



They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School

Bev Sellars

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Xat'sull Chief Bev Sellars spent her childhood in a church-run residential school whose aim it was to "civilize" Native children through Christian teachings, forced separation from family and culture, and discipline. In addition, beginning at the age of five, Sellars was isolated for two years at Coqualeetza Indian Tuberculosis Hospital in Sardis, British Columbia, nearly six hours' drive from home. The trauma of these experiences has reverberated throughout her life.

The first full-length memoir to be published out of St. Joseph's Mission at Williams Lake, BC, Sellars tells of three generations of women who attended the school, interweaving the personal histories of her grandmother and her mother with her own. She tells of hunger, forced labour, and physical beatings, often with a leather strap, and also of the demand for conformity in a culturally alien institution where children were confined and denigrated for failure to be White and Roman Catholic.

Like Native children forced by law to attend schools across Canada and the United States, Sellars and other students of St. Joseph's Mission were allowed home only for two months in the summer and for two weeks at Christmas. The rest of the year they lived, worked, and studied at the school. St. Joseph's Mission is the site of the controversial and well-publicized sex-related offences of Bishop Hubert O'Connor, which took place during Sellars's student days, between 1962 and 1967, when O'Connor was the school principal. After the school's closure, those who had been forced to attend came from surrounding reserves and smashed windows, tore doors and cabinets from the wall, and broke anything that could be broken. Overnight their anger turned a site of shameful memory into a pile of rubble.

In this frank and poignant memoir, Sellars breaks her silence about the institution's lasting effects, and eloquently articulates her own path to healing.

They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School **Details**

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Review by Dr. Theresa Turmel

I usually get very excited about reading a book written by a residential school survivor and this instance was no exception. I experience joy in that we are now hearing survivors' voices that had in the past been silenced.

Bev Sellars' They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School details Sellars' life from the time she was five years old until the age of 58 and she notes four reasons she felt compelled to write this book.

First, Sellars wanted to recognize that in the early 1990s "our communities first began to explore and deal with the aftermath of the Indian residential schools."

Second, Sellars wanted to share her experience with fellow survivors -- those she knew who were suffering the same experiences.

Third, through the process of writing, Sellars felt she was "still disassembling the restrictive world in which" she used to live and wanted to move forward in that process.

Lastly, Sellars was and continues to feel angry about the way Aboriginal people were treated and are still being treated in Canada and wanted to express and resolve some of that anger.

Read more here: <http://rabble.ca/books/reviews/2013/1...>

Rick says

This is an excellent book to help people really understand the impact Residential Schools have had on First Nations in Canada. Bev Sellars account of her experiences is honest and forthright. It is unique in several respects. First, she is a member of the last generation to attend residential schools in her area of British Columbia. However, she also relates aspects of her mother's and grandmother's experiences with the schools; the book, therefore, actually covers three generations quite well (but not chronologically). As with most accounts of Residential Schools, the book is heartbreaking and deeply troubling. Every Canadian, however, should read at least one of these accounts. I would recommend this book or another excellent one entitled, Up Ghost River.

Jennifer Bonnell says

Such a brave book, plainly and powerfully told. It made me see beyond the gross abuses of the residential

school system to the everyday, routine and systematic ways that children were demoralized.

Linda says

Chief Bev Sellars disturbing account of attending St. Joseph's Mission Lake Residential School. The Number One in the title refers to the "name" aboriginal children were assigned at the residential school.

Alexis says

I think this book should be taught in all schools and read by everyone, especially anyone who doesn't understand

1. The impact of residential schools
2. Why Canada's First Nations people have ongoing problems of poverty and violence
3. How Canada fucked up and failed First Nations people

Chief Bev Sellars tells her story in a straight forward, easy to follow format. It's almost as if she is sitting with you, telling you what happened to her. You can tell that she spent a long time thinking about this story and how to tell it. It's moving, disturbing and relevant.

I admired her strength to come forward and share. I would recommend this book to anyone and everyone.

If this book doesn't disturb you or bother you or make you want to act, then you just aren't paying attention.

Olivia Claire says

I read this book start to finish on my ferry ride from Tsawassen to Victoria. I never put it down. I had always been interested to learn more about this horribly dark time in Canadian history that never gets spoken about, and this book gave me more insight than I could have imagined. It was fascinating in the most awful way, making me feel ashamed, horrified and heartbroken for every person who had to go through a residential school and the aftermath that followed them. This book should be mandatory read in the social studies curriculum and then some; A must read for every Canadian.

Jules Goud says

Residential schools are a dark part of Canadian history and the sad part is that most Canadians do not know about them. They are avoided and not talked about along with the many other problems that Native people face today.

I myself didn't know much about residential schools before I read this book. I just knew what they were trying to achieve and that the means that they used were terrible. However, this book explained just how terrible they were treated in those schools. They were abused physical, sexually and above all, mentally. The

pain that the children endured was then reflected in their lives afterwards. A lot committed suicide and many also turned to drugs and alcohol to cope with the abuse that they suffered in those schools. It is such a heartbreaking subject to read about, and it is absolutely despicable what those people did to the native people.

I really like the fact that Sellars only told her story. The experiences in these schools would be different for everybody and she doesn't try to tell anyone else's story. She just tells her own and the abuse that she suffered. Some people don't want to speak about the things that they had to go through in these so-called schools and Sellars respects that. She gives the reader her story and pieces of her grandmother and her mother's experiences but that is it. She leaves the other people involved to tell their story.

This book is about the totally affected of the residential schools. The reader follows Sellars as she goes through her experiences, as she tries to come to terms with what she had to go through and her healing process. The reader learns that even though we have come a long way from the residential schools, there is still lots of work to do.

Mj says

They called me Number One is a first hand account of the impact of the St. Joseph's Mission, a Residential School located in Williams Lake, British Columbia (B.C.), Canada. This is the first full length memoir out of St. Joseph's Mission and was written by Bev Sellars, chief of the Xat'Sull First Nations in Williams Lake, B.C. The memoir is primarily about Sellars' family including four generations of women – her grandmother, her mother, herself and her daughter. Only her daughter did not spend any time in a Residential School but she too has been impacted by its legacy,

The Title was chosen because when native children were taken away from their families for 10 months a year, without visitation, to attend the St. Joseph's Mission, the children were no longer called by the name their parents had given them but were instead assigned a number. They were called by that number for the duration of their stay. One's name is one's identity, one's pride and how others know you and how you identify your own unique self. How can anyone interpret the Residential Schools' intentions and actions as anything but negative? It was a deliberate and full blown attempt and strategy to obliterate the Aboriginal children's past and their native heritage in order for the Residential Schools to reinvent the children according to their own preferred ways. Sellars' memoir describes how the St. Joseph's Mission operated and treated the children in their care.

The book is well worth reading even if you have read other books about Residential Schools and their impact on Natives or Aboriginals (Canadian Natives in this case). It is even more worthwhile if this will be your first exposure to reading about this part of Canadian history. Unfortunately, non-Canadians will also learn much from this book as there seems to be a pattern throughout history in many parts of the world of poor treatment of Aboriginals; as if they were non-persons without rights.

It is apparent when reading this memoir, that Sellars has given a great deal of thought to the issues and has been a critical observer of First Nation peoples' experiences throughout her life. Her memoir is filled with a great deal of insight and thoughtfulness. It is a firm and rational analysis of what happened to generations of native children and families and the extent of the damage caused.

Sellars tells her story, objectively but with impact, illustrating how multiple generations were negatively

impacted by racism, abuse and control (beatings, hunger, forced labour, and sexual advances including rape with minors.) Her memoir style is reserved but clear and her writing and accomplishments are evidence that Bev Sellars has a strong intellect and excellent leadership skills. Sellars, as a single mother, trained as an accountant, a business student and lawyer at post-secondary schools and first became a chief at the urging of others in her community. She is a woman to be respected with a story worth telling and reading. Much of the memoir is about her personal pain and her journey of healing. It have no doubt that it was very difficult to write but Sellars is courageous and hopeful that the telling of her story will help many others who currently unable to tell share their story to begin to speak out and start their own healing process.

From an article on January 29, 2014 in the Williams Lake Tribune entitled “Books That Changed Me” by Mark Thiessen, Superintendent of Williams Lake School District 27 (not speaking about Bev Sellars’ book per se but about books he’s read describing the Residential School Experience) and I quote ***“There are those in our communities who feel that our First Nations friends and neighbours should just “get over” their residential school experiences. With all of my recent reading, I have a much better understanding as to why our expectations need to change.”***

From back flap of the book contributed by Chief Phil Fontaine, former National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations and I quote ***“Chief Sellars bravely adds her voice to the burgeoning chorus of stories about residential schools and their powerful effects on family life, community wellness and self-image. That she has been able to carefully articulate such a deeply personal and painful story is a testament to her courage and determination.”***

Both of the above comments will hopefully give you cause to consider reading They Called me Number One – a Third Place Winner of the 2014 BURT AWARD for First Nation, Métis and Inuit Literature sponsored by CODE.

Despite the dark subject matter, the book is surprisingly hopeful and optimistic as Sellars features other survivors besides herself who are now taking leadership roles to make positive change in their communities.

Magdelanye says

Bev Sellers writes with authority and concision, testifying here to her years in residential school and her years of service to her community.

Frank Busch says

It seems that many books have come out telling Residential School stories, many of them written by non-survivors. "They Called Me Number One" by Chief Bev Sellars is the real deal and an ideal primer for anyone curious about the Residential School era. Without sensationalizing the physical and sexual abuse that was all too common, readers can experience exactly what it was like to be incarcerated in an Indian Residential School as a child, as well as dealing with the effects of being indoctrinated into a foreign culture only to be dumped back into your devastated homeland years later. This novel is an expose of Canada's darkest chapter, but it is also a story of triumph over adversity and impossible odds.

Sam says

Important and clearly written. I read it in one day.

Diana says

A must-read. Books like these chronicling the atrocities that Indigenous people have courageously endured should be incorporated into the Canadian curriculum. It vividly describes a history that we choose to ignore, leading to the pervasive stereotypes to which indigenous people are subjected. Told with frankness and clarity, we are hearing the voice and thoughts of a residential school victim, a number one fighter, a resilient lawyer. Bev Sellars is not here to survive, she is here to live.

Linda Hopf says

Bev Sellers & I are roughly the same age but our experiences as young Canadians couldn't have been more different. I thank her for telling her story. It helped me understand the impact that residential schools & racism had/have on the minds & hearts of our Aboriginal people. What shocks me is how the Catholic Church managed to find so many cold hearted sadists from their flock of priests & nuns to man all those schools. I mean bad apples are supposed to be the exception not the rule. The devil is dancing here. And the Canadian government ...boy have they ever f'ed this whole thing up.

Shambe says

I have lived in Canada almost all my life and never knew of some of these injustices. It is excellent that Sellers told this lost story in an easy to follow, enjoyable and informative way.

Kat says

Bev Sellars takes us on a tri-generational journey through the horrific realities of life & living in St. Joseph's Mission Residential School. Bev is able to paint pictures with words. As a result, the images are at times horrifying, at times perplexing and confusing, sad, angry and, yes, even at times joyful and filled with hope and humour. But make no mistake, as one person stated, if they had known earlier in their life what jail/prison was like, they would have chosen to go there instead of back to residential school after "escaping" and being found. Residential school reality was worse than prison! Read this book to develop some insights into the laws created to "take the Indian out of the Indian" and find out how Bev Sellars rose above her experiences (when so many others were unable to do so) and become a gifted leader within the First Nations community.

