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# Kuessipan

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *Kuessipan* (2019), directed by Myriam Verreault.

## **Author Notes**

Sherry Coman is a professor of film at Humber College in Toronto and adjunct professor in film and theology at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario. As a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film, she works as a development consultant with writers and artists working in film, fiction and digital media. She is also the curator and creator of online devotional projects for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.



**Kuessipan (2019), dir. Myriam Verreault**

**Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVtRbCltm5g>**

For the past seventy years, Québécois filmmakers have been turning their lenses on the landscape and peoples of the Côte-Nord, the region stretching upward along the northern shore of the St. Lawrence river for hundreds of miles northeast of Québec City. In the last decade the interest has swelled, as a new generation comes forward and seeks new ways of expressing the diversity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices and the relationships among them. Québec City born Myriam Verreault spent years living with and learning from the Innu Indigenous communities of the North Shore after shooting several short films there for her 2011 youth project series, “My Tribe is My Life.”<sup>1</sup> With *Kuessipan*, co-written and adapted by Naomi Fontaine from her own novel,<sup>2</sup> she brings us a moving coming-of-age drama about cross-cultural connections and the home ties that run deep.

“The centre of my world lies in a bay,” writes Mikuan, a teenaged aspiring writer from the Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam First Nation, “covered in snow six months of the year.” If the centre of her world is a bay, the centre of her life is Shaniss, a best friend for whom Mikuan’s family is more of a home than her own. Early on in the movie, we see them separated as children, when Shaniss is sent to live with an aunt. Resourcefully, little Mikuan searches out her friend and walks to find her on foot. An adult Mikuan tells us that the word ‘friend’ is not good enough to describe their connection. “Sister” is closer.

As the turbulent years of early adulthood unfold, Mikuan and Shaniss discover that even sisters can have profound and challenging differences. Longing to become a writer, Mikuan joins a local workshop at her high school where she meets and forms a relationship with Francis, a non-Indigenous fellow writer. When she brings him home, suspicion and doubt are manifest in the family and especially in Shaniss. The friendship of the girls becomes increasingly strained, and after a fight, they separate. Shaniss, who is a new mother, takes refuge in her relationship with partner Greg, but is sometimes a victim of his instability and anger. Verrault and Fontaine’s script never slides into stereotypes, especially non-Indigenous-perceived prejudicial ones. Instead, all four main characters in *Kuessipan* are complexly developed, and we understand how and why they are needed by each other. When Mikuan and Shaniss eventually reconcile, it is because each sees the other as ‘home,’ defined and united in the heart.

Shaniss is the one who makes the image vivid for us. Using a stick, she maps out an imaginary house in sand on the bay, describing her dream of a place where they both can live together safely. We soon see, however, that she has more invested in that dream than Mikuan, who forms a plan to go with Francis to live and study in Québec City. As Shaniss’ life appears to be slipping into despair and uncertainty, Mikuan’s sense of hope is shattered by a series of events,

including the death of her hockey-star brother, and the break-up of her relationship. Going deep within, she retreats to the family hunting cabin to vent her rage and fear. She feels the seismic shifts in her life and wonders if she is capable of what she most wants. “Pride is something you build,” she tells us. And through Mikuan’s eyes, we see how the journey becomes long and steep.

In Mikuan and Francis’ relationship, we see the possibility and challenges of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships. The two young lovers unite in the same way that other couples do, through a shared love of music and by upholding each other’s dreams. But the intensity of Mikuan’s family life is too much for Francis, who we see become increasingly restless. He has been assimilated into the family but knows he does not really belong. Unused to the startling changes of events, he sits alone at her house, finding empty rooms and hanging out there while Mikuan relates to Shaniss and others. Rather than accepting Mikuan’s family dynamics, and/or trying to deepen his connections with them, Francis prefers to withdraw and wait until he can have Mikuan for himself. In this subtle and effective way, we see the underpinnings of an inmate sense of cultural superiority, though the character struggles not to fall into this way of thinking.

Verrault’s film is more narratively driven than Fontaine’s novel, which works as a series of poetic fragments grouped into four larger chapters. The sketches of people and places offer brief and searing illuminations from a young woman’s eyes of the faces and places of her memory. In the film, that poetic sensibility is rendered with stark juxtapositions in which we see Mikuan surrounded by landscape both familiar and alienating. It grounds her and estranges her by turns, but ultimately becomes a place of renewal. When Mikuan and Shaniss rediscover that central yearning on which they built their emotional sense of ‘home,’ we know at the same time that things will never be the same. The ending locks them in that deep and also divided connection, marked by separated and more fulfilled lives.

‘Kuessipan’ is an Innu word that means “your move” or “your turn.” As each friend makes decisions for her own life, the other waits to hear it and respond, until they can’t anymore. The film’s feminist underpinnings bring an unexpectedly moving and meaningful final sequence in which Mikuan and Shaniss are forever sealed by language. Mikuan’s writing unites them in ways that they could not ultimately manage in their lives. Shaniss may or may not escape her rugged reality, but her spirit will be enshrined by story, as vivid as the frozen bay of Sept-Îles.

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<sup>1</sup> “My Tribe is My Life” is a collection of eight short films made by Myriam Verrault in 2011. They can be viewed in their entirety on the website of the National Film Board: <https://www.nfb.ca/directors/myriam-verreault/>

<sup>2</sup> For a biography and publishing list for Naomi Fontaine (in French), see: <https://kwahiatonhk.com/auteurs/naomi-fontaine/#1533653833396-3a68569f-b417>