



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

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David Robertson's "Black Water: Family, Legacy and Blood Memory" is a profound memoir touching on the many complex aspects of family and claiming one's heritage. Robertson dives into the effects of intergenerational trauma, as well as the pain of lacking one's true identity while perpetuating racist and negative views on Indigenous peoples and himself. His Cree father and white mother agreed to withhold their First Nations background from their children until they were older, though their long separation furthered the disconnection Robertson felt towards his identity. Reclaiming aspects of himself that had been kept hidden becomes a centerpoint for Robertson, as well as highlighting how the effects of colonialism continues to affect Indigenous peoples today. Reconciling with his father, Don, whom he spent ten years without, furthers his desire to reconnect with his roots, as well as enhances the revelation of his Cree heritage. Robertson imparts a unique wisdom to the familiar narrative of reclaiming one's heritage and finding the true meaning of family and home. His memoir expresses both the personal revelations with the universal experience of passing down family legacies to future generations.

In the beginning of the memoir, Robertson paints a picture of his upbringing, a prominent theme throughout the entire memoir, including the painful and long separation of his parents at a young age as his mother raised him on her own. He expresses that being raised solely by his

mother, and the absence of his father has a profound impact on his idea of self and identity, as he was missing a profound piece in his life (p. 22.) With this, the internalized racism, as well as the perpetuation of racist stereotypes against Indigenous peoples impacted the author in many ways, as it was a way for him to fit in with the other kids, who were predominantly white. Further, the parents' decision to withhold Robertson's Indigenous heritage, although with good intentions to protect him and his siblings, created further confusion as he grew older. Once confronted with his identity that was kept hidden for so long, he still internalized it himself, as he did not wish to be associated with negative stereotypes of Indigenous peoples, despite having a successful Cree father as a figure to look up to (p. 116.) Even when asked by peers, Robertson continued to divert the conversation away from his race, as he states, "I didn't know what to say if I wasn't going to tell her the truth...I was still doing what I had done my entire life: hiding" (p. 116). Hiding his identity had almost become a habit to Robertson, though the feeling of familiarity in Norway House began to shift the internalization of identity.

There are multiple instances where the concept of blood memory is brought up in the memoir. First, we see this concept in Niso (Chapter Two), as Robertson describes blood memory as the feeling of familiarity as he visits Norway House for the first time, despite no prior exposure to the place. Robertson writes, "The first time I visited the community, years earlier, it felt familiar to me, even though I'd never been there before. An Elder told me during the trip that the feeling of familiarity was called blood memory, and that Norway House, as well as the water and the trees surrounding it, had always been a part of me" (p. 24). This becomes a profound aspect for Robertson, where despite his unfamiliarity with the place and its surroundings, he feels connected

to the land and what it has meant for his ancestors, his father, and now himself. This is one of the first instances we see Robertson express peace, while at other points he states that the neighbourhood in which he grew up, was far from a connected home for him, “living there felt like living in a bubble...there were invisible borders that, for the most part, we didn’t cross” (pp. 36-37). Further, he expresses that time moves differently in Norway House compared to Winnipeg, as “there isn’t a rush you feel in the city. We’re living in an age of anxiety for several reasons, but one of them, it seems to me, is that we’ve come to expect and want everything *right now*” (p. 57.) Furthermore, the sense of belonging at Norway House becomes extremely important to the author, as he becomes more involved, knowledgeable, and proud to be Indigenous through his time at Norway House and his journeys to his family’s trapline. This is shown through his desire for his first permanent tattoo to be in a Swampy Cree word: *niwakomakanak* (p. 58) meaning “my relatives. This strikes me as an idea, like time, that means something different to Indigenous People. The concept of relatives, what it means to be a member of a family, of a community. It’s why I wanted to get my Indian status...because I wanted to be a Norway House Cree Nation band member” (p. 58.) Not only did the absence of Norway House affect the author, but the long absence his father, Don, experienced when he left Norway House also had a profound impact, “that absence changed him. It changed his entire family” (p. 60.)

Robertson’s memoir delivers a heartfelt and extensive look into the very complex dynamics of family, as well as what it means to have a family and relatives. In terms of academic audiences, Robertson conveys most relevance to the disciplines of psychology and sociology, as he not only dives into the issues regarding race, racism and discrimination through his earlier years, but also

the concept of labelling theory in sociology, as he frequently avoided topics regarding his race, as he did not wish to be associated with the negative stereotypes society holds against Indigenous peoples and ultimately, avoided such labels. In addition, the complex ideas surrounding family, including separation and parental absence is a large topic within the discipline of sociology, as well as being a topic of interest to many, as many can relate to the often messy, complicated, and complex factors of family dynamics. The author's description of intergenerational trauma in which his father wished to protect his children from, while simultaneously blending the need and desire to connect with his Indigenous culture is a beautiful scene painted by Robertson, as not dives into the painful past of his ancestors and father, while celebrating his deep roots to his heritage. For many Indigenous people who were also raised disconnected to their culture, languages and land, this memoir serves as a significant component in reminding people that culture, heritage, and ancestral legacy will always remain close through one's blood memory.

This memoir remains unique through the compelling reflections of past and present, as he describes his once disconnected relationship with his father to one of deep connection and profound love. The vivid descriptions of Robertson's loved ones, as well as Norway House, reel in the reader through a refreshing lens, allowing for every reader to connect to the author's memoir in one way or another. David A. Robertson has written a beautiful telling of complex family dynamics, hidden identity and the ultimate embrace of one's roots and culture, that will undoubtedly remain to be a powerful read for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who read this memoir.