

Book Club Kit

Discussion Guide

Jonny Appleseed by Joshua Whitehead

Contents

Biography	2
Review by Megan Parsons	3
Review by Alicia Elliot	5
Review by Maya Khankhoje	6
Interview with Jessica Johns	8
Interview with Sheilagh Rogers	19
Discussion Questions	20
Discussion Themes	20

Biography

Joshua Whitehead (he/him) is a Two-Spirit, Oji-nêhiyaw member of Peguis First Nation (Treaty 1). He is currently a Ph.D. candidate, lecturer, and Killam scholar at the University of Calgary where he studies Indigenous literatures and cultures with a focus on gender and sexuality. His dissertation, tentatively titled “Feral Fatalisms,” is a hybrid narrative of theory, essay, and non-fiction that interrogates the role of “ferality” inherent within Indigenous ways of being (with a strong focus on nêhiyawewin). He is the author of *full-metal indigiqueer* (Talonbooks 2017) which was shortlisted for the inaugural Indigenous Voices Award and the Stephan G. Stephansson Award for Poetry. He is also the author of *Jonny Appleseed* (Arsenal Pulp Press 2018) which was long listed for the Giller Prize, shortlisted for the Indigenous Voices Award, the Governor General’s Literary Award, the Amazon Canada First Novel Award, the Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award, and won the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction and the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction. Whitehead is currently working on a third manuscript titled, *Making Love with the Land* to be published with Knopf Canada, which explores the intersections of Indigeneity, queerness, and, most prominently, mental health through a nêhiyaw lens. Currently, Whitehead is premiering his newly edited anthology, *Love after the End: an Anthology of Two-Spirit and Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction*. You can find his work published widely in such venues as *Prairie Fire*, *CV2*, *EVENT*, *Arc Poetry Magazine*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Grain*, *CNQ*, *Write*, and *Red Rising Magazine*.

Source: **Athabasca University Students’ Union website**

<https://www.ausu.org/services/2slgbtqia/joshua-whitehead-he-him/>



Review by Megan Parsons

Jonny Appleseed Book Review

July 12, 2019

Every so often, a book comes along that feels like a milestone, with revolution nestled beneath every sentence, every word. Oji-Cree/nehiyaw two-spirit/Indigiqueer writer Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed* is one of those books. Of course, anyone who has read Whitehead's futuristic, cyberpunk, poetic masterpiece *full-metal indigiqueer*, released earlier this year, won't be surprised at this statement.

On paper, *Jonny Appleseed* is about a young two-spirit/Indigiqueer NDN glitter princess named Jonny trying to get back to the rez from the big city in time for his stepfather's funeral. Jonny had a difficult relationship with his stepfather, Roger. He not only made Jonny feel bad for being queer, but also "called me an apple when I told him I wanted to leave the rez. 'You're red on the outside,' he said, 'and white on the inside.'" Still, Jonny knows that without Roger, his "Momma's got the sick of loneliness, the kind that'll turn your liver into coal" and he loves his mother, so he decides to go back so he can support her.

Love, in all its forms, permeates this novel. Complicated love, messy love, nourishing love, platonic love, sexual love, familial love, secret love. Every character in this book is portrayed with empathy and understanding – from Jonny's Momma, to his kokum (or grandmother), to his best friend/lover Tias, to Tias's girlfriend (and, eventually, Jonny's good friend) Jordan. All of them are complicated, dealing with their own traumas in various ways, but they're never *only* their traumas, which is important. Each character has hopes, dreams, vulnerabilities, regrets. Each one laughs and jokes. In other words, they feel like real people. Long after I finished the book, I found myself missing these characters. That isn't something that happens often.

Whitehead doesn't just write about love of people, but also places. When Jonny talks about the decision to leave his rez, it's clear that he feels conflicted. "Leaving hurts," Jonny says. "It's not glamorous like Julia Roberts makes it seem." What's particularly beautiful is the way that Whitehead writes about the rez, the way it's imbued with such care and open-eyed clarity: "Even in the 21st century, two brown boys can't fall in *love* on the rez.... But it's home because the bannock is still browning in the oven and your kokum is still making tea and eating Arrowroot biscuits. It's home because it has to be – routine satiates these pangs."

Perhaps the most refreshing part of this book is the frankness with which Whitehead writes about sex – particularly queer sex. As soon as the book opens, he lets readers know what they're in for: "I figured out I was gay when I was eight. I liked to stay up late after everyone went to bed and watch *Queer as Folk* on my kokum's TV. She had a satellite and all the channels, pirated of course."

From there, Jonny tells us about his first hookup with a white guy, his catfishing of Tias, who he originally told that he was a girl named Lucia, his gradual relationship with Tias and all the drunken hookups and hustles in between. As an Indigenous sex worker, Jonny often has to deal with what he calls "treaty chasers," or men "who only want me to play NDN." These men never recognize that what

they're asking Jonny to enact is a fantasy. One even complains when Jonny dresses up as Catwoman, saying he wanted Jonny to dress up as "himself," which he interpreted as "the fringe and [stuff]." The arrogance of assuming that this stereotypical image of an Indian is in any way grounded in reality, particularly the reality of a stranger, is one that Indigenous readers will know well. It's particularly good to see Whitehead acknowledge how racist stereotypes work within the setting of sexual fantasy, as so many racist stereotypes are ingrained in modern-day sex and pornography, even in queer communities.

Jonny's relationship with Tias in many ways drives the book. Both assure one another they're not gay – a proclamation that Tias in particular *has* to make, as his adoptive father is violently heterosexual and toxically masculine, punishing Tias for any deviations from the "manly" norm. Still, his love for and attraction to Jonny can't be denied. After Jonny tells Tias about a traumatizing night of drinking and violence that left him hospitalized, Tias leads him to his bedroom, lays a cold washcloth on his head and holds him, telling him everything will be okay. This is what I think of when I think of decolonial love, which Leanne Betasamosake Simpson wrote of in her book *Islands of Decolonial Love*: love that sees your trauma and carries you through it. As Jonny says, "Funny how an NDN 'love you' sounds more like, 'I'm in pain with you.'"

Despite its often serious subject matter, *Jonny Appleseed* is a very funny book, in the same way that Indigenous people themselves are often very funny despite our traumas. In that way, reading this book felt to me like home. Every line felt like being back on Six Nations, laughing with my family, even though I was in my apartment in Brantford. With its fluid structure and timelines, *Jonny Appleseed* creates a dream-like reading experience – and with a narrator as wise, funny and loveable as Jonny, it's the sort of dream you don't want to wake up from.

"I am my own best medicine," Jonny says. He's ours, too.

Source: **Savant-Garde**

***Jonny Appleseed* Book Review**

Parsons, M. (2019, July 12). *Jonny Appleseed* book review. Savant-Garde.

<https://www.savantgarde.ca/jonny-appleseed-book-review>



Review by Alicia Elliot

Joshua Whitehead's Jonny Appleseed is a milestone novel about love, in all its messy forms

June 4, 2018

Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed* is, at its core, a coming of age story centred on the life of Jonny, a Two-Spirit Indigiqueer cybersex worker, who moved from the reservation where he grew up to Winnipeg and his journey home after his step-father dies. Two-Spirit is an umbrella term describing an Indigenous person who identifies as a third gender (or as gender nonconforming). The novel is written in short non-linear chapters that read like diary entries and the chapter's narrative shift between dreams, memories, and current events. The novel is less concerned about traditional plot and more concerned about the exploration of Jonny as a character. These stories' main focus is Jonny's relationships: his relationship with his childhood friend (and the love of his life) Tias, his close relationship with his kokum (grandmother), his complex relationship with his mother, his rocky relationship with his step father, his non-existent relationship with his biological father, and most importantly his relationship with his self. His relationship with his sexuality and his identity is the one constant in every chapter.

The novel walks the fine line between being both honest and empathetic on polarizing subjects such as gender expression, sex work, and Indigenous issues. Jonny's sex work is neither romanticized nor shamed. The reader sees Jonny react with dingy to the sometimes scary men who disrespect his culture by asking him to dress in stereotypical Indigenous costumes but they also see him thoroughly enjoy expressing his sexuality with others. Jonny is written sympathetically but he is not without his flaws. His affair with Tias is one example of the kind of questionable things he does throughout the book. Jonny's Indigenous identity is explored throughout the novel especially in memories of his childhood on the reservation. While these memories are sometimes sad there is an element of vibrancy in them that bring colour to the story. This nuanced characterization of Jonny adds depth to the novel.

Whitehead's history as a poet shines through in every line in the entire novel. At certain points I was taken aback by the poetic writing and found myself re-reading sentences in awe of them. An example of this poignancy is as simple as the line, "I am my own best medicine". As a result of this style the novel does not have a directed plot and some may find this irritating. The openness of how Whitehead writes and his poetic language might bore some readers; if you are looking for the traditional hero's journey this story is not for you. Additionally, since the narrative is so focused on Jonny's life the other characters may seem one dimensional. I have no real problem with this because it captures the realness of real relationships. Often times we see others from one side and it makes many of the relationships in Jonny's life ring true.

Overall, *Jonny Appleseed* tells an important story. Whether you are interested in contemporary stories or in more traditional ones I believe you will be missing out if you ignore this novel. I personally look

forward to reading more of Whitehead's work as well as other works by Indigenous writers in Canadian literature.

Source: **Globe and Mail**

Review: Joshua Whitehead's Jonny Appleseed is a milestone novel about love, in all its messy forms - The Globe and Mail.com

Elliott, A. (2018, June 4). Review: Joshua Whitehead's Jonny Appleseed is a milestone novel about love, in all its messy forms. *Globe and Mail*.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/reviews/article-review-jonny-appleseed-is-about-love-in-all-its-messy-forms>



Review by Maya Khankhoje

A Review of Jonny Appleseed

March 20, 2019

Joshua Whitehead is an Oji-Cree/nehiyaw, Two-Spirit /Indigiqueer member of Peguis First Nation (Treaty). He is also the author of *full metal-indigiqueer* and winner of the Governor General's History Award for the Indigenous Arts and Stories Challenges in 2016. He is currently doing a PhD in Indigenous Literatures and Cultures. With such impressive credentials, it might come as a surprise that his writing is anything but stuffy. In fact, it is as raw, poignant and poetic as the non-conformist sexual and outside-the-law survival escapades of Jonny, his literary alter ego.

The reader meets Jonny trying to scrape up enough money to make it back from the big city to the Rez for his stepfather's funeral. As a cyber-sex and sometimes-in-the-flesh sex worker, he has to work very hard – and very fast – to make it back home in time for the burial, if not for the visitation. In fact, he has to pull an all-nighter to be able to afford the four-hour ride with a friend. In between gigs, there are flashbacks to his early childhood, his coming to terms with his unconventional sexuality as well as with the harassment he endured on the Reservation. He also has to process his grief over the loss of the dearest person in his life: his kokum, or maternal grandmother. He finally makes it back to the Rez and, hopefully, to closure.

Life on the reservation is hard. So is life outside it. Rez boys have it as tough as urban Nates. But family life, while not idyllic, is very much there. So is conviviality, which flourishes in good and bad times. Jonny's kokum is the matriarch who holds the community together.

Jonny says it best:

We're all here telling our stories in NDN time.

But the ironic thing I've learned about NDN time is that it's an elixir of an excuse and a toxin of a measurement.

It'll kill you, you know, if you love it too dearly.

And that's the truth.

Source: **Montreal Serai**

[A Review of Jonny Appleseed](#)

Khankhoje, M. (2019, March 30). *A review of Jonny Appleseed*. Montreal Serai.
<https://montrealserai.com/article/jonny-appleseed>



Interview with Jessica Johns

Coming Home: An Interview with Joshua Whitehead

1: Pekiwewin

Jessica Johns: One of the biggest things that stood out for me in *Jonny Appleseed* was the nuanced and cared for way you explored the complexity of pekiwewin. I think it's a challenging thing for anyone, but especially for Indigenous folks with varying backgrounds and relationships to their communities, homelands, and people. *Jonny* really explored how it's not simple or easy, both to leave home or to go back again. Can you speak to the idea of coming home, and what that means in the book for the main character, Jonny?

Joshua Whitehead: It's interesting to me to think about home. What is a home? What does home mean? What constitutes a home? And home for Jonny was a space of refuge, a space of safety, a space of nourishing and warmth. As he says, he uses home as an affect, or home as a feeling or emotion. Home is the rez, but Jonny feels that it withered away when his kokum passes, because that was the glue that tied him to that space. But then again, yes, his kokum passes but she also becomes this mental mentor that guides him through his life, a spiritual advisor, an ancestor. So the story he keeps repeating to himself about her, he's still learning lessons from them and still has a strong kinship bond with her even though she's not physically there.

Especially towards the end of the novel when he visits her grave; he has this vision of them as shadows holding hands [and] walking down the road, so she's always there with him. And I think with this idea of learning about his kokum and the stories she wanted to tell outside of her physical body—because he misses those when she was alive, as she passes before Jonny can return home to hear the stories she has prepared for him—he learns to create a home in himself, I think, through those kinds of storytelling methods that he uses throughout the book.

But he also does have a home with his mother, who is still there [in Peguis] and who is trying to re-nourish that type of home, or re-water it to allow growth again, to learn how to better mother a 2SQ person. And he has a home in Tias—that's his space of refuge—and they have a long history together.

But in thinking about this idea of home, specifically about Manitoba, I was also trying to consciously craft Manitoba as a kind of 2SQ home too.

The Cree word for Manitoba is Manitowapow, which I was taught meant "The Strait of the Spirit," which is where the rivers meet. And I always question that. What does it mean to be a Two-Spirit person from the strait of the spirit? If the two rivers meet, do the two spirits meet as well?

For me, I really hold Manitoba as a Two-Spirit home base. A lot of Manitoba, and the Nations and peoples who live there, are born out of sex. We have post-contact nations like the Métis or the Oji-Cree. So it's interesting that sex is deployed ceremoniously, which can allow for a futurity and world building for a lot of peoplehood. Leanne Simpson talks about land as pedagogy, and this is the idea behind the

new book that I'm trying to work on, but it's thinking about Manitoba as this queer sexual pedagogy. These queer stories are already ingrained in the land, and I'm just trying to find them. Things are never forgotten, they're just forgone.

Jonny is my first foray into thinking about the land itself as already inherently queer. So I think it's what allows him to fluctuate in thinking about ideas of home, where the land itself is problematic at times, but it also nourishes him and it's beautiful in generous ways. I think Jonny being a Two-Spirit kind of allows for that, especially in the space of Manitoba.

Jessica Johns: Yes, there's that amazing line where Jonny says "home isn't a place, it's a feeling." And Leanne Simpson also writes—and something else you touched on—that coming home isn't just home as land, though it is always tied to it. Home isn't static; it's in movement and relationship to everything else. And in Jonny Appleseed, that layering was there. I acknowledge the attention and intentional interconnectedness of all of that.

Joshua Whitehead: There's also this idea in queer culture of "coming out" as this whole process, and everyone knows that story. Also Alex Wilson, who is an Indigenous scholar in Saskatchewan, also talks about this idea of "coming in" as Indigenous people who are queer, trans, non-binary, etc. "Queer" in the largest sense of the word. She talks about this idea of "coming in" as a simultaneous process that queer Indigenous people need to go through. Because within Indigenous spaces, specifically on the rez because of intergenerational trauma caused by queer sexual assault in residential schools, or the sixties scoop, or Child Family Services, or any kind of colonial agenda, queerness has been made to be this horrific and demonized thing.

So Alex Wilson talks about this idea of "coming in" as another process that a queer Indigenous person must undergo, which is coming back to that space and claiming your space within that community, but it is also creating a braid or a bridge that allows you to live as you are, unabashedly, but in a way that places you back within that community. And that's a difficult process for a lot of Indigenous peoples, and I know that's something I struggled with when I came out on my home rez of Peguis. I had cousins who were like "if you ever come back here we're gonna kick your ass" because they're in this hyper-masculine space, and especially for a lot of Indigenous youth who want to prove themselves as this kind of "noble warrior" masculine stereotype.

I think the idea of being a queer Indigenous person trying to go home or come in is a precarious process. It can be dangerous, you can be ejected from those communities, you can be placed in harmful situations, or you can become completely disenfranchised.

So with Jonny, I was really trying to do two things: remove the trauma and this horrific idea of queerness within Indigenous ways of being, specifically Ojibway and Cree, but then also try to give some type of map that shows the ways in which someone could be unabashedly both queer and Indigenous and still thrive and survive, and have traumas but also have triumphs. And not always have this overarching, traumatized idea about queerness and queer sex. It was important for me to show a pathway to reconciling both spaces and both ways of being.

Jessica Johns: Quill Christie-Peters talks about how important it is for Indigenous folks, especially displaced Indigenous youth, to know and listen to their bodies. It's how to remain connected to your home and yourself, no matter where you are. So anyone's understanding of themselves as a Two-Spirit person or a queer person is a home-coming and an extension of the land as well.

Joshua Whitehead: Yes exactly, because thinking of bodies, that extends to bodies of land, bodies of water, things that are all intertwined with you. And with the stories of the communities too. So if you're there, the stories are there. And queer stories in the land are important stories to think about. Like when people talk about Two-Spirit people, a lot of the Elders and those in their beautiful prime, they'll say that Two-Spirit people were revered. Two-Spirit was this thing that we all cherished and loved. And it's interesting to me to hear the past-tense participle on those statements like "were" and "was." It's always in this past, and it's always like we don't have those stories anymore. But even though we may have lost some stories, or we may have forgotten them, we can think about the ways the land in each Indigenous home base already has those stories within them. Thinking in terms of a genealogy or a history, it's there. It's just we're not honing in on those gaps.

Lately I've been thinking a lot about the body and what it means to write about the body, from the body? I see this a lot in poetics and prose, mine included. The body; what does it mean to write about the body as if it's the penultimate conception? I'm beginning to believe that it isn't. A body is temporary, it sags, atrophies, it falls apart, it withers.

What's important to me is the spirit, the story, spiritstory, heartmind. Just like the land, it's the spirit(s) that inhabit the body that thrive and survive. In what ways, I'm beginning to ask myself, can we think of story as even more so interconnected with the spirit than with the body? How much can the body hold and how much can it gain within a lifetime? And what means "lifetime" when we think of time as a settler conception, a Western invention, a "lifetime" in which whiteness is often elongated beyond belief compared to an Indigenous "lifetime". Sometimes I think the body fails in that regard because it needs a universal register, a type of globally accessible frame of reference or backdrop from which to measure it. But the spirit and its stories? You cannot measure that, it's an infinitude.

To write from that vantage point, I then wonder in what ways can we think of narration as a summoning of ancestral worlds that exist beyond the plane of embodied existence? Though, this of course is all theoretical and metaphorical right now, at least to me, but it's an idea that's been weighing on me when thinking about the limitations of my body, how it likes to self-destruct, how it likes to expand and shrink—what's lost in the folds? What's lost in the spaces culled?

2. Sakihitowin

Jessica Johns: Alicia Elliott wrote a really wonderful review of Jonny Appleseed, and she hit it so hard on the head about how much sakihitowin is in this book. Jonny's relationship, again, with his kokum, his mom, with Tias, and with Jordan. Tias and Jordan's love for each other. But also other connections, like Jonny's relationship to the pigeon who builds its nest on an abandoned building across the alley. There's love there.

Joshua Whitehead: The little pigeon, yep.

Jessica Johns: That little pigeon! It got me. The line “silly little bird, building a home in a dead place” crushed me. The pigeon stayed with me.

Joshua Whitehead: [laughs] I’ll have to write him into a new story.

Jessica Johns: Please do. But in your poetry collection, *full-metal indigiqueer*, the poem “you tell me you love me between two & three a.m.” really captures why the love stood out so much in these stories. It felt like love in its most genuine form, which is love that exists in liminal spaces. All the instances of love, sex, and intimacy were imperfect and beautiful. It showed love as complicated, sometimes messy, sometimes harmful or damaging, sometimes as medicine. And specifically showed queer love in all these forms. What were you attending to as you were weaving this love through Jonny?

Joshua Whitehead: The ways in which I was reading, writing, living, and loving at the same time shifted from *full-metal indigiqueer* to Jonny, like a complete tone shift. Yes, there’s a style shift and a genre shift, but the tone shifts too. I’ve been thinking recently that this is something I am trying to pay more attention to. So after I did the tour, my mental health was not the best. I was exhausted, I couldn’t sleep the whole night through, I had terrible insomnia. On the tour, I was being asked all these weird extractive questions from CBC or interviewers like “tell me your own personal trauma that helped you write your grandmother’s death scene.” I got a lot of this. Returning, I say that parts of that tour broke me—which is not to say that it was intentional, I think it was the weight of the world had finally damned me with its gravity, had fractured me, all it took was a feather atop an anvil to crack the skin. And I had to wrestle with the consistent reminder of, “Josh, don’t let the world teach you how to hate your best things.”

And looking back, I loved the tour. But, like I said, something on the tour kind of broke me, so I’ve been trying to find ways to improve my mental health and heal myself, in a sense. So every morning I’ve been lighting my sweet grass, and praying with the medicines that I have. And I’ve also been playing a lot of video games as a reparative gesture. You get to leave your body and enter a new world for a while. For me, it puts the body on pause, like it’s plugged into a charging station, and my mind is preoccupied so my body can do its thing.

Jessica Johns: Yes, it does do that! Your body actually feels like it’s charging while your mind is focussing on something completely different.

Joshua Whitehead: It does. Cleaning is the same for me, too, but that only lasts an hour [laughs]. But after a role-playing game of three hours? I feel good.

So with all this in mind, I was thinking about the shift between full-metal to Jonny. And full-metal took me about five years to write, slowly, over the course of three degrees. I started during my BA, honed in on poems during my MA, and finished it during my PhD. I was thinking about Eve Sedgwick, an affect theorist who hones in on two types of reading: paranoid reading, which means you’re going through the world looking and already knowing that you’re going to encounter things that you already disagree with

or are problematic, and reparative reading. And full-metal was very much paranoid reading and paranoid writing. full-metal was written with a lot of paranoia, anger, and annoyance and just negative affects.

And then the reading I was doing for Jonny in a sense was a little paranoid. I was looking for the queer YA texts and the appropriated Two-Spirit stuff, and I was like, this is not helping me. So I thought, let me do some kind of reparative reading. Where I'm looking to just experience and feel, in a sense. So I really think of Jonny as reparative writing too, where he kind of allowed me to heal and allowed me to come into myself. Jonny gave me a lot of tools to help navigate my life. I also wanted to write with this idea about reparative writing so when people read it they'd experience reparative reading.

So I think the main two differences between them is that Zoa [the main character in *full-metal indigiqueer*] kind of taught me how to be a badass, say no when you need to say no, and then Jonny taught me all the different ways you can love.

So right now I'm trying to figure out how to braid those two together. Because too much love makes one sick, as Jonny experiences quite a bit in his novel, and then too much anger also makes one sick. So where is the happy medium between the two?

Also in thinking about queer love, I think in a lot of queer circles we have all these instant gratification things. You can go on Grindr or Scruff; there's all these apps. You can quickly just fill your physical needs and then move onto the next, so that type of love is really quick and it's quite extractive—at least it is for me. And in Jonny, I was really trying to think of what an Indigiqueer love looks like. I think he captures the most love for me, he just always steals centre stage. He'd just put on his fur coat and all his glitter and be like "Okay, step aside, I'll do this."

So Jonny taught me all these ways to love. Yes, he has this grandeur love for Tias, and he even goes so far as to stretch it to encapsulate Tias' partner, Jordan, too. But when I think about love, I also think about the Cree language not having genders, we have animations. And Jonny's grandmother, who taught me in the book that a humility is the humiliation you love so much it transforms. If we can take our pains or our traumas, and if we can animate them as kin, then in what ways can we make love to them and transform them? So I was always trying to use love as a transformational tool too. A tool that can take pain and transform it into something energizing and nourishing, because pain is a medicine too, I believe, just like as Jonny says, leeches are medicine. So it was just trying to unpack the nuances and the breadth of feelings one undergoes on a daily basis.

3. Miyopimatisowin

Jessica Johns: Crafting reparative writing in order for someone else in the future to experience reparative reading is a way of building other futures. Also in the way that Jonny Appleseed works to centre rather than simply include. You can see and feel the difference. Centring queer love and relationships from an Oji-Cree perspective, and centring understanding and storytelling in nehiyawewin,

there's an understanding and a way of seeing the world that exists directly in this way. It shows the kinds of possibilities that open up when you centre language, centre worldviews, centre 2SQ identities.

Joshua Whitehead: Well, I've been thinking a lot about world building, and with *full-metal indigiqueer* I was just like, I'm gonna destroy shit and fuck up some monuments and ruin the canon [laughs]. I was more interested in world destroying, I suppose. And literary world destroying. But sometimes the land teaches us that sometimes you need to raze to make room for the growth, so I think I began with that anger so I could get to a space of hope, love, and futurity.

But when I think about worlds, and I think about this futurity, I put it into terms of Cree again and try to think, live, and write in a mode that encapsulates *miyopimatisowin*, or moving towards the good life, which Leanne Simpson writes quite a bit about too. And thinking about what it means to always move towards the good life. For me, that means reciprocity. For me, that means accountability and ethics. It means healing and transformation. It means making it an active verb rather than a descriptor. And a futurity that you're always kind of moving forward toward. But then forward is not a two-dimensional trajectory, it's not straight, it meanders and eddies like water. It's moving up and down, so you're getting this full range of emotions, gender fluidity, sexual fluidity.

But also in Cree ways of being, we have this way of placing our most vulnerable in the centre. And within the literary scene, the political scene, I always see this het-cis man in the centre while everyone else moves around him and tries to heal from the outskirts. But then how many Two-Spirit queer Indigenous people are committing suicide, how many women are going missing and murdered, how many Two-Spirit people are going missing and murdered while we perform this ceremony? Can there not be time for all?

So with Jonny, I really wanted to make a world where 2SQ, bi, and women were centred for once towards healing. So Jonny is kind of planting a seed with that. There's this narrative of flourishing for Two-Spirit queer and Indigenous women. Jonny's father already passed away and he didn't really care for him in the beginning of the book, his stepfather is really just, plot-wise, the reason Jonny is going back to Peguis. So in terms of the men in the book, they're either queer or bisexual, or non-conditional in a sense if they're centered. So I was trying to mix space for folks who needed to be in that vulnerable centre. It's their time and they deserve it and they need healing just as much as anyone else. And with them, as you see in the literary scene right now, we're creating beautiful, new, and empowering and radically altered worlds. With Billy-Ray Belcourt winning the Griffin, or the work that Alicia Elliott is doing, or Gwen Benaway, or Arielle Twist, or Jaye Simpson, Kai Minosh Pyle, there's so much happening right now and I think in terms of the literary Indigenous scene, the Two-Spirit queer Indigenous blossoming is happening right now. There's another wave of it coming. That was the type of nebula I was trying to create with Jonny.

4. Nîkânote

Jessica Johns: I think that's part of the reason why CanLit is so trash, because it works to centre the most privileged voices. So the "inclusion" of voices from their centre is always on their terms, and including

voices on anyone else's terms isn't real inclusion at all. So the centring that is happening in Indigenous lit right now is so exciting. Like seeing all this stuff happen first hand, I feel like I'm dreaming. I never thought I'd read a book like Jonny Appleseed when I was in my teens or even early twenties. These are the things that change lives.

Joshua Whitehead: Exactly, and during my BA and my MA, I worked for the Friendship Centres helping run a day camp in the summer, and then I worked for a youth drop in from September to May or June. We had this drop in and we had a lot of kids come in, and we had a lot of youths that a lot of settler folks would call "at risk" teens. I had this one kid who was thirteen-fourteen years old, who was a regular and the Friendship Centre was quite close with his family. But he came in the middle of July and we thought he must have had heat stroke or something because he just didn't look good. He was super sweaty and hot, so we gave him some water, and we had this computer room where the kids would come and work on their essays or check their Facebook because they didn't have internet access at home. And me and another co-worker were in our office and we heard some kids screaming, so we ran into the computer room and this kid had had an overdose at the desk. We called the ambulance, and now he's healed and he's back and healthy again, and he visited a couple months later and we asked him what happened. And it turns out he was addicted to painkillers, and at first I thought what kind of pain does your body have to be in as a fourteen-year-old to be addicted to painkillers? But the one thing that he told me that has always stuck with me was when we asked why he was doing this, he told me was that he thought this was the natural process of growing up.

Jessica Johns: Well, there's basically two narratives that colonial agendas push for Indigenous youth, which are that they're either going to end up dead or in jail, because that's the kind of future that strengthens colonial control. And I think with works like this it's like, here's a future that's not that. Here's something else.

Joshua Whitehead: Yes, so for me writing Jonny, it was originally written as a YA novel but Arsenal thought it was better suited as a novel, so they wanted to promote it as a novel and gear it towards youth. But it's first and foremost and always will be for the kids. Because I wanted to show them ways that we can be, live, survive, and thrive unabashedly. It was always for them. I just wanted to be like here's a small seed, here's a lens into a world in which we can move towards, that we can build, a world in which you are needed and matter, and that we really want you to come into. So Jonny was a small world that I'm hoping kind of grows into something for them. I think about it a lot with the youth suicides right now. A lot of them are Two Spirit and queer kids who can't necessarily braid those two worlds together yet. So this is always for the kids.

And I'm so excited to see in ten to fifteen years when these kids who we've all been working for take our spots, I'm excited to see what they do, and how they surpass us, and what types of worlds they'll build. It's a beautiful cumulative Indigenous brilliance. And specifically the literary world, it's changing so rapidly. There's all these amazing new books, ideas are shifting. We're in this accelerated space right now of Indigenous brilliance and Indigenous writing and Indigenous stories, so I'm very excited to see what's gonna happen down the line.

5. Maskihkîy

Jessica Johns: I think so much of it comes down to all the reciprocity and love that happens, for the most part, in Indigenous lit, right now and always. Everyone coming up brings forward other Indigenous writers and artists who are doing awesome things. It's such a positive and nice thing to see in an industry that doesn't do that very much. Even the idea of self-care, in its very name is very individualistic and self-initiated. It's a self-reflexive word that I think is kind of trendy, but it doesn't resonate with me that the idea of care is something you do with yourself, for yourself. That relying on others, getting care, and giving care is less important or thought of as weak. And pushing the idea of individualism and self-contained living can be damaging, I think, to Indigenous folks who value support systems and networks.

Joshua Whitehead: I totally agree. When anyone is like you should try yoga or go on this retreat, I'm like that sounds terrible. I want to go home and call up my cousins, my aunts, my grandma, go and visit them and have a bunch of tea and bannock. That's the best medicine, that's self-care to me. Where we can gossip and see who's snagging who. It's like the holistic communal thing. So I always heal better in a community. If I'm just trying to think through a thing myself, sometimes that works, but it always derails at some point. So I always depend on other people. And I think that's exactly what we're seeing in CanLit compared to Indigenous Lit. That's what I tried to do with the withdrawal from the Lambda. I was like this isn't for me, this is not my space, this is for all of you folks. It's the same thing that happened with Write magazine, we all did that together. And it's just beautiful. If something goes wrong, my friends will call me and ask what I need. And I know so many other folks who don't get that. This should be the natural way of writing and reading and being reciprocal with one another instead of always trying to compete. Like who's gonna get published first, am I gonna be in this new thing? So it's such a beautiful space and community to be a part of.

Even when I was just in Toronto recently for the Dayne Ogilvie prize, it was really beautiful for all of my Indigenous friends who came with me. They just came up afterwards and were like "Okay, what do you need right now?" And it's such a beautiful question to ask. It's so simple, but it's so packed and it means so much. So this beautiful type of care that we all practice, for me, energizes me. It allows me to work at this pace and do all the things that I'm doing. I couldn't do it without everyone else.

And I think creative writing programs try to foster the opposite. This idea that writing is a vacuum, writing is suffering, we need to do this individually, create the "new best work" and it's like we don't do that. We're working together, we build on top of each other's ideas or stories sometimes but we always build with each other, so I'm so happy to be part of that.

Jessica Johns: I think that care and idea of reciprocity comes out in Jonny Appleseed too. It showed what I understand as care in my own family and in my communities. It showed love as never individual, care and medicine as reciprocal, as given and received. This happened with the characters, the love and care between Tias and Jonny, but in other aspects too. The Thunderbird and Nanabush dream, for example. How Jonny and the eagle take care of each other through the storm.

Joshua Whitehead: I love that scene. Jonny started as these little short stories. I took this course at the U of C [University of Calgary], which was to write a 100 pages in 100 days, so I wrote that scene. It was this idea of apocalyptic dreaming but everyone kind of comes together to care for each other. But I remember folks telling me that it was too magical or mystical, and to take it out, but I refused. For me, it was about creating a Two-Spirit story and history about the responsibilities that we have for each other, and for the land and the stories that they hold. So everyone told me not to include it, and I was like, I don't care. I'm putting it in the book. I love this scene. And it was the same thing for the bear scene too. If I ain't got one, this will be my own creation story.

Jessica Johns: This is so representative of creative writing programs. What I've come across a lot too, is people telling me to take out "mystical" scenes or telling me I have too many characters.

Joshua Whitehead: [laughs] I know, it's like have you read Eden Robinson?

Jessica Johns: I'm like if I have to tell one of my aunties that I'm cutting them out of this story, you're all gonna get some shit.

Joshua Whitehead: Creative writing programs are so weird. They were teaching me how to write white. I had to unlearn for so long.

Jessica Johns: I feel like it was a process of learning a bunch of stuff, and some of it was great, but now there's so much more work to do to unlearn.

Joshua Whitehead: Yes. And for me it was so much pushing to write realism, and not magic realism. But genre writing is amazing. I know Hemingway didn't do it, but I don't care. So when people were telling me to take out the magical bits I was like no, these are the best bits.

Jessica Johns: Yes! This looking down on genre writing and looking down on anything that's not some literary story that you don't really understand, which means it must be really good is just. I don't know, I don't want to read that. |

Joshua Whitehead: I know. I don't want to read about some teacup and think about existential things. Who is this serving? It's serving you, that's it. It's just smokescreen and bravado. We need a now, a yesterday, and more importantly a tomorrow—words help build those worlds.

6. Asenamâkewin

Jessica Johns: You talked a little before about withdrawing *full-metal indigiqueer* from the Lambda. I was at your reading in Vancouver where you talked about the power of refusal, and specifically the refusal to take up space, but also this idea that in refusal there is the potential for space making for Two-Spirit and queer voices. And in these writing classes refusing to take out these amazing parts that you know are important to you. I think it's very hard when you're an emerging writer and you're hearing other "established" people tell you this isn't going to be good, or giving you advice to do something that doesn't feel right, it's hard not to listen. And it's hard to refuse. So I think the power of refusal is such a radical act.

Joshua Whitehead: Refusal is something I've been recently learning and still trying to put into my everyday life, because the world will work me to the bone if I kept letting it. Going on tour, interviews, readings, asking to be a part of talks, etc, is a really extractive process of your energy, your time, your mental well-being, and with very limited or if any pay. So I've been trying to learn to say no more, which is difficult for me. I guess it's my Indigenous normativity, I suppose? So I always try to if I have the time, if I have the energy, because I'm able bodied, I want to contribute. And again, I think it comes from a lot of creative writing pedagogy that you have to take whatever you can get and keep rolling with it.

So for me, my character [in *full-metal indigiqueer*] Zoa taught me so much about refusal since Zoa was just this badass who didn't give a fuck about anything or anyone who was just like "I'm gonna do what I want and centre who I want and make what I want from the rubble that I'm creating." So I learned a lot from that first book, but for me with refusal I take a lot from being a killjoy. Like killing settler-colonial joy by not giving them what they want. Not always being their Native informant or go-to guy.

But refusal has been one of the tools I've learnt and one of the most energizing and world-building things. So when we all refused Write magazine, we got the Indigenous Voices awards. And I was so happy to see that dance into the world. And then with the Lambda, I was so humbled and honoured to have such a large, international scale award to be shortlisted within, especially for a first book. But again, I think a lot of people just google "what does Two-Spirit mean?" and assume that it must be a trans person, and sure there are trans and non-binary qualities in *full-metal indigiqueer* I guess, I wouldn't say I wrote them in there but I guess some folks might read it like that. But for me, I sat down and I spoke with Arielle [Twist] and Kai Cheng Thom and Vivek Shraya and got advice on what I should do. Because again, it was still so ingrained in me to take what you can get when you can get it. Take take take. Be a Windigo. So I sat down and asked what I should do, and a lot of them suggested I do what felt right for me. Vivek was the one who explained the story to me. Which is that this trans poet category, which I think there are like four or five categories now, but this was only added a few years ago through a lot of grassroots work of activists, and active refusal on the part of trans writers, specifically trans women writers. And you don't need to self-identify to win these awards. So Vivek was saying that in the past that cis/queer women or men have won the trans categories because they had trans characters in their works.

But for me, I just thought this isn't my space to take. So in the letter I wrote, I do take storytellers to be in a relationship of reciprocity and accountability and I didn't think that was my space to take. So I said I was going to remove myself and leave this space for those folks. It was their literary homeland.

So from that, once I refused the letter went viral, kind of. And the Lambda reached out to me and said they would love to have me and would I reconsider, and I said no but I would love to start a dialogue with them, to perhaps have a 2SQ category within the Lambdas? Because even if I was in the gay male category like Tommy Pico was, I don't even know if I would feel comfortable in that. So I think we need our own category. So with that active no it has been fostering dialogue between Lambda and myself, Lambda and other Two-Spirit queer writers, and also just largely in the queer communities too. Folks are now asking what is Two-Spirit, am I contributing to the appropriation scheme? So being a killjoy, a killer

of settler colonial joy gives me joy. [laughs] It energizes me too. I think that if it's not your lane to take, you take a step onto the path beside it. You'll find that someone else can take that path so much further. So I'm trying to put this into my everyday ways of being.

Even in the letter I said that I strongly believe that refusal and stepping aside and moving aside is a personal act of moving towards miyopimatisowin. Because that's reciprocity, it sounds like it's an individualistic thing, but it's also interconnected with the community and with the land. And I believe that when one of us succeeds, we all succeed so I try to practice that every day.

Source: **Room**

Coming Home: An Interview with Joshua Whitehead

Johns, J. (n.d.). *Coming home: An interview with Joshua Whitehead*. Room.

<https://roommagazine.com/coming-home-an-interview-with-joshua-whitehead-3>



Interview with Sheilagh Rogers

Why Joshua Whitehead explores being Indigiqueer and two-spirit in his debut novel

June 18, 2018

Planting the seeds

"Jonny is a character that's been with me since I was 17 or 18. He's this little kid obsessed with the beatniks and problem novels like *Go Ask Alice*. He came from poems that I excised from *full-metal indigiqueer*. When I took those little poems and planted them into this new idea for a story, Jonny took the stage and was like, 'Here I am — write me into the world.'

"A lot of people are reading him as this hyper-confident, super-suave swindling character. But I had to craft a two-spirit character who has pain, but who is triumphant in that pain, shifting it into love. Jonny is the better parts of me, hyperbolized. From that came this shiny, glittered figure of light for myself."

Bridges

"'Two-spirit' is a pan-Indigenous term that originated in Winnipeg in the 1990s. It encapsulates hundreds of nations, but it's something that is specific to each regional space, to that homeland and to those peoplehoods. But because of colonization and, more specifically, Christianization, those histories and stories around two-spirit peoples have been lost. I use 'two-spirit' because it's a homecoming and homecalling. For me, to take the word 'Indigenous' and braid it with 'queer' is a new type of worlding — a braiding of two bridges. I really like the biting edge 'Indigiqueer' has. I think of it as the driving force that is pulling along two-spiritness.

"*Jonny Appleseed* grows up with the stigma of having to perform as hyper-masculine. What I'm seeing — in terms of sexual trauma brought upon Indigenous communities by things like residential schools — there's always this idea of silence, this idea of being macho. Jonny is dealing with that."

Source: **CBC Radio: The Next Chapter**

[Why Joshua Whitehead explores being Indigiqueer and two-spirit in his debut novel](https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/full-episode-june-18-2018-1.4704378/why-joshua-whitehead-explores-being-indigiqueer-and-two-spirit-in-his-debut-novel-1.4709105)

Why Joshua Whitehead explores being Indigiqueer and two-spirit in his debut novel. (2018, June 18). CBC Radio. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/full-episode-june-18-2018-1.4704378/why-joshua-whitehead-explores-being-indigiqueer-and-two-spirit-in-his-debut-novel-1.4709105>



Discussion Questions

1. This book is a novel that feels a lot like a memoir. How did this affect your reading experience? Did it feel more like fiction or non-fiction to you?
2. In the “kinanâskomitin” (thank you) section at the back of the book, Whitehead says “I write this book with the goal of showing you that Two-Spirit and queer Indigenous folx are not a “was,” that we are not the ethnographic and romanticized notations of “revered mystic” or “shamanic,” instead we are an is and a coming.” (p. 221) How does this book represent Two-Spirit people as an “is” rather than a “was”?
3. There are Cree words throughout the book. What was your experience of reading an Indigenous language interspersed with English? Did it feel different than seeing another foreign language? If so, how?
4. How do safe spaces, or the lack thereof, play a role in Jonny’s life both on reserve and in Winnipeg? Does he have a safe space, and if so, where?
5. On page 88, the narrator says “Funny how an NDN 'love you' sounds more like 'I'm in pain with you.'” How does Jonny’s relationship with Tias reflect that sentiment?
6. The book explores themes of sexuality and sex-work, alongside Indigeneity (i.e. Jonny is fetishized for being Indigenous). What was it like to read about how Jonny is treated as an Indigenous sex worker? What was it like to read the more graphic content?
7. Back on the reserve, Jonny says “Who the hell gonna love me now, Kokum?” (p. 217) In what ways did his kokum show love to him? How is his relationship with his mother different from his relationship with his grandmother?
8. One review calls Jonny Appleseed “a story of decolonial love in a colonized world” (Hardwick and Laboucan, Canadian Literature, 2019). What does that mean to you, and how is “decolonial love” portrayed throughout the book?

Discussion Themes

Intergenerational Trauma | Racism | Homophobia | Community | Family & Kinship