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An Analysis of the Censorship of David A. Robertson’s *7 Generations*

David Alexander Robertson, award-winning indigenous author and youth educator, gives us *7 Generations*; a series of graphic novels written and illustrated for grade nine to twelve students that includes: *Stone* (2010), *Scars* (2010), *Ends/Begins* (2010) and *The Pact* (2011). Robertson writes from a powerful and personal place; focusing on the history of his people, and using structuralism/semiotics (Levi-Strauss 1963), historiographic metafiction (McCallum 2009) and cultural studies (Watkins 2009), he delivers enlightening literature dedicated to calling attention to generational trauma and how it has led to life-altering and oftentimes life-threatening emotional and psychological depression. His four graphic novels vividly address some very real and controversial issues pertaining to Canada’s socio-cultural and socio-political past, with each novel in the series focusing on a specific historical event while illuminating the ways in which it has come to affect the contemporary socio-cultural and socio-political reality of indigenous peoples. The entire series, albeit wonderful, has come under recent censorship, with censors from the Edmonton School Board falling back on a variation of the go-to claim that they are “unsuited to age group.” The attempt to limit the accessibility of the literature appears, however, to be “derived from broader cultural and historical currents” (Young, 422), deeply rooted in ideology and the struggle to preserve the status-quo and control the means of knowledge and the dissemination of ideas, beliefs, values and norms (Miller 2014). The censorship of Robertson’s graphic novels needs to “be understood not as an isolated action or a singular event but rather as part of a complex set of exchanges and leverages within the cultural field” (Kidd, 199). In a society where knowledge is power, the censorship of literature for children and youth remains an influential means of socio-cultural and socio-political control (Kidd 2008; Lesnik-Oberstein 2009; Miller 2014; Sarland 2009; Wertham 1954).

The first graphic novel in Robertson’s *7 Generation* series, *Stone* (2010), opens with a young man’s attempted suicide and the remainder of the novel and the three other novels in the series—*Scars* (2010), *Ends/Begins* (2010), and *The Pact* (2011)—unfold to tell the story of how the young man, Edwin, came to find himself in such a mental state and how the history of his family (their experiences at contact, under colonization and in residential schools) contributed to his lack of hope and to his journey down the devastating path of wanting to take his own life. Through a combination of captivating imagery and concise narration, Robertson is able to convey the complexity of human relationships and highlight how past events have the profound ability to affect the present in a myriad of ways. The images and text, taken together, draw readers into the inner and outer struggles of each character—those of the protagonist Edwin but also of his supportive mother, his estranged father, and ancestors before them. Readers *witness* the pain of being separated from loved ones; they are made to *feel* the loneliness and emptiness that incurred as a result of that separation; they actually *see* the physical, emotional and psychological pain written across each character’s face and body; and thus they *observe* how a history of debasement, anger, loss and guilt in one individual’s past can lead to feelings of betrayal and abandonment in another individual’s present—affecting generation after generation.

The historic relationship between Canada’s indigenous peoples and “white” colonizers had, and continues to have, grave and harmful repercussions for indigenous societies, families and youth; Robertson, an advocate for educating youth on indigenous history and contemporary issues, is able to alert his young adult readers to the importance of such issues and he calls awareness to the fact that the silence needs to be broken and that society, and Canada as a nation, must begin to engage in some difficult conversations about the past so as to start healing the hurt and hate and eventually abate the generational trauma they continue to perpetuate. The *7 Generations* series is instrumental in its ability to assist, in a non-didactic way, the learning of today’s youth; it accurately portrays cultural context and has the intertextual ability to bridge gaps and add to the knowledge of youth readers (Benton 1999; Wilkie 1999); it can help inform today’s youth of the consequences of the past in a way that they are more accustomed to—that is, through a visual medium. Robertson, however, opens himself and his work to controversy and censorship because he writes “honest, realistic stories for young readers that some adults find disturbing” (Kidd, 209). His targeted youth audience, the realness that comes from his books being written and illustrated from a personal place, and the effective strategy he adopts in reaching his readers through a visual/textual medium (Nodelman 2009) makes his graphic novels a target for censors; the series opens old wounds and exposes the State, Church, Residential School, and the “white” majority of their past atrocities; it reminds society of the hate and hurt inflicted upon a people based on socio-cultural and socio-political difference; and, perhaps most importantly, it reveals an unfortunate reality: that the atrocities of the past are partly responsible for the current socio-cultural ills and for the personal and persistent identity crisis experienced by a portion of Canada’s youth population—that is, Canada’s indigenous youth.

Robertson’s *7 Generations* series came under censor by the Edmonton School Board who recommended that it not be used in the public-school system because it contains “sensitive subject matter and visual inferencing of abuse regarding residential schools” (Derworiz, 3). The Board placed all four graphic novels on their “Books to Weed Out” list, a resource intended to assist teachers in choosing appropriate educational literature for use in their classrooms. The censorship angered Robertson, who stated that: “[t]here’s a lot of indigenous writers who are sharing their truths to own those stories about difficult parts of our history that sometimes we don’t want to talk about, and these are the books we should be bringing into the classroom”; going on to say: “[i]t’s pretty troubling to me that an entire public school system is not recommending some really valid, important texts—and not just mine, but from other writers as well” (Derworiz, 2). The School Board noted that it was “not recommending” Robertson’s books because they “require pre- and post-conversations with students” (Derworiz, 3). Robertson, forthright and accurate, claimed: “[w]hat is a school there for if they’re not going to have pre- and post-conversations about literature that begin in the classroom? That’s the whole point…They need to take a hard look of what they are recommending and what they’re not recommending, and why” (Derworiz, 3). The site was eventually taken down by the School Board and is undergoing “revision.”

Here, in the context of present-day liberal Canada, we have an attempt to limit literature based on a claim that it is unsuited to age group; yet it is apparent that the real goal was to maintain the status quo and uphold the School Board’s ideology. The Board felt uncomfortable with the content of Robertson’s novels because they had the potential of upsetting the “balance” and went against the current idealized image of themselves and was not what they wanted reflected back unto them. The Board, saying that the novels are too “sensitive,” was really implying that youth grades nine through twelve needed to be “protected” from the ideas held within them; and yet the majority of the subject matter contained in the novels can be found in any high school Canadian history book and school curriculums cover the period of contact, the small pox epidemic, the events of colonization, and the negative repercussions of residential schools in detail. Thus, it seems that it is not so much the historic subject matter per se, but the combined use of explicit imagery and the narrative references to contemporary socio-cultural issues that is of concern—that is, targeting “impressionable” youth readers and drawing their attention to indigenous youth depression and suicide was what came under censorship—an issue for which the censors felt unsteady in discussing and for whom did not want to be cast in a position of blame on account of past atrocities that occurred in Canadian educational institutions.

Was this censorship attempt right or just? Does censoring our youth from literature that contains real life issues, such as depression and suicide, make sense when they are bombarded with these issues on television, in films, on the internet, over social media, in the news and at school? Is it not better to address these issues through “good” literature and with guidance from trusted adults, such as classroom teachers? The “shift toward social relevance as evidence of value” (Kidd, 204) was obviously missed by the Edmonton Public School Board in its attempt to censor the *7 Generations* graphic novels; making it both ironic and nonsensical—there is nothing in the novels that a student in grade nine through twelve is unfamiliar with today. Silencing the reality has done nothing to help the situation; it is time to start talking about these issues and Robertson’s graphic novels are a great place to start, whether in the classroom, at home, or in the community. Robertson, calling out his censors, was successful in drawing public attention to the irony and unjustness of an attempt to limit some really valid pieces of literature that Canada’s youth should be able to freely access and engage with in conjunction to other sources of knowledge and information—both historical and contemporary.

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