

## Book Review

Whitehead, J. (2018). *Jonny Appleseed*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press. 224 pages. ISBN: 978-1-55152-725-3

*Jonny Appleseed*, author Joshua Whitehead's debut novel, pops off the page in a flash of love and heartbreak. The eponymous tale of a young, Indigenous Two-Spirit queer man carving out a life in Winnipeg, Manitoba, is by turns lyrical and scatological, of the body and beyond it. The novel is constructed in a loose yet snappy narrative flow of reflections from Jonny's childhood and youth on the Peguis Rez in Manitoba. While making preparations to attend his stepfather's funeral, a man for whom he feels more familial allegiance than affection, he pauses to remember his beloved kokum (grandmother) and best friend, Tias. The reader also gains insight into Jonny's current occupation, sex work, which is engaged with as much for pleasure than financial necessity. The novel contains lyrical passages of pageantry and performance, with Jonny dressing in gender fluid and Indigenous dress for his on-line and off-line clients; sex work in the modern era.

I myself am a White, cis-gender man living on Treaty 7 land in Calgary, Alberta. I live and work in a space that is "founded on occupation and colonization whose nation-building history and normative national identity have entailed identifying and punishing racialized internal enemies" (Burman, 2010, p. 201-202). Whitehead is an Oji-Cree/nehiyaw, Two-Spirit/Indigiqueer member of Peguis First Nation (Treaty 1), currently completing a PhD in Indigenous Literatures and Cultures at the University of Calgary. Despite sharing space in Treaty 7 territory, I considered my reading and review to be an invitation, an outsider looking in. I feel thankful to have spent time in the pages of his book.

When we think of sex, "we inevitably and immediately think of bodies" (Haug, Hauser, & Rathzel, 1983, p. 267). Much of the magic of Whitehead's novel is in presenting queer sexuality as both situated in the body (enjoying fantasy, pain and pleasure), while also reclaiming the sensationalized discourse so common of racialized bodies. The power and privilege that the White body affords exists among the book's pages, and Whitehead pauses at moments in Jonny's story to offer a pointed post-colonial critique, with "queerness as a tool that deconstructs and reformulates concepts of nation" (Driskill, 2010, p. 76). More challenging are those markers of play and performance (the plethora of makeup and costumes he uses to entertain his clients), reveling in a "funhouse of femininity" as he calls it, for his own enjoyment as much as theirs (Whitehead, 2018, p. 116). For Jonny, sex work is not only a means of raising capital but a personally generative force of Two-Spirited power: "The funny thing about Grindr is that it's full of treaty chasers... And I always got a tickle out of how you could anthropomorphize yourself within the gay animal kingdom: 'bear,' 'otter,' 'wolf,' 'fox,' 'cubs.' If only these gays knew how powerful Mistahimaskwa could be" (p. 18).

Whitehead's novel shows how we're moving beyond Judith Butler's early notions of gender and performance as regulating sexuality to a place that sees identity and being as a lived reality of sex, culture, and costume; Jonny struggles to survive but his wholeness isn't open to critique. As Maggie Nelson (2015) writes of queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "It's easy  
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to get juiced up about a concept like plurality or multiplicity and start complementing everything as such. Sedgwick was impatient with that kind of sloppy praise. Instead, she spent a lot of time talking and writing about that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity” (p. 62). For Jonny, Two-Spiritedness is encompassing but defined, giving agency.

Whitehead’s more critically self-reflexive, however. Jonny’s friendship with Tias includes sex and fleeting moments of intimacy, with distance between the pair only occurring after Tias’s girlfriend becomes pregnant. The book necessitates a second read in unpacking the complexities at play. It also continually finds the agency, wisdom, and love in Indigeneity; when Jonny comes out to his kokum, she simply states: “Jonny, m’boy, your kokum old but she ain’t dull. You’s napewisk-wewisehot, m’boy, Two-Spirit. You still my beautiful baby grandkid no matter what you want to look like or who you want to like (p. 48).”

Humour, pain, and love: whereas the West continues, *pace* Foucault, to wrestle with untangling the boundedness of sexuality and power to regulate the body’s agency and movement, Whitehead furthers this conflict between sex as a physical act and situated identity by defining the two as a distilled essence. Jonny’s kokum presents Two-Spiritedness as a way of being that simply is. For all readers, *Jonny Appleseed* offers wisdom regarding the emancipatory nature of all bodies. As Jonny says, “I may not have the best body but I do have *a* body – and it’s a body that deserves to be touched and loved and owned, annit?” (Whitehead, 2018, p. 154).

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### References

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