

The Residential School Experience Through the Eyes of Indigenous Children's Authors

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Abstract

Storytelling is a way that many Indigenous peoples pass on history, traditions, knowledge, and wisdom from one generation to another (Dumas, 2013). Indigenous authors use storytelling to share contemporary knowledge with young people as well. Nowhere is this more apparent than in how Indigenous peoples are telling the story of the residential schools in children's literature.

The purpose of this study is to identify children's books (PreK-12) authored by Indigenous peoples in Canada that include content related to the residential school experience, its legacy, and the way forward. Of the over 460 books identified, 152 met the inclusion criteria for the overall study. These were reviewed by one or more of the researchers, who identified and came to consensus on themes relevant to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action and the 10 Principles of Reconciliation. This poster presents selected themes and highlights examples from the subset of books relating specifically to the experience and legacy of residential schools.

Dumas, W. (2013). *Pisim finds her miskanow*. Winnipeg: HighWater Press.

Hair cutting



A black-cloaked nun cut my hair. I felt naked as my braids fell to the floor. Stripped of my warm parka, I was made to wear a thin pinfore and scratchy underwear, with stockings too small to stay above my knees.

Jordan-Fenton, C. & Pokiak-Fenton, M. (2013). *When I was eight*. Vancouver: Annick Press.

Forced labour



They went to mass once each day. That's where they learned how to pray. For half a day they worked, the other half they went to school.

The girls did the cooking, cleaning, knit mittens and scarves, and they laundered and sewed everyone's clothes. The boys learned how to farm, do carpentry and blacksmithing. And three times a day all the children went outside to play in wind, rain, hail or snow.



Campbell, N. (2008). *Shin-Chi's canoe*. Toronto: Groundwood.

Abuse



Robertson, D. (2011). *Sugar falls: a residential school story*. Winnipeg: HighWater Press.

Loss of clothing



But at the school I went to, far away from home, they gave us different clothes to wear. All the children were dressed the same, and our clothes weren't colourful at all. ... They didn't like that we wore such beautiful clothes. ... They wanted us to look like everybody else.

Robertson, D. (2017). *When we were alone*. Winnipeg: HighWater Press.

Humiliation



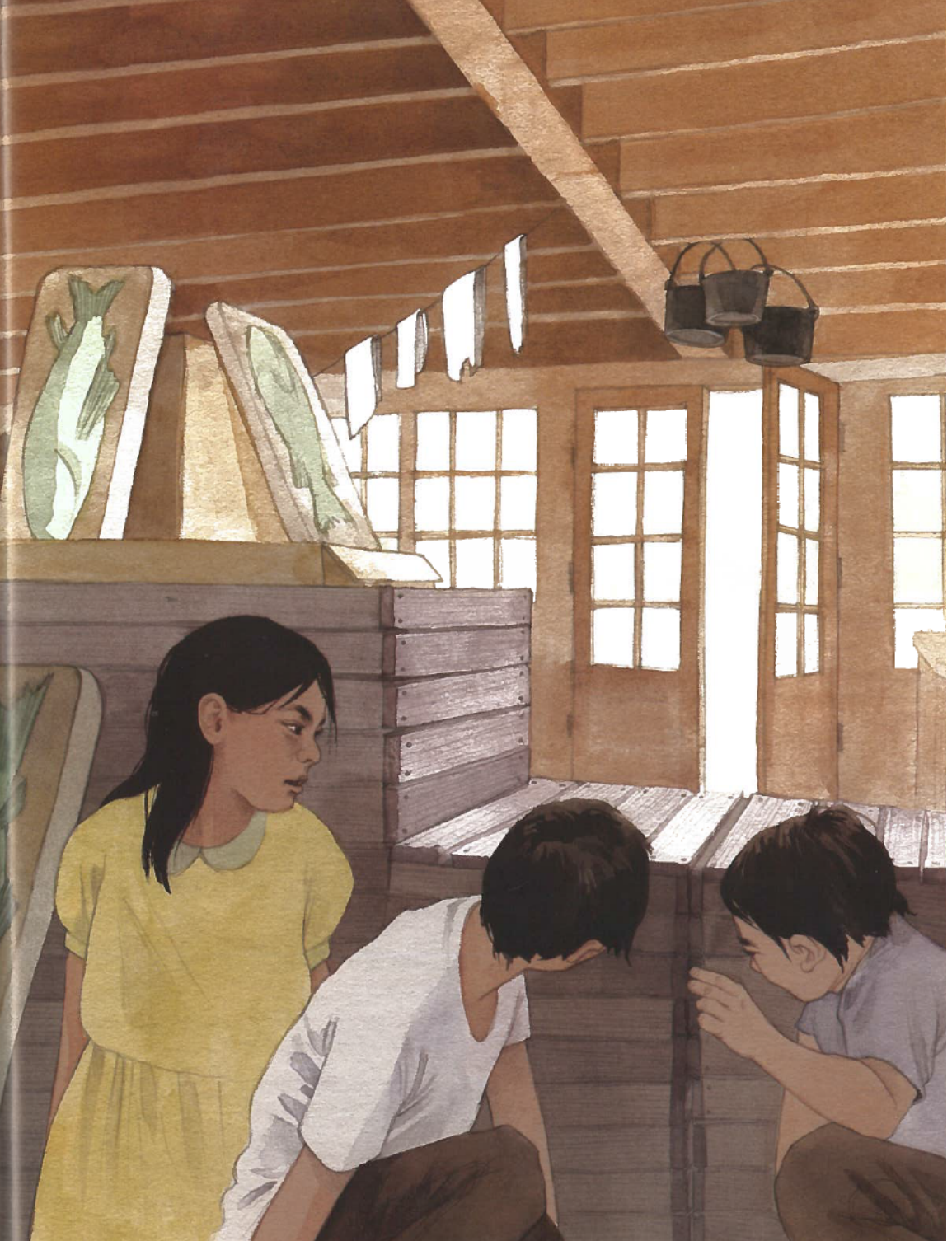
Robertson, D. (2010). *7 generations: A Plains Cree saga*. Winnipeg: HighWater Press.

Death



Robertson, D. (2011). *Sugar falls: a residential school story*. Winnipeg: HighWater Press.

Forced removal from family



Then my loving father – chief of the community, strong and wise – raised himself up to his full height. “Do whatever you want,” he replied in a voice that was low and even. “Call the police. Have me arrested. You will NEVER. TAKE MY CHILDREN. AWAY. AGAIN!”

Dupuis, J. K. & Kacer, K. (2016). *I am not a number*. Winnipeg: Second Story Press.

Separation from siblings in school

But at the school I went to, far away from home, they wouldn't let us be together. My brother and I were separated like day and night. ... They didn't like when we were with family ... because when we were together we thought too much of home.



Robertson, D. (2017). *When we were alone*. Winnipeg: HighWater Press.

Lack of food



For breakfast the children ate porridge and burnt toast. Through the doors they could see their teachers carrying steaming plates of bacon, eggs and potatoes from the farm. For lunch they ate thin soup, and dinner was hard buns with stew. For dinner the teachers had meat, vegetables and corn. The children were never given enough food.

Campbell, N. (2008). *Shin-Chi's canoe*. Toronto: Groundwood.

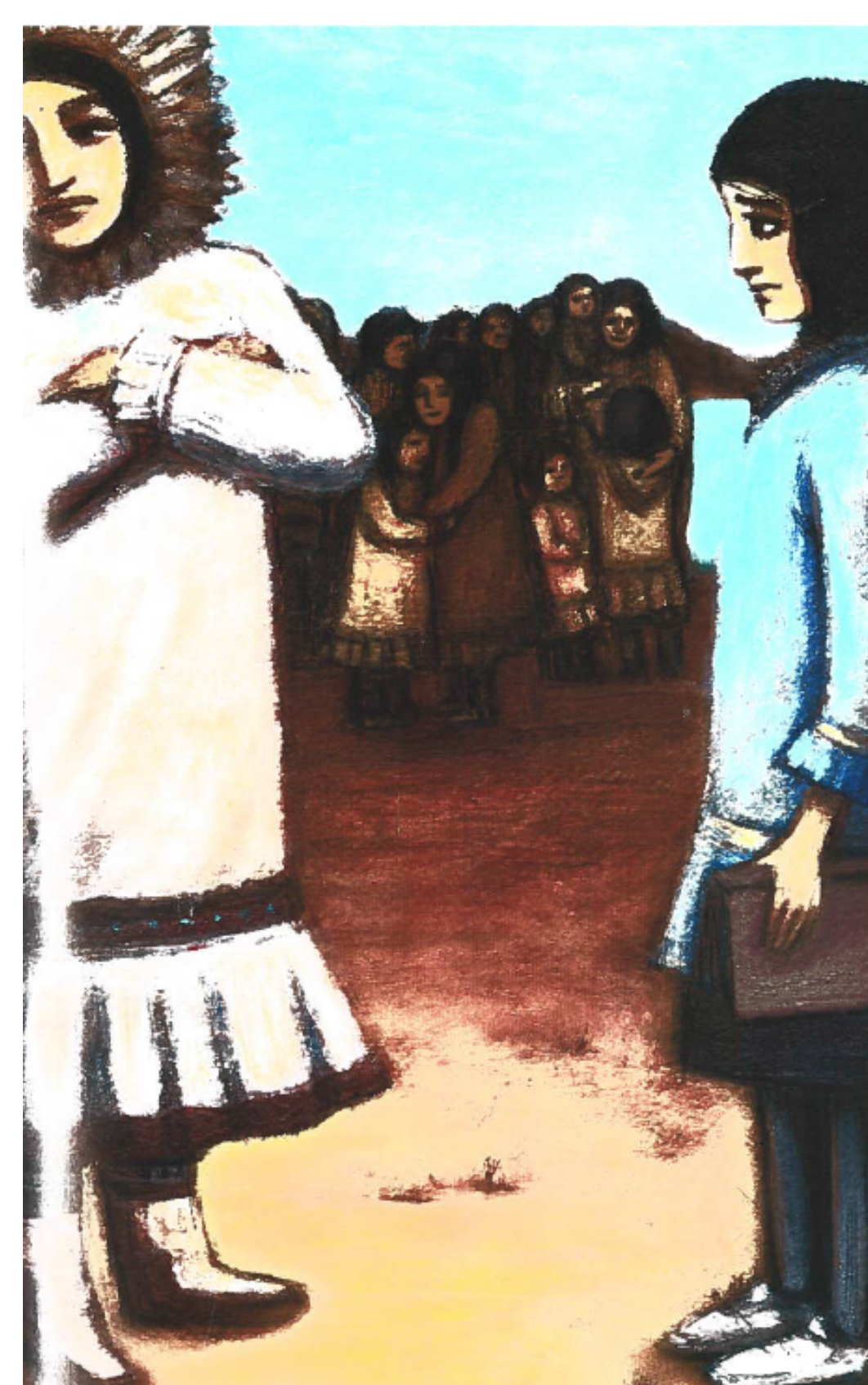
Loss of language



Away to a school that was cold and lonely, where angry white faces raised their voices and their hands when we used our words. ... They took our words and locked them away, punished us until we forgot them, until we sounded like them.

Florence, M. (2017). *Stolen words*. Toronto: Second Story Press.

Reintegration problems



It was all too much: the way my little brother studied me as if I were a strange species of fish that had washed ashore, the way my mother touched the ends of my hair and sobbed that her little girl had turned into an outsider. I no longer belonged to my own family.

Jordan-Fenton, C. & Pokiak-Fenton, M. (2011). *A stranger at home: a true story*. Toronto: Annick Press.

Conclusion

While the residential school experience is unique to each individual survivor, these themes consistently appear in the titles we reviewed. These books tell us that these cruelties were often experienced by children in residential schools across Canada. The books cover a broad age range, and there are more themes than the ones listed here.

We are creating a list to guide users to books that speak to the residential school themes, as well as other identified topics. Additional works from this project examine how the concepts of reconciliation and the way forward are portrayed through children's books.