

The Impacts Residential Schools had on First Nations.

Canadian citizens are familiar with the current issues surrounding First Nations and their connection to the land but **do Canadians know about the history of residential schools?** The stories of two First Nations children, a boy and a girl, tell the journey they traveled starting with being taken from their families to the tragic effects that will forever be inside them. *Indian Horse*, written by Richard Wagamese, told the story of Saul Indian Horse, a young boy who went through a residential school, St. Jerome's in Ontario roughly the 1960's. David A. Robertson wrote the graphic novel *Sugar Falls* illustrated by Scott B. Henderson. This story shows Betty who gets taken to a residential school somewhere in Canada and shows with illustrations and few words about her time at the school. **Both *Sugar Falls* and *Indian Horse* shows the explorations and effects that residential schools had on First Nations children. Unfortunately, Saul and Betty shared being sexually, physically and mentally abused. *Sugar Falls* stated a longterm repercussion, loss of hearing, whereas Wagamese told some alcoholism as a follow up effect to residential schools along with inner demons that Saul carried with him for a long time. The schools in both stories had the ultimate goal of assimilating the First Nations cultures. In the end Betty from *Sugar Falls* embraced still acknowledging her culture well after the residential school when in *Indian Horse*, Saul didn't embrace his culture till later in life and even then not the way Betty did.**

Alike in being taken at a young age from their families, both children unfortunately experienced abuse in the residential schools. Saul and Betty became prone to watching their cultures slowly become erased. Saul was sexually abused by someone he loved and thought loved him. He looked for and wanted love from Father Leboutillier as Saul was a lonely young boy and didn't have that sense of 'love' in the residential

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school. That is why when Leboutillier sexually abused him he claimed he was half alright with it. "You are a glory Saul" (Wagamese 199). Father Leboutillier stated after every sexual action. There are differences between females and males, however taking away innocence from either gender is something that will effect both equally. Betty, *Sugar Falls*, slept in a room with numerous other girls. The Priest would come in their room in the night and take one girl out at a time just for his pleasure. One of the girls Flora told Betty how she dealt with the abuse: "She would numb her body so she couldn't feel it" (David A. Robertson 27). In both residential schools their main goal was to assimilate the First Nations cultures and beliefs. Converting them to Christianity was the outcome they strived for. Betty, along with other students, had to transcribe the Bible in Latin. On top of not knowing the Latin language and trying her best to learn it, she got slapped by a Nun for not getting it right. Lonnie Rabbit of *Indian Horse* was forced to change his name because it was not Biblical. When Lonnie stated his name was passed on from his father, Sister Ignacia, said "Your father is the Heavenly Father. You will learn that here. Your human father has nothing to offer you anymore" (Wagamese 45). Every First Nations culture has different beliefs alike religions. In the residential school that Betty was at had them do more religious principals then Saul: "we went to mass two by two" (David A. Robertson 21). If Betty and Saul were able to be with their families and not have been taken to the residential schools they would have had the experience of their own culture and be proud of who they were. It took awhile for both to see their culture in a positive way rather than the negative they grew up being told.

From being taken from his family to the aftermath of alcoholism and anger, Saul Indian Horse evolved as a person. Crashing into obstacles along the way, the effects after the residential schools were serious and heartbreaking. After hardship and the abuse, the day Saul gazed his eyes on the hockey rink he had found an escape. Father Leboutillier had come to the school and started to coach the boys hockey team. You had to be of a certain age to play. Saul wanted to be involved in the joy that hockey brought the older boys so he practiced, cleaned and spent as much time as possible at that rink so

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maybe one day he could play. After countless hours and beads of sweat to come down his face Saul was told he could play. Little did he know this was the first step to a long road ahead of him. With just a few games under his belt other began to notice his talent. Leboutillier especially saw his potential, "You go somewhere when you're one the ice" (Wagamese 115). The greatness hockey brought to Saul was powerful however, he did receive some verbal negativity: "the Indian school brought their mascot" (Wagamese 74). Saul heard much worse but didn't start acting on it till he decided to play more physical. Years past and Saul began to drink and fill up with anger, "I'm not sure when I began to drink myself" (Wagamese 180). Saul ended up going to a rehabilitation centre. He also went back to St. Jerome's residential school. Both of these actions were Saul trying to get rid of or forget his inner demons. "There was a restlessness in me. Something that wouldn't settle" (Wagamese 184). Saul said this at a time when he felt he wasn't all cleared up from the past.

Betty, beginning her journey by her mother pushing her into a cellar and leaving her her life had already tasted tragedy. She came into contact of a family while walking through the snow. They welcomed her in and their love grew for each other. Betty's relationship with her new father grew quickly and strong. He took her to Sugar Falls, a river, and she was taught some heritage, their beliefs and traditions. When the time came for residential school she would forever hold onto her fathers words. "Be brave" (David A. Robertson 16). Throughout the residential school journey Betty met friends and held onto her fathers words and tried to let them take her away for any moment so she could escape the bad life she has at the moment. Catastrophe hit when Flora, Betty's friend, went to trek across the strong currents along the lake and leave the residential school. The day before Flora went to swim Betty was trying to speak the language of Cree with her in the halls and got caught. Betty was pushed to the floor and kicked in the ear. This was permeant damage. She lost her hearing in that ear for the rest of her life. The following day when Flora began to swim the currents latched onto her and pulled her under. "No. Flora." (David A. Robertson 32). Flora was now gone and Betty began to feel anger. She constantly reminded herself of her fathers

words and how she had to be wrong for him. Several years after the residential school she moved to Winnipeg and began a new life. Her outlook on life was much different from Saul's. Betty's grand-daughter was asked to do a project with her friend. They interviewed Betty and her final words to them after telling her horrifying stories were, "You honoured me by asking to hear it. Telling these stories is how we will create change. We need to look at the past to teach others our stories and then look forward, together, with knowledge and healing. My father once told me there was an ember in me that would one day ignite to burn as bright as a sacred fire. I believe that ember is in all of us" (David A. Robertson 40). Betty changed as a person by taking what happened and seeing the brightest side she could. That takes a lot from a person.

In conclusion both *Sugar Falls* and *Indian Horse* showed the tragedy residential schools had on First Nations children. Although ending in different ways their lives were impacted greatly. *Sugar Falls* showed a longterm result: the loss of hearing. Saul dealt with his demons through forgetting with alcohol and having a lot of anger. The schools in both stories has the ultimate goal of assimilating the First Nations cultures, in both stories, Saul and Betty held onto their culture no matter how small, they did. The effects of residential schools on First Nations children and culture were vast and horrible however, individually each child took something away from it either it be a love hate relationship with hockey or seeing an piece of beauty in everyone, residential schools had an impact all.