

# RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS THROUGH THE LENS OF *INDIAN HORSE*

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## Residential Schools

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*Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese is a 2012 novel that depicts the horrors of the residential schools. The author himself was someone who was hurt and troubled by the torment inflicted on communities by the schools. According to *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, ‘Both of Wagamese’s parents had also been removed from their families at a young age; they were survivors of Canada’s residential school system’.<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately, Richard Wagamese passed away on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March 2017, leaving behind his wife, children, and grandchildren.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, his legacy lives on through his work. In this specific case, a part of this legacy lives on through *Indian Horse*, a fictional novel that draws from his personal life to illustrate the displacement of Indigenous communities. The book tackles themes such as sexual abuse, violence, and child abuse.

Written in first-person perspective, *Indian Horse* portrays the main character, Saul and his Indigenous family living out in the open. However, Saul eventually gets taken to a residential school after an extremely turbulent journey, which marks the start of his worst nightmare.

Overall, the story is inferred to be of Saul’s personal life as he experiences the trials and tribulations that come his way through the corrupt system of cultural assimilation.

Eventually, he learns to cope with the death, torture, and abuse of his peers after being assimilated into the school through hockey. However, even that dream becomes short lived as further discrimination and harassment is showcased in the story.

Due to the entire story being written in the first person, the author appeals to pathos to get the readers to empathize and sympathize with Saul.

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, J. “Richard Wagamese.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. (Historica Canada, 2018), n.p.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, J. “Richard Wagamese.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

It is believed that one of the ways to educate and spread awareness on certain topics is to put people in other shoes, and *The Indian Horse* does an amazing job in doing that. Wagamese makes the reader feel as if they were friends with Saul, if not Saul himself. Saul's trauma becomes a reader's trauma, and Saul's grief becomes a reader's grief. While describing and presenting the horrors of cultural assimilation and racism, the author maintains a vivid and strong ability to story tell and enrapture his audience. Wagamese displays his bountiful wealth of knowledge on the subject, utilizing his personal experiences as fuel to the plot. These experiences include the 'neglect he experienced from his parents as a result of the abuse and trauma they had suffered in the residential school system'; the 'painful legacy would become a reoccurring theme throughout his body of work'.<sup>3</sup> It can be inferred that this 'painful legacy' is what allows his work to be so powerful and impactful. A person describing his pain and suffering will of course lend to not only more credibility, but also superior storytelling.

Humans are sympathetic creatures. Rather than telling facts, it is better to utilize the appeal of pathos and get the reader to empathize with the writer.

However, it is important to note that Richard Wagamese is an indirect victim of the

residential school system. While it can be assumed that he gets his information from his estranged parents and his community, everything described in the book may not be completely accurate. The book is a work of fiction; it is not based on a real person and is also not meant to be accurate. Wagamese's goal, in the end, is to spread awareness and portray horrors of the time period, and he does that splendidly. If *Indian Horse* were to be republished, it could incorporate a biography of Wagamese's experience to provide a better understanding for readers, as the most accurate and precise source of information would always be a primary source. For more information on residential schools, it is recommended to the reader to investigate real survivors of that cruel time. Here Wagamese/the publishers could provide links or other books at the end of the novel for readers to continue research. That being said, what is presented here is by no means to undermine Richard Wagamese's experiences of the situation, but rather a devil's advocate's take on it. The story is a good entry to the subject if someone is overwhelmed by the topic. And as mentioned earlier, presenting the possible dread of residential schools is very effective through the appeal of pathos.

*The Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese is a

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, J. "Richard Wagamese." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.

very intricately woven story while at the same time educational. It connects to Canadian culture by illustrating and pointing out the disgraceful mistakes we have made as a nation. Nevertheless, it could be these exact mistakes that allow us to never repeat them. It is to our knowledge that even today, the Prime Ministers of our nation have issued apologies to those subjected to the inhumane treatment of residential schools; albeit apologies may not be enough. *The Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese spreads

awareness and wishes for a change. The story is a way of representing those who have suffered at the hands residential schools and providing a beacon of hope for future generations through the appeal of pathos, showcasing the horrors of the residential school system.

## REFERENCES

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