Deep Writing or Illustrations: Residential Schools

**Writing about residential schools is difficult, between graphic novels and detailed writing styles, it’s all about figuring out which is more effective in showcasing the abuse within the schools, so which way is better?** The book, *Indian Horse*, written by Richard Wagamese, is a story taking place in the 1960’s Northern Ontario, Canada. Back then, residential schools began where these government required schools would take First Nations children and teach them in the way of god, away from their family’s culture and traditions. The protagonist, Saul, was a boy taken to St. Jerome’s Indian Residential school at the age of 8 and spent 5 years of his life within the school. Saul would witness horrific forms of abuse around him by the priests and nuns set to take care of them. The graphic novel, *Sugar Falls*, written by David Alexander Robertson and illustrated by Scott B. Henderson, is a story about a grandmother, Betsy, teaching a young man named Daniel about her traumatic experience in a residential school. Betsy tells him stories about what she did to survive, what she’s witnessed, and what a typical day within the schools was like. **Similarly, both St’ Jerome’s and Sugar Falls residential schools are incredibly abusive and have negatively impacted the children mentally, sexually, and spiritually. Unlike *Sugar Falls*, *Indian Horse* portrayed residential schools in depth with figurative language while *Sugar Falls* used graphic illustrations. Ultimately, *Indian Horse* is more effective in presenting the abuse the schools had on the First Nations because of the complexity of the author’s writing and the in-depth stories of the mental, emotional and spiritual effects.**

Wagamese’s portray the story’s events with detailed concepts, deep imagery, and many metaphors. Since his book is entirely written without the advantages of drawings, because he writes so much detail into the imagery he doesn’t need the bonus of illustrations. For example, when he described Saul’s outfits that the nun gave him it was very descriptive: “The wool pants scratched at my skin. They were a size too big and had to be held up with a belt clinched tight. The shirt was stiff and white. The shoes were thin leather with laces and smooth, slippery soles” (Wagamese, 44-45). The idea of the outfit could have been reduced to a single sentence but because he went into detail, he painted a whole picture of Saul’s clothing, including the texture, colour, and fabric. In contrast, a detailed depiction like that is never written in *Sugar Falls* because they have illustrations to show what the children wore. Writing styles help readers imagine pictures of the residential schools, and with words alone, Wagamese’s details portray the hardships of residential schools more than Robertson’s simple texts.

On the other hand, Henderson’s illustrations are still effective with showcasing the abuse because it’s just vague enough to consider hidden meanings and interpretations. In *Indian Horse*, hidden meanings are easier to find since Saul is a deep thinker and we see the world through his point of view. In *Sugar Falls*, they do not just tell you how cold and closed off Betsy becomes, it is shown in the pictures. Particularly, while Betsy has been punished: “She kicked me so hard I lost the hearing in my ear… So, from that day on, I refused to let her make me cry” (Robertson, pg. 30). Then it illustrates how static Betsy has become towards the nuns. Likewise, with *Indian Horse*, Saul is more obedient and does not directly get physically abused in the book. Saul describes the pain he witnesses from his peers, he still gets abused sexually but he does not consider it pain at the time. Because of this, Saul can not describe the punishments as well as Betsy can. Regardless, Henderson’s illustrations are incredibly helpful when portraying the hidden meanings of residential schools.

However, *Indian Horse* is still effective with residential school abuse because after the events of the school passed, Saul’s experiences still haunt him. In *Sugar Falls*, Betsy doesn’t go in-depth to how she got over the trauma. Betsy tells David that “we need to look at the past to teach others our stories and then look forward, together, with knowledge and healing” (Robertson, pg. 40). Betsy is a forgiving and understanding person so she doesn’t go in too deep about reconciling. Saul on the other hand, takes awhile for him to accept his past. He spends the rest of the book using hockey as a distraction for coping the pain he went through and witnessed. Betsy accepted the pain early which then allowed her to rebuild her new life while Saul still held on to the past. Which ends badly as he soon turns into an alcoholic. Wagamese wrote more chapters of the effects it had on Saul than Saul being in the school themselves. To sum up, *Indian Horse* is more effective in showcasing the long-term effective the residential school had on it’s victims.

To conclude, though both residential schools in *Indian Horse* and *Sugar Falls* are equality as abusive, Wagamese’s portray of the abuse is more effective with his in-depth writing style and long-term effects of suffering. Wagamese used deep metaphors, creative imagery, and detailed descriptions to fully describe the events, feelings, and pain that took place. Although, Henderson’s realistic illustrations were very beneficial to presenting the unsettling vagueness of the schools, Wagamese’s Indian Horse did a better job of describing the pain while going in-depth with the mental, emotional, and spiritual effects the schools had on victims. In the end, residential schools were a dark part of Canadian history so hopefully others can learn about it’s effects before they are able to repeat it.