Isolation and Salvation

The horrors from residential schools were harsh on the First Nations children that attended and left many of them traumatized for years. *Indian Horse* is a book written by Richard Wagamese, a story set in the 1960s that talks about the experiences of a First Nations boy named Saul who attended a residential school called St. Jerome’s. *Sugar Falls,* written by David Robertson is also set in the 1960s, and talks about a young First nations girl named Betty that attended a different residential school. In the 1960s many of the First Nations children were taken to residential schools at young ages in order to be assimilated and suffered different kinds of abuses while attending these schools. **The two stories explore the effects of these residential schools. Both main characters from Indian Horse and Sugar Falls suffered some type of abuse throughout the time they both spent at the Residential School. Conversely, Betsy from Sugar Falls made friends and found a deeper connection to her culture; whereas, Saul from Indian Horse isolated himself from people, became alcoholic, and suffered the pain. The two authors teach the readers one can achieve a positive or negative result from a similar situation if taken different approaches.**

Unfortunately, Saul and Betty experienced multiple types of abuses at residential schools. Betty was caught by a nun while speaking her native language to her friend. She was beaten and put to shame: “Stay there, and think of what you have done. You are to speak only English, not your shameful language” (Robertson , 29). Other than that, Betty also experienced sexual abuse at the school: “She would numb her body so she couldn’t feel it… he called them happy rides when he came for us and made us sit on his lap” (Robertson , 27-28). While Saul experienced similar abuses, what he saw a lot of were children dying from “tuberculosis, influenza, pneumonia and broken hearts at Jerome’s” (Wagamese , 55). Father Leboutilier was a young preist that sexually abused Saul. Father Leboutilier was a father like figure to Saul, but had a dark secret that haunted Saul for years. Unable to escape the school, both characters ended up being affected differently.

From the abuses at St. Jerome’s, Saul’s life was affected heavily. Saul knew the English language before he was taken to school and was considered an outsider by the children; therefore, he was lead down to a path of isolation: “At St. Germ’s the kids called me ‘Zhaunagush’ because I could speak and read English” (Wagamese , 48). Not only that, Saul was also looked down upon by the priests and nuns, which inflicted a sense of unworthiness onto him. Saul felt, “We were like stock. That’s how we were treated. Fed, watered, made to bear our daily burden and secured at night” (Wagamese , 80). Saul stayed strong while suffering, but only to be broken in the end. For Saul to survive, he resorted to drinking alcohol; however, drinking only caused Saul more pain in his life. The effects of St. Jerome’s lead him down to a dark path: “You drink down to where you can’t hear voices anymore, can’t see faces, can’t touch anything, can’t feel” (Wagamese , 180).

Residential schools may have weighed Betty down, but she was able to become stronger from the abuse. The beatings from the nun lead to Betty making friends that helped her through the hardship. For example, “Flora told me once how she got through the abuse” (Robertson , 27). Flora was the first person to soothe Betty from the pain she is experiencing. Although Betty managed make friends during the hardship, the nuns and priests only became harsher over time, leading to physical injuries that lasted on Betty. The nuns and priests inflicted a feeling of low self-esteem on her. Not only that, Betty also witnessed the death of Flora, which put her into a state of anger and hatred. She thought, “There was only anger left” (Robertson , 33). Finally, just when she had enough and was about to leave, she remembered the guidance of her culture. Betty managed hold on to herself, her culture, and her spirit throughout the abuse from the residential school. From that point on, Betty only became stronger and successful; therefore, the abuse from the residential inflicted a positive result for Betty: “I vowed to become excellent at my penmanship, to never give them a reason to hit me again” (Robertson , 39).

**In conclusion, similar abuses can affect people differently if they take different approaches.** In the book *Indian Horse,* Saul isolated himself and drank alcohol in order to fight through the suffering. Saul became mentally ill, but eventually found forgiveness for the abuses St. Jerome’s gave. On the other hand, Betty’s connections and relationships with her friends and culture became stronger throughout the abuse from the residential school. She learned that no matter how bad the situation is, she can overcome it because she is strong. In todays world, people often judge mentally ill people without hesitation, but don’t know the road they went through to become what they are. To fully understand the state of mentally ill people one needs to look back into their past. **In the end, Saul may have suffered a worse result than Betty, but both characters were able to overcome the hardship and move on.**

# Works Cited

Robertson, David. *Sugar Falls*. Winnepeg: Highwater Press, 2012. Print.

Wagamese, Richard. *Indian Horse*. Madeira, New York: Douglas & Mcintyre, 2012. Print.