Coping with the Hardships of Residential Schools

In both *Indian Horse* and *Sugar Falls* the protagonists have to endure physical, psychological, and sexual abuse at the residential schools. **How is one supposed to cope through pain and hardships when they are going through so much trauma at a young age?** How are children supposed to deal with the horrible abuse? How is anyone? Indian Horse is a novel that is written by a First Nations man named Richard Wagamese. The story takes place during the 50’s, 60’s, and 70’s, and is about a boy named Saul and how he overcomes the long-lasting hardships of the School. Sugar Falls is based on a true story and takes place during the mid 1900’s. The protagonist named Betsy, must cope with being taken away from her family and being taken to a Residential School. Both stories take place in Ontario. The Residential Schools were created to assimilate First Nations people into “Canadian” society**. Similarly, both protagonists turn to their past for guidance and support; Whereas, Saul used hockey as an escape as well as drinking, Betsy found strength and would not forget her heritage. Ultimately, every person has their own way of coping with hardship and it can be a long process; but in the end, one may become stronger.**

**Similarly, Both protagonists look at their past for guidance and support during their hardships.** Saul had visions of his family after he was still coping with the affects of the school and he missed them deeply. He wrote, “I saw my father, my mother, my brother, my uncle, my aunt, my grandmother, I wept at the sight of them” (Wagamese 193) He was subconsciously thinking about them and losing them at a young age was impactful on his life. He went to the residential school to end that chapter of his life so he would not have to think about the abuse again. However, Betsy remembered her father’s words and was able to overcome losses and the school’s abuse. She was able to keep pushing forward even after Flora died and after the psychological, mental, and sexual abuse. She explains, “I remembered sugar falls. I remembered the words of my father, ‘When the darkness comes, let this strength be a light, let it guide you away from the pain so no matter how hard they try to tear you away from our ways they will fail because you are strong.‘” (Robinsion 36-37) Her father is telling her to never forget her roots and that it was keeps her going. Both protagonist look at their past for guidance and support but in different ways.

**Saul also coped with the abuse by taking himself away from his hardships.** Throughout the book he had different ways of doing this. Saul would wake up early in the mornings to clean the school’s ice rink. He eventually made the team and with hockey he could escape the horrors and abuse of the school. At one point he explains, “In the spirit of hockey I believed I had found community, a shelter and a haven from everything bleak and ugly in the world.” (Wagamese 90) He was able to cope with the hardships of the school through playing the game. He also experienced racism while playing against city teams. The affects of the school and the society’s racism took away hockey for him. It took away the one thing he used to cope with all the hardships and abuse. Later on in the story Saul started drinking to cope with the racism from hockey and the memories of the school. He became addicted to alcohol and ended up in a worse-off place than before he had started. He used it to calm himself and to just feel “normal”: “I’m not sure when I began to drink myself. I only know that when I did the roaring in my belly calmed. In alcohol I found an antidote to exile.” (Wagamese 180). He wanted to forget and suppress the feelings of the school and the racism that he resorted to what would be considered a bad way of coping with hardships. People have their own ways of coping but some methods are better and more effective than others.

**On the other hand, Betsy found strength in her past and was able to overcome her abuse at the school and not let the teachers get the satisfaction of abusing her.** Betsy’s best friend at the school died and she because angry and frustrated with the teachers. She eventually had enough and got up and left when they were working in the fields. She was going to swim across the water to her home: “One day soon after, I was in the fields again when the pull became to great to ignore.” (Robinsion 34) But once she left, “as quickly as I forgot I remembered everything,” (Robinsion 35) She remembered the words of her father became stronger, she was then punished for running off: “I was punished but stayed strong.” (Robinsion 37) She applied herself to her studies so they would never had to hit her again: “I vowed to become excellent at my penmanship, to never give them a reason to hit me again” (Robinsion 37). Doing this she could stop some of the pain from happening in the first place. Sister Marie kicked her in the head one day because she spoke her native language: “So from that day on, I refused to let her make me cry.” (Robinsion 30) She would not let the teachers at the school get the satisfaction of making her feel pain. She suppresses the pain to show that she is stronger than the school and can keep going. Overall, she coped with the pain by suppressing the effects the attacks had on her and applying herself to the school, and conforming. By doing this she can trick the school into thinking they are getting to her even though she is more connected to her heritage than ever before.

In conclusion, both characters coped with hardships by looking to their past. Saul saw his family in a vision which compelled him to end the school’s reign on his life. Betsy remembered the words of her father and she never forgets her roots and heritage. Saul also coped in a different way, he coped by playing hockey but he also started drinking later in life as well. Betsy used her past to push her through the school and conform without forgetting herself. Different people have different ways of coping with hardships and some ways can be more effective or less effective. Some can also cause more problems that the original hardship. Hardships affect all of us and finding a way to cope with hardships that is effective is a very helpful skill. It may be a lengthy process and take years to find a way of coping that suits you best, it may even save your life.

# Works Cited

Robinsion, David Alexander. *Sugar Falls*. Winnepeg: HighWater Press, 2012. Print.

Wagamese, Richard. *Indian Horse*. Madeira Park: Douglas & McIntyre, 2012. Print.