

## From the Ashes – Book Study

***From the Ashes: My story of being Metis, Homeless, and finding my way*** by Jesse Thistle was the winner of the 2020 Kobo Emerging Writers' Prize for non fiction and will be featured on Canada Reads (CBC Radio 1) between July 20<sup>th</sup> and July 23<sup>rd</sup> this summer. It will be defended by Canadian country music star George Canyon.

Described as “heart wrenching and heart warming” (CBC Books) this memoir is “an eloquent exploration of the impact of prejudice and racism . . . in the end, about how love and support can help us find happiness despite the odds” ([www.chapter.indigo.ca](http://www.chapter.indigo.ca)). Jesse Thistle chronicles his previous struggles with addiction and homelessness and his journey to becoming an assistant professor and Ph.D candidate at York University (<https://jessethistle.com/about/>).

We hope that the following questions might be useful as you read alone or as part of a reading group. If you would be interested in a Zoom reading group with members of the Manitou Intentional Learning Community please contact [gillian.schell@sympatico.ca](mailto:gillian.schell@sympatico.ca).

- In many ways Jesse’s story is about a search for identity. At the end of the first section, Lost and Alone, Jesse speaks of “the resentments that had taken root” and states: “I felt torn between wanting to be Indian and wanting to hide in my lie [his claim to be Italian]”. Reflect on the ways in which Jesse’s childhood experiences impacted his early sense of his identity and on the key people and events that lead him to embrace and become proud of his Metis identity.
- In an interview with CBC radio Jesse comments: “If you look through the book, you'll see flashes of light every time I was traumatized.” Reflect on some of these “flashes of light” and the impact they had on Jesse.
- Speaking about homelessness, Jesse states: “The Canadian definition of homelessness is about not having a house to live in. I realized that it was more about a dispossession from something called ‘all my relations’ which is an indigenous world view where everything is interrelated, interconnected.” (From Street to Scholar). How did you respond to Thistle’s depictions of homelessness? What new insights did you gain? Think about the things which enabled him to move out of homelessness. Will anything you learned make you think or behave differently when you see people living on the streets of your community?
- The Metis are often referred to as “Canada’s forgotten people” (<https://indigenouspeoplesatlasofcanada.ca/article/metis-today/>) In what ways is this depicted in this memoir? Are there ways in which Jesse is a “forgotten” person? If so, does this change and how?
- “What was I doing here in jail anyway? Why had I put myself in the midst of this filth, this horrible violence? The answer was simple. I did it to save my leg — and my life.” Reflect on Jesse’s experience of the criminal justice and penal system. What made you sad? Angry? Did you find any hope?
- Speaking about his experiences, Jesse states, “It [homelessness and criminality] wasn’t because I was just making bad choices. I was traumatized and I was trying my best to survive” reflect on

some of the specific events that illustrate this. Jesse also claims that “You have to give people a second chance.” How does this memoir illustrate the importance of second chances?

- Re-read the dedication and reflect on the ways in which this memoir “speaks of the damage colonialism can do to Indigenous people”. Think specifically about residential schools, the 60’s scoop, and broken treaties. The United Church is committed to journeying towards reconciliation. How has reading this book impacted your understanding of the need for and the challenges of reconciliation? What actions can we as individuals and communities of faith take?
- In a recent statement Rev. Douglas Walfall stated: “It is past time for dismantling the systemic racism found in the very fiber and fabric of our society” (Dear White People). Reflect on experiences of systemic and personal racism depicted in this memoir. How has your reading changed your understanding of racism and its impact on individuals and communities? What can we as individuals and communities do to begin to “dismantle” racism?
- Reflect on the final words of the book: “. . . the pain in my foot has been a blessing, and I value each and every step I take. Every step is a gift, every one is sacred, and each in its own way, is a prayer for me.”

#### **You might also find these resources helpful:**

Jesse Thistle overcame homelessness, addiction and trauma — and wrote a book to inspire others to do the same <https://www.cbc.ca/books/how-jesse-thistle-survived-addiction-homelessness-and-incarceration-and-became-a-canada-reads-finalist-1.5293752>

From Street to Scholar <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/rethinking-housing-from-an-indigenous-perspective-1.4372047/from-street-to-scholar-jesse-thistle-creates-new-definition-of-indigenous-homelessness-1.4376118>

United Church of Canada Reconciliation and Indigenous Justice <https://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/reconciliation-and-indigenous-justice>

Rev. Dr. Paul Douglas Walfall calls on White people in the church to put their love into action to counteract racism. <https://www.united-church.ca/blogs/round-table/dear-white-people>

United Against Racism Worship Service, June 14, 2020.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHJYOdEPK2w> HYPERLINK

"<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHJYOdEPK2w&feature=youtu.be>" & HYPERLINK

"<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHJYOdEPK2w&feature=youtu.be>"feature=youtu.be

Indigenous Ally Toolkit [https://gallery.mailchimp.com/86d28ccd43d4be0cfc11c71a1/files/102bf040-e221-4953-a9ef-9f0c5efc3458/Ally\\_email.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/86d28ccd43d4be0cfc11c71a1/files/102bf040-e221-4953-a9ef-9f0c5efc3458/Ally_email.pdf) (Although the term “ally” is controversial, there are some excellent ideas here.

#### **Additional Reading**

Study guides for the following books are available on the MILC website  
<http://www.manitoulearningcommunity.com/>

*Speaking my Truth: Reflections on Reconciliation and Residential School* selected by Shelagh Rogers, Mike Degagne, Jonathan Dewar and Glen Lowry.

*Children of the Broken Treaty: Canada's Lost Promise and One Girl's Dream* is a book by Charlie Angus published in 2015.

*Indian Horse* by Richard Wagamese

*Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Waabgeshig Rice

**Also check out:**

[One Drum: Stories and Ceremonies for a Planet](https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/one-drum-stories-and-ceremonies/9781771622295-item.html) [HYPERLINK "https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/one-drum-stories-and-ceremonies/9781771622295-item.html"](https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/one-drum-stories-and-ceremonies/9781771622295-item.html) by Richard [HYPERLINK "https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/one-drum-stories-and-ceremonies/9781771622295-item.html"](https://www.chapters.indigo.ca/en-ca/books/one-drum-stories-and-ceremonies/9781771622295-item.html) Wagamese - a manuscript he was working on at the time of his death in 2017 – “*One Drum* welcomes readers to unite in ceremony to heal themselves and bring harmony to their lives and communities” (Chapters.Indigo.com).

*The Other Side of the River: From Church Pew to Sweat Lodge* by Alf Dumont. Dumont, from Shawanaga, shares stories of building bridges between these worlds and challenges the church to re-examine the theology behind its past decisions around residential schools, so that it might live out the words of its apologies.