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Ken deBoer

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Book Review

Indian Horse

By Richard Wagamese

Vancouver: Douglas and MacIntyre, 2012

Saul Indian Horse is an Ojibway, a native Canadian, who finds himself at the New Dawn Center (“They call it a treatment facility.” page 2) to deal with his addictions. He is asked to tell his story, the story of how he came to be in this place a place where the choices are change or death. He struggles to tell it. He cannot do it in the context of the circle with thirty others listening, so he is encouraged to write it down in the hope that by facing the story, bringing it out for examination and understanding, he can get on with life, in fact find life again..



The story told is one that is not only Saul’s story, but the story of a whole people, told in such a way it cannot help but convict those who were, and are complicit, in the abuses suffered in the name of bringing a policy of assimilation to first nations people. It is a riveting story, a stark story, one that does not allow the book to be put down. In the same way as our eyes are drawn to the horrors of a car crash along the highway, this story of draws the reader deeper and deeper into a story which is indeed an allegory of the experience of an entire people. We are drawn to witness, pain, abuse, racism, loss, in a way which does not throw it in our faces but rather entices us to find ourselves in the story.

Wagamese weaves this story of abuse with humour and overlays it all with Canada’s love for its national sport, hockey. The use of hockey at the center of this story, makes it unmistakably Canadian, it brings the rest of the story home, close to home, while also providing something of a metaphor for the way that Aboriginal people, even when they are good enough to compete in the mainstream of society are prevented from reaching their potential by the prejudices of the dominant society. Even those who seem to be allies in Saul’s quest to embrace the game, who seem to be encouraging and protecting him, are, in the end shown to be exploiters.

While the exploitation Saul suffers is named, its place in the story gives the impression the author recognizes people don’t want to acknowledge that they too have been used. Saul is quite willing to enumerate the abuses, the losses, the deaths suffered by others in the residential school system, but, for much of the story holds himself outside of the circle of victims. Certainly he does recognize the wrong he suffered in the loss of his family, and the fact that his mother was lost to him, “turned so far inward she sometimes ceased to exist in the outside world” (page 9) because of what she had earlier suffered in the system. He also recognizes the prejudices he has endured as he has entered and excelled in the world of hockey. But, for almost the entire book it appears that he has emerged from St. Jerome’s Residential School relatively untouched, physically. He’s done this by keeping his head down, blending into his background, one of the lucky ones to survive the system. He’s done it by burying his own abuse while grieving that of those around him.

He gains success in the white man’s world playing “their game” until the anger boils over, and alcohol becomes the medicine to cover, salve, the deep hurt and grief that comes

with recognizing he too was abused, shamefully, continues to be exploited, and was really only valued as something to be used and tossed away. He spends most of his story toughing it out, trying to beat the whites at their own game, their sacred game, to rise above and ignore what has been done to him until it finally does catch up and he gives up his dream.

Many books have been written describing in detail the abuses suffered by First Nations peoples in both Canada and the United States. While their words are certainly accurate, and their accusations against “the invader” very likely fully warranted, Wagamese brings the message in such a way that it cannot be ignored, it cannot be put aside as another Indian manifesto enumerating the wrongs of generations past. Indian Horse puts flesh on the realities in a way that implicates all of us. It draws our eyes to the disaster created by a policy of assimilation, wrapped in the mantle of Christian mission, in a very personal way. It pulls back the curtain on the idea of assimilation, showing the end result to be domination rather than equality; a society with an underlying foundation of racial superiority where true assimilation was never really the goal anyway. By putting young Saul in the game, playing better stronger, smarter hockey and being pushed out for the colour of his skin rather than being honoured like the hockey greats he had come to look up to and admire, Wagamese draws a parallel to the struggle of all natives to succeed in the white man’s world.

I don’t know if I have ever read another book about hockey, but this book really isn’t about hockey. It’s about a system pushing people down, destroying lives. Indian Horse leaves the reader with a sense of disquiet. Certainly the residential schools have been closed. St Jerome’s is broken and battered. But, the wounds remain, the hurts still hurt, and there don’t seem to be any ready remedies. While there are few answers or simple solutions, Wagamese leaves us with the sure knowledge that hearing the stories is an important first step to reconciliation and wholeness.

Ken deBoer