Effects of residential schools in Canada

As Canadians we should educate ourselves about the First Nations people of Canada **so we know the effects the residential schools had on them.** The novel, *Indian Horse*, written by Richard Wagamese, is a story that took place during the 1960’s in Ontario. Set in a time where First Nations children were sent to residential schools, they were often maltreated. The main reason why residential schools were created was to strip the First Nations culture away from those children. This story shows the journey of the protagonist, Saul, within the residential school and the events throughout his life. Thankfully, Saul played hockey as a form of an escape. *Sugar Falls,* a graphic novel written by David Robertson is a story during the 1960’s somewhere in Canada. This graphic novel shows the experiences Betsy had with the residential schools. Throughout the traumatizing hardships in her years at the school, she holds on to her culture and what her father told her before she left in order to cope. **Similarly, the characters in *Indian Horse* and *Sugar Falls* tell a story about their disturbing experience in the residential schools. In *Indian Horse*, Saul shares his experience within the residential school that left him dealing with alcohol, anger and distress; meanwhile, *Sugar Falls* shows the suffering that Betsy felt being in a residential school but learning to accept it and deal with what it did. She holds onto her culture throughout the story no matter what they did to her. Ultimately, these two stories demonstrate how similar the residential schools treated the First Nations people of Canada and how it took a big toll on their lives**.

From what these two stories show, the children put into these school’s struggle with the issues thrown at them. The protagonist from both stories experience similar aspects of the residential school such as abuse that led to anger. Saul tells his story of abuse years after he was in the school. His only source of love was Father Leboutier, unfortunately Father was the one who abused Saul. He states, “That was the phrase that began the groping, the tugging, the pulling and the sucking… I loved the idea of being loved so much that I did what he asked” (Wagamese, 199). Saul’s only escape was hockey, but he had to pay a price to do it. The hockey came with the abuse, but Saul finally felt loved. After all that happened with his family, that was his only source of loving so he did what the Father asked and accepted it. Anger crept into his body throughout the years which left him being aggressive and violent. After explaining the abuse, he says, “I kicked at the roots and stones and jut of logs as I howled, ragged, rough and sore. When I couldn’t scream any longer, I picked up the small hatchet I’d bought and began to whack at a stump. I hit with everything I had, until my arms and shoulders burned and it seemed that every ounce of fluid in me had drained out through my sweat and tears” (Wagamese, 202, 203). He’s had so much anger built inside him about the abuse, school and hockey, he finally let it all out. For Betsy, she explains “She kicked me so hard I lost my hearing in my ear” (Robertson, 29). What the nun did to her shows how disrespected those children were, they were treated like animals. As for the anger Betsy felt, she had a friend, one of her only friends. She died because she tried to escape, Betsy snapped and became very angry: “No more pain for her, and for me there was only anger left” (Robertson, 33). Death was such a big part in residential schools, some kids could not handle what it did to them so they resorted to death. After that event, Betsy was determined to stay true to who she was, never forget where she came from and not let the residential school affect her like it did on other children. Seeing what Saul and Betsy went through, its safe to say they both went through intense abuse, both physical and sexual that led to anger.

Although *Indian Horse* and *Sugar Falls* have their similarities, they do have their differences in the way they coped. Even through all the hardships, it was a journey of learning and healing for Betsy: “I was punished, but I was strong. I vowed to become excellent at my penmanship, to never give them a reason to hit me again.” (Robertson, 37). She followed what they said and told her to do, she stayed strong because she didn’t want her culture washed away. Her father told her to hold onto those relationship (First Nations) as tight as she could: “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” (Robertson, 38). Her strong mindset helped her get through the school, and made her a strong, respectable woman. But that isn’t always the case for everyone.

Even though way Betsy showed that you can be strong and you can go down the right path, Saul took a different path. During and after the residential schools, Saul went through drinking, isolation and anger. He isolated himself because he was always alone, he thought it was better off being that way: “’Nobody wins alone, Saul’ ‘I’m used to alone’… ‘I’m not disappearing,’ I said. He shook his head sadly. ‘Seems to me you already did”’ (Wagamese, 178). Saul has pushed himself so far inwards, he is living in his own world. So many things building up inside of him, residential schools, hockey and death. Those were all the roads he’s travelled throughout his life. He says, “You drink down because after all the roads you’ve travelled, that’s the only direction you know by heart” (Wagamese, 189). Both his mom and dad drank when he was younger, it had a big impact on him. Watching his parent somehow forget about the affects, maybe he thought drinking could do the same for him. With the forgetting came the anger and the violence, everything was building up inside Saul. He hit rock bottom. Even though the way he coped was not necessarily the best idea, he eventually got back up from his misery by accepting his past and moving on to the future.

In conclusion, both *Indian Horse* and *Sugar Falls* show the damaging effects of residential schools on the First Nations people of Canada. Even through the similarities such as abuse, trauma and anger. There will always be difference between each person’s story. For Betsy, she showed how no matter what happens, you should always stay true to yourself and be strong. On the other hand, Saul showed the terrible impact the schools could have on your life and the dangerous effects it could have for your future. One could say that residential schools were in the past and do not matter anymore, but the lasting affect could haunt someone for the rest of their life.