

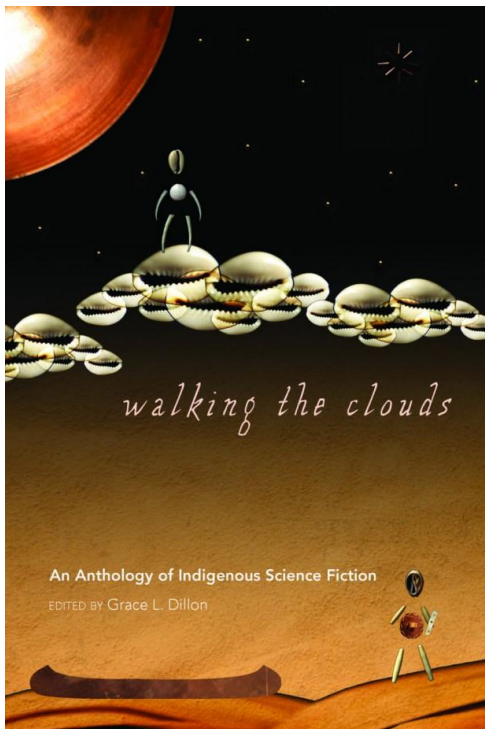
Indian Country Today

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First Native Science Fiction Anthology Showcases Indigenous Imagination

By [Joseph Zummo](#) April 15, 2012

New Realms: Review of *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*



With its mind-bending possibilities, science fiction is the perfect genre for Native storytelling. Now, *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (University of Arizona Press, 2012), edited by Grace Dillon, is the first collection of stories, excerpts and poems from this overlooked field.

Dillon, a professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies program at Portland State University in Oregon, aims to show that “Native storytelling has always contained the elements of science fiction that are considered forward-thinking, inventive and visionary today,” she told Indian Country Today Media Network.

Dillon brings together authors and pieces that previously have been shoehorned into a broad range of other subgenres, from classic spaceships-and-lasers adventures to more unusual styles, such as magical realism or stream-of-consciousness. Most passages are short excerpts, usually no more than 10 pages, of much longer works. This may disappoint readers who hoped to enjoy fully developed tales. But a few excellent short stories are printed in full.

The editor precedes each piece with literary analysis and context, making this book an excellent starting point for scholars and sci-fi fans alike. In pulling together 19 excerpts from 16 authors, Dillon offers insights into the artistic freedom that science fiction gives some of the best and most widely acclaimed Native writers. Anything can happen in this genre, Dillon points out. The rules and expectations of conventional writing do not apply.

Walking the Clouds reflects this freedom, organized as it is into five sections displaying ways that a sci-fi setting supports essential elements of indigenous storytelling. The Native Slipstream section features four tales with a not-quite-linear conception of time, space or narrative. An excerpt from *The Fast Red Road: A Plainsong* by Stephen Graham Jones, Piegan Blackfeet, fascinates with an unpredictable dreamscape, depicted in a stream-of-consciousness narrative.

The Contact section explores a ripe subject for Native people. “The Black Ship” by Gerry William, Spallumcheen Indian Band, reads much like mainstream science fiction, with spaceships and warring planets. However, a Native worldview is at its core, with aspects of indigenous experience and history—spiritualism, tribal structure, an oppressive colonizing force—informing characters and themes. Its glimpses of known circumstances from a different perspective is in keeping with the best traditions of science fiction.

Views on Indigenous Science and Sustainability make up the third section. An excerpt from *Darkness in St. Louis: Bearheart*, by Gerald Vizenor, Anishinaabe, presents a satirical vision of a future in which the world has run out of gasoline. The work is typical of Vizenor, a professor whose works often feature biting irony and cultural commentary.

After reading *Walking the Clouds*, you'll want to head for your library or bookstore to drink in more from the exciting works and authors it features—or start writing your own stories. Dillon wants to inspire young indigenous writers, she told Indian Country Today Media Network, so author royalties from the book are being donated to an annual writing contest, Imagining Indigenous Futurisms, which offers a \$1,000 prize. Young indigenous, Native, First Nations, Métis and aboriginal writers from around the world can enter. For more information visit Naisa.org/node/358.

Above the Clouds: Q&A with *Walking the Clouds* editor Grace Dillon

Grace Dillon's groundbreaking sci-fi collection Walking the Clouds gathers excerpts from a broad range of Native authors to show how the freedom that science fiction offers as a genre is tailor-made for Native themes. She elaborated to Indian Country Today Media Network via e-mail.

What hopes do you have for Native science fiction as a genre?

I hope that all people read the book so that they can realize that indigenous storytelling not only invented “science fiction” but also that it invented science! What commonly gets called “traditional ecological knowledge” or “Native ways of thinking” looks like “superstition” or “magic” to Western anthropologists and armchair ethnographers, but [they] have passed our scientific knowledge from generation to generation for centuries.

Is Native science fiction a new genre, or is it a reclassification of extant works to better describe their origins?

The stories are by contemporary indigenous writers who are asserting Native self-determination in a space that has commonly been dominated by Euro-Western writers. Gerald Vizenor invented and wrote “slipstream” literature in 1978, but the majority of science-fiction critics give a mainstreamer credit for coining the term in 1989.

What is important about Native science fiction? What can it tell us?

Just as our science is not primitive, our storytelling has always contained the elements of science fiction that are considered forward-thinking, inventive and visionary today. Native intellectuals have begun pointing out that “our knowledge is not primitive,” as a recent book by Wendy Djinn Geniusz on the botanical scientific teachings of the Anishinaabe puts it.

Who is the book aimed at?

I especially want emerging indigenous writers to read it and realize what a wealth of opportunity science fiction provides for expressing their worldviews.

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