

Thistle, Jesse. (2019). From the Ashes: My Story of Being Metis, Homeless and Finding my Way. Toronto: Simon & Schuster Canada.

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Jesse Thistle's book "From the Ashes" recounts the author's personal experience of family turmoil, drug addiction, and homelessness. The author uses his gift for storytelling coupled with family photos and real lived experiences to paint a vivid and unflinching recollection of his personal struggles growing up estranged from his parents. The book begins with Thistle recounting a cherished memory of him and his grandmother that soon becomes dark as he shares with the reader how his parent's relationship was sullied with domestic violence. Thistle goes on to tell us about growing up with a drug addicted father in extreme poverty. Despite his parent's inability to provide a stable home, Thistle feels immense love and loyalty to them, especially his father. This loyalty and longing for his father will become Thistle's greatest demon and deeply impact his ability to maintain healthy, meaningful relationships in adolescence. Another source of tension for Thistle is understanding and making meaning of his Metis identity while growing up in a predominantly white suburb of Toronto. The key themes that emerge are of identity, belonging, addiction, and reconciling the ideals of family life with reality.

Thistle begins "From the Ashes" by introducing us to his maternal grandparents, who live on property the Canadian government allocated to them using the road allowance system in Erin Ferry, Saskatchewan. Immediately that indicates to the reader the tension between being Canadian

and being Metis within our colonial society. It also functions to introduce the reader to a time of innocence and familial love, a feeling that Thistle will spend the majority of the book attempting to chase down. Thistle reminisces about his relationship with his brothers and Mushoom saying, “Sometimes Josh and I would get jealous of Jerry. He crawled all over Mushoom’s stomach and they bellowed until tears came out their eyes. He never did that with us. He’d hug us but it wasn’t the same” (p. 13). This is a major theme within the book that ties to the feeling of belonging; Jesse feeling inadequate or not loved enough by the men in his family.

Sonny, Thistle’s dad, mirrors the struggles Jesse will face as a young adult. Sonny is addicted to hard drugs and is unable to provide for his three young children. Thistle writes “[Sonny] promised [my mom] a life of sobriety. Dad lasted three days before he drank himself into a stupor. One day he took his anger out on everyone. Josh endured a beating and Mom received it even worse” (p. 19). The young boys learn to steal food with Sonny and even will drink his “brown pop” (p. 29), from the fridge to numb their hunger pains when there is no food in the house and Sonny is nowhere to be found. This begins Jesse’s struggle with turning to drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism to process the trauma he experienced as a young child.

As Jesse and his brothers are already estranged from their mother, the boys are placed into the foster care system when it becomes clear to authorities that Sonny has abandoned his sons. While the brothers are awaiting placement, they are sheltered in “Children’s Aid” (p. 35), where many children sleep and eat together under government care. While there, the brothers become quite close with another child, Johnny. Johnny becomes like a fourth brother to the boys and they all look after each other with fierce protection and loyalty. Thistle writes “We made a pact, then

and there, to take care of one another, no matter what...Five minutes after the pact was struck, a team of workers came in and wrestled Johnny from our circle...[They] took away our red-headed brother” (p. 37). This reinforces to Jesse that family is not a constant and cannot be counted on to protect you and thus begins Jesse’s inability to forge strong bonds with people.

Jesse’s paternal grandparents become the brothers’ legal guardians and even though this is a much more stable environment than with his parents, Jesse struggles with impulse control and behavioural issues. When Jesse is in kindergarten, he gets drunk with a classmate (pp. 52-53), he destroys a cherished robin’s egg nest of a neighbour (p. 56) and he begins to steal from the local corner store (p. 64). These behaviours cause massive tension in his grandparents’ house and begin a vicious cycle of Jesse desperately wanting to be accepted by his family and him being completely unable to control his behaviour which leads to deeper family rifts and then more bad behaviour. When questioned about why he destroyed the robin’s nest, Thistle writes

When I saw the three eggs tucked into that nest it reminded me of my brothers and me and our home in Saskatchewan. I thought of how much that mother robin loved those eggs and how well she and Brian’s family took care of them and I got jealous. The eggs had their mother, and my brothers and I didn’t anymore. So, I took the eggs. I thought that if I had them, in some way I’d have the same love the eggs had, and that would mean that in some way I’d have a mother’s love again (p. 56).

With Jesse lacking the supports to process his parents leaving him in a healthy manner, his relationships suffer and he struggles in school. This solidifies his personal narrative of feeling like an outsider and not belonging with the children who are successful in their studies. Adding additional stress is Jesse not being able to connect with his Metis identity, Jesse remembers a

classmate telling him “You’re just a dirty Indian, like the rest of them...You’ll probably die drinking like they all do” (p. 87). This comment is particularly malicious because it is the fate that many assume Sonny has succumbed to. Jesse soon begins using harder drugs and partying to escape from real life.

Ultimately, Jesse’s drug use soon sabotages his relationships with his grandparents and his brothers. He is unable to maintain working his job at a grocery store and he ends up homeless. Thistle chronicles his time living on the street in a raw, brutally honest manner. The typical perils of street life such as being assaulted and having to rob and steal for food and clothing are described heart wrenchingly in depth. Thistle also writes about the issues and complexities one might not think of immediately when imaging homelessness. Specifically, Jesse becomes quite injured during a fall while inebriated (p. 236). He can access medical care but once discharged from the hospital keeping his wound clean and caring for himself, and getting enough sleep and eating nutritiously, becomes almost impossible and the wound becomes infected. Jesse soon realizes that his best option, as his family is can no longer handle his addiction, is to be put in jail where he will be sheltered and can sober up. Thistle writes “Society, I figured, cares more about criminals than they do about the homeless” (p. 247). Luckily for Jesse, prison is able to provide him with the means to battle his addiction and enter rehab, as well as help him receive his GED.

This leads Jesse to be accepted into university where he is given the chance to write a paper about his Metis heritage and ultimately leads him back to Erin Ferry, Saskatchewan with his mother and aunt. This serves as a form of catharsis for Jesse and allows him to really accept himself and his heritage. It also allows him to achieve a deeper understanding of his parents’ struggles that

left them unable to nurture him as a small child. Thistle writes “I started taking Indigenous history classes to figure out who I was and why I saw so many other Natives in all the homeless and justice institutions and out on the streets over the years” (p. 325).

“From the Ashes” is a vivid and captivating read that can be easily devoured over a few evenings. Thistle writes in a manner that is easily accessible and with the purpose to really illustrate how deeply entrenched one can become in their addiction. I would recommend this book to scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds, as Thistle touches on many issues of colonialism, which is something that immerses all of our lives and studies here in Canada. However, the book would likely be most pertinent to those specializing in Sociology and Social Work because of the depth of personal information on addiction and the real systemic and systematic barriers that those trying to access services face. One limitation of the book that I found myself focusing on was a lack of reflexivity in the writing. I would have appreciated hearing Thistle’s thoughts and reflections on his own actions and others now that he is completely sober and has reconciled with some of his family. Despite that one minor critique, I would still highly recommend this book to anyone who is wanting a deeper understanding of addiction or who is struggling with addiction and conflict within their family.