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A Clash of Two Cultures: David A. Robertson’s *7 Generations*

Abstract

David A. Robertson, award-winning indigenous author and youth educator, gives us *7 Generations*; a series of enlightening graphic novels dedicated to breaking the silence and calling attention to the clash of two cultures—that of indigenous culture and white-settler culture. Through the use of vivid imagery and impactful narration, Robertson is able to expose (to the dismay of his censors) the long-lasting and devastating effects of one group’s cultural hegemony over the other—highlighting the phenomenon of generational trauma and how it has caused life-altering and oftentimes life-threatening emotional and psychological depression for individuals of indigenous ancestry. Yet, right when hope seems lost, Robertson reveals that reconciliation, through discussion, is possible and that there is hope for the future of indigenous youth culture.

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; drawing on the history of his people, using structuralism/semiotics (Levi-Strauss 1963), historiographic metafiction (McCallum 2009) and cultural studies (Watkins 2009), he delivers some extremely enlightening literature dedicated to calling attention to the clash of two cultures—that of the indigenous peoples of Canada and the white-settlers who came to colonize the nation and “civilize” its inhabitants. Robertson explores how the cultural hegemony of white-settlers over indigenous peoples has created generational trauma and led to life-altering and oftentimes life-threatening emotional and psychological depression for individuals of indigenous ancestry. Robertson’s 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, came 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.” Yet, upon analysis, the attempt to limit the accessibility of the novels appears 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). As Alyson Miller attests:

It must be noted that scandal is often a battle between the status quo and the politics of ‘otherness,’ a conflict between mainstream tenets and concepts of difference that are fighting for space in the worldview of the child reader. As the constant presence of minority voices within scandalous debates suggests, literature for children is an expedient vehicle through which to contest cultural systems and present marginalized views within a majority form. […] groups attempting to assert a specific cultural imperative (137).

In a society where knowledge is power, the censorship of literature for children and young adults remains an influential means of socio-cultural and socio-political control (Kidd 2008; Lesnik-Oberstein 2009; Miller 2014; Sarland 2009; Wertham 1954).

Breaking the Silence and Making Painful Stories of the Past Accessible

The historic relationship between Canada’s indigenous peoples and white-settlers 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 significant and long-lasting consequences of cultural hegemony 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 heal the hurt and hate and abate the generational trauma they continue to perpetuate. The *7 Generations* series is instrumental in its ability to assist, in a non-didactic way, this precise task and with the overall learning of today’s youth. Robertson makes painful stories and accounts of the past accessible to young adult readers, allowing them to engage, decipher and interpret their own culture and also the culture of the “other.” David Booth, author and educator, hails the series because it “offers a powerful message through image and word, and will engage readers in a historical and insightful story that illuminates the conflict that challenged Canada’s very core, and continues to concern us as a nation today” (quoted in Robertson, 2010). Each graphic novel accurately portrays socio-cultural context and has the intertextual ability to bridge gaps and add to the knowledge of youth readers (Benton 1999; Wilkie 1999); they can help inform today’s youth of the devastating impressions left by the hate and hegemony of the past in a way that they are more accustomed to—that is, through a combined visual/textual medium which has proved itself to be quite strategic:

Because we assume that pictures, as iconic signs, do in some significant way actually resemble what they depict, they invite us to see objects as the pictures depict them—to see the actual in terms of the fictional visualisation of it. Indeed, this dynamic is the essence of picture books. The pictures ‘illustrate’ the texts—that is they purport to show us what is meant by the words, so that we come to understand the objects and actions the words refer to in terms of the qualities of the images that accompany them—the world outside the book in terms of the visual images within it (Nodelman, 72-73).

Images are a powerful means by which ideologies are produced and onto which ideologies are projected, thus the graphic novel becomes a powerful tool in socio-cultural conversations:

 Like most narrative, picture book stories most forcefully guide readers into culturally acceptable ideas about who they are through the privileging of the point of view from which they report on the events they describe. Knowing only what can be known from that perspective, we readers tend to assume it ourselves—to see and understand events and people as the narrative invites us to see them. Ideological theorists call such narrative perspectives ‘subject positions’; in occupying them, readers are provided with ways of understanding their own subjectivity—their selfhood or individuality. But as John Stevens suggests, ‘in taking up a position from which the text is most readily intelligible, [readers] are apt to be situated within the frame of the text’s ideology; that is, they are subjected to and by that ideology’ (1992: 67) (Nodelman, 75).

Robertson’s novels are open to controversy and censorship because they are “honest, realistic stories for young readers that some adults find disturbing” (Kidd, 209); his targeted youth audience, the realness and honesty that comes from his books being written and illustrated from a personal place, and his effective strategy of reaching his readers through a visual/textual medium makes his graphic novels a target for censors. The series cuts through the silence, opens old wounds and exposes past atrocities of the State, Church, Residential School, and dominant white-settler population; it reminds society of the hate and hurt inflicted upon a people based on socio-cultural differences; and, perhaps most importantly, it reveals an unfortunate reality: that the atrocities of the past are partially responsible for the current socio-cultural ills and for the personal and persistent identity crisis experienced by a portion of Canada’s young adult population—that is, Canada’s indigenous youth.

7 Generations—The Series

Robertson’s *7 Generation* series weaves the present with the past; through a myriad of stories, the reader comes to see how Edwin, a young indigenous man, has been shaped by his family’s history—going back generations, to their experiences at contact and in residential schools. In interweaving stories from present to past and past to present, Robertson illuminates how cultural hegemony and the historic treatment of generations of indigenous peoples has contributed to generational trauma, a lack of hope and to Edwin’s journey down the devastating path of wanting to take his own life. By reconciling the past with the present, Edwin is finally able to embrace his future and move past the hate and hurt. 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 young readers into the inner and outer struggles of each character—those of the protagonist Edwin; his supportive mother, Lauren; his estranged father, James; and ancestors before them. Young 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 and emotional pain written across each character’s face and body; as such, 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—going on to affect generation after generation; stopping only if the cycle of hate and hurt is replaced with a cycle of forgiveness and reconciliation.

7 Generations: Stone—The Importance of Knowing Where You Came From

The first graphic novel in Robertson’s *7 Generation* series, *Stone* (2010), introduces the young adult reader to Edwin—a young indigenous man who must come to understand his family’s past in order to have any chance at a future. The novel opens in contemporary time (March 25, 2010) in what appears to be an urban context; dreary images of rain and a concerned woman evoke a sense of anxiety in the reader while the text alludes to a good-bye letter:

Dear Mom…I’m so tired of hoping. I’m so tired of waiting. I think this way I just won’t know anymore. I won’t know to be sad or how to be let down. I’ll just sleep. No waiting or hoping. Hope is never realized… (1).

The reader is immediately drawn in as the next few pages are flooded with vivid images of Edwin’s mother finding him lying unconscious on his bed with a half empty bottle of pills spilled across the floor; the ambulance, Edwin on a stretcher; his mother’s face overcome with terror and worry; and a figure of an older man (Edwin’s estranged father) in the shadows. Edwin pulls through, awakes to his mother and has a conversation that shapes the rest of the series; his mother telling him: “You have so much to live for. I wish you could see that. Our past has shaped us all. You, me…all of us” (4); but Edwin responds: “The past isn’t an excuse”, for which his mother replies: “No, it isn’t…but you should know where you came from” (4-5).

Edwin’s mother goes on to tell him the story of his ancestor: Stone, a young Plains Cree man from the nineteenth century whose historic “battles” (both emotional and physical) parallel those being fought by contemporary Edwin; the reader becomes enmeshed in two very different time frames with differing relationships, yet comes to view similar experiences and feel comparable emotions. As Edwin’s mother tells him the story, the reader is taken back and forth in time as she intermittently comes back to Edwin to discuss the past and how it affected their people (historically) and how it pertains and has come to affect him (contemporarily). There are points when the reader sees Stone and Edwin as mirror images, with graphics on a two-page spread depicting mirrored actions and relations between them and their loved ones: Stone with his brother and Edwin with his mother (14-17); and also points in their lives: Edwin’s readiness to leave the hospital and Stone’s readiness to become a warrior (24-25). The story of Stone’s brother losing his life in battle and Stone’s conversation with his brother’s spirit at the “Calling River” alludes us to Edwin’s own experience of pain and loss; Stone’s comments: “You’ve left me alone…You were supposed to teach me” (20) echo Edwin’s thoughts: “Where did you go…a timeless face in misty eyed disgrace…if you could turn around, you could have it all…but I’m still drowning…why did you go…” (30); while Stone’s brother’s comments: “you’re not alone…rage will cloud you…you need patience” (20) echo Edwin’s mother’s words: “I told you this story for a reason, my son. We all have someone to fight for. And this gives us hope. Drives us. Even when sometimes it’s hard to keep going. But in taking this journey…maybe you will know that someone is fighting for you, too” (29).

Robertson uses structuralism/semiotics (Levi-Strauss 1963), historiographic metafiction (McCallum 2009) and cultural studies (Watkins 2009) throughout the novel; he relies on intertextuality, imagery and symbolism to express moods and meaning; it is through pre-existing knowledge that readers garner the full meaning being conveyed in the graphics: “[s]tyles identified with specific individuals, or with whole periods or cultures, can evoke not just what they might have meant for their original viewers, but also, what those individuals or periods or cultures have come to mean to us” (Nodelman, 78). Edwin’s mother speaks of how things were and were not—the importance of family, community, and how their people were not “savages” but a people who respected family, community and a pre-destined path—intertextual information that Robertson’s young adult readers would have already received in their lives: at home, in school and/or throughout their communities, through other texts, genres, on television and in films. Stones’ amulet, which he received on his “vision quest” and was to remind him of what he needed to do, becomes a symbol that is carried throughout the entire series—passed from one generation to the next, symbolic of passing on a “destiny” or “identity.”

7 Generations: Scars—Cultural Contact and the Small Pox Epidemic

The second graphic novel in Robertson’s *7 Generation* series, *Scars* (2010), re-introduces the reader to Edwin; opening with vivid images of him holding a picture of a man behind shattered glass—symbolic of a broken relationship and an emotionally broken Edwin who is imaged in tears, sitting on his bed where the empty bottle of pills still lie beneath. The words “I hate him” escape Edwin’s mouth (1); to which his mother replies: “I know. You know, Edwin, sometimes we love something so much we have to let it go no matter how much it hurts” (1-2). The reader sees images of a grown man letting go of the hand of a child, then standing in the doorway watching a child sleep and eventually walking away with despair written across his face; Edwin, looking confused, responds: “Mom, I don’t understand” (2) to which she replies: “Let me tell you of a different time for our family. The year was 1870. In many ways, it was the end of our way of life as a people. The end of the time we called paradise” (3-4). Edwin’s mother then recites the story of how the smallpox epidemic swept through the prairies during the late nineteenth century and the reader is introduced to a young Plains Cree boy, White Cloud, who witnesses the death of his entire family, has to leave behind his people in order to save the next generation, is torn by the guilt of doing so, and yet somehow is able to summon the strength to live, to journey to a new home, and to survive so that his people are not forgotten. This story parallels Edwin’s own journey of despair and by learning of his past he realizes he is not alone and is able to summon the strength to confront his own source of pain—that is, his estranged father who, as was alluded to in the imagery, left when he was a young boy in order to save Edwin from the hate and hurt he was carrying; yet him leaving did not save him, it only led to feelings of abandonment and anger—perpetuating the hate and hurt and continuing the generational trauma. Only by learning of his past and how that influenced his father’s choice to leave, can Edwin begin to live and heal:

In the end, we define ourselves by the actions we take; how we address the past and look to the future. We can choose to give up or we can choose to survive. Nobody can do this for us, no matter how hard they try. And as some have let us go out of love, out of love we can find them again” (30).

This strong message, given to Edwin by his mother (alongside an image of Edwin and his father coming face to face at his father’s house) ends the novel and leaves the reader anxious to find out what they say to each other and what will happen next.

Once again, Robertson uses a brilliant mixture of structuralism/semiotics (Levi-Strauss 1963), historiographic metafiction (McCallum 2009) and cultural studies (Watkins 2009); drawing on intertextuality, imagery and symbolism to infer greater meaning into the story and his message. When Edwin’s mother speaks of the spread of smallpox, Robertson is aware that his young adult readers have acquired some knowledge of this over the course of their lives and it is this pre-existing knowledge that allows readers to garner the full meaning and message being portrayed:

When the newcomers came […] our people had no immunity to their diseases. At different times in our history, small pox ravaged our people […] whether exposed to it accidentally or given to us on purpose, we never stood a chance against it (12).

The reader sees the fear held throughout history by mothers, such as White Cloud’s, who feared for their children’s lives and asked (from her death bed where she lay covered in smallpox): “what will happen to my children?” (7); paralleled in contemporary time by Edwin’s mother’s own fear, holding the empty bottle of pills, asking herself: “Is it only a matter of time? What will happen to my child?” (8). The symbolism of the amulet is invoked again, this time as White Cloud’s father passes it down to him while on his death bed, sick and dying from small pox (5), and again when Edwin’s mother passes in on to him, saying: “The amulet that Stone and White Cloud wore has been in our family for seven generations. It has the power of our culture within it. It will help you on your journey of healing” (26). The visible marks—the scars—left behind on White Cloud from smallpox are imaged beside the scars left behind on Edwin’s wrists from a previous attempt to take his own life, paralleling the historic and contemporary “battles” fought by indigenous youth to survive generational trauma: “Scars forever remind us of the past. We all have scars, memories of harder times. But the past doesn’t have to define us” (29-30).

7 Generations: Ends/Begins—Cultural Hegemony and the Effects of the Residential School

The third graphic novel in Robertson’s *7 Generation* series, *Ends/Begins* (2010), opens where the second novel left off—on March 24, 2010, the day prior to Edwin being found overdosed on pills in the first novel. The reader picks up at the scene where Edwin has come to his father’s house to talk about the past and find answers as to why he left, but his father says: “you have to stop coming here” and closes the door (1). Edwin is left outside alone and the reader comes to understand what emotions led up to Edwin attempting to take his own life. However, in order to fully understand Edwin’s father’s actions, the reader needs to know more about the past; and so Robertson takes the reader back in time to June 10, 1994, wherein Edwin’s father is shown depressed and drinking while a young Edwin plays on the living room floor; distracted by his guilt and grief, Edwin’s father does not notice him go out the door and Edwin finds himself playing in the road with a car speeding towards him (2-3). Robertson then takes the reader forward in time, to April 13, 2010 (after Edwin’s overdose and release from the hospital); this time it is Edwin’s father coming to him for reconciliation, but Edwin slams the door in his father’s face who pleads: “Edwin…please let me explain things to you” (4). The reader is then swept into another story, beginning in 1964 and told by Edwin’s father, about two brothers (Edwin’s father, James, and his younger brother, Thomas) who must leave their grandparents and board at a residential school; their grandfather telling him:

…the white people are numerous. There are too many of them. They are like birds in the autumn that blacken the sky. Our people are now scattered leaves on the ground, fallen from what we once knew. Detached from the strength of our past, crumbling under their feet. The circle where all life ends, begins is broken. At the school, pray they teach you their ways so you survive this changing world (6).

James tells Edwin that the school was “this other planet” where the “priest didn’t even speak our language” and was “like an alien” and “soon we learned that we weren’t supposed to speak our language either […] he said we’d go to hell if we did […] we’d never heard of hell before, but it sounded scary” (9); he goes on to tell that “the first thing they did was cut off our hair. It was too Indian*.*  Then they gave us new clothes to wear […] pretty soon we looked like white’s. Except, you know, for the brown they couldn’t scrub away” (10). The images of the two brothers are now “un-indianized” and solemn; Thomas telling James that he is “scared of this place” and wants “to be at home with Grandpa” while James reassures him that “I won’t let anything bad happen to you” (11). Robertson goes on to provide two separate narratives of the residential school experience—first of James and then of Thomas. The brothers were forced to pray, eat food they were not accustomed to and were strictly regimented; they kept the brothers distant from one another, with James forced to do manual labour and Thomas confined to the classroom and school quarters where he was shamed, punished and physically abused. Thomas grew quieter and never wanted to talk; becoming more home sick and terrified. James eventually discovers why his brother was in such anguish when he walks in on the priest belting Thomas; enraged, James attacks the priest and inflicts unto him the same abuse he had been inflicting on Thomas. Meanwhile, Thomas runs off in fear and has a terrible fall in the woods, hitting his head on a rock that causes his death; emotive images of James holding Thomas in his arms, completely overcome with grief flood the page (29). A flip of the page takes the readers to the final page of the novel, wherein the reader is taken forward in time, again to June 10, 1994, where young Edwin is in the street, the car nearly about to hit him when his father scoops him out of the way. The novel closes with vivid images of Edwin being taken inside the house, his father taking off his belt, raising it (like the priest had done), about to strike the young Edwin—leaving the reader hanging in suspense, wondering what will happen but knowing that this was the pivotal moment that led Edwin’s father to leave: to protect him for his past.

Robertson’s young adult readers likely have prior historic knowledge of the residential school system and are aware of how indigenous youth were treated behind the institution’s walls; this allows them to draw deep meaning from the images and text, discerning the cultural hegemony—the explicit social and cultural ideology—of the residential school system. An analysis of Robertson’s narrative and rhetoric reveals how binary ideas of superiority/inferiority, civilized/savage, clean/dirty, white/brown, and ultimately us/them weighed strongly in the residential school system and thus on the indigenous students who were placed in the institutionalized setting for “teaching.” The ideology was based on Christianity, white superiority, patriarchy and hierarchy; the school/religious leaders prided themselves on genteel values of character, intellectual and moral refinement, self-control, and their dedication to God was paramount. Christianity and the State, together, aimed to promote social cohesion and moral respectability; any veer from this path came under scrutiny, as was the case with indigenous social, cultural, and spiritual practices. Indigenous ways of life were seen as a threat to Christianity, the family unit and the social order—that is, threatening to the dominant ideological ideals of the day and thus in need of “civilizing.” The white-settlers feared that indigenous peoples would stand in the way of “progress”; they believed that their own social, cultural and religious ways were superior and would uplift the nation; whereas indigenous social, cultural and spiritual ways were seen as inferior and believed to debilitate character, promote bad behavior, retard material progress, and stagnate if not reverse the social, cultural and religious progress of white settlement. Indigenous ways of life did not factor into the equation; residential schools were structurally imperative to “white” hegemony.

These attitudes and beliefs—the white-settler ideology—has deep roots in Canada’s past (An Anonymous Memorandum, 1663; Jaenen 1966; Welton 2005). The ultimate goal was to remove all aspects of the indigenous socio-cultural and socio-political ways—that is, a lifestyle of hunting, fishing, gathering, and nomadism—and to accomplish such a plan they targeted the children, removed them from their families, and intended to raise them without knowledge of their own culture or ideology (norms, values and beliefs). Through story, Robertson illuminates the detrimental ramifications of such cultural hegemony and how it came to affected two generations of indigenous peoples—James and Edwin. Residential schools evolved from ideas of a people belonging to a society with a vastly different ideology than that of the indigenous peoples and the “moralizing quality attributed to the treatment of the unfortunates is an example of European value judgements being applied to a different culture” (Jaenen, 270).

7 Generations: The Pact—Reconciliation and the Beginning of a New Journey

The fourth and final graphic novel in Robertson’s *7 Generation* series, *The Pact* (2011), is a story of loss and pain but also of reconciliation and hope for the future. The novel opens back at the residential school with James carrying Thomas through the woods to their “home” where “it’s warm” and “safe” (1-2). James, once again narrating the story, tells Edwin that he “became trapped in his thoughts” and “prayed for release but there was no freedom from those thoughts…the thoughts of what I could have done…or what I did” (3). James blamed himself for not knowing what was happening to his younger brother in the residential school, for not protecting him when he said he would, and for not being able to save him. The reader is then brought forward in time, returning to the images of James holding the belt, standing over young Edwin, about to strike, when Edwin’s mother (wearing the stone amulet) steps in and guides his hand down. Images of Edwin’s parents consoling each other and conversing; Edwin’s mother saying “you need to deal with the demons that haunt you before you can be a father to him. You need to heal yourself. You need to forgive yourself. Promise me you will James—for his sake…for all of us”; Edwin’s father saying “Goodbye, my son” and saying to Edwin’s mother “I promise you, Lauren” (7)—solidifying *The Pact*.

The reader is then brought forward to “present day” where Edwin and his father slowly begin to work through their issues and start down a path of reconciliation:

James: I’m sorry Edwin. I thought by leaving I could become a better husband, a better

father. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to make things worse. […] I used to let the past define me. In so many ways I let the school, those people in it, take away my life, just like they wanted to. But I’ve been trying so hard to be good enough for you, to let that all go (8-9);

Edwin: Yeah, I’m sorry, too. […] I remember when you were my dad. Now those

memories are like a reflection in a broken mirror. I grew up without a Dad (8-9).

Stepping back in time, James recalls how the guilt, pain and loss followed him through his young adult life, swallowing him in depression and causing rifts between all those he cared about; vivid images make it clear to the reader that James could not let go and how the guilt engulfed his entire existence. Through the graphics the reader can see and feel the gravity of his sorrow and hopelessness—like watching a film unfold, James is depicted repetitively trying to drown his pain with alcohol in close-ups, deep focus and wide shots. James recounts how he tried to be a good father; how Edwin’s birth had made him feel “hope” for the first time but the pain would not go away and so he left in hopes that he could become a better person and one day come back to him as a better father:

…all the years on this path to try and be better for you. You were my reason for continuing on […] I kept you both as close as I could, everywhere. So I would never forget the pact and the hope it gave me to be with you again. Then the hope was almost stripped away. I visited you that night. You were pale and cold. You were in a place I knew all too well. The white…the white of the sheets, of the walls…like a blizzard. Like there was no beginning and no end. I thought I’d almost done it again, Edwin. Left you when I should have been there for you, always. I don’t want to be away from you again. I want to be home.” (20-24).

But Edwin, not quite ready to forgive, replies: “You know what? I have wanted something so bad for so many years. I wanted a father. You can’t magically become that again. Not so quickly” (24). Throughout the narration, the reader is taken back to Edwin’s attempted suicide; images of James by Edwin’s hospital bed; the lifeless figure of Thomas floating in the snow above them. The pain had followed James through his life and, in turn, affected Edwin’s life—the trauma of the past being passed on from generation to generation. Edwin’s mother, as the mediator in the reconciliation, reminds James that “this is so fast for him […] you need to give him some time” (25) and then reminding Edwin that “He loves you […] you have to know that. Maybe this is a journey you have to take together. Forgiveness is powerful. He needs it for himself, and he needs it from you, when you’re ready” (26). A week later, James reaches out again and the novel comes to a close with powerful imagery, symbolic images and some extremely meaningful messages; first, from James, who tells his son:

 We all get scared, son. There is always a way out. You just have to find the path. […] One of the things that helped me was coming to know our ways again, finding those things I’d lost when I was young. Those parts of us help to make us whole, son. They’re pieces of who we are. I’m no hero. I can’t swoop down and save you. Hell, it’s taken me this long to get where I am, back to you, and able to forgive myself. You don’t need me to save you. You need to save yourself…and I know you’re strong, son. These are steps in your walk, to help you along your way. All our ancestors live within you, our ways and our history. […] The elders say what was done to us will touch us for 7 generations. So, too, the healing we do now will mend our people over that time. What happened to you doesn’t define you. You define you. We are not our yesterday. We are our today, our tomorrow (27-28).

And then from Edwin, who, holding out the symbolic stone amulet, tells his father:

 Dad…this was yours once. When mom gave it to me, she told me it had the power to heal, to help me on my journey. I want you to have this as you continue your journey. So you can heal, so you can keep the pact. Because I forgive you. But your walk…this is yours. I’m going to find my own (28-29).

These final words, with a graphic of Edwin setting out along the river to walk his own path, bring the series to a close. Through a combination of powerful text and images, Robertson tells his young adult readers an important story that touches many indigenous families; he shows his young adult readers that there is hope for the future and that reconciliation is possible through forgiveness and respect—of one’s self and one’s past.

7 Generations and its Censors: Cultural Hegemony, Power and the Status Quo

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.” However, this does not negate the fact that the books were censored in the first place. “Censorship clarifies what is and isn’t legitimate in a culture, leading to further debate about worth and often transforming the original standards” (Kidd, 198), thus the reasons behind this attempt to censor require further investigation.

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; this criticism is strictly based on the confines of the adult censor’s understanding of what is too “sensitive” for young adults. The School Board was implying that youth grades nine through twelve needed “protection” from the ideas held within Robertson’s graphic novels; and yet the majority of the subject matter contained in them can be found in any high school Canadian history book and the school curriculum covers the period of contact, the small pox epidemic, and the 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 graphic imagery and the narrative references to contemporary socio-cultural issues that is concerning—that is, targeting “impressionable” youth readers with themes of youth depression and suicide was what came under censorship; an issue for which the School Board wanted to protect its young adults from and for whom was uncomfortable discussing (perhaps because one of the past atrocities detailed by Robertson occurred in a Canadian educational institution). Under the guise of protection, the Board was attempting to establish a level of ideological control while maintaining the status quo. Miller (2014) argues that:

…in the context of the culture wars, public education is not a ‘neutral process of imparting knowledge and technical skills’ but rather a ‘primary institutional means of reproducing community and national identity for succeeding generations […] These narratives are constructed and policed by the dominant members of a national group, which discloses how nationality is both performative and culturally inscribed, as the process of storytelling relies on repetition in order to entrench an image of the nation-state as “truth”[…] the scandals related to literature for children are firmly entrenched in arguments about the nation […] a battle ‘to define reality,’ a contest for the ‘symbolic territory’ that orders and shapes lives and identities (131-132).

Therefore, 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 or the nation-state and was not what they wanted reflected back unto them—thus they needed to “control” the situation through censorship.

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/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.

Going Forward

Indigenous silence has perpetuated the hate and hurt of cultural hegemony and it has created generational trauma that continues to plague contemporary indigenous peoples today; attempting to silence the discussion through censorship will only exacerbate—not alleviate—the situation. Indigenous and non-indigenous societies must start talking about these issues and Robertson’s graphic novels are a great place for young adults to begin those difficult conversations with their trusted adults—whether in the home, the classroom and/or 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 young adults should be able to freely access and engage with in conjunction to other sources of knowledge and information—both historical and contemporary. If young adults are limited in what they read—if they, alongside the adults in their lives, do not explore critical views—they are limited in their growth; in their ability to define themselves, their culture and their role within the world. Literature can provide children with a wealth of experiences because it is their own to decipher and interpret. Rather than censoring literature, adults should be encouraging children and youth to read a variety of literature while helping them to understand their experiences with it; being overly cautious about what children and young adults read can lead to narrowed knowledge and limited experiences; being open and honest allows them to grow and helps them flourish into well-rounded adults going forward.

Annotated Works Cited

“An Anonymous Memorandum on Colonization,” (“L’envoy et l’Estabilissement des Colonies),

1663. In Cornelius J. Jaenen ed. *The French Regime in the Upper Country of Canada during the Seventeenth Century*. Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1996, pp. 34-37.

An analysis of the narrative and rhetoric of the “Memorandum” highlights

euro-centric ideas of superiority/inferiority, civilized/savage, and us/them; as a people belonging to a society with a set culture and religion—and this significantly affected their belief system (their norms, values and ideals) and their actions to control Amerindian societies, culture, spirituality, and *place.*

Benton, Michael. “Readers, Texts, Contexts: Reader-Response Criticism.” *Understanding*

*Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 81-99.

 Benton highlights the complex relationships that exist between readers, text, other

texts, other genres, and the cultural context of any reading underpins the reader’s understanding of the children’s book being read; he argues that the implied reader and the response of the child reader during the process of reading is framed in cultural contexts; and that the implied reader and intertextuality become how the reader makes meaning—all highly important to an analysis and an understanding of Robertson’s graphic novels.

Derworiz, Colette. “Boards ‘Not Recommended’ Book List Angers Award-Winning Indigenous

Author.” *The Canadian Press*. (Edmonton) September 25, 2018, pp. 1-5. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-public-school-book-list-review-indigenous-1.4837289

 This new article provided information on the censorship attempt—the

“scandal”—surrounding David Robertson’s *7 Generations* series; Robertson’s interview and point of view was used to shape the analysis.

Jaenen, Cornelius. “Problems of Assimilation in New France, 1603-1645.” *French Historical*

*Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, Spring 1966, pp. 265-289.

Cornelius J. Janean, prominent history scholar who has written numerous books and articles on the subject of colonization and assimilation, provided added historic background information in support of white-settler ideology and indigenous culture.

Kidd, Kenneth. “‘Not Censorship but Selection’: Censorship and/as Prizing.” *Children’s*

*Literature in Education*, vol 40, no 3, Feb 2008, pp. 197-216, doi: 10.1007/s10583-008-9078-4.

 Kidd’s essay is important as it draws attention to the history, complexity and

significance of censorship; how censorship is context specific and has socio-cultural and socio-political roots; how censorship, as a means of selection, is part of legitimizing what is and is not appropriate for a culture.

Lesnik-Oberstein, Karin. “Essentials: What is Children’s Literature? What is Childhood?”

*Understanding Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 15-29.

 Lesnik-Oberstein’s article is significant to an understanding of any study of

children’s literature; she breaks down children’s literature into three parts—the literature, the children and the adult critics—and she reviews the complexities and range of positions that can be taken in the search for working definitions of each; helping to assist in the analysis of Robertson’s novels and in bettering an understanding of the censorship they came under.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest

Schoepf. New York: Basic Books, 1963.

 Strauss, as an anthropologist, discusses how structuralism draws on semiotics to

explore visual codes that operate in texts and by which meaning is constructed; he related structural elements in myths to structural elements in society, which can be used as a tool of ideological critique, allowing parallels to be drawn between ideological structures in texts/images and those in society at large; important for an analysis of the indigenous mythology, representation, symbolism and identity in Robertson’s *7 Generation* series.

McCallum, Robyn. “Very Advanced Texts: Metafictions and Experimental Work.”

*Understanding Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 138-151.

 McCallum discusses historiographic metafiction, which refers to novels which

self-reflexively mix fictive and historical modes of representation so as to pose questions about the relationships between fiction, history and reality. Alexander Robertson uses historiographic metafiction in his 7 Generation graphic novels and thus McCallum’s article assisted the analysis of them.

Miller, Alyson. “Unsuited to Age Group: The Scandals of Children’s Literature.” *College*

*Literature: A Journal of Critical Literature Studies*, vol 41, no 2, Spring 2014, pp. 120-140, doi: 10.1353/lit.2014.0025.

 Miller contextualizes what is at stake in public debates over children’s literature

and draws attention to the fear that censors hold with regard to the “impressionable” child; she highlights how literature aimed at children tends to be monitored by the church and schools because of its perceived ability to inform, socialize and effect character development; and how scandals about children’s literature ultimately reveal anxieties about the intimate connection between children, identity, and literature and the centrality of language in determining notions of both self and “other.”

Nodelman, Perry. “Decoding the Images: Illustration and Picture Books.” *Understanding*

*Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 69-82.

Nodelman provides an in-depth analysis of the complexity of picture books and explores, through semiology, how images and the combination of text/image can be powerful in sending messages to children through children’s literature; he draws importance to putting the book and its images in context and decoding its ideological underpinnings.

Robertson, David A. *7 Generations: Stone*. Illus. Scott Henderson. Winnipeg: HighWater

Press, 2010.

*7 Generations: Scars*. Illus. Scott Henderson. Winnipeg: HighWater Press, 2010.

*7 Generations: Ends/Begins*. Illus. Scott Henderson. Winnipeg: HighWater Press, 2010.

*7 Generations: The Pact*. Illus. Scott Henderson. Winnipeg: HighWater Press, 2011.

Sarland, Charles. “The Impossibility of Innocence: Ideology, Politics, and Children’s

Literature.” *Understanding Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 39-55.

 Sarland’s article provides an in-depth overview of ideology and how it pertains to

and affects children’s literature; he explores ideological power struggles and how the “imbalance of power” between adult writers and child readers further complicates the reading of children’s literature.

Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart, 1954.

Wertham’s work as psychiatrist and author in the 1950’s contributed to the idea that graphic literature was “dangerous” and has played an important part in the idea that such literature should be censored to protect children from delinquency.

Watkins, Tony. “The Setting of Children’s Literature: History and Culture.” *Understanding*

*Children’s Literature*, edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 30-38.

 Watkins article discusses new historicism and cultural studies, for which

Robertson draws upon in his novels and for which I used perform my analysis. Watkins explores how these new concepts of history and culture have implications for children’s literature, enabling it to become part of the broad, “ideologically aware field of cultural studies.”

Welton, Michael. “Cunning Pedagogics: The Encounter Between the Jesuit Missionaries and

Amerindians in 17th Century New France.” *Adult Education Quarterly*, vol. 55, no. 2, February 2005, pp. 101-115.

Michael Welton provides further valuable insights into the “inner workings of the ‘colonial imagination’ that believes that the objects of instruction have everything to learn and nothing of value to teach” and he argued that “educational leaders gradually produced Euro-Catholic subjectivities in their learners”; he also highlights the “pedagogical methods and techniques used to undermine the indigenous belief and action system.

Wilkie, Christine. “Relating Texts: Intertextuality.” *Understanding Children’s Literature*,

edited by Peter Hunt. First published by Rutledge, 1999. Republished in Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002, pp. 130-137.

Wilkie focuses on intertextuality and her article makes it clear that no text means in isolation; she argues that texts can only have meaning because they depend on other texts—a total knowledge—from other books, from language in use, and the socio-cultural context and conditions which make meanings possible in groups and communities; further arguing that not only are all texts inter-textual, but become so because they are products of linguistic, cultural and literary practices—and so too are readers and writers.

Young, Arthur P. “Banish the Books: Horatio Alger Jr., the Censors, the Libraries, and the

Readers, 1870-1910. *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, vol 38, no 4, Winter 2013, pp. 420-434, doi: http://doi.org/10.1353/chq.2013.0058.

Young’s article allows one to see how censorship arises out of ideology and how the roles of key players shift and play out according to whether they are for or against the dominant ideology. The article enriches an understanding of what censorship involves and what is (and always has been) at its roots—that overarching concern or fear that literature can/might/will influence the minds and actions of young readers and therefore have a negative impact on social and cultural norms, values, and belief systems.