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They Called Me Number One: Secrets And Survival At An Indian Residential School



Synopsis

Like thousands of Aboriginal children in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere in the colonized world, Xatsu'll chief Bev Sellars spent part of her childhood as a student in a church-run residential school. These institutions endeavored to "civilize" Native children through Christian teachings; forced separation from family, language, and culture; and strict discipline. Perhaps the most symbolically potent strategy used to alienate residential school children was addressing them by assigned numbers only—not by the names with which they knew and understood themselves. In this frank and poignant memoir of her years at St. Joseph's Mission, Sellars breaks her silence about the residential school's lasting effects on her and her family—from substance abuse to suicide attempts—and eloquently articulates her own path to healing. Number One comes at a time of recognition; by governments and society at large; that only through knowing the truth about these past injustices can we begin to redress them. Bev Sellars is chief of the Xatsu'll (Soda Creek) First Nation in Williams Lake, British Columbia. She holds a degree in history from the University of Victoria and a law degree from the University of British Columbia. She has served as an advisor to the British Columbia Treaty Commission.

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Customer Reviews

"They Called Me Number One" by Bev Sellars is far more than a story of the residential school experience. It is the story of a courageous child and woman who survived by clinging to the pieces of her life that were kind and good. Her wonderful Gran who taught her compassion and even a few caring words from a dormitory supervisor. She held to these large and small pieces of flotsam in order to maintain the courage to survive the beatings and ridicule that were the daily bread of the unholy alliance between the Catholic Church and the Canadian government. Sellars does not spare the people and the system that abused her, and generations of her family, but she also remembers those who threw a life ring. For all survivors she has written a self-help book equal to any that she reports reading in her adult years. When people ask, "What do the First Nations of Canada want?" give them this book. I know that I will.

Chief Sellars spends the first half of this book describing the horrors visited upon her and 3 generations of her people and family by the Indian residential system. The second describes the struggle she went through to overcome the trauma and grow into a leader of and passionate spokeswoman for her people. I can only imagine the relived pain this book cost Chief Sellars, but I thank her for bearing it. Part of the book's power is the clear, lucid but passionate language in which the story is told. Others have told the big picture story of history's largest genocide, but Chief Sellars puts a face and place to it. A must read.

Bev Sellars' "They Called Me Number One" is not my first literate foray into the horror that was the Canadian Indian/American Indian/First Nation experience of 'residential schools'; still it was insightful and provided me with a much better understanding of why there is so much social, emotional and psychological destruction that takes place within many of their communities/reservations. Ms. Sellars tells the heart wrenching, joyful and intimate story of both her life and that of those closest to her. She gives details about how the Canadian government from the late 1800s straight through today have used laws to undermine indigenous culture via many routes, but focuses heavily on the 'boarding school' experience which was meant to 'civilize' the indigenous peoples of the Americas (and take their land) by forcefully removing them from their parents at tender ages, force them to stop speaking their native language, forbid them to dress in their native clothes, forbid them to eat their native foods, forbid them to practice their native religion and abusing them sadistically (physical beatings, sexual abuse, verbal and mental abuse and death) if they couldn't 'adapt' or 'keep up'. Sadly, but predictably, these institutions were headed by Christian

churches throughout the Americas and sanctioned by the Canadian and American governments. Per Bev Sellars, though there has been progress, there is still a very long way to go for the indigenous peoples of Canada. It's long past time for the Canadian (and American) government to step up, take responsibility for their past crimes against humanity and do everything in their power (and then some) to right past wrongs. Much can be done â€” only lack of will stands in the way. An excellent book that every Canadian regardless of hue or race should read.

It was an eye opening experience. I realized in North America our own indigenous peoples were wronged in so many ways. We turned our back on the injustices toward those who are the original people who were the first to live here. In truth we are the invaders who robbed them of everything that was "them". As a white woman, I feel all persons should read informative narrative.

An eye opening book for me. I wanted to understand more about the residential schools and got a much wider picture of what happened to the First Nations people not many years ago... I also understand that it will take a few generations to overcome the horrific history. And I still cannot understand how all this happened in modern times!

It is understated, honest, direct and compelling. It fills in the gaps in our country's history. It would serve us to teach this in our schools. It's a perfect example of how not to treat children.

Well written. Clear and honest. I really got a sense of her life as a child, as a teen, as an adult. Definitely a book that needs to be required reading in junior/high school for all students.

Heart-breaking; unthinkable that this could have been policy for First Nations. All Canadians should read this. But I would have liked more of the historical context.

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