



Book Club Set #102

Five Little Indians

By Michelle Good

About the Author

Michelle Good is of Cree ancestry, a descendent of the Battle River Cree and a member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation. She has worked with indigenous organizations since she was a teenager and at forty decided to approach that work in a different way obtaining her law degree from UBC at 43. She has practiced law in the public and private sector since then, primarily advocating for Residential School Survivors. She graduated from UBC with a Master of Fine Arts Degree in Creative Writing MFA in 2014 where her novel Five Little Indians first started taking shape. Her poetry, and short stories have appeared in a number of publications. Her first novel, Five Little Indians won the HarperCollins/UBC Best New Fiction Prize and her poetry has been included in Best Canadian Poetry in Canada 2016 and Best of the Best Canadian Poetry in Canada 2017. Michelle is currently working on her second novel.

Retrieved from: <https://www.michellegood.ca/biography.htm>

About the Book

Taken from their families when they are very small and sent to a remote, church-run residential school, Kenny, Lucy, Clara, Howie and Maisie are barely out of childhood when they are finally released after years of detention.

Alone and without any skills, support or families, the teens find their way to the seedy and foreign world of Downtown Eastside Vancouver, where they cling together, striving to find a place of safety and belonging in a world that doesn't want them. The paths of the five friends cross and crisscross over the decades as they struggle to overcome, or at least forget, the trauma they endured during their years at the Mission.

Fuelled by rage and furious with God, Clara finds her way into the dangerous, highly charged world of the American Indian Movement. Maisie internalizes her pain and continually places herself in dangerous situations. Famous for his daring escapes from the school, Kenny can't stop running and moves restlessly from job to job—through fishing grounds, orchards and logging camps—trying to outrun his memories and his addiction. Lucy finds peace in motherhood and nurtures a secret compulsive disorder as she waits for Kenny to return to the life they once hoped to share together. After almost beating one of his tormentors to death, Howie serves time in prison, then tries once again to re-enter society and begin life anew.

With compassion and insight, *Five Little Indians* chronicles the desperate quest of these residential school survivors to come to terms with their past and, ultimately, find a way forward.

Retrieved from: <https://www.michellegood.ca/published-works.htm>

Discussion Questions

1. The precipice of the novel centres around showing the true effect of intergenerational trauma. As Michelle Good has said herself, “Trauma is almost like osmosis. When you’re living with people that have trauma responses, you learn those.” Despite being a common and important thread to each character, this is especially seen between Clara and Kenny as they grow up, begin to have kids and try to rebuild a life after the school. How did their trauma manifest and effect their development as they moved through adulthood?
2. The novel highlights this further through the trauma within families. Maisie highlights this when she says, “the rest of us ran too, right into that crowd of grown-ups who were supposed to be our parents.” Why was this phrased this way? What does it mean? Discuss the stories of parents throughout the book and the trauma that they too experienced.
3. In keeping with this concept, Kenny is reunited with another child from the school, whilst working as a picker on an orchard. There is an exchange prior to picking up their paychecks; “Yeah, well, we’re back in the same place again, aren’t we?” Kenny motioned toward the foreman, his khakis still spotless, blowing on a whistle and yelling for everyone to hurry up. What is the symbolism of this scene? What does it represent about the structures at play in Canada today, for Indigenous Peoples?
4. Five Little Indians highlights the systemic racism that lives within the foundational structures of society. This is shown through each character’s interactions with the police and judicial systems, as well as health and medical services, in post Residential School system life. Some examples include when Maisie is in the hospital or when Howie is moving through the prison system. Discuss these interactions with your group and how systemic racism and oppression are prevalent both in other elements of the book and in Canada today.
5. Maisie is a particularly tough exterior character, explained in the book description as having, “internalized her pain and continually placing herself in dangerous situations.” Finally, Maisie has a vulnerable moment with a healer within her community and states, “We were children, me and Lily, and neither of us survived, even though I’m still walking.” What does this mean? How does this manifest in her actions and the ways she interprets the world?
6. Discuss with your group the symbolism of the pinching, not only its act but when it came up in the book. Why do you think this was included? What did this add to the story?
7. a) The impact of the residential school system is continuously whitewashed and portrayed as something of the past, despite the last school closing in 1996. Many

call into question the failure of the Canadian education system as having a role in this. Discuss your experience in learning about the Residential School system growing up. Was this discussed within your family, your school, your friend groups, your workplace?

b) Did you learn something new in reading Five Little Indians, if so, what?

8. What is something that you can take from reading this book, that be applied in your everyday?

9. Who would you recommend Five Little Indians to? Why?

Retrieved from:

<https://www.amnestybookclub.ca/BookClub/Books/2021/Five%20Little%20Indians.aspx>

Author Interview

Q. What drew you to start creative writing?

A. I think I was born with the desire. I really do. I was one of those funny little kids walking around with a little journal under my arm when I was 11, 12 years old. Observing, considering and recording has been a huge part of my life since I was a child, and that's what we do as writers.

Q. You became a lawyer first, but that is a kind of a storytelling job.

A. It is entirely about telling a story and being able to convince a decision-maker that your version of the story is the strongest version. It's absolutely about storytelling.

Q. What has writing creatively about the impact of residential schools done for you over the years?

A. I represented survivors for many years. Before that, when I aged out of foster care because I was a Sixties Scoop kid, many of my own personal experiences were quite similar to some of the characters in the book — struggling to find a way when you're unceremoniously dumped from the care of some agency. Those kinds of things were cathartic to be able to write about.

I first started giving consideration to residential school trauma as a child because my mother was a survivor. There's a little character in there, a secondary character Lily who haemorrhages to death from tuberculosis. And that was the first story that my mother told me. Lily was a real child, and my mother watched her haemorrhage to death from tuberculosis at the residential school.

It was such a shocking thing to be told that it just sent me on this trajectory. This is something that needs to be known. How could anybody, much less my mother, be treated this way?

And so, it's been my life's work, either in poetry, or in short fiction, or in advocacy, or in this book.

I knew right away that I needed more characters to carry the weight of the full spectrum of this story. - *Michelle Good*

Q. Why did you decide to break the book up into five perspectives?

A. I wrote the first paragraph in an exercise in the Master of Fine Arts program at UBC. I instantly knew that one character couldn't carry the weight.

There is such a diversity of abuses and experiences, and a huge diversity in terms of their psychological responses to it and their ability to rise above it.

The male experience was different, the female experience was different. I knew right away that I needed more characters to carry the weight of the full spectrum of this story.

Q. It's reflected in your book that when we experience trauma, even when we know we're being mistreated, we can't help but internalize it and feel that we deserve it, even though we don't. Why do you think that happens?

A. I think that's a very common psychological phenomenon and it's well articulated in that discipline. It's hard to believe that you would be treated that way unless you deserve it.

For example, speaking in Indigenous languages was forbidden in the schools. My mother didn't speak a word of English when she went to residential school. Imagine your circumstances. You're there. The only way you know to verbally communicate is in Cree, and when you speak Cree, someone hits you.

You can't find a way to justify that. You can list through all the things, "What did I do? Why did she do that to me? Why did that person hit me?" And, because you can't come up with a legitimate reason, you begin to internalize and to say, "Well, it must just be me. Since there was no objective reason to do this, it must be me, there must be something wrong with me."

The other thing, too, is that when children are abused as children, they continue to perceive that experience from the perspective of a child. Until they have some kind of meaningful therapeutic intervention, they're not able to externalize it and go, "Wait a minute, I'm not the one that should feel ashamed."

Q. You mentioned earlier that you feel like Christian really understands the essence of the book. How would you describe the essence of the book?

A. There's a lot to that. I think one of the things that was very important to me was that these characters be fully formed human beings, that they are far more than their trauma, that they feel love and joy. There's humour in the book. There's laughter. There's just the full spectrum of the human experience.

It's not just about the abuse. It's not just about the impact. It's about these people and how those people are very reflective of Indigenous people, and I guess the Indigenous ethos.

As soon as I started talking with Christian, I knew, "He gets it. He recognizes this." And that's really great. I'm really pleased about it.

Q. Do you happen to be a fashion enthusiast?

A. No, but it was really interesting because, back in the 1990s, I remember thinking there was quite a favourable trend in furniture patterns, in upholstery, where you were starting to see tribal patterns that were being, in effect, appropriated from Indigenous art.

I remember thinking, "Careful." Pay attention when your art is being mass-produced for profit because, for example, in Navajo beadings or those kinds of things, there are stories inherent in those patterns. I think that's one of the things that Christian talks about in his book, *The Power of Style*, in terms of reaffirming identity through fashion, through design, through art. I think he's doing some wonderful work in that area.

Q. You said, "be careful when your art is mass-produced." Is that something you are mindful of?

A. A production company has picked up the option to potentially make a limited series out of *Five Little Indians*. In that negotiation, I made sure that I have some meaningful involvement in how that's going to be presented and interpreted in terms of creating the screenplay and so on and so forth.

But what I'm talking about really when I say "mass produce" is when a thin imitation of a beautiful piece of art is created, like the plastic dream catchers. The things that have meaning in our cultural milieu that are then taken outside of our cultural milieu and made into something completely different.

Q. What was the joyful part of writing this novel?

A. Those characters. I mean, they were with me for so long and they really came to life very quickly and I fell in love with them. They were like my own children in many ways, and I still feel them around me from time to time.

I say that in sort of a light way, but in my heart, it was also about giving voice to the realities of survivors and that gives me joy to think that there are people reading this book and deepening their understanding of why this goes on and on and on through generations, why there is intergenerational harm and why the suffering continues.

Q. Has there been a particularly meaningful moment from a reader or a critic that read the book?

A. Dozens and dozens and dozens. I regularly get emails from readers. They move me so deeply.

From non-Indigenous readers, I've had responses like, "I just never knew, but now I'll never forget." And, really thoughtful responses to a deepening understanding and being given an opportunity through this book to reconsider what they think they know.

And, from survivors, both direct and intergenerational, who have responded. Intergenerational survivors say, "Now I understand why my dad or my mom or my auntie was this way." Direct survivors saying, "I can relate to every one of your characters." Those kinds of things are just so incredibly meaningful to me. I regularly get emails from readers. They move me so deeply. - *Michelle Good*

Q. That mirrors what Kendra went through at the end, where she starts to understand her father, Kenny, a bit more.

A. Yeah, and that's such an important aspect because that thing where people say over and over again — 'Oh yeah, my mum went to residential school, but she never talked about it. My auntie or my uncle or my grandma went, but they never talked about it.' Why would they? Why would they want to talk about the most hideous thing that happened to them in their lives, the violent brutality of it all?

This book, I think, helps give survivors, I guess, an affirmation that they've been heard. That's what I want. I want survivors to read this book and say, "Yeah, that's what it was like. May the world finally understand." And, I want the children of survivors to perhaps be more gentle with their parents that can't talk about it.

Q. How did you decide on the title *Five Little Indians*?

A. It started with a title referring to the birch trees. And then, for a long time, a working title was *Indian School*. I was really committed to that because I was driving through Arizona one day and I looked up, there was this big sign on the freeway, "Exit: Indian School Road." The residential schools started in the States, they were all over the States, even more than here. And I just thought, "Oh, that's a sign. Yeah, that's the right title."

But then me and a mentor, we were just going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth about the title. And then, one day, I was just sitting there minding my own business and it just came to me in a moment: *Five Little Indians*. Perfect.

The reason that it was perfect to me is because it's a layered title. There's a terrible, racist nursery rhyme, but then again there's *my five little Indians*. There they were. They were ripped out of their homes. I felt that title gave notice to whoever is looking at it that this book is going to be about something fundamentally racist.

Especially the cover of the book, the way I look at the cover is that they're walking in an upside down world. So it just came to me. And, that's something I attribute to the ancestors as well. I think it was a gift.

Q. Michelle, what guides you as a storyteller?

A. Spirit. I guess when I'm writing something, the major question I ask myself is, "Is this true?" I don't mean true in terms of factual. I have often said, "Something need not be factual to be true," but to have an essence of truth, something that is inspirational, that is educational and that contributes something more to the world.

I don't have any critique of this, but for me, I am not "art for the sake of art" in my writing. My writing is an extension of advocacy for me.

Q. Have you always understood the distinction between truth/fact and truth/truth?

A. I think so. Like I said, I was a weird little kid, but my mom told me once that I used to argue with her on the basis of principle when I was like three years old.

She would say, 'Do this, do that,' and my response to her was, 'But mummy, it's just not right.' My poor mother, she had to deal with me.

But I do think that I was born with a certain sensibility because I remember when I was a little kid and how I looked at the world and how I thought about the world, and thinking, is it true? Is it right?

I guess there has to be a weirdo in every family.

Q. What is your definition of success as a writer?

A. To create something that moves, inspires, comforts, invigorates.

Retrieved from: <https://www.cbc.ca/books/michelle-good-on-her-novel-five-little-indians-and-the-question-that-guides-her-writing-1.6377078>

Other Links and Resources

About Chanie Wenjack:

<https://downiewenjack.ca/our-story/>

American Indian Movement:

<https://www.aimovement.org/>

Canada Reads 2022 winner:

<https://www.cbc.ca/books/canadareads/christian-allaire-championing-five-little-indians-by-michelle-good-wins-canada-reads-2022-1.6403622>

Michelle Good Is a Book Person – Interview:

<https://thetyee.ca/Culture/2021/05/26/Michelle-Good-Book-Person/>

'To call it history is simply wrong': Michelle Good on how residential schools fit into our national story:

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/q/tuesday-june-1-2021-michelle-good-girl-in-red-and-more-1.6047121/to-call-it-history-is-simply-wrong-michelle-good-on-how-residential-schools-fit-into-our-national-story-1.6048852>

Barrie Native Friendship Centre

<https://www.barrienfc.ca/>

Barrie Area Native Advisory Circle:

<https://banac.on.ca/>

First Nations of Simcoe County – A History:

<https://firstnations.innisfillibrary.ca/>

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DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: