



**Robertson, David A. (2020). Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory.  
Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers.**

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David Robertson's book "Black Water" is a memoir about intergenerational trauma and healing. He recounts his journey of understanding his family, identity, and reconnections with the land on which his Cree father, Don, had abandoned. The book's subtitle reveals its themes: *family, legacy and blood memory*. Robertson then reflects on the way his experiences of his family and social surroundings have shaped him and questions himself about what it means to be Indigenous. Moreover, he reveals the normalization of Indigenous peoples being portrayed as racialized and deprived. Through it, he divulges historical trauma and exposes the colonial violence against Indigenous people.

Robertson has a unique style in his memoir; he recollects a father-son journey to the northern Manitoba trapline and entwines it with recollections of his memories and reflections from his childhood. He reveals to the readers that he was raised without knowledge or understanding of his family's Indigenous roots, fostering a childhood filled with anxiety and uncertainty (pp. 12-13). More specifically, the book indulges itself as if the reader is sitting with Robertson and his father on the way to the trapline.

His parent's decision not to disclose that they are First Nation is rooted in racism and bias against Indigenous people, believing that their Cree roots would be an awful burden for their children. As he followed through with recollections of his childhood, he expressed the anxiety that his indigeneity produced. At school, Robertson often denied being Indigenous, as everything the school taught about being Indigenous had a negative connotation (p. 12). He collected his thoughts and said:

I was ashamed to be Indigenous. That wouldn't be the last time I'd face questions about my cultural background and do the same damn thing. But there was something more. I was ashamed to have denied self, and back then I couldn't understand why. Not why I'd denied who I was, but why I felt ashamed for having done it. Hadn't I just dodged a bullet? (p. 40)

To understand Robertson's childhood, it is vital to recognize the negative connotation attached to Indigenous peoples, which is actively being taught in classrooms. He explains that his skin colour was a determinant of how many friends he acquired in school (p. 41). His school years were filled with insults and slurs thrown at him which created a stressful life situation leading to the diagnosis of his anxiety. This ultimately resulted in Robertson rejecting his identity as Indigenous.

Robertson makes use of metaphors and imagery frequently. He makes a compelling comparison between the church and *rez dogs* to describe the relationship that the church brings about for the Indigenous community (p. 121). He explores the duality of the church being cruel and altruistic. In his father's case, the church caused his father to lose the ability to speak the language. Though, his father believed that losing his ability to speak Cree was an advantage as it

was part of losing the identity of being an Indigenous man:

While for Dad Christianity was, and continues to be, a positive experience, the church, in Indigenous communities for Indigenous People, has also been viciously damaging. In Dad's case, his faith in Jesus Christ did not come at the expense of his identity as a Cree man. (p. 121)

Robertson discusses his father's family, specifically about being on the trapline. His family, parents, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles were part of a community where he learned how to survive independently. However, this way of life is taken away abruptly because the Federal Government introduced the Family Allowance. Robertson describes that with the Family Allowance, in order to obtain the benefit, families must have a permanent address. A trapline was not considered a permanent address. This resulted in his father's family moving away from the trapline, abruptly stopping all tradition. Don Robertson explains, "What it did was break up traplines for the families." (p. 101). This is significant as the Government of Canada made a decision believed to be beneficial for the Indigenous peoples. Consequently, the long-lived traditions ended, and the urgency to preserve and maintain indigeneity became absent.

In addition to exploring the disappearing traditions, Robertson makes a striving effort to find what the meaning of intergenerational trauma is; through the Elders and knowledge keepers; the land itself; and recollections of his childhood memories. Under those circumstances, he discovers how to heal that trauma, effectively realizing that it takes a community to do so (pp. 248-249). He deduced that "...this acquisition of knowledge, this learning, happens through Elders, happens through stories and happens through the language" (p. 248).

Essentially, his rekindling of connection with his father and identity is a significant part of the memoir. Some conversations were challenging for both parties but were needed to heal that intergenerational trauma. Eventually, Robertson let go of his resentment towards his father for being an absent father figure and unpacked why his father made the decisions he made.

Robertson concludes by extending the conclusion of his journey to resolving his identity crisis, his pain from his father's absence, his childhood bullying, intense anxiety and his reclamation of his indigeneity- tying all the themes together. His conclusion reads in part:

A feeling came over me that I'd come home. It was a feeling I now recognize as blood memory - that the memories and lives of my ancestors, of Dad, are woven into the fabric of my DNA. Everything they lived through, everything they experienced, lives within me. I feel the same thing here, on Black Water (p. 257)

Robertson then accomplished what he acquired to do so from the beginning of the book. Robertson's memoir accomplishes three goals. First, it offers discovery and reconciliation not just for the author but for his father as well. Second, he feels at ease knowing that he will be carrying on his indigeneity in his children; he reads in part: "And their indigeneity will change as they grow older, as they learn new things, as they and I carry on a conversation that I hope lasts for decades" (p. 260). Lastly, he addresses and illustrates the harsh reality that Indigenous people face and the long-lasting effects of colonization. Robertson accomplishes these goals by distinctively drawing out his themes- *family, legacy, and blood memory*.

Robertson's intended audience is any Canadians or academic bodies striving to educate themselves about the history of intergenerational trauma that resulted from the colonization of Indigenous peoples. It teaches the effects and the normalization of the disenfranchisement of Indi-

genous people. His book is an excellent teaching and reference resource for academic bodies focusing on the Indigenous experience in Canada. Remarkably, the unique-styled memoir will open up discussions on racial bias, racism, stigma and, in general, the social issues that Indigenous people confront today.

Though Robertson shares his anecdotes about his experience as an Indigenous man, I wonder if his recollections are accurate; the author may have exaggerated or embellished specific stories, which can distort the readers' understanding of the situation. Other disciplines that may benefit from the book are sociology, law, education, history, Indigenous studies, and film studies, to name a few. I found "Black Water" a must-read for readers exploring family history, travel memoirs, and Indigeneity. It was easy to follow, emotional, engaging, and fulfilling.