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Blood Sports , and: Dream Wheels (review)

Frances W. Kaye

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(Review)

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Eden Robinson. *Blood Sports*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2006. 288 pp. \$21.00 sc.

Richard Wagamese. *Dream Wheels*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2006. 416 pp. \$21.00 sc.

Since 1983 novels by Canadian First Nations and Métis authors have formed a substantial, expanding, and satisfying category. Eden Robinson's second novel, *Blood Sports*, and Richard Wagamese's third novel, *Dream Wheels*, form part of 2006's contribution. At first reading, the two novels seem poles apart. *Blood Sports* is the sort of work always described as "gritty," a violent quasi-thriller set mostly in Vancouver's downtown Eastside during the years (though this is never mentioned) a serial killer casually murdered the "working" women of the area. Although the neighbourhood is largely Aboriginal, the characters are catalogued as "Caucasian" in the transcripts of videotapes that form one of the many narrative strands that crisscross to form the novel. In contrast, *Dream Wheels* is a cowboy novel set primarily on an idyllic British Columbia ranch, where an attractive cast of black, white, Sioux, Ojibway, and mixed-blood characters meet to effect the healing of two young men, one an Indian cowboy and the other an inner-city black youth. Although the storyline shifts from character to character without transitions, it is basically chronological and combines dialogue and third-person narrative. While *Blood Sports* hisses "mean streets," *Dream Wheels* calmly suggests the healing power of nature, animals, and stories.

Yet beneath the surface differences, the two novels are surprisingly similar. Each writer celebrates love, family, and loyalty against a heightened background, Robinson's of often baroque violence and Wagamese's of almost Victorian sentiment. Both violence and sentiment are sensations, created by words on a page, and both create strong and predictable responses in the reader by drawing on pop culture and the reader's own lived experience. Like Robinson's first novel, *Monkey Beach*, *Blood Sports* originates from one of the stories in *Traplines*, Robinson's first published book. Tom Bauer struggles to escape from his mother's alcoholism and his cousin Jeremy's terrifying and seductive hold on the two of them, a warped Tom and Jerry cartoon, in which Jeremy's successes in drug dealing and protection rackets enable him to buy a home with/for Tom and his mother, but at the cost of a good deal of emotional and physical abuse of Tom. At present in the novel, Tom and his ex-junkie girlfriend, Paulie, are clean and sober and engaged in doing their best to raise their toddler daughter, Melody. Jeremy's release from prison sets off their kidnapping, Tom's torture at the hands of some thoroughly exotic thugs, and a few murders. We know from the beginning of the book, however, that Tom, Paulie, and Mel escape and are still alive, so the focus is not on the thriller elements of the present but on discovering the crimes and connections of the past that have brought about this present.

Robinson tells us in her first “Note from the Author” at the back of the book, “I prefer the older, bloodier versions of the fairy tales. . . . *Blood Sports* is an homage to the original *Hansel and Gretel*, the version where Hansel uses a finger bone from a previous victim to convince the witch he’s still too skinny to eat” (279). Jeremy is a well-drawn witch, his cottage, a condo with a view of Stanley Park, decorated with cocaine and pretty girls instead of candy drops. Tom and Paulie are an engaging and courageous Hansel and Gretel, dealing forthrightly with the guilt accrued from their earlier excursions with Jeremy, hopeful and touching in their efforts to stay clean and particularly likeable in the “kid-savvy” descriptions of them with their daughter. Tom’s voice and his understated narrative about the ways they have forgiven each other is the strongest aspect of the book, while the default setting of “Caucasian” for the characters is a realistic reminder that poverty, abuse, and addiction are the products of a class discrimination of which racism is only one subspecies. For me, Jeremy’s murderous histrionics are less successful, partly because I read the novel during the trial of the alleged serial killer of the women of Vancouver, a tale far more repellant than any fiction, and partly because I’m just not a big fan of thrillers.

If Jeremy represents pure evil, most of the characters in *Dream Wheels* represent something akin to pure good. Victoria and Lionel Wolfchild, their son, Birch, and his wife, Johanna, run a ranch that raises and trains rodeo stock. Grandson Joe Willie Wolfchild, three seconds from being named All-Round Rodeo Cowboy, has been thrown and maimed by a bull. City boy Aiden Hartley, recently released from prison for an armed robbery that he planned but did not commit, and his mother, Claire, have been sent to the ranch to recover from his incarceration and her abusive boyfriend. Like all of Wagamese’s books, *Dream Wheels* is about healing, and particularly how the family conspires for Joe Willie and Aiden to heal each other by restoring the old pickup that carried Lionel and Birch to the rodeos in their start-up days. While Robinson’s schtick is violence, Wagamese’s is sentiment. It is perilously inviting to parody *Dream Wheels*, to turn it into a corny send-up of all the clichés of Native fiction, as the *Dream Wheels* of the pickup shade into the Medicine Wheels of the First Nations, and Victoria’s invented-on-the-spot stories of old-time people shade into Joe Willie’s vision of a bear and even into the bear herself. But wisdom is more difficult to portray than foolishness, virtue more difficult than vice, and healing, that most elusive and necessary of properties, more difficult than wounding.

If Jeremy is the witch, then Victoria Wolfchild, herself of Irish ancestry, is the shaman, a counterpoint that demands both gender and cultural shape shifting. Jeremy’s grittiness and malevolence are palpable in the violence and cruelty he unleashes purposefully on Tom and Paulie and casually on everyone else. Dismembered bodies decomposing in a cooler, videotapes of torture, and the image of literally blowing cocaine up someone’s rear end are disturbing, vivid, and memo-

nable. They spark our neurons in ways even the most lovingly restored pickup and the wisdom of a grandmother simply do not, so Wagamese is required to tell us how we feel, rather than thrill us into feeling. Where he does thrill us, in vividly rendered depictions of the bull, of the bear, and of the mountains, we register awe, not stomach-churning horror.

What does it mean to write within a literary ethic in which violence and harm are, seemingly by common consent, more authentic than wisdom and healing? Perhaps we are trapped in despair and cynicism, content to let our Hansels and Gretels stay always on the edges of the witch's wood and find no deliverance, except in vengeance. Perhaps in losing the wisdom traditions of whitestream culture and religion in those of intolerance and domination, necessary for the colonization of the mind, we have devalued all wisdom traditions. The contrast between the sensations of these two fine books is striking — though the images of Tom and Paulie with their daughter are also sensations — as is my own learned response of distrusting the sentiment and trusting the violence. This, I think, is a mistake. Leslie Silko's great apocalyptic novel *Almanac of the Dead* attempts a reconciliation between the violence of the present world and the ancient wisdom traditions associated with Nature. These two novels by Canadian First Nations writers also seem to approach such a reconciliation in the shadows between them. The well-observed child in *Blood Sports* and Aiden's mean streets in *Dream Wheels* serve as a bridge between the two forms of sensation. Tom and Paulie are certainly in need of healing, and they find it in their child, in AA, and, particularly, in forgiving each other and themselves for the violence they had earlier committed against each other while they were in Jeremy's thrall. However, the last words go to Wagamese, a recipe for healing. Joe Willie realizes "that the power to heal lay within himself and the anger, the rage, were the spurs he needed to coax himself into action" (272). By the end of the novel, after he has restored the pickup, he can tell his grandfather, "Scars and breaks make us what we are, give us character. Make us unique. Make us beautiful" (388).

Frances W. Kaye

Departments of English and Native American Studies
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

David A. Green and Jonathan R. Kesselman, eds. *Dimensions of Inequality in Canada*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007. 477 pp. Index. \$29.95 sc.

Dimensions of Inequality in Canada is one of three edited volumes that came about from the Equality, Security, and Community project. The project was conducted over