Facing the Bitter Past

Us Canadians claim that we are an accepting and welcoming nation. But have we forgot that we were the ones that put indigenous people in residential schools? **How about the everlasting effects of residential schools?** The main objective of residential schools was to take away their culture and traditions by making them think their culture is shameful and to make them more “White”. The novel, *Indian Horse*, written by Richard Wagamese, is a story set in Northern Ontario, in the 1960’s. This novel is about a boy named, Saul Indian Horse who is Ojibway and is sent to residential school after his grandmother died. While he is in the residential schools, he finds a passion for hockey. The graphic novel, *Sugar Falls*, written by David Alexander Robertson and illustrated by Scott B. Henderson is also about residential schools in Canada. The main character, Betty, was thrown out of her home by her mother. Then, she lived with another family who treated her as their own child. But things turned around after she was sent to residential schools. **Similarly, residential schools effected Saul and Betty the same way because they were both traumatized from their experiences of the abuse and the shame. However, Betty embraced her culture and built inner strength, not allowing the effects change who she is. Saul on the other hand, had so much anger built into him that he started drinking to keep himself away from his past. Ultimately, people react differently to the effects that residential schools had on them. Both of them eventually overcame the effects, although, Betty was more successful in overcoming them.**

The protagonists in both books were not only victims of physical abuse, but also sexual which lead to mental and emotional trauma as well. Father Leboutillier, in *Indian Horse*, seemed to be Saul’s best friend, but turned to be the one who took away Saul’s innocence and in return gave him shame, but also allowed him to clean the hockey rink in the mornings. At one point Father Leboutillier says, “‘You are a glory, Saul.’ Those were the words he used instead of love, and he’d given me the job of cleaning the ice to buy my silence, to guard his secret” (Wagamese, 198). This quote shows that he uses Saul’s greatest joy, which is hockey, against him to keep quiet of the shame he bestowed upon him. In Sugar Falls, the priests would come and take the children along with their innocence at night. In the morning, they returned them with the everlasting shame. Betty used Flora’ s advice: “She would numb her body so she couldn’t feel it. And when the morning came she would pretend it had been only a nightmare” (Robertson, 27). This shows that all they could do was to keep quiet, while they take their innocence away and hope it isn’t their turn to go with the priest.

Residential school and the discrimination turned Saul into a bitter person which lead him to a difficult path of recovery. There was so much anger built into him to the point that he used alcohol to cope with the pain. In the beginning, he drank occasionally, but things turned around and he soon found himself addicted. Saul says, “You drink down to the place that only diehard drunkards know, the world at the bottom of the of the well where you huddle in the darkness, haunted forever by the knowledge of light” (Wagamese, 189). Saul went so deep into drinking where it became difficult to stop. He was shortly hospitalized in the New Dawn Centre where he started to recover from alcohol. Saul, finally decides that the only way to cope is to revisit the past. To go to the residential schools and God’s Lake to remember the times he did not want to remember. His demon’s haunted him but he pushed through. When Saul is on the boat on his way to God’s Lake, he remembers Father Leboutillier words: “’You’re free.’ That’s what Father Leboutiller had told me… He was my captor, the warder of my innocence. He had used me … ‘You are a glory, Saul.’ I repeated those words over and over… When I couldn’t scream any longer, I picked up the small hatchet I’d bought and began to whack at the stump” (Wagamese, 202). All these years he kept the pain from the abuse, the names he were called, and everything in between, to heart. He finally, realizes that he needs to remember the past and let all the anger out before he can start fresh.

On the contrary, Betsy reacted to the effects of the schools differently than Saul, which lead her to a more smooth and productive recovery. In the beginning, she was tired of seeing the deaths of her friends and the abuse. So, she decided to kill herself. But at the last moment she remembered the words of her father and the promise she made back in Sugar Falls. Her father said to her, “The beat of the drum represents the strength in our relationships, between our ancestors, our traditions, with mother earth, and with each other” (Robertson, 13). Betty was told, “When the darkness came I was to use them as a light” (Robertson, 13). She remembered that no matter how hard and hopeless life becomes she should never give up and because of her father’s words, she gave life another chance. “I’m not saying the road was easy after that, but no matter what they did to me, I held onto myself, my language, and my spirit. This shows that she took the effects of residential schools in a way where she could improve her self in. No matter how hard her life became, she always embraced her culture to the fullest. For all Indigenous people, English was a second language which made it harder to communicate and do the school work. When Betsy was caught speaking Cree, she was kicked so hard in the ear that she lost her hearing in one ear. When she made mistakes on her assignment she was hit as well. So, “from that day on, I refused to let her make me cry (Robertson, 30) … I was punished but I stayed strong. I vowed to become excellent at my penmanship, to never give them a reason to hit me again” (Robertson, 37). Instead of the residential schools making her weaker, she didn’t give up, she built inner strength. This shows that she could have taken the effects and done nothing about it, however she became the best she could be.

In Conclusion, the protagonists in both were traumatized from the abuse. However, each character chose different routes to overcome the effect of residential schools. Regardless, this taught me that people act differently based on their personality and their situation. The abuse that the residential school caused didn’t only affect them back then, but also for the rest of their lives. Saul had a challenging recovery because at the time he kept quiet and did nothing about it and then later it caused him to reach for drinking to cope. In the end, he realized that he can only create a better future by revisiting the ugly and bitter past. Betsy, chose to embrace her culture and build inner strength to have a bright future ahead of her. Overall, we need to understand and respect that everyone is different and the path to recovery may be different for everyone.