

## The Reason You Walk: A Memoir

Alyssa Beach

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# Book Review

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## **The Reason You Walk: A Memoir**

By Wab Kinew

Penguin Random House Canada, 2015, 262 pages (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0-670-06934-7

### **Reviewed by:**

Alyssa Beach, Graduate Student, Nipissing University

Wab Kinew's *The Reason You Walk* is a monumental, perspective altering and life changing novel that addresses the many barriers faced between Kinew, a reconnecting Anishinaabe man, and his father, a disconnected Anishinaabe man who was forced away from his culture and to the bottle by residential schools, racism and intergenerational trauma. It is a touchingly beautiful story of how a son and father rekindle their own relationship by reconnecting to their culture, paving new pathways for reconciliation, and breaking intergenerational trauma cycles that plague so many Indigenous men and their male family members today.

*The Reason You Walk* is structured as a shared memoir that details the lives (and legacies) of Kinew and his father, that importantly addresses the many trials, tribulations, struggles and triumphs that many Anishinaabe men increasingly have to endure as the result of intergenerational trauma, abuse, addiction, apathy, etc. Kinew's story offers not only a beacon of hope for Indigenous youth as it celebrates Anishinaabe resilience and success despite the immense amount of hardship endured, but also exists as a cathartic release and retelling of his and his father's life as this is one of the main purposes of Indigenous story telling. In Anishinaabe culture, storytelling is seen as a form of ceremony as Anishinaabe people share many stories, teachings, and happenings in their lives during ceremony in order to let go parts of our spirit that no longer serve us, this is how



Kinew reconnects to his father and his culture is through this exact form of storytelling and ceremony. Through Kinew's retelling, he shows the audience (especially a connected or reconnecting Indigenous audience) what it means to 'walk the red road' (living life according to Indigenous law/protocol) all while providing a necessary pathway forward for reconciliation and healing. In true Anishinaabe storytelling fashion, Kinew allows for the reader to take part in each man's paramount journey as they both come to realize the reasons why they both walk as each story completes the penultimate mosaic of healing, love, reconciliation, and the importance of fathers supporting sons and vice versa no matter the barriers; anything is possible.

The novel is sectioned into three uneven parts, with each section addressing a different stage of their lives: Part 1: Oshkaadizid (Youth); Part 2: Kiizhewaadizid (Living a Life of Love, Kindness, Sharing, and Respect), and Part three: Giwekwaadizid (The End of Life). One of the devices that Kinew uses throughout the novel that may seem like a hinderance or barrier to some is the inclusion and use of the Anishinaabemowin language. While this is a form of reclamation for Indigenous (specifically Anishinaabe) peoples, it can be overwhelming and discouraging for some as Anishinaabemowin can have very long and complex sounding words and sentences. However, upon reading this book as a young scholar and now rereading it again, more connected now to my Anishinaabe culture than ever, the use of Anishinaabemowin made me (the reader) feel more connected than ever to not only Kinew and his father, but to the spirit and ancestors in which Kinew invokes when speaking in his ancestral tongue. Oshkaadizid gives the reader an exclusive insider scoop to what life was like for an Anishinaabe boy who was forced to attend residential school. Kinew is not shy with the gruesome details and ordeals that his father suffered, including unspeakable forms of abuse, rape and even nutritional experiments performed on him and other Indigenous boys at the school. This part of the novel gives context to the barriers Indigenous men face and the consequences that can arise from these barriers such as alcoholism, addiction, and physical violence. This part of the novel is necessary as it acknowledges the atrocities that occurred to Indigenous peoples in residential schools, but it reveals the truth to non-Indigenous readers and starts the conversation of 'How can we do better? What should reconciliation look like?'.

The second section of the novel, is titled "": Kiizhewaadizid" which roughly translates to "living a life of love, kindness, sharing, and respect". Kinew addresses how his father chose to live his life after being diagnosed with stomach cancer. Kinew eloquently retells the journey that his father took in order to become a better father, brother, husband,



friend and spiritual person. Kinew's father reconciled his spirit with his experience at residential school. To do this, Kinew's father went to the Vatican to give an offering of peace and reconciliation to the Pope. During his visit he became close with an archbishop who he later ended up adopting into his tribe and clan as a brother. This beautiful relationship is a perfect example of the ultimate form of reconciliation, to live a life full of love, kindness, sharing and respect. Whether that's sharing of cultures, faith or good medicine, love and kindness are always at the forefront.

The third section is titled "Giiwekwaadizid" which translates to "the end of life". Kinew discusses his father's end of life journey and his legacy, thereafter, addressing the question asked at the beginning of the novel, "What is the reason you walk?" This is an amalgamation of both Kinew's and his father's journeys intersecting and coming full circle when addressing their identities, responsibilities as Indigenous men, resiliency, and reconciliation. Finally, Kinew discusses his children and how they will remember their grandfather's legacy and create legacies of their own that will uplift and strengthen their Indigenous community, especially the males in it.

*The Reason You Walk* offers a compelling exploration of resilience, reconnecting to identity, the importance of maintaining and strengthening male relationships and the need for change in how we educate our Indigenous peoples and how we get non-Indigenous peoples on the same page. Through his use of Indigenous storytelling, Wab Kinew challenges readers to rethink traditional notions of reconciliation, identity and hegemonic masculinity and encourages readers to create more inclusive learning and healing environments for all, and most importantly for Indigenous youth and men. While the focus on two personal and specific stories limits the book's scope, its insights into the intergenerational barriers, trauma, and guidance towards successful reconciliation makes it an extremely valuable resource for all educators, scholars, and leaders, who are seeking to promote meaningful reconciliation, resiliency in Indigenous boys and men, and to provide hope for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike as we recognize and value each other's experiences.

## Reference

Kinew, W. (2015). *The reason you walk*. Random House.