



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

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David Robertson's book "Black Water: Family, Legacy and Blood Memory" is a unique, self-reflective memoir in which he utilizes storytelling to share how his father's experiences of cultural revitalization and colonialism impacted him. Robertson narrates his pursuit to reestablish his identity, restore his cultural ties, and address intergenerational trauma as he alternates between revisiting his childhood memories and returning to the trapline with his father. The interconnectedness of family legacy, personal experiences, and historical events is revealed in this introspective exploration. Prominent throughout the book are themes including Indigenous identity, family, colonization, blood memory, and the significance of oral tradition, all collectively contributing to the book's overarching essence. Furthermore, the book illustrates the enduring resilience of Indigenous communities and underscores the significance of reconciliation. This compelling book provides readers with an intimate description of the author's experiences, fostering an appreciation for the diverse perspectives of Indigenous individuals in Canada and prompting self-reflection regarding their roles in advancing decolonization.

Robertson reflects on his family's past and how specific locations, experiences, and individuals have provided him with insights into the significance of his Cree heritage. Throughout

the book, he introduces family and community members pertinent to his story, including his father, Don. Upon his contemplation regarding the lack of his Indigenous identity in childhood, he discusses how it caused confusion coupled with low self-esteem (Chapter 1). The conversations about his father's past started when he was a teenager. These discussions directed him to the realization that his Indigenous heritage was the motivation for the different treatment he encountered since childhood. Robertson explains that visiting Norway House for the first time with his father was a pivotal moment at twenty-three years old (Chapter 15). That was where he embarked on his journey to connect with his cultural roots. It is evident that the stories he heard from his father and his memories have shaped him and will continue to influence his family even after he is gone.

One major theme relevant to the book is colonization, which is demonstrated as a process, not an event. Robertson proves this when he explains that the cost of his dad's success in school still affects him today (Chapter 6). Ultimately, it was and continues to be responsible for the loss of language, culture, and identity in Indigenous communities. He shares that the Family Allowance required families to move into the community to receive benefits. In Don's experience, this was one aspect of colonialism that stripped Indigenous knowledge and their known way of living on the land (Chapter 6). Indigenous culture is rooted in the world's interconnectedness, so the book illustrates how this generational loss has impacted Robertson's family, along with many others. Robertson describes how addressing historical injustices, such as residential schooling, can promote understanding and healing. Don's influence on educational reform resonated, and he shared why it is integral to "teach from the known and work towards the unknown" (chapter 6).

Remarkably, this book highlights the critical need for reconciliation while creating space for people to share their experiences of colonialism and its effects.

Notably, the significance of oral tradition and storytelling in Indigenous knowledge is displayed throughout Robertson's book. He realized the significance of a simple, profound teaching from his great-grandfather about the creator and that it was unavailable for decades until his dad told him it (Chapter 6). These stories are emphasized to show the importance of oral tradition in preserving Indigenous culture and history. Similarly, language holds power, which is crucial for connecting and sharing knowledge. Robertson mentions that his dad's biggest regret is not teaching him the Swampy Cree language (Chapter 9). Healing from intergenerational trauma for Robertson meant he needed to learn through elders' wisdom and through narrating his story. "Black Water" may not include our typical Western research methods or theories. However, it does draw on a form of cultural research and transmission of knowledge, otherwise known as traditional Indigenous storytelling.

Indigenous identity is a central theme displayed in the book, and Robertson uses symbolism throughout to represent his preconceived ideas of what it means to be Indigenous. For instance, he states that in high school, his "favourite accessory was a Cleveland Indians hat" (Chapter 1). Additionally, he shows how mending his connection with his father resulted in teachings that assisted him in finding where he belonged in the world as an Indigenous person. Although, in hindsight, he knows his parents' decision to avoid his Indigeneity was intended to protect him and his brothers, it contributed to his cultural disconnect and lack of sense of self (Chapter 1). He acknowledges the importance of culture and family history during his journey to self-identity. Loss

of language was followed by loss of culture, which came with the loss of self, and "the more these pieces disconnect, the harder it becomes to relate them to each other" (Chapter 9).

Robertson demonstrates the relationship between one's self-identity and their children's identity when he explains that learning more about his ancestors enabled him to learn more about himself (Chapter 15). Family and legacy are themes weaved throughout the book, and it is evident that they were an influential facet of his exploration into the impact of intergenerational trauma on his family. Robertson reflected on his father's ability to adapt by noting his inherited strengths, attributes, values, and the influence of his mother (Chapter 12). Unquestionably, these themes are correlated with blood memory, which is when cultural and historical experiences affect future generations, whether they are taught or not. Moreover, Robertson's discussion with an elder about his familiarity with the community despite never being there before was an example of blood memory (Chapter 2). He discusses the implications of this concept and its role in healing and discovering his cultural identity. In addition, the book comes full circle when he brings his children to Norway House to share the knowledge he had acquired from his father. Robertson describes the feeling he had during his first visit and says:

Nineteen years ago, I stepped out of a burgundy Dodge Caravan and put my foot onto the ground in Norway House Cree Nation, and a feeling came over me. Lauren feels the same thing now. Blood memory. The memories and lives of our ancestors are woven into the fabric of her DNA. Everything they lived through, everything they experienced, lives within dad, lives within me, lives within her. This is the way things have always been. This is the way things will always be.

Considering the book is written from an individual perspective, for some scholars, it may

require a more detailed historical context. I also recognize that the author's personal experiences are shared through subjective storytelling, which makes it challenging to see the diversity of all Indigenous experiences. Nevertheless, Robertson did bring light to the intergenerational effects of Canada's history and the loss of language, culture, and identity by describing the impact colonialism had on him. To address these limitations, Robertson could consider a more collaborative approach, including additional knowledgeable perspectives. Regardless, it is crucial to remember that these are not necessarily setbacks because the book is focused on his unique journey.

The book has a wide variety of intended readers due to its accessibility and engaging content. Although scholars, educators, and students within Indigenous studies, Canadian literature, social work, and cultural studies may find it valuable for its profound insights into the complexities of Indigenous identity, cultural preservation, and the continuous repercussions of colonization. Additionally, it would be helpful for anthropologists and sociologists who set out to learn about Indigenous culture and racism in Canada. Anyone striving to improve their understanding of Indigenous peoples and their experiences would be an ideal audience.

In summary, "Black Water" is significant to Canada's responsibility of reconciliation by raising awareness about colonialism and its effects on Indigenous individuals. Robertson highlights the power of storytelling while reestablishing a connection with Indigenous culture and identity. To conclude, the book is a testament to the resilience of Indigenous communities all over Canada. Overall, it was intriguing, thought-provoking, and inspiring. I highly recommend it.