

**Richard Wagamese. *Keeper'n Me*. Penguin Random House Canada, 2018. 320pp. ISBN: 9780385693257.**

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/184587/keepern-me-by-richard-wagamese/9780385693257>

Richard Wagamese died on March 10, 2017. A month later, the Clint Eastwood film production of his 2013 novel *Indian Horse* appeared in cinemas, solidifying the stature of that fiction as the strongest candidate for the one book that could serve as an equivalent to *The Diary of Anne Frank* in carrying the message of our own holocaust: residential schools. Yet there is so far little recognition for Wagamese's lifetime achievement, so it is good to see this Penguin Modern Classics edition of Wagamese's 1994 novel, which has always had a staunch following, and to see Wagamese described in the note on the author as being one of Canada's foremost writers.

Although he retreated to his home near Kamloops and to the inspiring presence of the land to do his writing, Wagamese was an engaged activist. He toured extensively to urban centres and Indigenous communities, maintained a lively Facebook site, and taught many creative writing seminars. On YouTube, one can find many interviews with him. He sought the widest possible readership. His prose style shows the conciseness and even terseness of his early experience as a journalist, combined with the Indigenous storyteller's humour, both of which lend to a broad appeal. His is not the mystical suggestiveness of Louise Erdrich, who accurately describes him on the jacket as "a born storyteller." Having been saved from post-traumatic stress response (the word *disorder* implies an inadequacy on the part of the victim, whereas the word "response" conveys the inevitable impact of historical circumstances) by the recovery of his Anishnaabe worldview, Wagamese wrote for Indigenous people who are similarly lost. He represents them in Garnet Raven, the hero of *Keeper 'N Me*. This is why *Keeper 'N Me* is such a good choice for re-issue: a young Indigenous man earnestly seeking reconnection with family and tradition is brought together with a witty and friendly elder who is keeper of the drum and of much cultural wisdom. As such, the novel may serve as a model for precisely the kind of rejuvenating relationships that many Indigenous peoples need to heal from colonial trauma.

Wagamese also wrote for and spoke to non-Indigenous audiences. Like many great authors (but not all), he was a humanitarian who reached out to others. When he spoke in my class at MacEwan University in 2015, it was a dramatic performance more than a speech, and more articulate than any speech I have ever heard. He used the English language with conciseness and power, while he weaved and darted about the room. It could be said that he spoke to the common person and wrote for the common reader. It could also be said that these two creatures are elusive if not non-existent, yet the effort to reach them is identifiable and palpable. His tone was and is always that of the blues singer, an ancient tone of pain blended with humour and always poised, with the right note of passion demanded by the moment and a fine measure of psychological insight. As an example of that poise, please consider the lifelikeness of the verb "skied" in the following sentence describing Garnet's homecoming to his mother after being away in foster homes and the wider world for twenty years, from five to twenty-five years of age: "She smiled all soft across the fire at me and a little tear skied down one cheek" (82). Garnet is, of course, an avatar of the author. Character and author share Anishnaabe cultural roots on a reserve in northwestern Ontario, and they are both drawn to the shiny and fast-moving world outside

Indigenous cultures: Garnet learns to love the blues, whereas Wagamese had a lifelong love of baseball and hockey.

To draw Garnet back to his cultural roots, Keeper sometimes explains Anishinaabe values; more often, he allows Garnet to discern the truths that lie beneath his methods.

Reciprocity. Care is taken to frame the key relationships in the novel as reciprocal. Keeper does not set up a hierarchical relationship with Garnet. Instead, he puts Garnet at ease by saying that they can “kinda be each other’s guides” (105). Through alcohol, Keeper has strayed from becoming the member of the Medewiwin, the guardians of the Anishnaabe people, that he was meant to be, and Garnet guides him back to the role of the knowledge keeper; in turn, Keeper guides Garnet back to his culture, but at his own pace. Nothing is forced, though conditions for learning are created. Concerning Garnet’s relationship with his physically powerful and oldest brother Jackie, who was an AIM activist and an articulate leader in the seventies, Garnet faces a big problem. Jackie has turned into what his next oldest brother Stanley describes as “a big broodin’ angry wounded bear kinda’ guy” (142) who alternates between coldness and anger. Extending the bear imagery, Keeper notes that bear mothers teach their cubs by setting up conditions of play so that the cubs learn unwittingly, while playing (148). Garnet learns that hockey is the one activity in which Jackie can “let off steam,” and, applying Keeper’s advice, he engages his oldest brother in a game of shinny. They end up sprawled against the boards in a bear hug, and Jackie admits that he hated the whites for kidnapping his baby brother (15); that he hated Garnet for “the whiteness I can see all over you” (156); and that he avoided him in fear that his hatred would spill out and drive him away. This confession leads to admissions of mutual emotional need: Garnet needs Jackie to fulfill his familial identity, and Jackie needs to let down his judgmental walls and restore his suppressed love for his baby brother (157). Jackie thanks Garnet for challenging him, and Garnet replies, comically, “It’s a bear thing” (158). The upshot is that the reserve team, the White Dog Flyers, featuring the Raven brothers and their uncles, cheered on by family and community, becomes the strongest in the area. Jackie gives Garnet a jersey with the name “Bagga Antlers” on the back; this is the nickname Jackie had given him in childhood because of his boniness, and Garnet wears the jersey every year (159).

Judgments. They form isolating barriers based on fear. Keeper’s ruminations make it clear that the white colonial leaders came in this judging mode, “not askin for a guide, judgin’” (108): they “seen us prayin’ strange and got fulla fear about it,” so that “Other people’s fear pretty much made up us Indyuns’ hist’ry anyway” (109). With his laconic humour, Keeper remarks that those who bowed in prayer to the God in the whites’ Great Book of Truth looked up to find that all their land was gone (108). The whites ignored the Anishnaabe truth that the true human being has “truth inside” (107). All growth, in the Anishnaabe world view, takes place from the inside out, and this accords with observations of the natural world: “Nothin’ in this world ever grew from the outside in” (56).

Simplicity. Keeper clarifies that the Anishnaabe people survived the last five hundred years because “we never lost that simplicity” (167). He explains that the worship of Creation or Mother Earth is an expression of humility: “Pray ‘n ask for help. It’s the start of your own power.... Simple, eh?” (262). From the foundation of faith springs respect and a series of other attitudes: “Give respect, you give kindness, honesty, openness, gentleness, good thoughts, good

actions. Simple. Eh?” (167). The drum is the heartbeat of Mother Earth, Keeper explains, and the drumbeat is about “the woman power all around us” and “the spirit power of the female” or “soo-wanee-quay” in Ojibway (165). The purpose of the drum is to bring people back to the sense of oneness that pulses through the heartbeat of the mother, something that is felt in the womb before birth (165). Garnet illustrates this principle when he recalls the early homecoming experience of being locked in a long hug with his mother:

My speeding brain got quieter and quieter and I felt more and more relaxed and safe and sheltered and warm until I began to realize that I'd felt this same way somewhere back in my past. I don't know what it was but something somewhere deep inside me recognized that heartbeat. Recognized it from the days way before I ever slid out into this world. Recognized it from when her body kept me safe and sheltered and warm. Recognized it from when she was all vibration, fluid and movement. From when our souls shared the same space and time. My mother. (78)

Balance. Garnet learns the need to honor both the gifts of the female and those of the male. He learns that his mother prayed often for his return over twenty years and composed a song that she sang often, with the single line ”bih'kee'-yan,” meaning “Come home” in Ojibway. His father, John Mukwa (Ojibway for “bear”), blamed himself for failing to keep his children, secluded himself on his trapline (72), drank, spoke to no one, and one rainy night fell to his death from a railway bridge over a river (73). Garnet thinks about his father's loss and his own (74), and he names a tiny early-evening star “the Bear Star” so that he can look at it and talk to his father about his feelings and perhaps sing him an Ojibway song (82-3). In doing so, he accepts the darkness his father slipped into and honors his truth without succumbing to that darkness himself. Garnet undertakes a four-day journey into the bush by himself to find and honor the cabin that his father built. He has a dream about two eagles that turn into an old man and old woman who smile at him (251). This means that the grandfathers and grandmothers are watching over him, Keeper tells him later (271). An eagle also leaves him with the gift of an eagle feather. As Keeper says, the eagle feather in Anishnaabe culture is given to honor someone who has done something to help people. Keeper explains that the freedom of the eagle's soaring is the result of a lot of effort to “pick out the bad air from the good.” People too seek balance in life through hard effort, and Garnet has done a “lotta work an' learnin' to see and feel” (185).

Real Warriors. Keeper warns Garnet against two kinds of silence that men fall into, “Indian or not” (127). One is “the smoldering, angry kind we use instead of our fists” (127). This is the kind that Jackie had fallen into when Garnet rescued him with a game of shinny and a bear hug. It coincides with the stereotype of the hypermasculine Indian man, conveniently inculcating the attitude that this dangerous male cannot be lived with: he must be controlled or defeated. The other kind is “the big open, embarrassed kind” when the heart feels things that the male cannot articulate. These are the nurturing and protective emotions that are attributed to the female (Indian or not). Keeper warns that the “real warriors” never surrender to silence. He jokes that “the only stone-faced Indians doing any good out there are statues” (127). This refers to the stereotype of the Stoic warrior that, for example, Archie Belaney adopted to pass as Grey Owl. Garnet replaces silence with action. He hugs people and creates closeness in other ways, such as finding that tiny Bear Star in the early evening sky so that he can connect with the spirit of his father. As Keeper explains, real warriors are also humble: at the feast at the end of the novel, the

men will first serve the women (287). Real warriors have long-term commitment and regard wisdom as a path rather than a goal (273). They are represented in the animal world by the mole that lives close to Mother Earth and always investigates carefully; those who behave like the mole take the time to know their feelings before acting (220).

Living in two worlds. The great challenge facing all young Indigenous people today is finding balance between the non-Indigenous world and the Indigenous world. Keeper warns that Indians “can’t be hidin’ behind our Indyun ways” (198). To illustrate his point, he borrows a tradition from prairie Indians about “stealin’ horses” (198). Keeper advises that Indigenous people need “the kinda horses them outsiders ride nowadays” to survive in the contemporary world and “fight the good fight” (198). He advises that, as long as they “do it in the spirit of the teachins’,” Indians can take up any role, trade, or profession and use it as “another horse we learn’d to ride” (200). For example, Garnet’s next oldest brother, Stanley, has earned a degree in social work and returned to White Dog to help his people. Stanley insists that Indians need to “steal all the whiteman’s horses to make our circles strong again” (136). Wagamese wisely frames cultural hybridity neither as a betrayal of Indigenous cultures, nor as a compensation for a deficit, but as an act of courage, a tactical victory, and a means of maintaining the traditional value of balance.

Like many actual Indigenous men and women today, Garnet needs the balance of the eagle. After five years at White Dog and all he has learned about family and tradition, he is still proud of having survived as a city Indian, and he is still occasionally drawn to the fast pace and shiny things of the white man’s world. The same is true for actual Indigenous people today. As Keeper puts it, the whiteman comes “in lotsa diff’reent ways” (56). Whereas there were blues and jazz then, there are hip hop and rap now, and there are cell phones and video games, etc. Not knowing himself, Garnet settled into a black family in Toronto and arrived at the reserve looking like “one James Brown-lookin’ Indian” (51) with a three-foot Afro, mirrored shades, a balloon-sleeved yellow silk shirt, lime-green baggy pants, and platform shoes (45). He looked “more like a parakeet than a raven” (62). Garnet’s years in white society left him with “one great big black hole” in his belly and the wind whistling through him (33) (these are repeated images). Wagamese suffered those feelings (though he would have looked pretty funny in an Afro, since he was so unmistakably Indigenous!), and those feelings persist for young Indigenous people today because racism is alive and well in Canada. Some young Indigenous people I know in academe are setting their priorities wisely: they are putting their culture first and their white education second, but they are uncompromising about wanting both.

I wanted to pay Wagamese homage by offering a detailed and appreciative reading of his novel. I am grateful that he is a humanitarian who writes in a way that is relatable. I am grateful for his uncanny talent for making his literary performance real: in his work, there is no separation between writer and writing. The gap between artist and art closes: both merge into a seamless whole, as happens with a fine actor or actress in a play or film, and as happened that day when he spoke to my class. His narrative voice has such authenticity that it validates the reading experience, so often denigrated as a pseudo-experience; specifically, he validates reading complex fiction literature, which is a demanding activity that seems imperiled in this age of mixed media when the Nobel Prize *for literature* is given to Bob Dylan *for his music*.

With the burgeoning of Indigenous memoirs and fiction about residential schools, the misconception has developed that Indigenous fiction is deliberately simple in its style. Helen Hoy disparages this premise, pointing out that it leads to the corollary that such texts render experience in a transparent or unmediated way (Hoy 288). Jo-Ann Episkenew adds that this old prejudice leads to the assumption that such texts should be studied under the heading of anthropology rather than literary studies (Episkenew 112). Wagamese is so important because his writings bring together aesthetic complexity and a tone of authenticity that speaks to the common reader; in particular, *Keeper'n Me* has many fine narrative touches while it introduces Anishinaabe cultural values and tells a wry tale.

I am grateful too that, through some careful narrative moves, he explicitly includes non-Indigenous readers in his audience. Garnet relays Keeper's view that we are all tribal people deep in our pasts; hence, fires warm our hearts and souls as well as our bodies, and the problems of the world and between people will be solved "once we remember the common fires that burn in our pasts" (239).

*Jack Robinson, MacEwan University*

#### *Works Cited*

- Episkenew, Jo-Ann. *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing*, University of Manitoba Press, 2009.
- Hoy, Helen. *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*, University of Toronto Press, 2001.