
Reviewed by: Roxy Perez, MacEwan University

"Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory" by David A. Robertson is a poignant memoir that delves into themes of intergenerational trauma, cultural identity, and the enduring impact of colonialism on Indigenous communities. Robertson's narrative takes readers on a journey of self-discovery as he reconnects with his Cree heritage and reconciles with his family's history, touching upon the legacy of Residential Schools and the loss of their ancestral trapline due to historical policies. Through his skillful storytelling, Robertson successfully conveys the significance of blood memory and the profound connection between Indigenous people, their history, and the land. The memoir offers a powerful exploration of Indigenous identity and highlights the ongoing consequences of the Residential School system on families, communities, and the ties between land, language, and culture.

In his memoir, Robertson intricately weaves together his journey, recollections of a father-son trip to a northern Manitoba trapline, and reflections on his childhood experiences. He shares that his upbringing lacked any awareness or comprehension of his family's Indigenous heritage, leading to a childhood marked by anxiety and a sense of uncertainty. Raised without his Indigenous heritage, Robertson's writing immerses readers in a journey as if they are sitting alongside him and his father on the way to the trapline. His narrative skillfully bridges the gap between Indigenous
and non-Indigenous readers. "Black Water" offers relatable, humorous, and heartwarming content that resonates with Indigenous readers while educating those with limited knowledge of Indigenous culture. Robertson explores the concept of blood memory, delving into the role it plays in shaping his Indigenous identity and drawing parallels to his own experiences and those of his daughter and father, emphasizing the deep connections between ancestral memories and one's sense of belonging. Robertson's father attributes his ability to adapt to numerous changes after departing from his hometown to the enduring strength of the Norway House community that resides in his blood memory.

Robertson delves into the separation of his parents, during which he spent a decade primarily interacting with his father on weekends. He uses the analogy of an emotional barrier to describe the disconnection he felt, leading to a profound sense of loss and confusion as he entered his teenage years. While Robertson discusses intergenerational trauma and biases within the community, he also explores the impact of growing up with separated parents. He briefly touches on how his parents' separation further complicated his struggle with identity, highlighting the implications of being primarily raised by his mother. Robertson's parents reunite years later and he characterizes the circumstances of their reconciliation as remarkably swift and smooth. While he acknowledges that unlearning internalized racism is challenging, the peace he finds after his parents come back together mirrors the profound sense of connection he now feels to his Indigenous heritage, despite the initial challenges he faced embracing it.

Furthermore, Robertson shares his personal odyssey of rediscovering and embracing his Indigenous roots after his Cree father and white mother decided to withhold their First Nations’
heritage from their children until they were older. He emphasizes the significance of forging connections with his family, culture, and the land, and how important it was in shaping his identity and reclaiming aspects of himself that he had concealed. Robertson's narrative illuminates the transformative power of reconnecting with one's heritage and the vital role it plays in grounding one's sense of self and belonging.

Throughout the book, Robertson explores how his parents' decision to keep their children hidden from their Indigenous heritage had unintended negative consequences. While his parents believed they were shielding their three sons, this secrecy ended up causing significant confusion regarding identity. Even after Robertson confronted his father, who finally revealed their Indigenous background, he stated his continued efforts to conceal this part of himself and assimilate with his non-Indigenous peers. Robertson explains that by reinforcing stereotypes and laughing at racial slurs, he could divert his peers' attention away from the fact that he was of Indigenous descent. This illustrates the depth of his struggle with identity and the measures he took to blend in during his formative years. Robertson's parents' choice to conceal their First Nation heritage stemmed from deeply ingrained racism and biases against Indigenous people, fearing that their Cree roots would be a heavy burden for their children to bear. As he delved into his childhood memories, he vividly expressed the anxiety and internal conflict that his Indigenous identity had triggered. In the school environment, Robertson frequently denied his Indigenous background, influenced by the negative portrayals and stereotypes he encountered in the educational curriculum. These experiences left a significant impact on him, leading him to reflect on his identity and upbringing. Robertson explained, “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)

Understanding Robertson's childhood requires recognizing the deeply ingrained negative perceptions surrounding Indigenous people that were actively propagated within the classroom setting. In his memoir, he illustrates how his skin colour became a determining factor in the number of friends he could make at school. His formative years were marred by a barrage of insults and racial slurs directed at him, creating an overwhelmingly stressful environment that led to an anxiety diagnosis. These experiences had a significant impact on Robertson, compelling him to distance himself from his Indigenous heritage. In his efforts to shield himself from the prejudice and discrimination he encountered, he gradually began to reject his identity as an Indigenous individual. This depicts the significant influence of societal stereotypes and discrimination on an individual's self-identity, as well as the consequences of being exposed to such negative biases during one's upbringing. Robertson's narrative serves as a poignant reminder of the challenges faced by many Indigenous individuals who navigate a world marked by racial biases and the severe impact this can have on their sense of self.

A recurring theme in the book is the concept of "blood memory" and the reverence for one's ancestors. Early on, Robertson's father, Don, attributes his adaptability to the strength of his ancestors, referring to this as blood memory. Robertson describes images of his pre-colonial ancestors that surface almost instinctively as he retraces their steps alongside his father. One of the
most touching moments of connection with his ancestors occurs when he and his father first set out on the water. He shares how he envisions a fleet of canoes filled with his relatives, embarking on their journey back to the community after months spent on the land. This mental image fills him with the same excitement and anticipation they must have felt, and he experiences a serene sense of belonging and relief. From an academic perspective, Robertson's memoir offers valuable insights for social sciences, including sociology, psychology, social work, and social policy. While no single individual can represent an entire community, Robertson's narrative holds cultural significance for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. His experience as a child of separated parents is a universal story that resonates with people worldwide, particularly his longing for his parents' reconciliation. The author addresses social issues such as racism and ignorance, highlighting his own participation in discrimination as a self-protective measure. His parents' decision to withhold part of their children's identity is seen as a symptom of intergenerational trauma, with the father aiming to shield his children from the discrimination he endured throughout his life. Robertson aptly demonstrates how cultural differences can both divide and unite. Despite the disconnect he experienced from his father, their rekindled relationship became profoundly meaningful and may not have been possible without the initial disconnection.

David Robertson's memoir, "Black Water", is a compelling and emotionally resonant exploration of his journey to reconnect with his Indigenous roots. While some may question the accuracy of his recollections, the book offers valuable insights. It serves as a must-read for those interested in family history, social workers, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and anyone curious about the Indigenous experience or intergenerational trauma. Robertson's narrative
stands out because it defies the typical linear structure of memoirs, intertwining memories and adventures engagingly and vividly. His storytelling skill, attention to detail, and intimate language provide a lasting warmth to the readers. Through this memoir, he immortalizes his father and offers a lasting impact on future generations seeking to reconnect with their Indigenous heritage. Collectively, Robertson effectively conveys the concepts of intergenerational trauma and blood memory, offering an accessible perspective on the Indigenous worldview for readers of all backgrounds. While the book may not delve into the extremes of trauma and racism, it serves as a valuable starting point for those interested in understanding the effects of colonization on Indigenous communities.