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David A. Robertson’s book “Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory” is an evocative and deeply personal memoir following the author’s search for a deeper connection with his Indigenous ancestry. Robertson takes the reader on his journey of self-discovery in this stirring, heartfelt and profoundly vulnerable memoir. Robertson wrote this book to find himself to deepen his connection to his Cree ancestry. He wrote this book for his children so that “one day it might help them discover a piece of who they are” (p. 310). The book delves into concepts such as racism and internalized racism yet makes it palatable for the average reader. The book begins by describing his and his father’s journey as they sit one day at a café. His father, Donald, tells him, “I want to go to my trapline one last time” (p. 25). Robertson’s father has not been to his trapline in nearly seven decades. Thus begins a journey that sees the two reconnecting with his father’s ancestral grounds of Norway House Cree Nation. He begins each chapter with a recollection of this journey, then transitions to his childhood memories. Through this, the reader begins to see the loss of culture, the intergenerational trauma, and most importantly, the intergenerational healing and resilience.

A central theme throughout the book is the negative stereotypes that exist in society about Indigenous People; however, Robertson explores this theme further and explains how systemic
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racism caused him to internalize these stereotypes: “I was educated by ignorance, by the perpetuation of stereotypes through popular culture, by the wilful denial of colonial history in the classroom” (p. 22). Although Robertson recalls instances of being bullied as a child, he ties these negative stereotypes back to colonialism. He mentions that these negative stereotypes were some that he held for a long time. However, Robertson invites the reader to move beyond the stereotypes, arguing that we all can speak up against racism and stereotypes and that inaction is like participation. After some self-realization, Robertson acknowledges the impacts those stereotypes had on him. He uses his father as a positive role model of what it means to be Cree. However, as he says, his father “just wasn’t around enough to do that modelling, and I needed it to counter all the stereotypes that had become ingrained in me” (p. 216).

Robertson recounts his formative years in Manitoba. His parents separated when he was young; however, they reconciled years later. Robertson states that only seeing his fathers on weekends during their separation had a profound effect on him, as exemplified when he recalls, “While I can fill in the blanks to a racist song from a Disney movie or feel the rain splash underfoot while dancing through a puddle, I am left with almost nothing when it comes to memories of dad” (p. 71). His father was a Cree man, and his mother was a white woman with “a beautiful smile and flowing brown hair” (p. 13). Robertson’s parents decided not to disclose his Cree ancestry to him. For him, their decision not to tell him about his Cree heritage contributed to his feelings of confusion and disconnection with his identity. At this point, the first theme becomes evident: Robertson is grappling with self-identity issues and the loss of culture due to colonialism and due to his father being gone for his formative years. He believed that his parent’s decision not to
disclose his Indigenous identity was to protect him in a predominately white area where negative stereotypes were plentiful. It was not until junior high school that he found out he was Indigenous. By this point, the negative stereotypes had been internalized, as is evident when Robertson recounts, “I had no desire to be Indigenous because everything I’d learned about Indigenous People during my formative years was negative” (p. 21).

Another prevalent theme, as depicted in the title, is blood memory. Robertson’s interpretation of blood memory is “the experiences of one generation felt by the next, and the next after that” (p. 77). Blood memory is critical in Robertson’s memoir, as he learns about himself through his journey to Norway House Cree Nation. Robertson recounts small pieces of his grandmother’s experiences at a Residential School and details her resilience as a survivor. However, he does not want to be defined solely by the atrocities his family endured. Instead, he says, “that history is a part of our family, and it always will be. But there is more to it, more to us, and there was more to Nana” (p. 91). At the same time, he notes that all these memories are a part of who he is. When he steps into Norway House Cree Nation for the first time, he feels the feeling of blood memory, which he says is deeply tied to his ancestors. Through this journey of self-exploration, Robertson details how the culture was stripped away from his family through the lasting impacts of colonialism. He states that “language loss has been, arguably, the most profound impact of any system established to educate Indigenous children” (p. 126).

Additionally, he speaks about the indoctrination by the church and the effects it had on Indigenous communities. He states, “If the indoctrination wasn’t happening at church-run schools, it was taking place in what could be viewed as church-run communities’ (p. 144). However,
religion has been an important component of his father and one he has come to respect, yet it is in an interesting dichotomy. His father says that not teaching him the language was his biggest regret. Nevertheless, religion was the catalyst for the indoctrination of Indigenous children because “it always starts with the children, doesn’t it?” (p. 146).

Perhaps one of the most crucial themes in this memoir is intergenerational healing, demonstrating Indigenous Peoples’ resilience. Intergenerational healing is seen throughout the generations addressed in the book and is even touched on for the newer generations, such as Robertson’s children. We see his grandmother surviving the atrocities of residential schools, wanting her children to get an education and stressing to her children and grandchildren the value of family, kindness, happiness, education and faith. Intergenerational healing is evident in the mere act of the reconnection to culture we see for Robertson and his father on their journey to Norway House Cree Nation. As Robertson recounts, “When Dad and I discuss reconciliation, he talks about it, within the context of healing, as an act of remembering” (p. 78). However, the most profound and moving example of intergenerational healing is when Robertson’s daughter asks her grandfather to teach her Cree. As Robertson states, “This is how we will heal. Intergenerational trauma requires this kind of act, purposefully working towards healing through the connection we choose to foster, the things we seek to learn, in whichever way we choose to learn them” (p. 286).

Throughout Robertson’s memoir, we see a progression which is not always linear. He reconnects with his culture by writing the book. He better understands himself and his father and details a moving father-son relationship: “I can see it. I understand it as well as I understand myself. Everything Dad was, everything he is, is the journey that led here. Everything I was, everything I
am, is the journey that led here, to Black Water” (p. 293). His memoir is thought-provoking and relatable to anyone with aging parents and anyone who once felt disconnected from their identity.

Robertson’s memoir would benefit anybody in the social science fields, such as social work, sociology, and psychology. However, I believe anybody in Canada would benefit from reading this book as it provides a moving view into the lasting effects of colonization while also providing hope that the cycle can be broken. I do not have any critiques of Robertson’s book for two reasons. One, it was well-written, moving, and engaging and helped provide a picture of his life. Second, it is not my place, as a settler in Canada, to critique the deeply personal memories of an Indigenous man. Robertson was vulnerable in this memoir and shared his story, which is his, and his alone, to tell.