break*

-by Angie Abdou

I once thought it impossible to name a favourite author or a favourite piece of fiction. I fell in-love with Canadian Literature as a first-year university student in 1987 and pledged my devotion to all of it, especially that by canonical women writers: Margaret Laurence, Carol Shields, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, and Mavis Gallant. I devoured their offerings and refused to single out one above the rest. "What's your favourite book?" remained an impossible question.

Then I read Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*. This, I thought, this is my favourite novel. Why did I respond so intensely to Mistry's book? Because it showed me the crucially important function literature plays in society. It allowed me to articulate the way literature really can make the world a better place. The novel's main character—who by the end of the book is a legless, homeless, eunuch living in the streets of India—created a space in which I could fully empathize with someone who I would never be. His story immersed me in a (hard) life I will never live, and it showed human beings finding resilience in seemingly impossible situations. Mistry's characters walk a treacherous line between hope and despair, and, in the face of overwhelming reason to fall into despair, they find a way to land on the side of hope. Through intense immersion, *A Fine Balance* teaches both empathy and resilience.

Set in Winnipeg, Katherena Vermette's *The Break* does for Canada what Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* did for India. People with hard lives—mostly women with hard lives—find a way to be hopeful, and in telling their story *The Break* promotes—in fact fosters—both empathy and resilience.

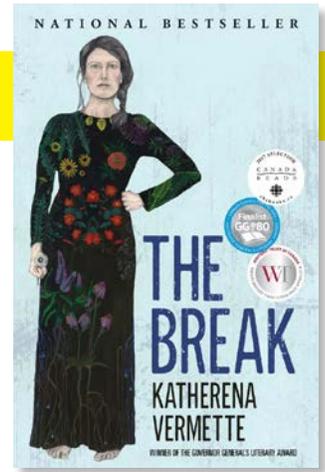
*The Break* begins with a violent sexual assault on young Emily, witnessed in the dark and from a distance by her Aunt Stella. Stella does not recognize Emily. Shaken by the violence she sees

and her inability to act (beyond calling the police), Stella remains unaware of her connection to the victim until later in the book, a realization that intensifies the shame she feels for not intervening and not directly helping the girl.

Vermette circles around that assault, zooming in from different angles, perspectives, and levels of proximity. Sexualized violence also ripples through the generations in the lives of the novel's large fictional cast. Parallel incidents (suffered by nieces, daughters, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers) force upon readers the reality that the horror suffered by Emily is not an isolated incident but part of a larger societal problem. As the characters question culpability, so too do the readers.

While Vermette excels at bringing energy and empathy and depth to all her characters and their complex situations, her talent truly shines in the portrayal of Phoenix. As the perpetrator of horrendous violence, Phoenix could easily come off as an irredeemable monster, fully to blame. However, Vermette dares to write chapters from Phoenix's point of view, thereby bringing readers into Phoenix's mind and creating empathy for this rapist, who is also a sad, neglected, abused, and lonely girl. As the novel unfolds, readers recognize Phoenix as a victim of oppression and racism—as not only a tormenter of Emily but also her fellow sufferer. That characterization—and the creation of empathy for a rapist, and reallocation of blame onto the long-standing complex systems that have made her so—would be an impressive feat in any work of literature, let alone the in the work of a debut novelist.

Ultimately, *The Break* is a call to action. As the characters of *The Break* recover and look to find a way forward to a better future, one hopes the readers will do the same.





## **THE BREAK: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

### Discussion questions from guest reader **Angie Abdou:**

1. Most of the story comes to us through female narrators (third person with the exception of Lorraine). The sole male point-of-view is Tommy Scott, the Métis police offer. How does his story parallel the story of the women narrators? How does racism—both explicit and implicit—affect his life and sense of self? What would the novel lose by not having this male point of view?
2. The two well-developed non-Indigenous characters are Tommy's work partner (Christie) and Tommy's girlfriend (Hannah). Christie is explicitly racist, insisting on calling Tommy "May-tee" and mocking his "in-stinked." Hannah, though well-meaning and obviously loveable enough that Tommy chooses to live with her, is also racist, if less explicitly so. In chapter seven, Tommy thinks: "Hannah makes jokes sometimes, vague unfunny quips about her man's wild ways, how she tamed him. She doesn't mean anything by it, and he's never told her it bothers him." Compare Christie's racism and Hannah's racism. How are they different? How are they the same? How does each justify their racial prejudice? What effects do their behaviours and comments have on Tommy? How do Christie and Hannah respond when confronted with these effects? How is the reader-experience shaped by having these two as the only well-developed, non-Indigenous characters?
3. Though the characters quickly learn that Ziggy's physical assault came at the hands of girls, they're slow to realize that Emily's sexual assault was also the work of female characters. Pauline, Rita, and the others assume that the crime of rape cannot be committed by girls. Did you know all along that the pony-tailed gang assaulting Emily were the girls from the party, the same girls who assaulted Ziggy? If not, when did you realize? If you did know, what effect did the distance between your knowledge and the characters' knowledge (and their slow realization of the truth) have on your reading experience? How would the novel be different if the violence had been committed by men?
4. Dramatic irony is when the readers know something the characters do not. Early in the book Pauline and Louisa suspect Pete to be responsible for the horrific injuries to Emily, but the readers know otherwise. This is dramatic irony but not to comic effect. What effect does this dramatic irony have on the reader? What does the misplaced suspicion say about the female characters? About the culture of which they are a part? About the way past experience shapes their future relationships?
5. Vermette often refers to shame in describing the emotions of her characters. In chapter nine when Pauline learns that her daughter has been raped and has glass inside of her, her first response is to feel shame. Why shame? Why not sadness or anger or helplessness or despair? Where else is this shame response mirrored in the novel?

6. Like *A Fine Balance*, *The Break* is dark. It is a hard read because it depicts hard truths. However, the tale Vermette weaves is not relentlessly dark. Her novel begins with an epigraph from Alice Walker: “The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” In *The Break*, little damaged Emily and her mother and her aunts and her grandmother—all these women find a way to acknowledge their own power and the power of their

sisterhood and to draw on that strength to survive and flourish. In what ways have these characters given up their power in the course of the novel? In what specific ways do they begin to reclaim it? Where do you see these characters’ strength at the end of the novel? What future do you see for them? How is that future pointed at in the final chapter? How might it extend beyond the pages of the book?

## Discussion questions from the Amnesty International Book Club:

1. Which aspects of *The Break* did you enjoy the most, and which ones did you find the most challenging? Why?
2. The start of each of the four parts of the book is a short reflection by an unnamed character. How does this approach provide insight into the events unfolding in the novel?
3. How did your feelings toward Phoenix evolve as you read the book?
4. How did *The Break* change your perceptions of victims and perpetrators of violence?
5. What did *The Break* teach you about the root causes of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in Canada?
6. For many characters in the book, the lands of their traditional territories represent sustenance and healing. What is the significance of the “bush” for these characters and how do those connections relate to their lives in the city? What tensions do specific characters face in the pull of these two worlds?



What did *The Break* teach you about the root causes of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in Canada?

## BACKGROUND



Drum given to Amnesty International in honour of the organization's work in support of Indigenous women in Canada.  
Drum painted by Jay Bell Redbird

### Violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people

Amnesty International has long been concerned about violations of the human rights of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada. We recognize that the most effective movements for the protection of human rights are led by the rights holders themselves. We work in support of Indigenous human rights defenders through research and documentation, promotion of international human rights standards, and by encouraging our members and the general public to speak their conscience on these crucial issues.

Over the last decade, we have worked alongside Indigenous peoples' organizations and activists to document the unacceptable impoverishment and marginalization of Indigenous communities, which among other tragic outcomes, has exposed Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people to horrendous levels of violence in their homes and on the streets of Canadian cities.

Canadian government statistics show that First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women and girls face much higher rates of violence than all other women and girls in Canada.

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If you are an Indigenous woman or girl in Canada—whether you live on reserve or in an urban area, regardless of your age or socio-economic status—the simple fact that you are an Indigenous woman or girl means that you are at least **three times more likely to experience violence**, and at least **six times more likely to be murdered** than any other woman or girl in Canada. This violence is a national human rights crisis and it must stop.

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People in Fort St. John march for Sisters in Spirit, a group for missing and murdered Indigenous women.



#NO MORE STOLEN SISTERS



## Why are the rates of violence so high?

- Racist and sexist stereotypes lead perpetrators to believe that they can get away with committing acts of violence against Indigenous women and girls.
- The many legacies of colonialism increase the risk of experiencing violence—from the lasting inter-generational harm from residential schools to the ongoing discrimination that continued to push many Indigenous families into situations of crisis and impoverishment.
- Decades of government and law enforcement inaction to end the violence.

# How many Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people have experienced violence, gone missing, or been murdered?

No one knows exactly how many Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people have experienced violence, or how many lives have been stolen, because government officials and police have not been consistently keeping count.

- According to a report released by the RCMP in May 2014—the first official federal effort to determine how many Indigenous women and girls have gone missing or been murdered—1,017 Indigenous women and girls were murdered from 1980-2012. Because of gaps in police and government reporting, officials have now stated that the true number may be much higher.
- **Indigenous women are far more likely than non-Indigenous women to experience violence.** In a 2009 government survey of the ten provinces, Aboriginal women were nearly three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report being a victim of a violent crime.
- **The high rates of violence threaten the lives of Indigenous women and girls from all walks of life,** in every region of the country, on reserve, and in major Canadian cities. The perpetrators include Indigenous and non-Indigenous men alike.
- **The violence experienced by Indigenous women is more severe.** The Homicide Survey released by Statistics Canada in 2015 revealed that Indigenous women were at least 6 times more likely to be murdered than non-Indigenous women.
- **Some patterns of violence facing Indigenous women and girls are different from those facing non-Indigenous women.** For example, according to the RCMP report released in May 2014, Indigenous women are more likely than non-Indigenous women to be murdered by what the police call acquaintances—friends, colleagues, neighbours and other men who are not intimate partners or spouses.



## What needs to happen to stop the violence?

A concerted, national response that is comprehensive, coordinated, well resourced, and developed in collaboration with Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people themselves. It should include:

- **A national action plan** to end gender-based violence which addresses the root causes of violence and identifies holistic, culturally-appropriate ways in which to prevent violence and to support those impacted by violence.
- **Implementation of outstanding recommendations made to government** by frontline service providers, the families of the missing and murdered, and Indigenous women's organizations, as the United Nations, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, parliamentary committees, and previous federal inquiries.
- **Regular, comprehensive collection of data** on violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people in official crime statistics.

Amnesty International remains in solidarity with the families of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people and girls and Indigenous peoples' organizations to demand real action now to end this human rights crisis.

## TAKE ACTION

# 10 things Canada can do NOW to end violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people

Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people experience higher rates of violence than any other group of women and girls in Canada. The federal government has launched a National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. This is a laudable effort and one that Indigenous women's organizations, Amnesty International and many others long called for. However, action to end violence against Indigenous women and girls must not be delayed until the Inquiry finishes its work in 2019.

- 1 National action plan:** Adopt a comprehensive, coordinated, well-resourced national action plan on gender-based violence, with specific measures to end violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people.

[>> Sign our e-action](#)

- 2 Services:** Work with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women and organizations to ensure substantive equality in access to all government services and programs, including women's shelters and other culturally-relevant programs to prevent violence, both on and off reserve, to ensure the safety of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people, and support Indigenous survivors of violence.

[>> Write a letter](#)

- 3 Recommendations:** Implement the hundreds of recommendations from the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry, the CEDAW and IACHR investigations, parliamentary committees, and other investigations into ending violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people.

[>>Read about the recommendations](#)

- 4 Close the gap:** Implement fully and immediately the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal ruling on discrimination in the provision of services for children on First Nations reserves.

[>> Learn more](#)

- 5 Resource development:** Require that reviews and approvals of resource development projects, and other decision-making and programming processes, be informed by a comprehensive gender-based analysis, conducted in consultation with women's rights and Indigenous organizations, including an intersectional analysis of the specific impacts on Indigenous women and girls.

[>> Learn more](#)

- 6 Data:** Routine collection and publication of consistent, reliable, disaggregated data on rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit people, including the number of missing persons cases.

[>> Learn more](#)

- 7 Justice system:** Decrease the high number of Indigenous women and girls in prisons and jails by increasing funding to support alternatives to incarceration where the individual poses no danger to the community, ensure women in prison can access culturally-relevant rehabilitation programs, and provide better access to justice by offering free and affordable legal aid.

[>> Learn more](#)

- 8 Policing:** Establish capacity for independent police review of unresolved cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls where there are concerns that bias or other factors have led to inadequate investigation.

[>> Learn more](#)

**9 Law and policy:** Ensure laws and policies are consistent with the commitment to fully implement the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, collaborate with Indigenous peoples' organizations, including Indigenous women's organizations, on a plan of action for its implementation, and report regularly to Parliament on progress made toward implementation.

>> **Learn more**

**10 Recommendations:** Follow through on the federal, provincial and territorial commitments to full implementation of the 94 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action.

>> **Read the Calls to Action**

## TAKE ACTION

### Write a letter to close the funding gap to ensure safety and support to Indigenous women and girls escaping violence.

Every woman and girl has the right to live in safety without threat of violence, intimidation, or harassment.

Please speak out now and contact Minister Philpott without delay. Use the instruction below to write a letter to Minister Philpott or visit: <https://bit.ly/2g3sjJR>

#### Letter writing suggestions:

- Start with "Dear Minister Philpott" and a sentence or two about yourself.
- Urge the federal government to work closely with its provincial and territorial counterparts, and with organizations representing shelters and First Nations, Inuit, and Métis women and girls to close the gap in supports for Indigenous women and girls escaping violence.
- State that this must include increase funding for shelters in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities and measures to ensure that shelters serving Indigenous women in urban centres have the tools and resources to create a culturally safe space and provide culturally relevant programming.
- Express your concern that the need is urgent and that the federal government must not wait for the conclusion of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls before it acts.
- **Send your letter by mail, email or Twitter to:**

The Honourable Jane Philpott,  
Minister of Indigenous Services

**Mailing address:**

Terrasses de la Chaudière  
10 Wellington, North Tower  
Gatineau, QC K1A 0H4

**Email:** jane.philpott@canada.ca

**Twitter:** @JanePhilpott

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL



BOOK CLUB

2018 READER'S  
CHOICE

COMING UP IN NOVEMBER 2018



## READERS' CHOICE

The top pick from Amnesty Book Club members

**STAY TUNED:** Our selection of 2018 will be announced in the beginning of November after your votes are in. Follow us online in social media for the updates.

**The discussion guide will be sent out mid-November.**

In the meanwhile, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

Find us online at [amnestybookclub.ca](http://amnestybookclub.ca) and:    