

**McLeod, Darrel. (2018). Mamaskatch: A Cree Coming of Age. Madiera Park, BC: Douglas and McIntyre.**

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Darrel McLeod's book, "Mamaskatch," tells a brutally honest, first-hand account of the consequences family and, in the broader sense, society has on the development of individual identity. In his recollection of events, Darrel recounts the residual and internal strife his mother, Bertha, had experienced following residential schooling. Forced to learn that her Cree identity was wrong through the indoctrination of Catholic values, Bertha went through a systematic annihilation of belief. The fallout from this experience diminished confidence in her world, blurring the boundaries between right and wrong creating a crisis of identity not only for Bertha, but for her children as well. Growing up with the same Catholic ideals imposed on him, Darrel experiences shame and guilt associated with his Cree status. With family and culture as a major contribution to identity, Darrel experiences difficulty in establishing his own as he comes to terms with his gender identity and sexual orientation, which work in opposition with his Catholic ideals. Inadvertently, a lack of belonging emerges for Darrel leading to the isolation he experiences for the majority of his young adult life. In his search for freedom of identity, Darrel aims to end a cycle of violence, a struggle that many Indigenous Peoples face.

A major theme emphasized in this book is the family and how it comes to impact an individual's identity. In reference to Bertha's residential schooling, Darrel indicates how physical similarities being "the same smooth brown complexion and deep brown eyes; the same jet-black

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hair hacked into an inverted rag mop” is indicative of familiar ties (p. 9). Physical appearance is important for Darrel because it comprises the Cree background he attempts to dissemble. The reason Darrel strives to suppress this part of his identity stems from societal and family pressures to act in accordance with the church ideal of what is considered ‘normal.’ This is reaffirmed by Darrel’s mother during her impaired states. For instance, after Bertha rides through the streets naked and drunk, a young Darrel attempts to grasp this complicated situation through an internal monologue:

I looked just like mother, could never deny I was her son. I didn’t like my round, brown face and squinty eyes, I didn’t want to talk like Mother or carry her scent. Why couldn’t she be normal, like other kid’s mothers? I hated my thick black hair, my patched up clothes and floppy runners. Was this what it meant to be Indian?  
(p. 66)

Unable to comprehend the complexity of Bertha’s trauma, Darrel starts to associate his own physical characteristics as abnormal while constructing a negative connotation around his ‘Indian’ identity. Similar to physical appearance, family can define identity in the form of expectations and values. For example, Bertha believes it is important to pass down Cree history to her children (p. 7) however discourages her children from practicing the culture. For instance, although Bertha preferred Cree, she taught her children English because she felt she had to if her children were going to “be somebody someday” (p. 210). This belief ensues as a result of residential schooling; Bertha was taught that Cree is the “language o’ the devil” and did not want her children to “go to hell” for speaking it (p. 165). The societal forces suppressing Cree culture directly impacted how Darrel and his sibling were raised by their mother and evidently impacting their identities.

The attempt to establish identity with two opposing cultural backgrounds can easily

constitute feelings of isolation. This is an ongoing struggle for Darrel throughout his life as he is consistently challenged by his Catholic and Cree counterparts. For instance, after entering grade one, Darrel can barely contain his excitement however, he also questions his place there as he becomes apprehensive of the unfamiliar setting inside and surrounded by strangers (pp. 28-32). Furthermore, when Darrel attempts to join a group of rich kids during lunch, they turn and run away from him (p. 33). Darrel is ostracized for his Cree identity despite his best efforts to conform to a Catholic system leading to a lack of belonging.

Other individuals may also reinforce or negate certain sides of Darrel's identity contributing to his experiences of isolation. When Darrel's brother, Greg announces he would like to be called Trina, Darrel and his mother both display genuine concern. They are torn with between their constructs of 'normal' following Catholic ideals but Bertha knows they have to accept him regardless (p. 118). Darrel has difficulty coming to terms with this new version of his brother as it begins to make him question his own gender identity triggering a sense of fear (p. 121) as it would completely violate what he had been taught his whole life. Entering a grey area where the lines between right and wrong are blurred, Darrel expresses how some days he feels empty and isolated, even from himself." (p. 148).

A major contribution to Darrel's internal conflict is his gender identity and sexual orientation which overtly contributes to the guilt and shame that accompanies him throughout his life. This shame coinciding with sexuality can be traced back to Darrel's catechism classes where he learned nothing could eliminate the shame of nakedness. In direct opposition, his Cree ancestors were proud of their bodies, spoke about sex freely and make jokes about it (p. 53) and likewise,

the gendered pronouns *he* and *she* did not exist (p. 7). Despite this Cree background, Darrel is riddled with guilt about having feelings for men and likewise any sexual encounter he has and is coupled with a strong belief that he will face eternal damnation in hell. After a curious sexual encounter with a male classmate at seven, Darrel instantly feels guilt for his 'sin' (p. 47) The graphic depictions that the sisters had shown in class had given him dreams of roasting in Hell (p. 49) exposing how powerful these indoctrinated beliefs were.

Darrel experienced many instances of sexual exploitation and abuse by older men however one in which he carried the most resentment for was his encounter with his sister's first husband Rory. Rather than see it as abuse, Darrel only saw what had occurred as a sin and that he would burn in hell along with the other sinners (p. 85). Feeling "trapped in his own evil" (p. 89), Darrel was able to successfully leave the situation yet, his future relationships were still coupled with these feelings of resentment as he feels forced to question the integrity of his actions.

A number of turning points for Darrel allows him to get past the tremendous difficulty of dissolving the Catholic ideals that prevent him from coming to terms with his identity. The most important revolve around when his roommates accuse him of being possessed by a "demon of homosexuality" (p. 139). After the exorcism takes place, Darrel admits to himself that he knew all along he was not demon possessed, that this was a farce and how he was doubtful same-sex attraction or love could be the work of the devil (pp. 139-141). These beliefs are only reestablished after he hears about the passing of his Uncle Danny who preferred *Diane*. The lack of acceptance and love Diane received from her family and others following her sex-change surgery had contributed greatly to her depression and suicide (p. 141). This is when Darrel acknowledges just

how deep Catholic values had come in replacing the tolerance that the older Cree generations had shown regarding sexuality and gender identity (p. 141).

Analogous to Bertha as a small child running away from her residential school screaming “Mamaskatch! We’re free!” (p. 20), is Darrel in his acceptance of himself and his own identity. With his education, Darrel was able to further understand the misgivings that Christianity and the Catholic Church had bestowed upon Indigenous Peoples. For instance, in realizing religion was just a way of keeping the underprivileged oppressed, fearful and poor Darrel was able to further his rejection of the Catholic ideals he had implanted in his mind (p. 187). Released from these confines, Darrel could finally escape the “black cloud of fear and guilt” that had been plaguing him ever since his childhood (p. 187) and is free to explore his Cree counterpart without judgement.

In telling his story, Darrel provides a well written insight into the most beautiful and devastating parts of his life. This story aims to educate and more importantly inspire its readers to explore the upbringings of Cree and other Indigenous cultures. Mamaskatch is a compelling read and it should be received on a multi-disciplinary basis as its topics concern sociology, psychology, anthropology, education, or history. If any limitations to this book exist, I would say that it was the limited perspective of one person as it would be interesting to hear the story told through another family members point of view. However, I think Darrel’s story was the one that needed to be told as he was able to provide a unique perspective of an individual experiencing the residual effects subsequent to enforced oppression through residential schooling.