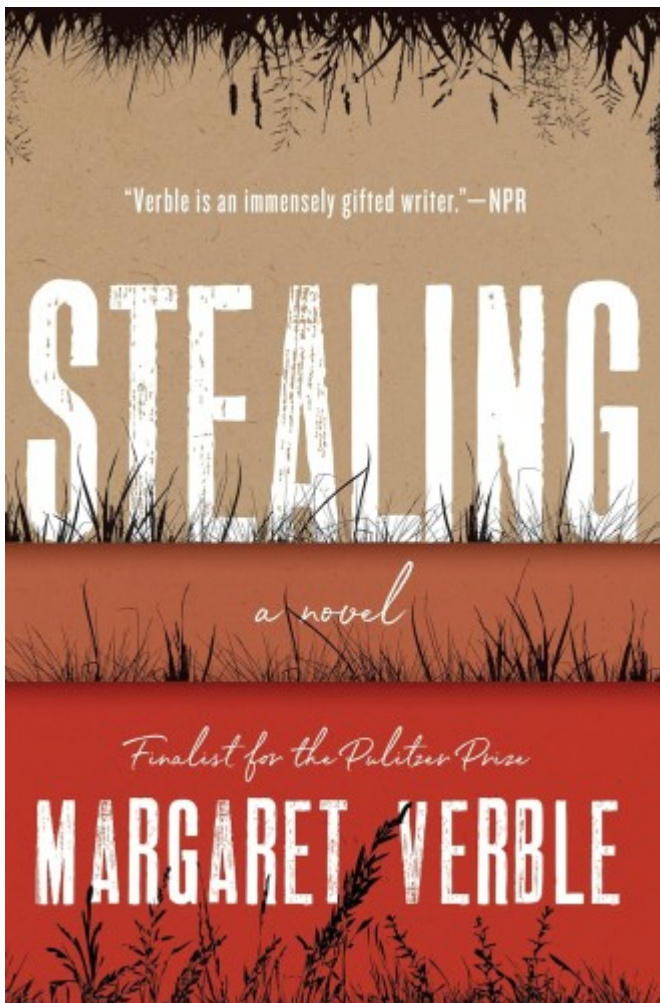


A harrowing novel about Christian boarding schools

In Margaret Verble's *Stealing*, a Cherokee girl finds what she needs to survive an evil system.

by [Chris Burton](#) in the [August 2024](#) issue
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In Review



Stealing

A Novel

By Margaret Verble

Mariner Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Stealing should make you angry. In this remarkable novel, Margaret Verble brings a mid-20th-century story to life through the power of relationships. Her harrowing tale makes it clear that violence and other forms of inhumane treatment thrive when the humanity of others is not honored.

The protagonist, Kit, is a Cherokee girl who is taken from her farm at age nine and sent to a Christian boarding school. There she finds herself saddled with responsibilities that would make most adults buckle under the pressure. She is stripped of her culture and subjected to physical and sexual abuse. In all of this, she demonstrates wisdom. During a moment of hunger when her classmates are stealing crackers, she painfully reflects, "I'm normally real cautious against [stealing] because so much has been stolen from me."

In these arduous circumstances, we see Kit cope. She provides therapy for herself in the form of writing, and she devises ways to get free. She finds herself asserting her family values in a society that does not value her family. It becomes clear that Kit is a survivor, grounded in a tradition of resistance. She writes letters as a way of keeping herself and her culture alive in hostile conditions. Kit remarks, "Maybe if I grow up to be a writer, I'll be able to say what's really happened and what I really feel, and that'll make things better. I already know that writing makes dead people come alive again, so a writer is never alone." It's easy to draw a line from Kit's letters to the legacy of narratives in anti-colonial and other liberation struggles throughout the world, especially within Indigenous people's experiences.

There is no way around it: in Kit's story, the Christians are the villains. *Stealing* is rife with theologies more interested in domination than liberation. The Bible is wielded as an oppressive tool, and conformity is underwritten by violence at a school whose Christian staff members show no interest in the children's humanity. In one memorable scene, a visiting minister preaches at an assembly, offering a message that is light-years away from the reality the students live in. Verble is providing here an incisive critique of Christian boarding schools and the legacy of normalizing education that we've inherited from them. It is hard to teach people if you do not view them as people.

Maintaining your roots is difficult in an oppressive environment that demands your subjugation. Still, Kit stays rooted. A loved one tells her, “We’re not broken people, Kit. We’re people who plot and wait. Then, when the time is right, we take our shots.” Although loneliness and grief hang over every page in *Stealing*, there are also tremendous demonstrations of community serving as resistance against oppression. Kit, though intentionally isolated and failed by too many adults, finds a way to connect with the people she needs to keep going. Society seems ready to destroy her, but she remains strong and courageous in her quest to do the right thing.

Throughout the novel, those who are being oppressed show a level of awareness that the oppressors do not have the ability to enjoy. The White Christians who run the school are only interested in their self-taught mythology, which tells them lies about themselves to convince them of their supremacy. Kit, like many of the children in *Stealing*, sees through this mythology and understands it as hypocrisy. She observes, “A lot of times when there’s a snake in the house, at first people don’t want to believe it and hope it’s just a rope or a stick. But, eventually, if there’s one inside, you have to deal with it.” In an oppressive world, Kit seems to understand, the truth is dangerous to those who are doing the oppressing.

This book hit me hard. As a parent and educator who believes education should be a liberating tool, I have seen far too many accounts of students, especially children, being minoritized by teachers. I’ve seen how White supremacy, in its love affair with the myth of scarcity, thrives by withholding resources—as Kit’s school does by keeping its students hungry. This is a system of pain that reverberates brokenness, and it demands interruption. As Kit observes, “It seems to me that unless something big happens to change them, most people act the same way again and again.”

Ultimately, though, *Stealing* is a story about resilience and hope. Evil, no matter how ubiquitous and seemingly mighty, does not get the last word. Wickedness has an expiration date. Kit’s story inspires me to keep praying for the day when all oppressors will disabuse themselves of mythologies and theologies marinated in fear.