
Reviewed by: Taylor Mackey, MacEwan University

David Robertson’s book, “Black Water” is an emotionally-healing memoir that intertwines his own lived experiences along with his father, and ancestors to regain his Indigeneity and live a life worth living in their eyes, especially within his role as a father. The story focuses on a trip to his father’s trapline (per his request) in which Robertson is able to tether together the missing pieces of his upbringing, and repair the bond that fell victim to lost time. Throughout this journey “home” central themes of family, legacy, and “blood memory” reveal themselves. Moreover, Robertson illustrates the impact that assimilation had on Indigenous people and the intergenerational trauma that remains despite attempts to erase it from Canada’s odious history. Therefore, he addresses the creation of harmful racial stereotypes remaining from the colonization of the Indigenous people, and how it influenced his own racial prejudices.

Robertson uses a conversational style of writing with a relaxed tone that provides intimacy between the author and the reader similar to a personal conversation between friends. As a child, Robertson was kept in the dark regarding his Indigenous roots. His parent’s decision to keep his identity hidden, was so as to not limit the various opportunities open to him, that would be revoked if he labeled himself an “authentically Cree” man. They acknowledged that the time in which he and his siblings grew up, as well as the neighbourhood they resided would not be so kind as to
accept them if they were aware of their Indigenous heritage. He did not seem to acknowledge his indigeneity until he got older and people in school started to ask if he was an “indian” and he would constantly deny. One specific situation with a girl in his class struck a match in his head that led to an identity crisis, on his walk home he recalled his thoughts:

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 who I was, but why I felt ashamed for having done it. Hadn’t I just dodged a bullet? (p. 46)

Robertson's experience feeling untethered to a specific identity, no doubt played a part in his continuing struggle with anxiety, thus making his desire in obtaining immersive experiences within a culture he knew little about, all that more impressive.

Essentially, to understand why Robertson’s father, Don passed on certain values, and life lessons (and not others) it is of vital importance to look into the cultural genocide of Indigenous populations. The Indian Act was established in Canada to, “assimilate Indigenous people and, ultimately, reduce the number of ‘Indians’ for whom the Canadian government was financially responsible” (p. 99). Following the enactment of these laws, Residential schools were invoked by colonizers -predominantly white, political and religious authority-in which Indigenous children were removed from their homes and forced to reside in overcrowded, unkempt school houses in which they were stripped of their intrinsic Indigenous values and beliefs. It was conducted under the guise that the children would be taught the “civilized” ways of western society and come out better equipped-in terms of education, language, and appearance-to exist alongside other Cana-
Robertson uses the little information his grandmother shared regarding her experience with residential schools as well as the stories resurfaced from survivors to piece together what her time there may have looked like. Nonetheless, he came to realize just how her experiences impacted the values she imposed upon his children (whether adhered to or not). She placed vital importance on, “the role of education in surviving in an increasingly white world; and … knowing your language” (p. 140).

Robertson’s use of imaginative metaphors such as comparing the overbearing presence of the Catholic church and the hand they played in the enfranchisement of Indigenous Canadians to that of “rez dogs”:

If the indoctrination wasn’t happening at church-run schools, it was taking place in what could be viewed as church-run communities, where structures built to praise a Christian God enveloped people on reserve like baptismal water. I visit Indigenous communities, and in many of them, churches appear on the roadsides with the frequency of rez dogs. And like a rez dog, the church can be - the church has been - both feral and friendly (p. 121).

Although Don did not have to sacrifice his Cree identity in turn for his involvement in the church, others were not greeted with such pleasant experiences. Don admitted to gravitating towards the church because they believed people could be “reborn and could understand that this was the way they wanted to live and develop an awareness of what that means, both for themselves and for how they could share that with others” (p. 124).

This memoir is not a personal biography, Robertson lends the focus mainly on the lived experiences of his father, and his ancestors growing up on the Trapline in Manitoba. From the
beginning it is known that Robertson finds solace in his father’s presence which his father’s temporary absence and in-turn his anxiety has often stripped him of, this is evident when he returns to the trapline after many years. Reading this book brings about a similar feeling, with every line you read the world around you seem to be still and you feel at peace in its presence. Robertson’s use of illustrative imagery throughout the memoir emphasizes his regained connection to the land.

Upon entering Norway house, he says while looking over the lake and taking his father’s advice on being grounded in a moment, “[I] listen to the wind and the water as it pushes towards the shore in tiny waves. That same wind feels cool against my skin. Fresh. Crisp” (p. 96). He paints the picture of Norway House as a personal utopia, devoid of all the stressors of everyday life. Geographical locations discussed within the memoir act as important memory placeholders. The conclusion reiterates this, in part:

In 2000, when I stepped out of the van and put a foot onto the ground in Norway House, 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. That everything they lived through, everything they experienced, lives within me (p. 257).

Clearly, the experiences Robertson gained on the father-son trip would not only affect the way he approaches his own life, but the Indigenous values, traditions and ways of living he will pass onto his own children to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma. Within the memoir is an interplay between the past and the present that does not trip over itself; there is a smooth transition between periods of time that prevents literary vertigo or confusion.

Although Robertson’s writing style may come off as “too sentimental or soft,” I think he
Mackey does an amazing job at expressing the awkwardness and vulnerability of sharing such personal information open to the possibility of judgment and criticism. The memoir is relatable. Robertson discusses topics such as divorce, anxiety, discrimination, feelings of inadequacy (fulfilling the role of a true “Cree man” and a father) and lack of belongingness that anyone, Indigenous or not can feel.

This memoir would be an asset to post-secondary students studying colonization, and the enfranchisement of Indigenous Canadians. In addition, this memoir would be of value to anyone studying sociology, Canadian history and Canadian criminal justice or foundations of law. While also offering itself as an emotional or informative resource to Indigenous young adults who are also struggling with identity acceptance.

Overall, I feel privileged to have learned about Robertson’s life as well as his fathers and ancestors. I could come up with minute criticisms, however, that would underplay the enjoyment and essential education obtained from this insightful reading. I will be picking this book up again in the near future.