



Wawahte: Indian Residential Schools

Robert P. Wells

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Wells tells a haunting tale of three Canadian Indians and abuse during their forced schooling in government institutions.

In *Wawahte*, Robert P. Wells sets out to tell the story of Canada's First Nation children who were taken from their homes and their parents by the Canadian government and installed in Indian residential schools. For more than one hundred years, from 1883 to 1996, generations of children were subjected to physical, verbal, and sexual abuse; racism; and denigration in these institutions, and were punished for speaking their native languages or practicing their beliefs. As told to Wells by three Indian residential school survivors, these haunting narratives are a familiar but gripping story of Western imperial dominance. While the writing is unpolished the accounts are nonetheless harrowing and important.

In a brief prologue, Wells introduces himself as a native of the woods of Ontario who never understood what might make his childhood First Nation friends any less than their white counterparts. The bulk of *Wawahte* is written in first person, as told by three individuals: Esther recalls a happy childhood with her family, followed by years of physical and sexual abuse at a residential school; Bunnie remembers the nuns who raised her as being kind and caring, but is wounded by abandonment by her parents and the subsequent loss of the culture that was her birthright; and Stanley had a mixed experience but proudly recounts his participation, as an adult, in cultural renewal.

Wells successfully executes the three different voices of his three narrators. These first-person chronicles demand emotional investment and point out relevant practical issues as well, such as the different learning styles of diverse cultures. Wells follows these narratives with discussion of the history of Indian residential schools as one part of the Canadian government's consistent and concerted policy to eradicate First Nation peoples and cultures. Appendices list schools and include apology speeches from the government and churches involved. The second half of Stanley's story, and to a lesser extent Wells's wrap-up analysis, quickly becomes repetitive and periphrastic, but heartfelt poignancy mitigates these meanderings.

The writing can be charming, as in Esther's lovely metaphor of quilting, but is often awkward. Possibly, Wells is simply being faithful to the voice of those telling their stories, but clumsy syntax is distracting enough to call for some cleanup for the sake of clarity and reading ease. Time lines are occasionally confused; there are conflicting details indicating how long Esther spends in school. Punctuation and word usage are also problematic, and while Wells's sources are carefully noted and generally reliable, one reference to *Wikipedia* detracts from the evidence of his research skills.

But there are unique redeeming details. Esther adopts an original practice in her section: words in her native Cree tongue are followed in parentheses by the English translation, and then by a blank, in which she instructs the reader to fill in the same term in his or her own native tongue. If we don't know it, she counsels, we should learn. This form of reader participation brings home something of Esther's message about cultural heritage and makes her a more complex narrator.

In the end, despite missed opportunities for more stringent editing, the stories of Esther, Bunnie, and Stanley speak for themselves. A slim book, *Wawahte* is absolutely worthwhile for those interested in the subject, especially considering the continuing cultural import of the historical events it relates.

JULIA JENKINS (August 27, 2014)

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