



Blue Saltwater

Dan Green

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The forced assimilation of Native Americans into white culture is one of the most horrific acts in the history of the Americas. As settlers came from Europe, Native people were brutalized in a multitude of ways. Europeans brought disease and legitimized theft. They also arrived with their own culture and Christian morality that often translated into a mandate to “civilize” native people. This was true in both North and South America. In Canada, one manifestation of forced assimilation was the Indian Residential School System, which started sometime in the seventeenth century, and did not officially end until the late twentieth century.

In *Blue Saltwater*, Dan Green tells the story of a young man named Blue. When he is sixteen, Blue’s family dies in a fire and he is left with no home, no money, and no extended family. His mother was close to a local priest named Joe Murphy. Joe wants to help the boy but is convinced to take Blue to the St. Ignatius Residential School for Boys. The school is terrible, however, and Blue is left in a facility where physical, mental, and sexual abuse are part of everyday life. Though Blue is eventually able to escape the school, he has nowhere to go, and no one to ask for help. His life spirals down into a world of crime and addiction. It takes another major tragedy, and a chance encounter with Joe, to turn Blue’s life around.

Green is a skillfully articulate writer. His lead character is painfully realistic, and the story is beautifully told from beginning to end. Despite all of this, or maybe because of it, the book is extremely difficult to read. The violence and cruelty that Blue suffers, at the hands of those who should be taking care of him, is devastating. The author writes of children tortured for speaking their native language, of humiliations heaped on innocent boys because of the color of their skin, and of sexual predators hiding behind religious authority. The book is full of pain.

There is also something more, however, and that something makes this book worth reading—the hope that even the worst suffering can be a vehicle for miracles. Joe says, “A miracle isn’t like some magic thing that just happens. It’s more like a gradual unfolding, like a rose bud that slowly opens its petals to the sunshine, something that you only really appreciate when it has fully blossomed and expressed itself.”

Joe tries to do his best by Blue, and even though his best is not always good enough, on more than one occasion he manages to help the boy recover from major tragedy. Blue’s life is horrific and tragic, but through the miracle of one man trying to care for another, Blue’s life is not without hope. Though the book is full of human cruelty, the reader will also come away with a sense of hope.

CATHERINE THURESON (November 19, 2010)

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