

# Who Are You, and What's Your Story?

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Stories are what connect all of mankind, both inter- and intra- generationally. Richard Wagamese's *Medicine Walk* and Cherie Dimalines's *The Marrow Thieves* both explore how stories are a vital piece of what makes us who we are. They enable us to be healed, as the stories of our past or of those who came before us can fill gaps in knowledge or even identity. Alternatively, not knowing these essential stories can have detrimental effects on us and prevent us from properly connecting to the world around us. Learning stories about our ancestors can allow us to feel a sense of connectedness to them, and although we might not be living the same way they did, knowing their stories adds an extra sense of interconnected identity to them. Ultimately, by sharing and embracing our own narratives, we are really embracing who we are, who we hope to be, and how we want others to live better than we did.

“It's all we are in the end. Our stories” (Wagamese 103). Think about who you are. Think about the experiences you have been through that have made you the person you are now. Think about the stories your parents or grandparents have shared with you. Would things be different if, for example, you had been raised in a large grey box, eating the same meal without any social interactions? It is safe to say that you would be a completely different person had you not been through all you have been through, both the good and the bad, in your life. In Richard Wagamese's *Medicine Walk*, he shares that stories are the means by which we can heal, help others learn from our mistakes, and connect to our cultural heritage and our ancestors. Likewise, in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, she argues that stories enable us to survive, that there are consequences for losing the stories that make us up, and also how stories can help us connect to both our cultural heritage and our ancestors. In this essay, I will be exploring the compelling narratives in Wagamese's *Medicine Walk* and Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* to see how both authors communicate that the stories that make up our own lives, those people we are close to, and our culture, ultimately create our identity.

In order for an organism to survive, it must be able to heal (Eberl). So it is with our survival that, in order to spiritually and emotionally heal, we must turn to stories. In *The Marrow Thieves*, Dimaline portrays the idea that stories about our history and heritage are used to ensure

the survival of the Indigenous peoples, as the whole world is out to extract their bone marrow so that they can dream again. To illustrate this, the family the book follows frequently hears Story from Miig. The story shared throughout the novel is essentially the history of the world before and after the residential schools, and how history repeats itself in that manner. Learning about this story is essential to the group's survival because if they know that those in the past have survived this all before, they can do it too. An example of how hearing stories impacts our identity is seen when Frenchie learns of Miig's coming-to story, after which he becomes much more serious in his reports to Miig about the settler activity he spied and says to himself that he “misses the innocence of an hour ago when [his] only concern was touching the hand of a girl [he] thought [he] might love” (109). Similarly, in *Medicine Walk*, stories are shared to heal oneself so that others can survive through them. During many of the frequent stops on Frank and Eldon's journey together, Eldon shares stories about his own life that are vital for his son to know. In sharing them, he is able to provide much-needed knowledge for Frank to have in his life as well as give himself a chance to heal from the trauma he has been through (Wagamese). Some examples of the stories that are shared with Frank are about who his mother is, Eldon's relation to the Old Man who raised Frank, why Eldon gave him up as a baby, and how his drinking problems began. By sharing these stories with his son, Eldon is given an opportunity to heal through forming some sort of connection with his son after 16 years of practically being strangers. Eldon was also able to get things off his chest, like confessing to killing his best friend Jimmy, which was needed to free him from his guilt. In addition, learning more about who his father is heals the scars that Frank has developed from their estranged relationship over the years. In addition to the healing and survival that come from knowing and sharing stories, both books delve into how not knowing stories can be harmful. For *The Marrow Thieves*, Miig shares his coming-to story with Frenchie about how he lost his husband to the recruiters from his own home. He relates,

Isaac didn't have memories in his family of the original schools, the ones that pulled themselves up like wooden monsters ... who stayed there, ingesting our children... for over a hundred years. Isaac didn't have grandparents who'd told residential school stories like campfire tales to scare you into acting right.... Stories about a book that was like a vacuum, used to suck the language right out of your lungs. And I didn't have time to share them, not now. (Dimaline 106)

Isaacs's lack of knowledge about residential schools and the horrors within made him a trusting person, who did not believe in the rumours about schools being reinstated or the fact that the people outside were there to take them away. Not knowing the stories of his generational past led to their capture, whereas Miig had a better understanding of the world and its history and, although he was also taken, he at least had his mind in the right place for this situation. He also learned from this experience once he escaped and made it his duty to share that history with the younger generation he cares for and leads so that they do not make the same mistake. Furthermore, in *Medicine Walk*, Eldon shares a story about his own childhood, and how, in order to survive, he had to live and learn by “white man things” (Wagamese 49). In full, he says,

All's I'm tryin' to say is that we never had the time for learnin' about how to get by out here. None of us did. White man things was what we needed to learn if we was gonna eat regular. Indian stuff just kinda got left behind on accounts we were busy gettin' by in that world. (49)

However, having to forgo his own cultural heritage and the knowledge his ancestors carried for generations in order to survive in this white man's world, it could be argued that this was not surviving at all. He didn't live by the standards his ancestors had, which eventually led to making a lot of mistakes in life. This is not going as far as to say that had he been raised with more Indigenous culture, things might have turned out differently, but it appears as though Eldon shares this with his son to compare their lives. Frank knows how to thrive in the bush, whereas Eldon has no idea how and, accordingly, is not as connected as he should be to his ancestors and culture. It is through sharing these stories with his son that Frank is able to connect with his generational past at the end of the book (Wagamese 246).

Indeed, the idea of stories enabling us to connect with our culture and ancestors and having an impact on our Indigenous identity is explicitly conveyed in both books. In the case of *The Marrow Thieves*, near the end of the book, the group comes across a large camp of other Indigenous peoples that have banded together to create their own community (Dimaline 167). This community is a living revival of their culture, with tobacco and sweetgrass being grown, active sweat lodges, music, and traditional dance (168; 190). These are things that none of the younger members of the group had really experienced before and were aspects of culture that were then extended to their personal identity from that point onward as they joined the larger

community. Likewise, in *Medicine Walk*, learning about Eldon's story and his history allowed Frank to finally form an attachment with his ancestors through the bond he made with his father as he passed away (Wagamese 236). Looking down into the valley back at home, he accounts being able to see people riding horses, children waving sticks, and people gathering herbs and berries; his ancestors living as they would have traditionally lived (246). Granted, he had basically learned how to live as they did through the Old Man, who was not Indigenous, but the connection he made to his ancestors through his father's stories allowed that bond to become tangible.

In conclusion, both *Medicine Walk* and *The Marrow Thieves* exhibit the profound impact that stories have on shaping our identities. Those stories are not entertaining tales but are the very threads of identity that are weaved together to create this beautiful tapestry of you and your life. They bind your past with the past of those close to you, and those who came before you. Through these stories, one can learn about how to survive and heal, avoid mistaken choices, and form a connection to our collective past. That being said, as we continue to weave our stories and learn from the stories of others, we must remember the point being shared by the characters in these books; by sharing and embracing our own narratives, we are really embracing who we are, who we hope to be, and how we want others to live better than we did.

## Works Cited

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