



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

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David Robertson's book, "Black Water: Family, Legacy and Blood Memory," is a powerful, heart-wrenching memoir that discusses his life journey and reconnection to his identity, Indigenous culture, and family. Robertson displays a profound level of vulnerability in sharing his story, the stories of his family members, and his honest thoughts, reactions, and responses to the challenges he faced. Robertson appears to be very transparent, such as when he describes his challenges with anxiety and his responses to confronting stereotypes (pp. 24, 179). It is appreciative that Robertson describes many situations and his responses, but also contrasts his past beliefs and his current reflections in detail, allowing the reader to accurately envision, and at times even feel, the emotions and experiences being described. Robertson's discussion of the importance of truth and understanding identity speaks to his intent of sharing his story and may inspire others to explore their identity, family history, and cultural connections as well.

Robertson begins his book by sharing various examples from his childhood and adulthood. He describes the shame he felt regarding his Indigeneity, his challenges and responses to racism and oppression, and how this impacted his self-image and understanding of his identity over time. These challenges are important to understand the motivation for Robertson to explore this through-

out his life. Although the book seems to go off on tangents at times regarding personal stories, many of the stories flow together and connect by the end of the book, demonstrating the intentional consideration of each experience that develops the themes of the book. Robertson dives deep into describing a specific difficult memory from a swimming pool in his childhood and said, “if a kid was going to treat me like that just because of my skin color, then I didn’t want to look that way. I didn’t want to be different” (pp. 33-34). Throughout the book, he further describes that skin color is a way of seeing other human beings and how he was able to “dissociate from [his] identity with relative ease” (p. 53). Despite other individuals encouraging Robertson to be proud of this identity, he shared that it was not that simple, or he did not align with it. Robertson seemed to be living in a world of confusion, and disconnection, but also a world of curiosity. Throughout the book, Robertson describes his journey away from this perspective as a child and how his curiosity about his culture influenced him to reclaim his connection to the land alongside his father. This land in particular was Black Water, the trapline northeast of Norway House, Manitoba, Canada. However, the reconnection was not only of physical land, it was also the culture, knowledge, language, ways of life, childhood, family history, and the relationship between him and his father that Robertson was seeking to discover and understand.

Robertson intended to create an understanding about how his father’s story, Donald Alexander Robertson - Dulas (Don), impacted his own story. Robertson says, “who you are, your identity, is formed 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 dedicates his time to exploring this topic. He seeks information from

childhood friends and family members, and interprets this input with people in his current life. He describes the journey that he is taking on his own, combined with the journey he took with his father. As Robertson is exploring and describing various perspectives at once, it can be challenging to follow at times, and there are repetitions throughout the book. However, perhaps this was intentional by Robertson to amplify certain aspects, such as his father's capacity and willingness to engage in conversations about his experiences. This repetition does emphasize the difficulty of Robertson's journey and the strength it took for him and his family members to explore certain topics, question historical events and experiences, and discuss the impacts.

Robertson shares a quote from his father where he states that what he [Don] regrets most is, "that I [Don] didn't teach you [Robertson] the language," which Robertson interpreted as "I didn't teach you about who you are" (p. 6). The theme of these conversations and other examples and experiences that Robertson shares is the profound disconnection he felt to the culture within him. However, Robertson progresses from this over time and describes remarkable understanding of his connection to his culture and ultimately his self-awareness. When Robertson describes his first interaction with the community of Norway House he stated, "the first time I visited the community, years earlier, it felt familiar to me, even though I had never been there before" (p. 25). This description of his feelings demonstrates the power of connection and what Robertson describes as 'blood memory.' Robertson makes an interesting connection and contrast of his own experience with the experiences of his father and his daughter, Lauren. The location seemed to exhibit energy in his father (p. 199), and brought a sense of calmness for his daughter (pp. 262-263). Robertson acknowledges that they share this blood memory and says "this is the way things

have always been. The way things will always be” (p. 263).

Robertson’s experiences and stories are unique, as all Indigenous peoples experiences are, however, his description and the portrayal of his journey to discovering his identity and connection to Indigeneity could be relatable to readers with similar experiences. Additionally, other populations and individuals of different backgrounds could easily relate to this book as well due to the broad descriptions of family and the journey of self understanding. Robertson also speaks greatly about protecting the memories he has of his father, which individuals experiencing grief and loss could also relate to (p. 242).

“Black Water: Family, Legacy and Blood Memory” intends to create a conversation about Indigenous knowledge, identity, culture, and connection and does just that. Robertson amplifies the experiences of Canadian Indigenous Residential Schools and speaks to many of the intergenerational effects that are still occurring and impacting individuals, families, and communities in Canada today. Furthermore, the book emphasizes the connection between land, language, and culture, and discusses the impact of losing these connections and the journey of reclaiming connection to the land and rekindling relationships. As Robertson describes his life journey, it is evident that this reconnection is an intentional and timely process requiring consideration and patience. Although the journey proves as a challenge at times, the outcome is the discovery of connection and resilience and the strength of this is much stronger than any challenge faced along the way. As Robertson states, “yesterday led us to today, and today will lead us to tomorrow” (p. 62). This book describes these experiences with honor and serves as a powerful opportunity to raise awareness and create conversation about Indigenous history and the ability to

take on curiosity and move toward hope and Reconciliation. Robertson highlights that “there is more to [his] Nana than her time at government-run schools in Norway House Cree Nation,” and similarly, there is much more to Indigenous People today than their historical experiences with the Canadian government and history of intergenerational trauma (p. 72). While this is extremely important to acknowledge and work towards Reconciliation for, it is just as important to highlight strengths that have continued to exist in communities including resiliency, the beauty of culture, and the strength of connection. “Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory” is a clear example of this.

Due to the difficult nature of some of the topics in this book particularly regarding specific examples and discussions of trauma, I would recommend this book to older youth or adults. The book would be beneficial for many disciplines such as social work, sociology, education, anthropology, psychology, and child and youth care work. I would also recommend this book to those interested in learning about Indigenous history, family, culture, and intergenerational trauma. Post-secondary level students of many programs could create discussions around the experiences that Robertson has shared. I found “Black Water: Family, Legacy, and Blood Memory” a pleasure to read, eye-opening, and thought provoking.