

## TEARING AT THE SEAMS

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### *This Wound Is A World*, Book Review.

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*This Wound Is A World* is the first and highly acclaimed collection of poetry by Ingenious writer, Billy-Ray Belcourt. Part essay, part poetry, this collection tussles with the very ideas of Indigeneity and queerness, as Belcourt attempts to reconcile and cultivate a world where he can exist. The result is a disturbing and sometimes beautiful tapestry of spiritual, bodily and natural imagery. Through which the language of loss permeates each poem respectively – as, above all, this collection is an act of mourning. To grieve in *This Wound Is A World* is deeply political. This collection is an eye-opening journey through a complex web of intersectional experiences.

One of the most unmissable observations the reader will make, is of all the bodily imagery. Belcourt cultivates the body as a site of extreme tension between the individual who inhabits it, and colonial society, which sees it as an object. Belcourt's definition of colonialism: 'turning bodies into cages that no one has the keys for', Summarises this perfectly. It strikes home the reality of racialised and gendered bodies. Through the eyes of Belcourt, the reader is able to observe

and feel how they are oppressed as a result of exterior factors, which cannot be mitigated by the individual. At the same time, the very nature of this fact runs counter to indigenous culture, which 'troubles the idea of having a body' in the first place. The majority of western readers might find this concept challenging. It manifests a kind of dualism within the self, as the hierarchy between the Indigenous body and mind, causes the two to fracture, creating an intense feeling of disembodiment. Often times, the speaker is little more than a soul, loosely tethered to existence.

The next observation the reader could make, is all the sexual encounters. It seems at times, that in Belcourt's experience, the only way to exist for a queer Indigenous man is through the act of sex. Which, in this collection, is frequently akin to a type of transcendence through 'disappearing into someone else'. Belcourt presents his own body as a 'crime scene' which is only escapable through sex. Despite how these situations often feel like 'taking apart pieces of yourself and giving them to someone who can't use them', there

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appears to be comfort in this type of sadism. It allows him to become untethered from his body, by sacrificing it to someone else. This idea by itself is relatable and speaks at least in part to an experience which a lot of readers can identify with. It demonstrates the way in which colonialism and western society turns us all into prisoners. However, there is of course an additional, intersectional layer here. Since his body, 'like the land, is also up for grabs', sex, especially gay sex, is also an act of rebellion and anticolonialism. Because allowing such easy access to his body is also to deny personal ownership of it.

Ultimately, the speaker's presence in his own body is ethereal and floats in the liminal space between trauma and love in the 'abandoned house of me'. His experience as an Indigenous queer man is somewhere beyond but also in between life and death and sometimes even time itself. Even physical intimacy is an intricate act of disappearing and reappearing. The fascinating social politics which sit at the centre of this collection are cradled by poetic language, which is literary and truly a joy to read. Belcourt's imagery is simple yet profound, accessible and rewarding to engage

with. It provokes readers to think outside of their privilege and gives an understanding of the weight and the complexity of Belcourt's intersectional experience.

*This Wound Is A World* has won the 2018 Griffin Prize, the Robert Kroetsch City of Edmonton Book Prize and the Most Significant Book of Poetry in English by an Emerging Indigenous Writer at the Indigenous Voices Awards – and it is easy to see why. There is much to be learned from a writerly perspective. Particularly in the audacious experimentation of form and structure, and the seamless blend of different competing elements. Mixing a literary style with crass subject matter, packed with colloquialisms – as well as social political theory. As mentioned before, there is also much to be learned about the indigenous experience through these poems. Thus, making this collection a perfect read for anyone who either enjoys poetry or, who is wanting to learn about the Indigenous Canadian experience. Read with an open mind and open heart, maybe one day, these wounds will heal for good.

## REFERENCES

Belcourt. B (2018). *This Wound Is A World*. *Calgary*: Frontenac House Ltd.