



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

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“Black Water: Family, Legacy and Blood Memory” is a profoundly beautiful memoir, written by David A. Robertson. Through shared moments and relayed stories, both historical and personal, the themes identified in the title, *family*, *legacy* and *blood memory*, are eloquently weaved throughout the book. The son of a Cree father and a white mother, Robertson was raised without direct knowledge of his cultural background. As a result, he grew up feeling as though he was lacking a sense of self and of connection to family and community. Reconnecting with his father and culture, the book details Robertsons’s journey of personal discovery and identity as he explores his family roots and learns what it means to him to be an Indigenous person. Through the book, the author illustrates through the theme of family how dynamics and upbringing circumstances can significantly shape who you are, how you view yourself and how you perceive the world and others around you. Families pass down traditions, history, and knowledge, which translates into a deeper understanding of your identity, your community, as well as how and where you belong. In an effort to shelter him from the challenges that come with being Indigenous, Robertson’s parents decided not to deliberately raise him Cree and so he spends much of his

childhood without knowledge of his culture. Growing up in a predominately white community, he was often exposed to stereotypes and prejudices held toward Indigenous cultures and peoples (p. 53). Not identifying with the negative characteristics of these views, as a teen, the author does not inherently view himself as Indigenous, but still, at his core, recognizes himself to be different (p. 53). The author recounts prominent moments from his childhood; a red-head kid at the pool calls him “burnt toast” (p. 33) in reference to his dark skin and he denies to a girl that he is Indian and tells her that he “just has a tan” (p. 45). Robertson asks his aunt “Why is my skin different? Why is it so ugly?” (p. 34). These experiences instil a deep sense of self-stigma and shame to Robertson; shame to be Indigenous, but also shamed to deny self (p. 46).

The author conveys throughout the book how not being told he was Indigenous molded who he was and about how he wished his father was around more in his formative years to model what Cree was and to combat these stereotypes. Robertson’s father spent much of his time away from his family to devote himself to his work, leaving his mother alone to raise three boys on her own and eventually leading to her separating from her husband. The author expresses the initial resentment that he felt towards his father not being there enough when he says, “I don’t think you’ve been a good father to me” (p. 57). He regrets the memories he didn’t have or things he didn’t know about his father and therefore not about himself (p. 57).

His fathers biggest regret however, was not in how Robertson was raised, but that he never taught him the Cree language (p. 146). The theme of legacy is articulately communicated through-

out the book, demonstrating that much of our culture, traditions and values are passed down through generations through language to conceptualize our historical and personal identities. This is the reason that his Nana was so adamant that his father not lose his Swampy Cree culture (p. 140) and why in the residential schools, the students were punished so harshly for speaking their traditional language (p. 106); simply, language equals culture.

As Robertson gains a deeper connection with his father and begins a personal journey of understanding what it means to be Cree, he starts to realize that what he thought he knew about Indigenous people through stereotypes was wrong and he begins to see that just because the stereotype fits, that doesn't make it true (p. 203). When he goes to Norway House, he is exposed to how his father grew up on the land and how he integrates himself within the community. Robertson's own involvement with Indigenous employment and by gaining interest in his dad's work by attending events and conferences with him, begins to change his perspective (p. 229), realizing that his dad wanted to show them what it meant to live a Cree life, rather than impress it upon them (p. 194). Robertson begins to see that legacy is also past down by not who we are, but rather, how we choose to live (p. 185). While his parents didn't raise him Cree, they did raise him to be a good human being who is also inherently Cree (p. 186).

Robertson reflects on his own legacy as a father when he states that his children "have been given the tools - the influence Jill and I have had on them, the exposure to knowledge that we have fostered in our home, the understanding of their cultural makeup - to figure out who they are, to be proud of who they are" (p. 259). He witnesses his daughter, Lauren, take an interest in learning

Cree and seeking to know about her culture. He understands that it is through this acquisition and passing on of knowledge that his own on-going legacy will be fostered and their history will retain meaning; “This is how we will heal [intergenerational trauma]” (p. 248). Robertson poignantly recognizes memories as footprints in the sand (p. 237) and that they are only impressions, just moments in time, and that our time together is limited. He acknowledges that his footprints and his dad’s have ended, but what is ahead is a blank slate, for more memories and stories to be written and shared (p. 253).

A final, prevalent theme is that of blood memory. Robertson recalls how his journey to Norway house and along the trapline conjures up visions for him of his father as a young man on the reserve and how through blood memory, his dad’s memories are really his memories too:

I can picture him as a child, dimming along the shores of the bay, jumping from rock to rock with his siblings. I’ve been down to those shores with him. I’ve watched him look out over the water. I’ve seen his face. It makes me feel a part of those memories, as if they are mine as they are his. And maybe there is some truth to that. Isn’t that what blood memory is? The 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).

Even though Robertson didn’t grow up there, he feels a sense of belonging and homecoming when he arrives. In the same way, even though there are no records, he also feels the deep sense of personal tragedy and community hardship of those who attended the residential schools (p. 63). He describes feeling connected with the peaceful land, the stillness and calm of Black Water and

how he feels the same serenity embodied in his father (p. 240). He sees that his daughter feels the same way when she is at Black Water too; “Blood memory [...] Everything they [his ancestors] lived through, everything they experienced, lives within Dad, lives within me, lives within her” (p. 263).

Within the predominant themes of the book, *family*, *legacy* and *blood memory*, “Black Water” addresses many issues such as anxiety, racism, houselessness, economic and societal disparity, and generational trauma. Therefore, this book would be a great academic addition to any of the social sciences that strive to gain insight into the human experience, including Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, and History. I found this book to be deeply impactful and moving. Robertson confronts the very real struggles and regrets he carries with him about his childhood, and poetically communicates the connection, hope and peace he has since claimed. As a memoir, this book was honest and heartfelt and as a piece of literature, it was compelling and engaging. As such, I would not suggest any areas for improvement as I believe that this would take away from the authenticity and sincerity the author very genuinely conveyed.