

THE POWER OF STORY

David Alexander Robertson is a member of Norway House Cree Nation in northern Manitoba, and currently lives in Winnipeg. He uses his gift of writing to entertain, inspire, and educate all Canadians about Indigenous history and current issues in Canada. Dave has written a variety of books, from novels to graphic novels to picture books. He travels across Canada to teach students and adults about what they can do to support reconciliation.



What were residential schools?

Dave: In Canada, the Residential School System started in the late 1800s. The schools were created for First Nations children in order to change their identity. The Canadian government and the Church thought they knew a better way for First Nations children to live and be. We know now that this was wrong, and that we are all just the way we are supposed to be. It makes us feel powerful when we act like ourselves.

Did anyone in your family attend a residential school?

Dave: Yes. My grandmother lived in God's Lake First Nation, but attended residential school in Norway House First Nation. She ended up living there. That's why my dad was born and raised in the community. My dad attended a day school that was the same in a lot of ways. He wasn't allowed to speak Cree at school. He would go into the bush with his friends so they could speak Cree to each other.

What impact has residential school had on you and your family?

Dave: One of the reasons why my dad never taught me to speak Cree was because of the way the Residential School System affected my grandmother and my dad. As an

adult, I am just starting to learn some words. My kids are, too. It has also been important for me to reconnect with my culture and community. This was something else I didn't have when I was younger because of the impact of the schools. I feel very strong in who I am now, but that healing has taken a long time.

Why did you decide to write a book about this topic?

Dave: I think it's important for all Canadians to know the history of the Residential School System. It's something that we can teach younger kids, too, if we do it in a good way. In fact, I think the history needs to be introduced at a very young age. Kids can be powerful teachers, when we give them knowledge. Stories are the best way to give kids knowledge. If kids grow up teaching others, it makes me feel excited about the future.



When We Were Alone

Dave is a firm believer that all children can and should learn about Canada's history if we are going to move forward together as a country. *When We Were Alone* was written to teach children about residential schools in an age-appropriate way.

"But sometimes in the summer, when we were alone, and our teachers weren't anywhere around the place we were, we would whisper to each other in Cree. We would say all the words we weren't allowed to say so that we wouldn't forget them. And this made us happy."

—from *When We Were Alone*

What made you decide to do a picture book for children?

Dave: Picture books are engaging. They help kids to connect more with stories. When we connect with stories, we learn more from them. I was lucky to work with Julie Flett on this book. She is a beautiful artist, and her work in *When We Were Alone* made the book as good as it is. Kids have learned a lot from it.

What does learning about residential schools have to do with reconciliation?

Dave: Everything. Knowing and understanding the residential school history in this country helps us to understand the impact the system has had on Indigenous Peoples. This impact has been on individuals, families, and communities. It also helps us to understand what our role is in reconciliation. Because everybody has a part. If we learn about the history, and understand its impacts, then we are ready to do our part.

Why is learning about this important for all Canadians?

Dave: I think it's important because it involves everybody. Even if you are not Indigenous, you are still impacted by that history. It might be somebody you see that you can support, or a view that you have on somebody that would improve if you understand what they have been through. If we really want to heal a relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, then everybody has to be involved. We can only do it in a good way if everybody learns the history.

Think About It!

How does listening to others' stories help with reconciliation?

Why did you include some Cree words in your book?

Dave: Indigenous kids feel powerful when they see an Indigenous language in a book. I want Indigenous kids to feel important, and that they matter. I have seen Indigenous kids, including my own daughter, want to learn the language after reading the book. These are incredible moments of healing. I think it's important, too, for non-Indigenous children to learn some of the language. I think that it helps us to understand each other better, and to connect better.

Stats

- ▶ More than 150 000 First Nations, Inuit, and Métis students attended residential schools for more than 100 years
- ▶ 139 residential schools across Canada (from start to finish)
- ▶ 6000 students died at residential schools
- ▶ 80 000 former students still living today

Source: Truth and Reconciliation Commission Interim Report, 2012