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Book Review: The Reason You Walk

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Abstract

This article provides a review of the memoir *The Reason You Walk* by Wab Kinew.

Keywords

Canada, First Nations, residential schools, intergenerational trauma, reconciliation, memoir, narrative

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Book Review: The Reason You Walk

Kinew, W. (2015). *The reason you walk*. Toronto, ON: Penguin. 273 pp. \$19.99 (Paperback). \$33.87 (Audiobook). ISBN: 9780143193555.

The Reason You Walk is the memoir of Wabanakwut (Wab) Kinew. Kinew purposes this memoir as a vehicle through which to share the experiences of his father, Tobasonakwut, and his own, as father and son rebuild their relationship with one another, other family members, and the wider Indigenous community in the wake of personal experiences of colonialism. Embracing Anishinaabe First Nations culture, Kinew and Tobasonakwut share experiences of Indian residential schools, intergenerational trauma, reconciliation, and healing. Yet, Kinew's narrative also holds rich and meaningful descriptions of Canadian policy by providing insight into how policies have impacted and continue to impact Indigenous Peoples.

Past Canadian government policy applied to Indigenous Peoples is widely regarded as discriminatory and oppressive. Knowledge of harm related to these policies has often reached the public as a result of strong opposition from Indigenous leaders, who began calling for policy reform in the 1960s to obtain equal freedoms for the Indigenous Peoples of Canada (Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016). The advocacy of these Indigenous leaders was very consequential to the first Indigenous policy reforms in Canada, but experts observe that Indigenous leaders encountered substantial obstacles in having their voices heard (Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016). The voices of Indigenous people have been, and continue to be, suppressed in mainstream Canadian society. Indigenous Peoples often have inequitable access to multi-media publishing and communication technologies that help to bring attention to Indigenous policy issues (Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016). Across generations, many non-Indigenous Canadians have silenced and occupied the voices of Indigenous Peoples, which has led to misrepresentation of Indigenous policy issues (Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016). Subsequently, Kinew's memoir is precious in light of the relative scarcity of authentic Indigenous narratives in discussions of policy issues. Considering the great breadth of policy, over time and across disciplines, that Kinew speaks to, this narrative becomes even more exceptional. For example, Kinew discusses the impact of policies that led to the creation of residential schools, the loss of land and minerals in Canada and America, a modern public education system that has failed to incorporate Indigenous culture, and residential school Survivors being mislabelled as "former students." Although a memoir is not a traditional place for researchers and policy makers to gather knowledge, Kinew's narrative has the potential to inform policy reform. He helps us to see the impacts of policies of oppression and the change produced by Indigenous leaders.

The Reason You Walk is 273 pages, comprised of 21 chapters, a foreword, prologue, and epilogue. The narrative is divided into three parts: *Oshkaadizid* (youth), *Kiizhewaadizid* (living a life of love, kindness, sharing, and respect), and *Giiwekwaadizid* (the end of life). Each of the narrative's parts capture the experiences of Kinew and his father moving through the stages of life, ending with Tobasonakwut's death. Kinew (2015) states in the memoir's foreword, "Much of the dialogue in this book is verbatim – these are the actual words spoken by your *dedenan* [Tobasonakwut], documented on video or in written transcripts" (p. xii), which assures the accuracy of Tobasonakwut's narrative posthumously.

Kinew (2015) describes the period this memoir has been lived and written as a "time of reconciliation," or during Indigenous Peoples' "journey from repression to resurgence" (p. xii). Kinew goes on to

support this statement by discussing numerous reconciliatory events in Canada during the time this memoir was written. For instance, Kinew discusses Prime Minister Harper's apology to Survivors of Indian residential schools, which acknowledged the suffering of Indigenous Peoples; the canonization of St. Kateri Tekakwitha by the Roman Catholic Church, the first Indigenous person of North America to be canonized; and the 2012 #IdleNoMore Movement. #IdleNoMore was a social media protest that began in Saskatchewan and grew into a platform for all the challenges faced by Indigenous Peoples in North America (including reconciliation; Kinew, 2015; Pierro et al., 2013). However, amid initial Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2010) hearings, only a small proportion of non-Indigenous Canadians endorsed the Commission and, of all the news coverage from 2010 to 2013, stories related to Indigenous Peoples only made up 0.28% (Flisfeder, 2010; Pierro et al., 2013; Stanton, 2011). During this time, Kinew was actively engaged in reconciliatory events (like assisting his father in providing testimony to the TRC), working within a news team covering Indian residential school stories, and participating in news coverage on reconciliation (Kinew and Tobasonakwut were featured in a national news piece), which shaped his view of reconciliation in Canada. However, Kinew's enthusiastic outlook on reconciliation may not be ubiquitous throughout Canada.

An argument could be made that Kinew's memoir builds upon the work of the TRC through its goals to "acknowledge Residential School experiences, impacts and consequences" and "witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, n.d., p. 1). Survivors of residential schools have criticized past narratives, including those taught in Canadian history classes, for inadequately acknowledging residential school experiences and the ongoing effects on Survivors (Gebhard, 2017; Shay & Wickes, 2017). Outside of education settings, even narratives in scholarly literature diminished the horrors of residential schools, such as starvation and abuse, and tend to portray residential schools as a bygone issue rather than an ongoing one (Gebhard, 2017; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, n.d.). Kinew's narrative truly acknowledges the horrific experiences of residential schools. He describes the physical and sexual abuse his father experienced in concrete terms, and he explores the ongoing impact as manifest in his father's substance abuse and strained relationship with his children. Finally, this memoir witnesses, supports, and facilitates truth and reconciliation through a publicly available and easily accessible personal history of residential schools, intergenerational impacts, and reconciliation. By detailing his own account of reconciliation and the associated benefits, Kinew provides a model of reconciliation that could be replicated by other Canadians in order to support the ongoing work of the TRC (2015).

Analyzing the memoir's content, the transitions between Wabanakwut and Tobasonakwut's experiences and perspectives successfully integrate the themes in the narrative without losing clarity. The narrative does not include extraneous experiences, and no content appears missing from the narrative, but Kinew does explain one omission he is required to make in the text: "Due to its sacred nature," the ceremonies of the *heyookas*, clowns with spiritual powers in the Lakota sundance ceremony are not described (Kinew, 2015, p. 174). This statement is not a true omission; rather, it strengthens the narrative, as Kinew's protection of the traditional ceremonies is a sign of respect and prevents the exploitation of Indigenous culture (Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). The memoir does not mention in the main text or acknowledgements, the role, if any, Indigenous leaders, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers had in revising and amending the content. Mention of this role would have been valuable to the reader in examining the accuracy of the content, as this wisdom enriches and strengthens

Indigenous knowledge (Kagan, Smith, & Chinn, 2014; Saini, 2012; Wray, 2008). Moreover, the experiences of Indigenous women are not central in the narrative and, hence, readers are unable to fully consider the influence of gender in the experiences and issues described. Although when women are called on, Kinew (2015) uses positive language, such as “. . . you could see how that challenging road had forged within her an exceptional strength” (p. 167), and “there she was, in a crowd of future world leaders, the best and brightest . . . she had fought for a very long time to achieve this . . .” (p.150), conveying respect for Indigenous women.

The book’s content and the format of the memoir brings the reader closer to Indigenous culture. Terms, traditions, and ceremonies rooted in Indigenous culture are described in detail, making the text accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with them. As well, many nouns throughout the memoir are followed by the Anishinaabemowin translation in italics, such as “the Anishinaabemowin word for twin is *niizhote*, or ‘two heart’” (Kinew, 2015, p. 8) and “that low-flying cloud. That *Tobasonakwut*” (p. 261). The inclusion of Anishinaabemowin in the memoir exemplifies Indigenous resilience against colonialism, which sought to eradicate Indigenous languages. Listening to the audiobook of *The Reason You Walk*, read by Kinew himself, improves the reader’s perception of Anishinaabemowin and aids in understanding the meaning through the tone and emphasis in the author’s voice (Alsamadani, 2017; Weber, 1986).

Worth noting, Kinew makes no claim that his memoir is intended to inform research or future policy in Canada. Yet, the authors of this review were compelled by Kinew’s narrative and feel that authentic intergenerational narratives, like *The Reason You Walk*, have a place in directing future policy research and creation. Memoirs in particular enable rich accounts of experiences, including those of marginalized populations, that address experiences over longer periods of time than qualitative interviews. They also grant the narrator autonomy over how knowledge is shared (Kagan et al., 2014; McGannon & McMahan, 2019; Saini, 2012; Shay & Wickes, 2017). Among Indigenous Peoples, narratives have been especially beneficial in decolonization and identifying intergenerational trauma (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Hildebrandt et al., 2016; Kagan et al., 2014). With colonialism exerting a complex set of influences across generations of Indigenous Peoples, Kinew’s narrative about the life of his father and his own offers researchers, policymakers, Indigenous communities, and other stakeholders direction in understanding and undoing this influence (Griffiths, Coleman, Lee, & Madden, 2016; Hildebrandt et al., 2016; Kagan et al., 2014; Saini, 2012). Colonialism has marginalized and suppressed the narratives of Indigenous Peoples (Hildebrandt et al., 2016; McCallum, Waller, & Meadows, 2012; Saini, 2012). This memoir creates an opportunity to learn from two established Indigenous leaders—Tobasonakwut and Wabanakwut are bloodline chiefs in their community and politicians in Canada. Today, Wabanakwut Kinew is well-known throughout Canada as the leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP) of Manitoba, and from his past work as a musician and broadcaster (Kinew, 2019).

Criticisms exist for the use of memoirs to inform research and policy. One prominent criticism being that a memoir is the perspective of only one person and, thus, the experiences are not generalizable to larger groups (Di Summa-Knoop, 2017). This criticism stems from Western research perspectives, which have marginalized and perpetuated racist stereotypes of Indigenous communities in the past (Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016; Saini, 2012; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). Modern Indigenous research must center around Indigenous traditions, research perspectives, and methods to improve cultural sensitivity and empower participants (Saini, 2012; Simonds & Christopher, 2013). Storytelling or

yarning is regarded as the cornerstone of Indigenous research methods, being a longstanding tradition in Indigenous communities to share and learn from the experiences of others (Kinew, 2015; Macfarlane & Ruffo, 2016; Saini, 2012). Therefore, a memoir, as a written extension of traditional Indigenous storytelling, may have more value for Indigenous communities than research studies informed by Western research perspectives that emphasize large sample size and generalizable findings (Saini, 2012).

As healthcare professionals, Kinew's narrative struck a deep chord with us about health inequity among Indigenous Peoples. In the narrative, Kinew pledges to his children, "I love you, I value you, and yes, I would die for you. But I would much rather live for you" (Kinew, 2015, p. xiii). Knowing that Indigenous Peoples in Canada experience, on average, shorter life expectancies and a greater burden of illness and injury than non-Indigenous people, Kinew's words exemplify resiliency to overcome colonialism and health inequity (National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health [NCCAH], 2017; Reading & Wein, 2013). Harnessing the characteristics and contributions that have made Kinew resilient, as seen in his recovery from addiction and his ability to cope with his father's death, could make a powerful foundation for future strengths-based Indigenous health policy. The same could apply to the fields of education, which is represented through Wabanakwut's and Tobasonakwut's experiences as students and educators, and cultural studies, as Kinew and Tobasonakwut persistently seek Indigenous knowledge, despite geographic and financial barriers, within Anishinaabe, Mi'kmaq, Lakota, and Wixarika communities.

External to healthcare policy reform, which is only one strategy to improving health inequity among Indigenous Peoples, health care students and professionals should also find value in Kinew's memoir (Goodman et al., 2017). Indigenous Peoples in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand have reported widespread stereotyping and stigmatization from healthcare professionals (Goodman et al., 2017). Researchers suggest an improved understanding of Indigenous health practices and health inequity, concepts outlined in detail in Kinew's memoir, among individual healthcare professionals could reduce these negative experiences and improve access to healthcare for Indigenous Peoples (Goodman et al., 2017; Mills, Creedy, & West, 2018). As more post-secondary and continuing education programs for healthcare students and professionals integrate Indigenous health content into curriculum, Kinew's memoir should certainly not be overlooked as a source of Indigenous knowledge (Mills et al., 2018).

Revisiting the TRC through the eyes of Kinew and his father deeply humanizes and enriches this work. Embedding this personal narrative into social, historical, and political contexts creates new ways of understanding this history, particularly among non-Indigenous peoples (Fitzpatrick, 2018; Hildebrandt et al., 2016). This understanding allows us to recognize why past policy was inadequate and generate support for new Indigenous policy agendas (McCallum et al., 2012). None of the limitations identified in this review overshadow the potential benefits of this narrative. Having earned immense praise and diverse accolades, *The Reason You Walk* has already found a place among the great literary texts of Canada (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2017). Let us now find a place for this memoir and future memoirs that share the voices of Indigenous Peoples in order to inform research, policy, and structural changes in Canada and worldwide.

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