
Reviewed by: Jenielle Anselmo, MacEwan University

“Black Water”, written by David A. Robertson, is a book that shows a Cree man’s journey to intergenerational healing and self acceptance through his personal account. Robertson tells his memories from childhood to adulthood interweaved through his documentation of attending his father’s homeland and how that trip assisted him in learning about his father and by default, learning about his own identity. He needed to learn the culture of his ancestors and how they lived, to understand his father and ultimately understand himself. Robertson studied self identity and his own Indigenous acceptance, family and community relationships, intergenerational trauma, how memories are shaped and formed and he ties them to his personal story to create an unforgettable journey about his own cultural identity.

Robertson acknowledges that he always knew that he was different from other children in his school, mostly with respect to skin colour. However, he notes that he is not “sure when knowing [he] was different turned into knowing [he] was Indigenous” (p. 32). Robinson was not told nor educated regarding his Cree culture, which was realized more into his older years. He grew up being “educated by ignorance, by the perpetuation of stereotypes through popular culture and by the willful denial if colonial history in the classroom”. He describes being at a party when another Indigenous person walks in. He remembers feeling scared. Robertson states that the sole reason he
thought this was because that person was Indigenous and of his perception of Indigenous people at the time. This created an identity crisis in his life. He “was ashamed to be Indigenous” (p. 46). This launches Robertson to look into his identity and where one’s identity comes from. He argues that “what we don’t know can influence us as much as what we do know” (p. 62). “Who you are, your identity, is informed by your own experiences and the experiences of those who came before you were born. If you want to understand yourself, take the initiative to seek out what came before you” (p. 62). Robertson has a hard time coming to terms with the fact that his parents never told him that he was Indigenous and because of this he “grew up disconnected from his identity” (p. 12). However, he also acknowledges that when his mother and father separated, and his father left, he would have lost the person who could have taught him about his culture, as his mother was Scottish (p. 21).

Robertson also analyzes and reflects on how his mother held his life together when his father left. How his mother was there, even for the moments that seem mundane in our lives, and how she kept him and his brothers close, so that they always have each other. He doesn’t seem to blame either parent for separating, he also doesn’t seem to blame his dad for leaving. His hurt stems from confusion within his identity and the rebuilding of that comes from his sense of community given to him from his mother and his brothers. He acknowledges that his parents could not have predicted the stress that their separation had on him and his “cultural disconnect” (p. 21). Throughout his writing, Robertson never places blame. Instead, he tells it like it is. This is his story, and therefore his memories. As he puts it, “memories are funny that way – they can be different in two people’s minds, but true to both” (p. 14).
While exploring these memories and while understanding how not knowing or learning about one’s culture can lead to underlying trauma, Robertson shows how human’s can heal, specifically through his own families’ intergenerational healing. He identifies healing through the main story – his trip to his families home town of Norway House Cree Nation. During this trip, Robertson feels a sense of calm, a sense of belonging and a sense that he is going “home” even though he has never been there before (p. 25). He calls these feelings “blood memories” (p. 25) which are “experiences of one generation felt by the next, and the next after that. Experiences, teachings, woven into the fabric of our DNA, ingrained in us through the stories we pass down as gifts” (p. 60). He explores how these “blood memories” help create and shape one’s identity through culture, and memories and stories that are passed down. His Nana’s recollections of what happened within residential schools strengthened his belief that culture is tied to language because that is one of the things that was brutally taken away from them in an attempt to destroy their culture. Without this being passed down, the importance of being able to speak Cree within Robertson’s family may not have held as much importance as it should. He identifies the moment it happens with his father and his daughter, with the latter asking to learn the Cree language from her grandfather, something that his father regrets not teaching Robertson. It was at this moment that Robertson realized that this was how they heal.

The desired result of Robertson’s book is two-fold. First, he wrote this book to show the importance of culture within an individual, especially the importance of the Indigenous culture and what it means to be Indigenous. For Robertson, this is his Cree identity. He explains that he has always been Cree however the meaning of that has changed from being a teenager (and having
a poor interpretation) to being an Adult and understanding that “identity is fluid and personal” (p. 172) and that his journey is his story and identity, nobody else’s. That the truth that was once believed can be wrong. “There is not one Indigenous identity” (p. 175). He also explains how this identity was conveyed to him from his family, why his dad never explicitly told him that he was Indigenous. When asked, his dad explained:

You are who you are. I never went around telling people I was an Aboriginal person. People knew. I’ve never hidden the fact that’s who I am…There’s a way of life in being an Aboriginal that helps you be the personal you are. One of the teachings of the Cree people is non interference. That is, you don’t interfere with another person’s life. They’re going to learn what they’re going to learn…. You live the way you live, and by the way you live, that should show the kind of person you are (p. 171).

The second goal of his was to show how it is important to have community, and how this is tied to indigenous identity. This can be shown through learning from your elders, “how language connects us to culture. And what happens when these things are denied us” (p. 245). “Black Water” takes this form of how memories and stories are told, and they get passed down to future generations. “Doing this is a way to preserve knowledge of what and who we are, not to leave footprints in the sand but to etch them into stone” (p. 241).

“Black Water” should be read by everyone in Canada. It shows a darkness to our history, but also that while there is a darkness, we can continue to learn and persevere through our community. It is educational, but also personal. It should be read by academics, and laypeople, especially those who are wanting to educate themselves. The disciplines that will benefit from this book are Sociology, History, English, Psychology, Commerce as well as others. While the
Commerce discipline may seem like it doesn’t belong, I wonder if understanding the community aspect of this novel would be beneficial to businesses caught in an individualistic time. All in all, I highly recommend this book as it pulls out emotion within the reader whilst educating, teaching, and giving the reader stories to be passed down through generations.