

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

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Jesse Thistle's book "From the Ashes", is an autobiography told from the perspective and lived experiences of a Métis-Cree man in modern post-colonial Canada. Often, the emotional toll survival stories like Thistle's, exert inexorable trauma in even the simplest of explanations. Thistle's use of symbolic descriptors, internal consciousness conflicts, artistic expression, and at times comedy, do indeed make many horrible experiences palatable for contemporary mainstream readers. Thistle accomplishes this by delving into critical societal issues such as, generational trauma, sexual abuse, sexism, stigmatization, poverty, neglect, marginalization, and thankfully healing. Thistle's experience and writing guides the uninformed through these societal minefields, with insight, wonder, and without self-censorship. Indeed, Thistle's book outlines many factors that contributed to his downward spiral into homelessness and drug dependency, as well as the factors that turned his life around for the better. One thing that sets this book apart from so many other similar stories, is that ultimately Thistle overcomes his addictions, comes to term with his past trauma and lifelong identity crisis, by choosing to reconnect to his ancestral heritage, and trade his pain and loneliness for a chance at companionship and love.

There are many interconnecting themes in Thistle's book that comment on the impact of changing dynamics of social supports, such as family, friends and partners. However, the following three themes appear to be the most consequential to Thistle's life experiences: (1) the notion of

love gone bad; (2) the power of choice; and (3) the restorative and bonding power of love and family. Social and emotional supports and societal inclusion are two important determinants of health and mental health. This is clearly depicted in the book, as when these determinants are removed from Thistle's life, his over-a-decade-long journey into homelessness, addiction, and depression happens almost immediately thereafter: "I remember a week later losing my job at the grocery store. I remember catching a ride out west with one of my buddies. I remember asking Josh if I could stay with him. The rest is a blur" (p. 154). This is not a singular event, but a recurring cycle throughout Thistle's story. Thistle tends to make a host of poor choices that continue to alienate him from family and social supports, even those who try to welcome him:

His eyes teared up and he moved in for a hug. I opened my arms like a thistle in bloom, wrapping every leaf around him, thorns outward, keeping us both safe. 'Don't mention it' I said. 'I did what I had to do.' He invited me to a celebration of his uncle's life, but I declined (p. 215).

Thistle eventually becomes too jaded (love gone bad) to consider an offer to live with his mother (love and family), the family he yearned for the most and lamented not being with, throughout his youth. The cycle of abandonment at this point has come full circle (love gone bad), and Thistle chooses (power of choice) to remain homeless and without family (love and family). This heartbreaking moment is captured as follows, "Daniel asked me to reconsider, and I could tell he was trying to defuse the tension; she was hurt. I think she really expected me to accept" (p.186). This cycle continues for Thistle and he loses himself in his addictions, trying to escape from his emotional and physical pain, which is now a constant assault on his mind, body and soul.

Priest, one of Thistle's prison-mates confesses a truth he discovered too late for himself, but perhaps maybe not too late for Thistle:

All us criminals start out as normal people just like anyone else, but then things happen in life that tear us apart, that makes us into something capable of hurting other people. That's all any of the darkness really is—just love gone bad. We're just broken-hearted people hurt by life (p. 260).

Thistle may not have been aware of this truth, but his life reflects this theme of love gone bad, as throughout most of his youth he endured abandonment and starvation. Thistle acts on primal impulses as a consequence, leaving him with a “gaping maw within” (p. 333) a self-described void that devoured goodwill and hopefulness. Thistle is no stranger to stigmatization and marginalization as he internalizes many misconceptions about who he is. For example, Thistle claims his family was Italian (p.78), and later he reinforces the dominate group's ideas of Indigenous cultures by mocking his brothers as they come to terms with their own Indigeneity (p. 129). Thistle is a broken-hearted man hurt by love gone bad, not unlike his grandfather and not unlike his father as well:

We Thistle men... were raised to be tough and unemotional, with the thickness of our calluses and fists the only way we were ever allowed to show how we felt—lessons that went way back to Grandpa's horrible boyhood in Cape Breton—lessons my dad, no doubt, struggled with, too (pp. 315-316).

This intergenerational trauma had multiple negative impacts on Thistle's idea of family, social supports, self-worth, self-identity and notion of personal agency. Thistle constantly fights for control in his life (power of choice). As a young boy he refused to speak. Thistle says, “My words

belonged to me, they were the only thing I had that were mine, and I didn't trust anyone enough to share them" (p. 18). As a young man, Thistle rebels against those he thinks cross or try to control him, including friends, family and love interests alike. In short order Thistle's misguided fight for self-determination backfires after a minor disagreement with his Grandfather (love gone bad) about how to spend his own money (power of choice). Thistle notes, "Destroying my future was my way of getting back at the old man" (p. 147). This leads to more behaviour that alienates much of what little social and emotional supports Thistle had left. He notes, "The dual losses (love gone bad, power of choice) were like my rudder had been snapped off, without warning. I was adrift... no search party was coming" (p. 162). Alone and struggling, Thistle tries to numb his growing pain with hard drugs and alcohol. He suffers a terrible sexual assault that leaves him devastated and ashamed. When family members try and help him, one final act of abandonment from his estranged father serves as yet another reminder that all the love in his life had gone bad. He says, "It's pointless, I thought, my destruction is complete. The next week I left Port Hope (power of choice) and began drifting again" (p. 177).

Thistle continues to drift, without meaningful social support and ultimately loses the will to live. He states, "I was going to climb to the top of a construction tower, close my eyes, spread my wings, and float away, crack and alcohol coursing through my brain for courage" (p. 287). However, Thistle is talked down from his plan by an old acquaintance, Lucie, possibly his first real social connection in over a year. As a result of this connection, Thistle chooses to live (power of choice). Thistle's road ahead is still fraught with challenges, but he begins to make good choices such as participating in rehabilitation programs. As Thistle begins to reconnect with his social

supports and family, he “rediscovered some fragment of home, some lost piece of myself. It filled me up” (love and family) (p. 303) ... “The support of family and love—Harvest House gave me both; they gave me the opportunity to choose” (power of choice) (love and family) (p. 314). By the end of his detox and the additional year in care Thistle finishes every program requirement without incident. Inspired by love and family, Thistle has a plan to reconcile his past by entering into his family’s circle and share a love with Lucie, the woman who saved him from committing suicide.

Thistle’s “gaping maw within” (p. 333) closes with the actualization of his love with Lucie. Following over a decade of estrangement, Thistle finally reconnects with his mother and Aunt Yvonne. They teach him about the history of his family and help him reconnect to his Indigenous culture. Thistle recollects, “It felt so good... I let my tears do the talking...I remembered who I was” (pp. 328-329). Throughout Thistle’s book so much of the tragedy he suffered in his young life centers on the theme of love gone bad. He felt continuously disappointed by those he expected to love and protect him. The hopelessness he experienced led to limiting his sense of power and choice. Fighting against this, he often made poor choices to prove he had some control in his life. Through love and family Thistle was able to regain a sense of his own identity and heal past wounds.

Jesse Thistle’s book is a triumph of spirit and of family. “From the Ashes” is an effective primer for academics who teach future helping professionals such as, social workers, nurses and doctors, seeking to inform about often marginalized lived experiences of Indigenous people. Academics or anyone seeking to better understand marginalized Indigenous people, systemic

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racism, drug addiction and poverty, and how family dysfunction and abandonment can affect developing minds, could learn many insights from this book that may not be found in academic texts. This book has relevance for all Canadians. It is not just an Indigenous story; it is a story about Canada. All Canadians have a responsibility to understand the impact of systemic racism perpetrated against Indigenous people.