

BOOK REVIEW

Crime and damages in 'The Lowering Days'

Gregory Brown's graceful and compassionate debut novel ponders right and wrong in a Maine mill town

By **Kerri Arsenault** Globe Correspondent, Updated February 25, 2021, 1 hour ago





NICOLAS OGONOSKY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

What is a crime? And should we consider something a crime if committed for the greater good? These are the central questions riding the undercarriage of Gregory Brown's graceful and compassionate debut novel, "[The Lowering Days](#)," a flashlight into the heart of a small Maine community perched on the precipice of the Penobscot River, its future and its past.

David Almerin Ames, the book's narrator, grew up a happy kid, in a house in a small community on the Penobscot River, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean via Penobscot Bay. His parents and the landscape around him boasted a close relationship with the elements, all seemingly in balance to one another, with deference to the water. The river provided salmon, the ocean provided lobster, David's father built boats for fishermen, and his mother published the local newspaper, *The Lowering Days*, named for "the birthday day for a boat, the lowering day, when the finished hull

was first slipped into the waiting sea.” Many townspeople also relied upon the now-shuttered paper mill, which also was built on and depended on the river. When we begin the story, Japanese investors consider purchasing and reopening the mill. While many townspeople are encouraged by the possible economic boost, others are troubled by the problems the mill contributed alongside its prosperity. “Working at the mill kills people,” 14-year-old Molly Greenwind says. “So does being poor,” her father Moses replies.

While Brown plants his flag in fiction, the circumstances in Maine are very real and still unsettled. On the periphery of the river around which the book is based, sits the Penobscot Nation, of which his characters Molly and Moses belong. During the 1800s, the Penobscot (and Passamaquoddy) Nations sold their land to the federal government, but the transaction, we come to find out, was never approved by Congress per the Indian Non-Intercourse Act of 1790. Penobscot sovereignty was only reestablished by the 1980 Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act. This act returned illegally acquired land to the tribes, giving them broad land use rights and millions of dollars in reparations. These rights have been challenged recently by the state of Maine, which has attempted to limit, control, and even prohibit their fishing from the Penobscot River. The book and the act interrogate the question: Who has a right to own land, if at all? The past is never past in small towns where everyone knows everyone, and where the capitalization of water courses through everyone’s lives. So when old arguments and wrongdoings meet up with the natural order of things as it does in “The Lowering Days” (the book and the newspaper), the center cannot hold.

The novel opens with a serious crime committed by Molly, who starts a fire that levels what remains of the mill. Nobody in town knows it’s her at the time, but they believe the land is cursed; 5,000 years earlier, the Red Paint people had buried their dead in

that same place. Most suspect the damage was done to avenge past wrongs and correct future ones. It's an open secret that the "mill knowingly discharged toxic chemicals and wastewater products from the pulp and papermaking process into the river, poisoning its fish and plants." Molly saw the mill's success twined with the Penobscot's demise and decided to act. After, she sent an anonymous letter to the paper:

"kənótamən? wiséləmosìpo, wiseləmolətəwak ahč nətələnqəpəmak pənawəhpskewəyak. kis apəčihle akələpemo" she begins in her native tongue. "The fire I started was meant for the mill only. Not to hurt anyone else. To the mill: this is for the river who you harmed, my people who you poisoned, and all the men and women who had to make themselves into machines to keep you alive."

The fire is an impetus to other crimes, some smaller (breaking and entering, cutting lobster traplines, a fistfight) and some larger (the Vietnam War, sabotage, homicide), some against the environment (resource extraction, dammed rivers, the mill's dioxin releases). Brown also writes about more personal casualties like suicide and unrequited love. And he poses questions about the relative nature of crimes. Is it the mill ruining the river, or is leaving a town unemployed the more severe offense? Was arson acceptable because Molly may have been ethically right? Or was the greater crime Lyndon Johnson's for bankrupting the psychological state of soldiers who served in Vietnam? What about the effects of Agent Orange, used as a defoliant in Vietnam, and ironically containing the same toxic that the paper mill belched into the water? David's father was a deserter in Vietnam, so was his desertion from an unjust war *just*? Or was the gravest crime of them all America's original one, that of colonizers pushing the First Nation people into the corners of their own land? Crimes, they add up, their effects cascading through generations.

What emerges from the ashes of the mill's demise are broken relationships between

human and land, but also the capacity for forgiveness and exoneration, which Brown signposts with flowers emerging from the mill's scorched soil. Brown's most urgent story, however, is one that has largely been untold — a modern day Penobscot Nation reckoning with the manacles of the past. “The moment one is imprisoned,” Brown writes, “he or she ceases to be human.”

THE LOWERING DAYS

By Gregory Brown

Harper, 288 pp., \$26.99

Kerri Arsenault is book editor for Orion magazine, contributing editor at Literary Hub, and author of [“Mill Town: Reckoning With What Remains.”](#)

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