



E nâtamukw miyeyimuwin: Residential School
Recovery Stories of the James Bay Cree

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Press release

For immediate release

March 14, 2023



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Cree Storytellers Share Trauma Recovery Stories in Groundbreaking New Book

CHISASIBI, QC — In *E nâtamukw miyeyimuwin: Residential School Recovery Stories of the James Bay Cree* (Volume 1), a quietly powerful and deeply human new book, twenty-one James Bay Cree storytellers, with award-winning author Ruth DyckFehderau, put a face to Canada's Indian Residential School cultural genocide.

Through intimate personal accounts of trauma, loss, recovery, and joy, this book tells of experiences in the residential schools themselves, in the homes when the children were taken, and on the territory after survivors returned as they and their families worked to recover from their experiences and to live with dignity.

Together, the stories in this book reveal the astonishing courage and strength of children along with the complexity and myriad methods of their oppressors. Illustrated by talented Cree youth and published in an accessible format, these accounts are full of hope, humour, and determination, and provide a valuable contribution to the ongoing efforts to address the legacy of Indian Residential Schooling.

A tough, often funny, and ultimately uplifting book that's not quite like anything else out there.

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For more information on *E nâtamukw miyeyimuwin: Residential School Recovery Stories of the James Bay Cree*, please visit resschoolrecovery.org.

This book is available for purchase from Wilfrid Laurier University Press:
wlupress.wlu.ca/Books/E/E-natamukw-miyeyimuwin

For interview requests, high-resolution visuals, or to obtain a review copy, please reach out to nicole.ritzer@ssss.gouv.qc.ca.

BOOK INFORMATION

Title: E nâtamukw miyeyimuwin: Residential School Recovery Stories of the James Bay Cree (Volume 1)

Format: paperback

ISBN: 978-1-989796-23-8

Publication Date: March 2023

Suggested Retail Price: \$29.99 CAD

Approximately 300 pages

Illustrated by James Bay Cree youth

AUTHOR BIO

This is the second book Ruth DyckFehderau has written with James Bay Cree storytellers. The first, *The Sweet Bloods of Eeyou Istchee: Stories of Diabetes and the James Bay Cree*, received Foreword Indies, IPPY, and International Book awards. It is now in Second Edition, and is undergoing translation into Northern East Cree, Southern East Cree, Ojibwe, and French.

Ruth is an adjunct professor at University of Alberta where she teaches English Lit and Creative Writing. Her novel, *I, Athena*, will be released (NeWest Press) in April 2023. She is hearing impaired.

ruthdyckfehderau.com

Q U O T E S a b O U T t h i s b O O K

“These previously unwritten stories of lived, traumatized experiences are testament to the storytellers’ courage and strength and resilience. When the rich Cree traditional and spiritual relationship with land and with family is harmed by separation, hatred, and fear - a harm resulting in anger and loss of values, identity, and self-worth - these storytellers find ways to heal. Through their stories, you learn about culture as treatment, about the power of forgiveness and love, and about peaceful co-existence in community as essential to healing, belief, and advancing true reconciliation.”

Chief Willie Littlechild, Ermineskin Cree Nation

Former Truth and Reconciliation Commissioner

Former residential school student athlete

Order of Canada; Order of Sport

Member of Sports Halls of Fame, Canada and North America

“My mom was always very quiet about what had happened to her in residential school - I remember the hushed tones between her and her sisters and cousins. And it took a while until I realized, for instance, that she had actually gone to two residential schools. Later, I realized too that my dad had also gone, and that in fact they had been at the same school for a year. That’s where they met and fell in love. My mom spoke of abject loneliness and a deep anger at the injustice of being forbidden, at age ten, to leave school and go home for her father’s funeral. My dad, who got very animated when he spoke of being taken, talked about “duking it out” with a Brother who tried to subjugate him as he shoveled coal into the school’s huge furnace.

“As an Honorary Witness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, I know that the stories of survival in this book are sacred. Though the words are uncomfortable and sad, they are stories we must all stop and hear. We must see beyond the horrors of adults’ cruelty in residential schools to the resilience of our relatives - our cousins. They survived this depravity, they reconciled what came to pass, and they are here to push us further, enriching and strengthening us, in these words. They deserve nothing but respect.

“Soon it will be up to us to remember and re-tell these stories. I take my role as a Witness and re-teller of this residential school story series. I hope you will too.”

Dr. Evan Tesla II Adams, Tla’amin Nation (Coast Salish)

Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Indigenous Services Canada

Actor, *Smoke Signals*

“These Cree stories, told with utmost respect and a feeling of safety, are gifts. They are medicine.”

Joanna Campiou, Woodland/Plains Cree Knowledge Keeper

“This is a difficult but necessary book. There’s a power to truth and to the realities of the Indian Residential School system, but for those wanting to see strength and movement toward hope, this is the book for you. These stories hold that hope close to the heart. What shines through is a love of the land, a love of community, a love of the Cree language, a love of family - exactly what colonial forces like the IRS system tried to destroy but couldn’t.”

Conor Kerr, Metis/Ukrainian author, Avenue of Champions

Giller Prize longlist

Excerpt:

JOHNNY NEEPOSH

Content warning: this story contains descriptions of physical abuse.

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JOHNNY NEEPOSH

JOHNNY spends a lot of time out on the redirected Rupert River where his land used to be. He sits in his boat on the water and thinks about his grandmother, his mother, about how they lived on this land that's now under water. He thinks about things that happened to him when he was a young boy and what they meant. And about his father. He thinks a lot about his father. Memories come easily these days.

"Stop!"

Four-year-old Johnny stopped instantly. He looked down at his feet. His dad's voice had a warning tone but Johnny was standing on the thick ice of the river. Everything looked fine. Confused, he looked over at his father.

"Use your ice chisel to test the ice in front of you."

Johnny pulled his chisel out of his leather sack, then he squatted down and raised his arm high. It was the dead of winter, the ice was hard, and he was little. He would need all of his strength to make a dent. He rammed the chisel down – and it burst right through! His glove was soaked. Another step and he would have gone under the ice.

He sucked in a lungful of cold air and stepped gingerly backwards onto thicker ice. Then he looked at his dad again.

"There and there, about four feet across." His dad gestured along the ice. "In the wintertime, that's where the currents run. They don't run straight. They zig-zag like a creek down the river. Even at thirty below, the ice is thin. It's thick over here though."

Later, back in their cabin, Johnny lay safe in his bed beside his sister and looking up at the baby moss roof. How was it that his father knew exactly where – on that wide, snow-covered river that looked the same all the way across – were the four feet of thin ice? His lungs chilled again when he thought how close he had come.

His father's lessons were always like that. Practical, straightforward, but with something to make you think for a long time.

A few months later, at the end of summer, Johnny and his family were at McLeod Point on Lake Mistassini. Other families were there too. For a few days now, ever since the Indian Agent and RCMP man had visited, the camp had been quiet, somber. Like everyone was waiting for something bad to happen.

"It's here," someone said.

A black machine, the strangest thing Johnny had ever seen, glided out of the clouds, buzzing like an insect, and landed on the water. The side opened. RCMP men with sticks and guns stepped out.

"That's your airplane, Johnny," his dad said. "You're going with those men."

Johnny looked at his dad. "I'm – what?"

"It'll be okay. All the boys here are going. You're going to School."

His voice seemed less certain than usual, but Johnny didn't question him. Instead, he obediently followed the other Cree boys down to the shore and into the belly of the black plane. He sat where the men told him to sit.

The airplane was a World War II bomber, the older boys said, and they pointed to where the bomb workings used to be. The thin metal on which they sat cross-legged was actually the

Johnny Neeposh

bomb-bay door. When the plane took off, Johnny felt the cold air currents right through the door and through his pants. The door was made to open and drop things out. Johnny hugged his knees to his chest and hoped the hinges would hold until the plane landed on Moose River, that he wouldn't burst right through.

Up until then, Johnny's dad had always been right – but Moose Factory Bishop Horden Memorial Indian Residential School was not okay at all. Oh, the classroom stuff was fine. The lessons weren't as practical as his dad's lessons on the land, but they were interesting. It was the other stuff that was not okay. Even now, it's hard to believe how not okay it all was.

On one of the first days there, Johnny approached one of the adults, a supervisor.

"Please sir, I'm hungry," he said. "May I have some bannock?"

He didn't know much English yet, so the sentence had some Cree words.

The supervisor reached around – and gently grabbed Johnny's collar. Then he half-pulled half-carried him around the corner and down the hall to a closet where he pushed him in, along with a bucket for a toilet and nothing to eat or drink, and locked the door. Click.

Two days later, he opened it again. Johnny was so dehydrated that he barely felt his body fall to the floor. The supervisor picked him up and set him on his feet.

"Don't you dare tell anyone about this," he whispered.

Another day, another Cree word, and another supervisor lashed a thick leather strap across his open hand. The impact broke Johnny's little finger. He wasn't allowed to have it set, and it healed permanently broken.

Other days he was made to scrub a toilet or a floor with a toothbrush and then to brush his teeth with that same toothbrush.

Once, Johnny was eating dinner, and he saw a supervisor

pull a leather strap from inside his priest's robe, silently approach a boy from behind, raise it high and, with all his strength, lash it down, across that boy's back. No warning. The air went right out of Johnny. What had the boy done wrong?

After the supervisor had moved on to the next table, the boy beside Johnny leaned over and whispered, "He was eating too slowly."

Johnny came to expect the violence. It might happen because he broke a rule he didn't know about or he said a Cree word – but just as often it happened because a teacher didn't like him. A couple of the teachers really didn't like Johnny.

Once, back home, when Johnny was very young, his dad had spanked him. Johnny had caught a good-sized frog and his sister was standing right there and so he threw it at her. Splat. It had seemed like a fine idea – but his father saw, put him over his knee, and swatted him once.

"Enough!" Johnny's mom said, and his dad's hand stopped mid-air.

Later, Johnny couldn't sit. His mom lowered his pants and looked at his bum. Johnny twisted his head around to see. There was his dad's handprint right across it. She called his father over then.

"Look what you did," she said.

His dad was horrified. "How is that possible? It was a light swat!" he said. "Frustrated people hit harder than they think," she said, "and that's why we never hit kids."

He never hit Johnny again.

But the priests at Bishop Horden Memorial Indian Residential School thought differently. They weren't horrified at what their punishments did. Instead they smiled, as if the scars should be there.

Johnny lived for the summers. In June, the plane flew the schoolboys home again. His dad picked Johnny up at the plane and first thing they all did was paddle up the lake and get right down

Johnny Neeposh

to catching fish. His dad showed him how to catch and clean a fish, and his mom showed him how to smoke it. They hunted game, big and small. With each animal, his dad showed him how to butcher. A muskrat had to be cut up differently than a beaver and a caribou had to be cut up differently yet again. His dad knew anatomy, how the muscles and tendons and ligaments worked. He showed Johnny how they connected to one another and made him name the organs and joints as he worked. Some glands, like those that helped an animal fight infection, had to be cut out right away, within minutes of death, or all the meat would spoil.

And then there were snares. Johnny *hated* the snares. A rabbit caught in a snare could chew through the rope and escape so Johnny's task was to make the rope smell so awful that the rabbit wouldn't go near it, no matter what. The way to do that was to smear the rope, cover it completely, with dog poo. It was poo. It was *disgusting*. Johnny pushed his tongue out and curled his nose. His dad laughed at him then, and picked up a handful of poo himself and helped Johnny to smear it. Even later, when Johnny ate his mother's wonderful rabbit and dumplings, he didn't think it was worth the trouble.

Out there on the land, Johnny and his dad often sat on shore, leaning against a tree, looking out on the sparkling lake. Johnny told him everything about School, holding nothing back. His dad listened. Sometimes he asked questions. Often he was completely silent, his eyes shiny.

"Our language is our lifeblood," he whispered. "Why do they want to take it?"

Then he talked about respect. Every person needed it, even if that person locked you in a closet for speaking Cree. Even if that person didn't respect you. Respect was why the family sometimes attended Church, his father said. He believed the Old Ways himself but he went to Church and sometimes even walked up for altar calls so that the Pentecostals could feel better about themselves, feel respected.

Often he talked about the Chain of the Nation, the ways each generation linked to the next. "If we let it break," he said, "we lose everything." And under reddened cheeks he admitted that if Johnny didn't attend School, the temple of disrespect, the Indian agent would starve them. Flour, sugar, rice, oats, even the powdered eggs Johnny loved, they'd all be taken away. Then his brothers and sisters would have only hunted meat to eat, and, since the agent controlled ammunition, they would soon have not even that. Every spring, they heard about another such family found dead in their tents, starved to death over the long winter. He blamed himself, he said, that he had not yet found a better way.

They talked often. With each conversation, Johnny healed a little more.

And saw that his father was also trapped by the White people.

And then, in August, it was back to the black bomber plane, back to School where things kept getting worse.

One day, early in term, Johnny and a friend tried to run away. They didn't get far before they were caught and brought back.

Every day after that, a priest forced Johnny's feet into a special pair of shoes that were much shorter than his feet and had extra laces down the side. First curling the toes under, the priest carefully wrapped the shoes around Johnny's feet and laced them as tightly as he could. He did the same to Johnny's friend. Then he made the boys stand by the wall in the special shoes for hours and hours. Each day, the priest pushed the toes further under and laced the shoes tighter, and each day Johnny stood there beside his friend as their feet grew more misshapen. At first Johnny's feet hurt more than anything had ever hurt before but, after some time, they went numb and he felt nothing in his feet at all. In front of the priest he didn't cry about it. But he couldn't wait to get home.

In June, just before it was time to leave, a supervisor brought Johnny a paper. If Johnny didn't sign it, he said, he couldn't board

Johnny Neeposh

the plane to go home. Johnny recognized the paper. Some of his friends had signed the same one before a School trip and he had never seen them again. He was desperate to see his parents so he took the pen and signed. Then he clambered onto the black plane – his feet were now too broken to walk up the ramp – and went home.

At home, his parents met the plane. Johnny had never been so happy to see them and couldn't stop laughing. But his father's face, as he watched Johnny hobble down the ramp, leaning on another boy for support, was stone. He walked forward and picked him up, hugged him close, and carried him out to the canoe where his mom sat quietly with wet cheeks.

Off they all paddled, up the lake to catch fish. The trees smelled wonderful. The lake was clear. Fish were jumping and birds flew free. Johnny was home.

Out there, under their tree at the side of the lake, Johnny's father examined his feet. He felt along the bones and ligaments, he twisted the feet this way and that, he pressed up into the arch and under the toes that now grew permanently under the main foot in the direction of the heel. His face was unreadable.

"We can fix this," he finally said. "For now, wear moccasins and begin stretching your feet back. It will hurt. In wintertime, we'll use snowshoes to fix them the rest of the way."

Moccasins made sense – Johnny couldn't wear regular shoes anymore at all. But how was he going to use snowshoes in wintertime? At School? In class? He wondered, but he didn't ask.

Johnny's dad asked more questions then, about the special shoes, about standing for hours, day after day, week after week, about how long it took for the feet to go numb.

"This was very dangerous," he said. "When your feet went numb, the blood circulation to them stopped. In that situation, things can happen in the veins that can kill you. You could have died. Now tell me more about this paper you signed."

Johnny talked about the paper and the kids who didn't come back.

"The Elders said something like this was coming," he said. And then he was quiet.

Things were different that summer. At age 12, Johnny had to learn to walk again, as his feet gradually and painfully took their shape once more. But even so, his parents seemed to be teaching him more than ever how to live on the land by himself, without any help. Here was a wolverine footprint. There was the scat of a skunk. This was how you made a medicine from a certain weasel part and this was what you drank if you were bleeding badly and needed the wound to clot quickly. The flesh of that animal would draw the heat from a burn and the sap from this tree applied to an axe wound could save the limb. After you killed a bear, you had to do this with the skull. That plant could be made into tea, that one should never be touched, and these roots could be eaten raw.

It was so much information, much more than ever before. Sometimes Johnny got bored or overwhelmed by pain in his feet and his mind wandered.

His father was strict. "Listen," he said. "If you don't listen, you'll be like a tied-up dog, walking in circles, always seeing the same things, never knowing more than you know now."

By the end of summer, Johnny's feet had stretched out enough to walk again and, if he was careful, run a little. The family packed up the canoe and paddled out to meet the black plane.

At their campsite, when the plane was still a faraway dot in the sky, coming in to land, Johnny's dad reached into his jacket, and pulled out matches and Johnny's slingshot and handed them over.

"Run," he said. "Into the woods. Hide. Don't come out, no matter what, until you see that airplane fly away. You know enough to live on your own for a few days."

Johnny Neeposh