

# A REVIEW OF CECIL PAUL AND BRIONY PENN'S *STORIES FROM THE MAGIC CANOE OF WA'XAID*

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## BOOK REVIEW

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In their book, *Stories from the Magic Canoe of Wa'xaid*, published in 2019, co-authors Cecil Paul, also known as Wa'xaid, and Briony Penn, tell the story of Wa'xaid's life and his fight to save and protect the world's 'largest unlogged temperate rainforest'<sup>1</sup> located on his homeland of Kitlope, British Columbia. Wa'xaid, who is a Xenaksiala from the Killer Whale Clan, partnered with Penn, an award-winning author, for the book.

The book chronicles consist of the many journeys Wa'xaid has made throughout his life, from his youth in Kitlope to his battle with alcoholism resulting from the reverberating generational traumas of colonialism and his path to sobriety, as well as his fight for the environment. It details some of the countless people who had an impact on his mission to save

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil Paul and Briony Penn, *Stories from the Magic Canoe of Wa'xaid*. (Rocky Mountain Books, 2019) p. 16.

Kitlope, from his wife Mae to celebrities like the Rockefeller brothers, who all hopped aboard his Magic Canoe to aid his fight. Woven in between Wa'xaid's first-hand account of his life – as told by Penn – is a plea to the people of the world to protect the lands we live on from devastation and abuse at the hands of governments and corporate greed.

Throughout the book, Wa'xaid invites the reader to join him in his Magic Canoe and paddle alongside him to protect the sacred and precious lands we walk upon from being destroyed. The focus of the book is to highlight the fight to protect and restore the land of Wa'xaid's home, Kitlope, as loggers nearly destroy it. It also argues explicitly for ongoing respect towards, and protection of, the lands we all reside on. It is a story of survival, suffering, and resilience as Wa'xaid shares the intimate details of the many journeys that led him to his Magic Canoe.

The Magic Canoe - referred to in the book's title and throughout the book - is not a real canoe, but a figurative one that represents the combined efforts of those who worked together to save the land of Kitlope. It is, as Wa'xaid describes it, 'a magical canoe because there is room for everyone who wants to come into it to paddle together.'<sup>2</sup> To join in and paddle together, all one needs to do is have respect for the land that surrounds them, and a desire to preserve its beauty.

The book is organized into five chapters which each span varying amounts of time throughout history. One-chapter spans

<sup>2</sup> Paul and Penn, *Stories from the Magic Canoe of Wa'xaid*, p. 13.

centuries as Wa'xaid discusses his people's history, whereas another spans a few decades as Wa'xaid discusses his own life. Wa'xaid's first-hand account of events and family history does well at drawing the reader in and guiding them through the intimate parts of his life. He directly addresses the reader several times throughout the book, making clear that his purpose is to educate the reader and urge them to act. The book also intersperses photographs throughout its pages to build a clear understanding of who, what, and where Wa'xaid references in some of his passages. The research within the book is quite thorough, as it does not just end with Wa'xaid's first-hand account of history. The book also contains a section of endnotes which link to various paragraphs throughout the book and provide key historical information. This information is not just regarding environmentalist movements and history, but also the history of colonization in Canada, specifically in the region surrounding Wa'xaid's homeland. Their purpose is to provide readers with necessary background information on all the intricate pieces of history that played a part in Wa'xaid's life and the creation of his Magic Canoe.

While these endnotes are extremely helpful in building an understanding of key background information, their location at the very end of the book creates a bit of a disconnect for the reader, making it difficult to maintain pace whilst flipping back and forth between pages to read them. The book also does not provide a sources list for the information contained in the endnotes, rather it opts to place the source information directly in each endnote where relevant. This makes it difficult to find a specific source in an endnote to pursue

further research as they blend in with the historical information written in each endnote.

In the end, Wa'xaid and Penn's *Stories from the Magic Canoe of Wa'xaid* is a well-written must-read that highlights the importance of respecting, preserving, and protecting the vulnerable lands we reside on, whilst highlighting how colonialism has had, and continues to have, an impact on the Indigenous peoples who reside on the land we call Canada. Wa'xaid's voice comes through with each word on the page, speaking directly to the reader and teaching them the history of the land and how they can do their part to protect it. The book leaves the reader with a paddle in hand as they join him in his Magic Canoe.