

**‘Struggle for Survival’ in Michelle Good’s *Five Little Indians***

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**ABSTRACT**

Michelle Good is a Cree writer and a member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. After working for Indigenous organizations for twenty-five years, she obtained a law degree and advocated for residential school survivors for over fourteen years. Good took up master’s in creative writing from the University of British Columbia. Her poems, short stories, and essays have been published in magazines and anthologies across Canada. As a lawyer, she has been a tireless promoter for Indigenous people specially the survivors of residential schools. *Five Little Indians* by Michelle Good is the story of five Indigenous people, all who attended residential school in British Columbia. The book focuses on the aftermath of school life, demonstrating how the children’s lives are affected by the abuse they have gone through while in school. The novel exposes the compelling and devastating ugly Canadian truth-harsh treatment of school children, yet it a beautiful work of literary art. The teens’ struggle for survival can be witnesses in the novel *Five Little Indians* which is a fictional look at the real Canadian legacy of residential schools

Keywords: Michelle Good, Canadian, Residential, schools, harsh, aftermath, children.

## FULL ARTICLE

Michelle Good is a Cree writer and a member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. After working for Indigenous organizations for twenty-five years, she obtained a law degree and advocated for residential school survivors for over fourteen years. Good took up master's in creative writing from the University of British Columbia. Her poems, short stories, and essays have been published in magazines and anthologies across Canada, and her poetry was judged in two lists as the best Canadian poetry. As a lawyer, she has been a tireless promoter for Indigenous people specially the survivors of residential schools.

Good was born to parents of mixed race - Cree mother and French and English father in 1956 in Kitimat, B.C., both from Saskatchewan. Good spent her Summers with her maternal grandparents on the Red Pheasant reserve, north of Biggar, Sask. As she grew up, Michelle Good knew that her mother, Martha Eliza Soonias Stiff, had been sent away to school as a child. But, as a voracious reader, Good had pictured her mother having the kind of boarding-school experience she read about in British novels. When her mother started telling stories about what the school was like, Good, then a preteen, was shocked. Good said:

“I experienced an extreme case of cognitive dissonance,”

“It was ... this sense of, ‘How could this possibly happen to my mother?’ And it just became a really living part of my consciousness at a very early age.”

At 13, Good went into foster care. She describes the experience as oppressive and abusive. She did not finish high school but did find a calling in working with Indigenous organizations. Soon she returned to school in Vancouver where she was introduced to Canadian literature and fell poignantly in love with it. Good was inspired by Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, the book which led her to a “a-ha” moment that she read it twice.

In the University of British Columbia, Good encountered the problem of racism, another key aspect for her to struggle to survive. There she experienced from the system and individuals which turned out to be an eye opener that further motivated Good's work in Indigenous communities. Eventually Good began to take the cases of five residential-school survivors

and between 2006 and 2014 she involved full-time in dealing with representing survivors. After Good decided to go back to school, she began creative writing while also working as full-time lawyer. This period was the most significant as Good's novel *Five Little Indians* began to take shape here.

“I went there specifically to write this book. I didn't know what it was going to look like. “But I knew I was going to write this book because it's a book that has been asking me to write it for many years.”

*Five Little Indians* is the story of five Indigenous people, all who attended residential school in British Columbia. The book focuses on the aftermath of school life, demonstrating how the children's lives are affected by the abuse they have gone through while in school. The novel exposes the compelling and devastating ugly Canadian truth, yet it a beautiful work of literary art.

*Five Little Indians* narrates the story about five Residential school survivors who hail from British Columbia. The novel is a fiction yet partly autobiographical as it projects few episodes from real experiences of the author's mother and grandmother, who were both survivors of Canada's residential school system. The novel centers on five survivors who struggle because of harsh treatment meted out to children in the Canadian Indian residential school system. The four children's struggle for survival is relentless in varying degrees that they labour hard to rebuild their lives in Vancouver, British Columbia after their time ceases in the residential schools. in a nutshell the novel explores the fact that love and strength that can emerge after trauma. In an interview, "Good expressed that the adaptation will make the story accessible for more people to read and discover the truth.

Michelle Good's debut novel, *Five Little Indians*, chronicles the aftermath of residential school.

(Marsha Lederman May 28, 2021)

The background with which the novel was penned expresses the real experiences of Good's mother and grandmother the survivors of the residential school system. The novel traces how Good's mother talked about the traumatic histories and experiences of attending St. Barnabas Residential School in Onion Lake, Saskatchewan. These bitter experiences of the novelist's mother laid a tremendous impact on Good's life and works. Good also depended on psychological assessments of children who experienced physical and sexual abuse in

residential schools then, since she felt that she could accurately depict the long-term impacts on a person's life.

The story deals with Kenny, Lucy, Clara, Howie and Maisie, the small children who were taken from their families when very small. The children were sent to a remote, church-run residential school. The children's stay in the residential school was so long that they realised they were out of childhood on their final release after years of detention. Left alone with nothing, no one to care for them and without any skills, support or families, the teens land up in seedy and foreign world of Downtown Eastside Vancouver. Everything seems strange, scary, and weird, and the teens cling together, struggling to find a place of safety and looking for sense of belonging in a world that doesn't need them. The children make all efforts towards survival but in vain. Their paths cross and crisscross over many decades as they struggle to overcome the trauma they endured during their years at the Mission.

Powered by rage and anger 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 out beat 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. It is also personal. These incidents reflect the autobiographical element as it also projects Good's mother experienced her own horrors at residential school. For instance, when she refused to eat contaminated food, she was forced to sit with it for hours and hours, and finally dragged into the principal's office. Good says the principal commented that:

she was nothing but an Indian slut and would  
never be anything but an Indian slut.

Good herself was spared being sent away to school; her mother had lost her status when she married her non-Indigenous husband. But Good was very conscious as she wrote that her characters' experiences could have been hers. "I've been picturing myself in their shoes my whole life, basically," she says.

Still, writing the novel was a positive experience, one that gave her strength, Good says. “I felt like I was a scribe more than a creator. And I think that these stories were so deeply entrenched in me that it just felt good to speak to them – to give them voice, to contemplate the idea of that story being in the world, in the way that I expressed it,” she explains.

Another facet of the story is Good’s personal connection to the work. She penned the novel while she was in the throes of her own devastating, complex grief. The sudden death of her son, Jay Good in 2013 at the age of 31, grieved her a lot and the cause unknown. Both Mother and son were extremely close to each other. Good says:

He was my person. “I was his person,” who was shattered by the loss. “He was my only child – so there will be no grandchildren.

For Good, her son was everything. She say:

His spirit was a driving force in me finishing this book,”  
His expectations of me, his perception of me – I would have let him down if I had given up. So I couldn’t.  
I couldn’t give up.

The teens’ struggle for survival can be witnesses in the novel *Five Little Indians* which is a fictional look at the real Canadian legacy of residential schools. Very Intimate and ambitious in its description, the book is a heart-rending account of lives moulded and wrecked by the residential school system. Expertly crafted and wisely observed, the novel is a powerful testimony, tragic yet full of redemptive moments, a persevering, compassionate and touching novel about the struggle for survival, to live and love in the wake of deep trauma. Michelle Good describes the horrors of the Indian residential school system in Canada. Residential schools were commissioned by the Canadian government to “civilize” or absorb Indian children into the broader culture. The children were separated from their kith and kin, familial bonds, and tribal traditions at the budding age of six that these children did never get a chance to see or get back to their relatives again. The ill-treatment did not end here but imposed in other forms. The children experience not just the torment of separation from

parent, siblings, and community, but they were also subjected to emotional, physical, and sexual abuse at the hands of teachers and administrators in the school.

One praiseworthy virtue of the author is Michelle Good spent many years as a lawyer championing the rights of survivors of the residential schools. as a means to an end, Good pursued a Master of Fine Arts degree which resulted in a thesis and served as the basis for her present novel. Falling into various categories of Native American Literature, British and Irish Literary Fiction, the novel is intended for adult readers as it describes the abuse of children.

The setting of the novel is Vancouver, British Columbia. The story covers the experiences of five Indian children who survived the residential school system and follows their lives over a 30-year period beginning in the early 1960s. The point of view of the story is multiple perspectives with a limited third person narrative technique. The First-person narration is employed only in the description related to Maisie and in a brief sequence in which Howie describes his abduction at the age of six.

The plot involves the life orbit of five children: Kenny, Lucy, Maisie, Clara, and Howie. The use of flashback episodes serves the meaningful purpose of describe the children's years of abuse at the hands of the administrators of a Catholic Mission school on the outskirts of Vancouver, Canada. The readers are also shown through the flashback how each of the children in their later years struggle with trauma. One takes an overdose of heroin, and another dies from alcohol poisoning. Two of the characters eventually overcome their early trauma to create happy and fulfilling lives for themselves. Thus the author projects the themes of struggle for survival, tolerance, abuse coping strategies, the failure of the assimilation theory, longing for home, and the quest to find home through the description of the adult lives of the survivors of the residential school.

Certain doctrines drove the creation of the residential school system in those days. One such major principle was assimilation-the belief that removing Indian children from their traditional context and indoctrinating them with the ways of the larger culture would make it easier for them to blend into society as adults. Good's novel is a fine example of the reality of children released from the system. During their time in school, they learn no useful skills, and their education turns out to become meaningless. They are exploited as a source of free labour to keep the institution running when they aren't being emotionally or sexually abused by the staff.

Lucy's confusion is evident during her initial journey to Vancouver after being set free at the age of 16. Her experience is like releasing a tame animal into the wild and expecting it to survive independently. The instructors at the schools ingrained docility and obedience into their pupils. These traits are useless to an innocent in an urban environment: "Wide awake now, Lucy pressed her face against the window, astounded by the lights, the endless flow of traffic, stores and malls and gas stations, things entirely new to her. Her life in the outside world ended abruptly when she was five years old" (38).

The Symbols and Motifs employed in the story signifies episodes of anger. The five children who have encountered the Mission school experience find it difficult to control their tempers. Under the wrong circumstances, each one exhibits an outburst of rage. This behaviour pattern heightens the motif that speaks to the theme of failed assimilation. In every case, the Mission survivor is faced with a situation in the outside world that triggers a sense of helplessness that originated at the school. Kenny, an ordinarily and kind soul is driven to fury when his when his foreman lessens his pay and retains the bonus Kenny earned by picking two extra bins of apples. He rebels against this unjust treatment because his job performance was exemplary for three years prior to that point. Unable to control himself, Kenny attacks his boss and flees to escape the police. Lucy is also mild tempered until the owner of the Manitou ridicules her aspirations to be a nurse and makes degrading comments about her culture and gender. While Lucy doesn't physically assault her boss, she feels enough righteous in doing with compassion and insight.

The title *Five Little Indians* is aptly justified as it expresses the story of five small children who hail from India and undergo harassment in the hands of the authorities in residential school. Michelle Good wrote the title referring to the birch trees in the beginning. Later she chose the working title as *Indian School* for which Good was really committed to because she was driving through Arizona one day and saw a big sign on the freeway, which read "Exit: Indian School Road." By then the residential schools were established all over the States and Good thought, this was a good a sign embodying the right title. But she and a mentor were going back and forth, about the title. Finally one day while Good was sitting and minding her business, it came to her in a flash: *Five Little Indians* which Good was assured that it was Perfect. The layered title projects racist nursery rhyme, that the five little Indians were ripped out of their homes and that the title gives notice to something fundamentally racist.

Thus, the novel *Five Little Indians* chronicles the desperate quest of the five friends who struggle to survive the harsh realities-insults, degradations and injustice-heaped on them in residential schools in Canada and these survivors to come to terms with their past and, ultimately, find a way forward to earn bread and butter to earn their living. In her acceptance speech for the First Novel Award Thursday evening, Good talked about the guidance she received from her ancestors as she wrote the book: "I feel that their fingerprints are all over this." Especially the cover of the book suggests that the children are walking in an upside-down world. Certainly, Good is not for the credo of "art for the sake of art", but her writing is an extension of advocacy to the people moral values to be practised.

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