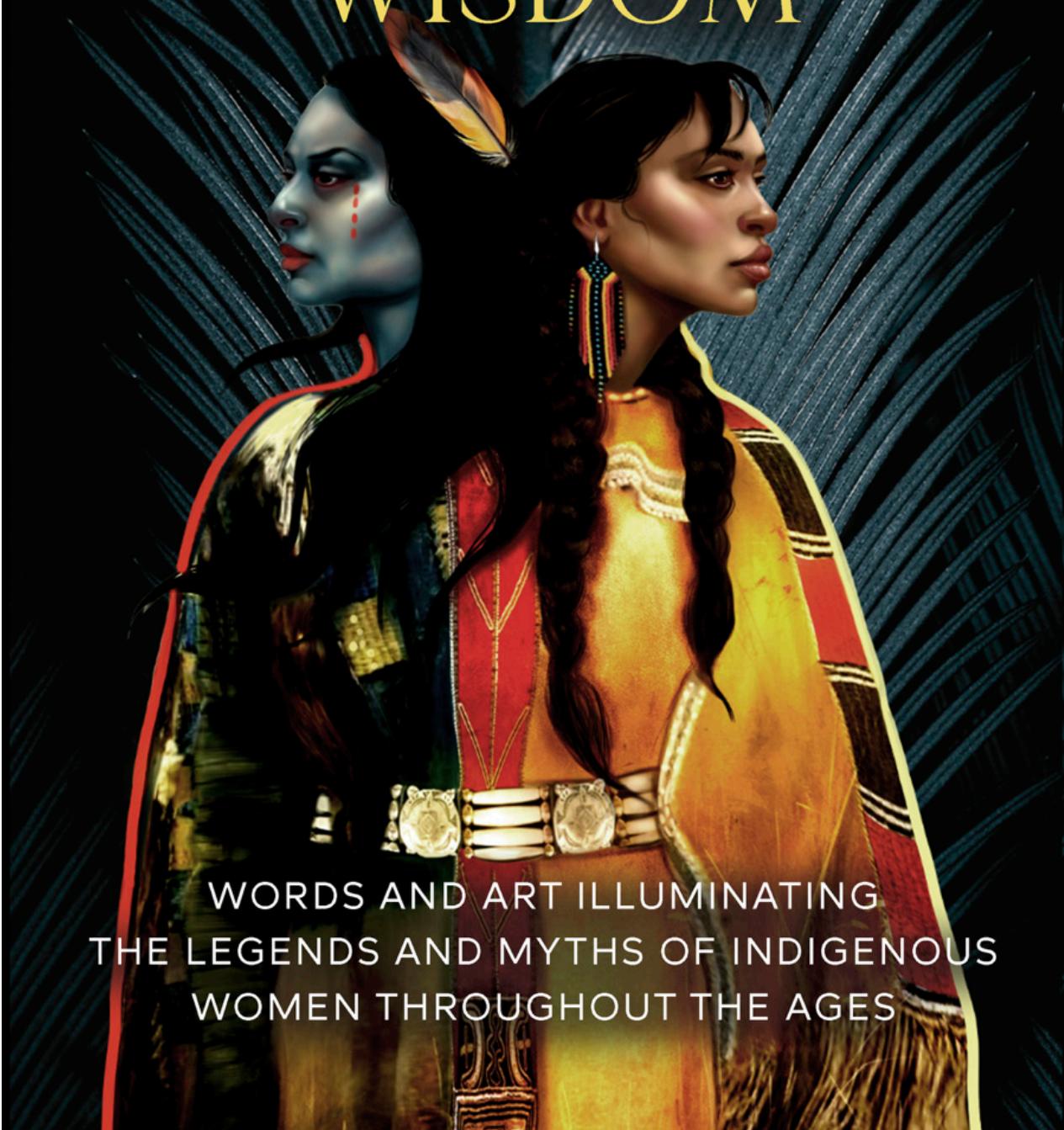


LEIGH PODGORSKI  
ILLUSTRATED BY KAIT MATTHEWS

# FEATHERS OF WISDOM



## BOOK REVIEW

# **Feathers of Wisdom: Words and Art Illuminating the Legends and Myths of Indigenous Women Throughout the Ages**

By Kait Matthews and Leigh Podgorski

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By Amelia (SkWumqnálqs) Marchand, MELP

## **ABSTRACT**

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This book review examines a distinctive literary collaboration that brings together original artwork, Indigenous storytelling, and carefully researched historical facts to portray forty-four legends from dozens of diverse Indigenous Peoples across the Americas and Oceania. The collection offers readers a rare opportunity to experience ancestral narratives through both visual and textual forms, highlighting the richness of cultural traditions and the resilience of communities whose voices have often been marginalized. Each legend is accompanied by striking artistic interpretations that not only illuminate the stories but also serve as a bridge between oral tradition and contemporary scholarship. The review situates the book within the broader context of Indigenous knowledge systems, emphasizing its relevance to ongoing conversations about cultural preservation, identity, and the intergenerational transmission of women's wisdom. By presenting legends that span vast geographies and diverse peoples, the volume underscores the interconnectedness of Indigenous worldviews and their enduring significance. This review informs readers of the book's format and thematic scope while encouraging engagement with its unique artistic and historical content. Ultimately, the work stands as both a cultural archive and a creative celebration, inviting scholarly audiences to appreciate its contributions to Indigenous literature and heritage.

**Keywords:** Indigenous knowledge systems, Indigenous women, legends and myths, cultural preservation, intergenerational wisdom, Indigenous storytelling, cultural resilience, ancestral narratives, Indigenous literature

*In Feathers of Wisdom: Words and Art Illuminating the Legends and Myths of Indigenous Women Throughout the Ages*, Leigh Podgorski and Kait Matthews collaborated to celebrate Indigenous Knowledges featuring prominent women leaders, goddesses, and spirit beings. Podgorski is a playwright, producer, and author whose works include stage plays and novels, including *We Are Still Here*, the story of Cahuilla Indian elder Katherine Siva Saubel. Matthews is a professional artist and illustrator of Ojibwe/Potawatomi heritage and a member of the Chippewas of Rama. Together, Podgorski and Matthews breathe life and give voice to ancestral teachings in this vibrant collaborative that is warming to the heart and a treat for the eyes.

Through a blend of history, storytelling, and original artwork, the book portrays 44 stories from dozens of diverse Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and Oceania. Through these words and images, the authors seek to restore personal relationships severed by the Canadian government's sanctioned and orchestrated kidnapping and trafficking of First Nation children to non-Native families. On a larger level, Podgorski and Matthews seek to heal the wounds of forced assimilation's torturous acts to exterminate the languages, culture, customs, and identity of Indigenous Peoples.

These activities of genocide, which separated children from their parents, families, and cultures, also separated the language speakers, cultural bearers, and Indigenous leaders from their future generations. The kidnapping, trafficking, and assimilation of Indigenous children were insidious acts perpetrated by

Canadian, U.S., and other governments for decades—the scars of which are felt to this day by many Indigenous families, including my own. But it is not the primary piece of history that defines Indigenous Peoples. In the thousands and thousands of years—since time immemorial—that Indigenous Peoples have survived and thrived on and across the continent and Oceania, the genocide but one marker in the timeline, it is not that which defines us. It is not our full history.

At its core, this book sets out to reclaim and honor that untold history: the thousands and thousands of years that remain in the hearts and souls of Indigenous Peoples, waiting to be remembered. Importantly, in order for us to remember, we must know where we came from—and that is the centerpiece of the stories portrayed within Feathers of Wisdom. The cultural heritages and identities of Indigenous heroines, women, goddesses, and spirit beings are proudly and beautifully described and envisioned within its pages. The diversity of languages, cultures, and geographies shared provides a glimpse of the roles and responsibilities of Indigenous women within Indigenous societies and governance structures.

Like Mother Earth, women are revered in many cultures for their strength and resilience, and for too long, the stories of Indigenous women have been suppressed. The feminine voices and lives of the legends and myths in Feathers of Wisdom call us to reconnect with these histories, to hear the wisdom in their teachings, and to embody the attributes of these Indigenous women figures and archetypes. The framing of each story follows a format in which historical context is

provided first, followed by the associated legend. Then, in a unique way, the reader is engaged to hear directly from the main character and invited to consider the character's key attributes and how they may be brought forth.

Dedicated "to all the Elders and mothers who have taught and continue to teach what is really

important in this world," the stories contained within *Feathers of Wisdom* are those to be cherished and honored. I hope it is the first of many editions which will continue to reconnect and reclaim our relationships with the Earth, with one another, and most importantly, with ourselves.

### Editors' Note:

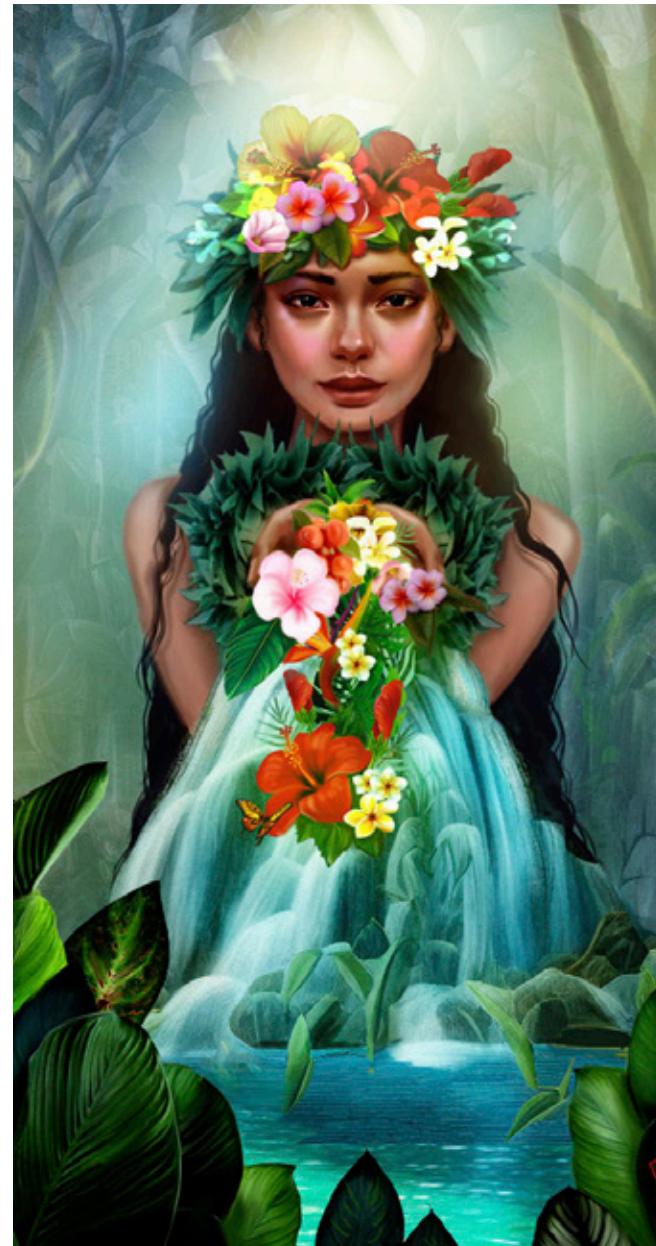
To accompany the review above, we include one of the stories featured in *Feathers of Wisdom*. This excerpt provides a representative example of the book's narrative approach and integrated visual storytelling, offering further insight into the volume's thematic and artistic qualities.

### Laka

#### The Hula School, Laka Goddess Of Hula and Nature

*Laka History and Culture*

Laka is an especially important figure in Hawaiian folklore. However, as her origins trace back before written language, and Hawaiian folklore was passed verbally from generation to generation in song and storytelling, several versions of Laka occur in various parts of Hawaii. In some, she is a male who remains the God of the forest, but not of hula. Her genealogy also differs. Some say she is the sister of Kapo, others speak of her as Kapo's daughter, who was another important Goddess, also associated with hula, but with a fiery temperament. However, the most prevalent folklore, history, and legends, describe Laka as a profoundly beautiful woman, born on



the island of Kauai, who possesses exceptional talents in dance and song, as well as a deep love and abiding care for all of Nature.

Devout believers pray to Laka before a hula dance, for ho'oulu, or inspiration for their performance and even for their practice and rehearsal. This ritual is illustrated in the story that follows: "The Hula School—Laka, the Hula Dancer." As the dancer listens to the intoxicating beat of the drums, and prays silently to her goddess, the dancer and Laka become one.

Laka gives us many ha'awina (lessons) on which to meditate, to take into our hearts, and to continuously learn. She teaches us not only about the hula, but also that her energy is a life force for our Natural World. This is Laka's realm, and before we enter into this world, we must show respect and ask for permission. Permission must also be sought to gather plants, dig for roots, or pick the flowers of Laka's forest.

The goddess Laka, through grace, harmony, and creativity teaches us many things. Not only does she encourage spiritual growth, creativity, and sustenance, but she also teaches us diligence and commitment. All of these apply not only to the artist who dances the sacred hula, but to all of us who seek to live in harmony, peace, and balance with our world.

### **The Hula School—Laka, Goddess Of The Hula and Nature**

Keao and 'Ilima sat on the hilltop watching the children playing in the sand. 'Ilima smiled at a sudden memory. "Ah!" She exclaimed. "That was

just what I was doing when I heard the call of the drums. So long ago, and I was so tiny. But that call hooked me like a fisherman's lure. I ran so fast!"

"It was hula, you heard," Keao grinned.

"Hula." 'Ilima agreed. "So many dancing. Men and women. And there, in the middle of the crowd, was my grandmother. The dancers with moving arms, the women's pa'u swirling. The sun beamed down on the leis, setting the bracelets sparkling. The anklets tinkled in time with the drums." She smiled. "That night I followed my grandmother all around the house, begging, teach me, Grandmother. I have to dance."

Keao and 'Ilima shared a laugh.

"Even though she complained: 'I am too old and heavy to dance and gesture.' It wasn't true."

"She was beautiful." Keao said.

"One day," 'Ilima continued, "I saw my Grandmother looking out across the meadow, a faraway look in her eyes. When I asked her what she saw she whispered so low I could barely hear her, 'Laka, my goddess.'"

'Ilima told Keao that no matter how hard she looked, she could see nothing. Her Grandmother explained that the vision was in her heart.

"Once Grandmother told me these things, I did, finally, catch a glimpse of her as she moved among the trees in the forest. She is the goddess of the hula, but also of nature," 'Ilima said. "And now, she is my Goddess, too."

Keao took her hand. She'd known 'Ilima's Grandmother, and loved her, too.

"Grandmother was right, of course. One day when I was in the lower forest with other women gathering berries, the rain came. Everyone rushed into a nearby cave, but I stayed in the misty rain. Something inside me whispered for me to stay. Soon, the sun lit up the bow. Like a mirage, a ghost, it all vanished, but the image never vanished from my heart."

Keao smiled.

"When I told Grandmother what I had seen, she hugged and kissed me. 'You have been chosen,' she said."

'Ilima had to wait three long years before she could even begin the rigorous training to become a hula dancer.

Then, before she started school, sacred preparations had to be made. Many prayers were offered up for guidance, wisdom, strength, and endurance. And an altar to Laka had to be built, complete with vines and flowers.

Keao was chosen to get branches for the altar as well as vines and flowers. As she entered the forest at dawn to gather the items, she prayed silently. She needed Koa branches because Koa meant unafraid. With the Koa she would weave sweet smelling maile, 'le'ie, palapalai fern, halapepe, and pili grass. Pili means to cling. Gathering pili grass is a prayer that the chants and gestures of the sacred dance may cling to the dancer for the rest of their days.

The vines and branches were sprinkled with purifying water, and the altar was built. Prayers to Laka followed, asking the Goddess to send her spirit into the altar so that the vines and branches would remain green and bursting with life.

That night, the last night before the training would begin, Wahi, the hula master, stayed alone in the halau, the hula school. He prayed to Laka; he prayed so that his teachings would be blessed, that his memory would serve him, and he would recall every chant, every gesture, and that he would be granted patience and wisdom. He also prayed for his students, for their courage, that their work may be supported and blessed, their voices pure, their bodies masterful and fluid, and their hearts touched by Koa so that they would be true and unafraid. Most of all, he prayed for reverence.

As 'Ilima came to the halau, the house where the hula dancers were to be trained, the next morning, she felt on fire. As the master blessed his pupils by sprinkling them with pure water, they noticed his face: it was shining as if the Sun himself had reached inside of him.

"Last night," Wahi spoke softly, "I had a dream. Many years ago, when I was a small child, I had learned a certain hula that was so beautiful, so magnificent, I wanted to pass on that dance. For months, I have tried to recall that elegant dance. But like an eagle, it had flown away. But last night... last night..." and here, Wahi had to stop as his emotions threatened to overcome him. "Last night our Goddess Laka came to me in a dream. And she danced the hula for which I have so longed. Now, starting today, I will give this most precious dance to you, my most wonderful pupils."

As 'Ilima danced, as she learned this most sacred art, she saw the Goddess dancing beside her. "Laka is in me," 'Ilima whispered.

*O goddess Laka!  
O wildwood bouquet, O Laka!  
O Laka, queen of the voice!  
O Laka, giver of gifts!  
O Laka, giver of bounty!  
O Laka, giver of all things!*

### **Laka Speaks:**

*Whether you glimpse me swirling in the mist, winding through the enchanted forest, or dancing at the end of the rainbow, I am always*

*here for you. Whether you desire to pursue the sacred dance or dedicate your life to harmony, peace, and balance, I will answer your call. Sit in stillness and breathe deeply. There are many paths that lead to your heart. Become the dance. What can you do right now, today, to begin your journey?*

### **Laka Attributes:**

*Spiritual Growth, Creativity, Sustenance*

Become the dance. There are many paths that lead to your heart. Dance at the end of the rainbow.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



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Amelia Marchand is co-founder and executive director of L.I.G.H.T. Foundation, an Indigenous conservation nonprofit. She has over 27 years of experience in cultural and natural resource management, climate action, and food and water security policy. A citizen of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation (CTCR) with diverse

Indigenous and European heritage, Amelia earned a master's degree in environmental law and policy from Vermont Law School and a bachelor's degree in anthropology from Eastern Washington University. Amelia has served as author, co-author, or editor on over 17 publications, including journal articles, research analysis, opinion pieces, and poetry. Notably, she co-authored the Fourth World Journal article "Cultural Genocide: Destroying Fourth World People" in 2020 and was a co-author on two chapters of the Status of Tribes and Climate Change Report, Volume 2, in 2025. She is a proud board member of the Western Environmental Law Center and the Center for World Indigenous Studies.