

## Why Am I Not on *Star Trek*?

**SONYA BALLANTYNE** is a Swampy Cree writer, filmmaker, and speaker originally from Misipawistik Cree Nation. As founder and creative director of Code Breaker Films, she is the creator of award-winning films such as *Crash Site* (2015) and *Eagle Girl* (2019). Her published works include the children's book *Kerri Berry Lynn*, as well as contributions to anthologies such as *Pros and Comic Cons* and *Women Love Wrestling*. She has also written for television, including APTN's *Taken*, TVO's *Wolf-Joe*, and the forthcoming *Builder Brothers' Dream Factory*.

WHEN I FIRST found out that writers get paid to write books, I knew, even at four years old, that writing was my sort of scam. My dad asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said, "Daddy! I want to be a marine biologist, a writer, or a pro wrestler!" Since all three careers seemed equally likely for a Cree girl growing up on a Rez, my dad wished me luck.

As a professional writer, I've often felt pressure to tell "authentic" Native stories. I never knew exactly what was meant by that.

The only time I ever saw Native people on TV was when my mum would watch *North of 60*. I would hear the theme song of that show right after watching something like *The Simpsons*, and I would immediately pass out from boredom. When people asked why I didn't like the show, I would say, "They live on a reserve! If I wanted to see that, I'd go sit on the porch."

Yes, my favourite shows were things like *The Simpsons*, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (ST: TNG). I adored ST: TNG. I faced a lot of racism growing up and was often made to feel that being a Cree girl put me at a disadvantage in the world.



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Watching *ST: TNG*, I saw a world where my being a Cree girl would not matter. And I saw the possibility there would be a place for me in that future.

However, even my beloved *TNG* could annoy me. There was an episode where Captain Picard and the *Enterprise* were helping relocate a bunch of Native Americans that had settled on a planet that was being given to an alien race by the Federation. Even at five years old, I was so annoyed that people like me were still getting kicked out of places two hundred years in the future.

People like me were only seen in movies and on TV if something negative happened, or if we were being portrayed like we were long dead. My hometown of Misipawistik, Manitoba, was only ever shown on the news when a crime had been committed or a tragedy had occurred. A Native woman would only ever be mentioned in the news for the same reason.

Since I could hold a crayon, I've been writing, though when I was a teenager, I stopped. The back of the books in my English class all showed white guys who had university education. At the time, I thought I would have to write the way they did to be successful. I couldn't find myself in those books and didn't write anything for almost five years. It didn't feel "right." The world doesn't need me to write like Clive Barker because there's already a Clive Barker. I need to write like Sonya.

The important thing for storytellers, especially Indigenous ones, is to tell stories their own way. When I began writing again in my own way, I got noticed for it. I wrote the stories I wanted with heroes that looked like me or my mother. They'd be about sisters dealing with grief with the help of a superheroine (my film *Crash Site*), a little girl who wants to be powerful enough to save her grandma (*Eagle Girl*), or a woman trying to understand her mysterious grandmother (*Nosisim*).

I write about women and girls who exist in the present and the future. I've grown bored with the stories that show women like me stuck in the past or not even present. It is my goal to change the narrative, and as a writer, I feel that I am in a position to do that.

We are capable of changing the world even in small ways. When I used to see my home community on CBC, it was never for a positive reason. Now, sometimes when Misipawistik is mentioned on the news, it's because Mattel has named me a Barbie Role Model or something like that:

But the more Ballantyne reflected on being named a Barbie Role Model, the more she realized it was an opportunity. Growing up in Misisipawistik Cree Nation in northern Manitoba, she didn't see herself on TV, or in movies, or in her little sister's blond-haired Barbie dolls. Challenging stereotypes and providing positive, empowering representations of Indigenous people has been a major through-line in her work as a filmmaker and, now, as an author.<sup>1</sup>

As a child, I saw a gap in the types of stories being told to me. I was always a storyteller, and when I saw that this gap wasn't being filled, I felt it was my duty to try and fill it. This wasn't because I thought I was the chosen one for it—I did it because I thought if I started something, others would help me finish it.

I learned a lot about myself from *Star Trek*, but I realized that no one was going to put me in that future unless I started mining the dilithium crystals to get us there. So, as a wise man once said, "Live long and prosper," and that's what I intend to do.

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<sup>1</sup> Jen Zoratti, "In a Barbie World: As Mattel Role Model, Cree Filmmaker/Author Empowers Indigenous People, Challenges Stereotypes," *Winnipeg Free Press*, January 18, 2019, [www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/in-a-barbie-world-504545652.html](http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/in-a-barbie-world-504545652.html).

