

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

From the Ashes

by Jesse Thistle

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out [the Book Club How-to resource](#).

Author Bio

Jesse Thistle is Métis-Cree, from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and an assistant professor in Humanities at York University in Toronto. *From the Ashes* was the top-selling Canadian book in 2020, the winner of the Kobo Emerging Writer Prize for Nonfiction, Indigenous Voices Award, and High Plains Book Award, and also a finalist for CBC Canada Reads. Jesse won a Governor General's Academic Medal in 2016, and is a Pierre Elliot Trudeau Foundation Scholar and a Vanier Scholar. A frequent keynote speaker, he lives in Hamilton, Ontario, with his wife, Lucie, and is at work on multiple projects, including his next book. Visit him at JesseThistle.com

Summary

From the Ashes is Jesse Thistle's memoir of childhood instability, family separation, addiction, homelessness and incarceration, and his eventual reconnection with family, education and his Métis-Cree identity. Thistle traces how experiences beginning in early childhood—including hunger, violence, abandonment and disconnection from his culture—continued to shape his relationships, health and choices into adulthood. His story then follows more

than a decade spent moving between streets, shelters, prisons, treatment programs and the homes of family and friends, while also remembering the moments of care and human connection that helped him survive.

The book demonstrates how trauma, colonialism, family relationships, addiction, poverty, anti-Indigenous racism, health, chance and institutional responses can accumulate and interact across a lifetime, shaping chronic experiences of homelessness and poverty. Likewise, his eventual recovery is shaped by many things accumulating and breaking through over time: treatment, education, relationships, cultural reconnection, grit and resilience, family reconciliation and opportunities that became available when he was able to accept them.

From the Ashes asks us to consider the enormity and complexity of peoples' lives, as we plan and prioritize responses to substance use and addiction, homelessness, and the on-going impacts of colonialism. It leaves us with important questions about what people need in order to heal and belong again, and what responsibilities communities and public systems have to create conditions in which people can survive and rebuild. While Thistle's experience is his own, his story also asks us to reckon with the broader story of the continuing ways colonialism has disrupted Indigenous families, communities, identities, and relationships to home.

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

From the Ashes is particularly relevant during the month of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. [The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action](#) recognize that the ongoing effects of colonial policies can be seen across health, education, child welfare and the justice system. They call on governments to address Indigenous health inequities, the distinct needs of Métis and off-reserve Indigenous peoples, gaps in education and employment, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in custody. Stories like Thistle's can help us better understand the conditions that reconciliation asks governments, institutions and communities to change—and the legal and moral imperative to act.

The right to adequate housing is protected in international human rights law, and the [Human Rights Commissioner has identified homelessness and encampments as evidence of governments' failure to uphold that right](#). The

Commissioner has also identified [B.C.'s toxic drug crisis as a human-rights crisis](#), calling for responses grounded in evidence, public health and compassion rather than stigma and punishment. These issues intersect throughout Thistle's story: access to safe housing, health care, addiction treatment, cultural connection and community cannot easily be separated from one another.

Poverty and homelessness can also expose people to discrimination because of their social or economic circumstances. In B.C., "social condition" is not currently a protected ground under the Human Rights Code, meaning the Code does not generally prohibit discrimination simply because someone is poor, unhoused or otherwise socially or economically disadvantaged. Other Canadian jurisdictions, including Quebec, New Brunswick and the Northwest Territories, do protect social condition. [The Human Rights Commissioner has recommended that social condition be added to B.C.'s Human Rights Code](#), recognizing that poverty, homelessness and economic marginalization can expose people to stigma, exclusion, and unequal treatment.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the book and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Whole lives and fragmented systems – responding to homelessness

Jesse's life includes many periods when he had somewhere to sleep but was still unstable, disconnected, or without any lasting sense of home. Later, [in his research on Indigenous homelessness](#), he argues that homelessness must also be understood as separation from family, culture, land, identity, and community. What gets missed when homelessness, addiction, health or criminalization are treated as separate problems? If people's lives are shaped by many conditions at once, what would it require for governments and service providers to respond to the whole person rather than only the immediate issue in front of them?

- Housing is essential, but Jesse's story shows why neither homelessness nor the other challenges he faced could be addressed through a single intervention. At different points, systems responded to fragments of his life: disruptive behaviour at school without addressing his wider

childhood needs; medical interventions for his staph infection, without considering the living conditions he would return to; or income assistance without adequate addiction supports. Thistle's later research asks governments and service providers to recognize material housing needs alongside relationships to family, culture, land, and community. A more holistic response requires coordination across systems and attention to how trauma, colonialism, poverty, racism, health, relationships and institutional responses accumulate over time. The problem is not that people's lives are 'too complicated,' but rather that our systems are often organized to see and respond to only pieces of people's lives.

2. Acts of care inside fragmented and imperfect systems

Throughout the book, Jesse remembers a number of people whose help did not fix the larger conditions around him, but still mattered: a teacher who comforted him when he feared physical punishment at home, an employer who quietly connected him with addiction support, a pastor who helped him pursue his GED in prison, and finally an Ottawa shelter worker who happened upon Jesse during a suicidal crisis, reminded him of the brothers he had spoken about, and intervened. What do these moments suggest about the both the limits and the power of one person's compassion, even when they are working inside a system they may not control?

- Small acts of care are not a substitute for adequately funded and accountable systems. However, as Jesse's story shows us, these small acts of care can still interrupt isolation, restore dignity, and sometimes create an opening for something larger to change. People working in schools, health care, social services, corrections and other institutions are often keenly and frustratingly aware of where policies fail the people in front of them. Their ability to listen, exercise discretion, spend extra time, connect someone to another service, or simply treat a person as worthy of care can matter enormously. Human judgment, discretion, and courage to respond differently can make systems more responsive, and be a conduit for broader change that is still needed.

3. Keeping doors open

Jesse has several moments when he wants help, but the systems around him are not always ready to respond. How should health and social-service systems

be designed so that a moment of readiness is a meaningful pathway to care, rather than another missed opportunity?

- Jesse's story shows how fragile and temporary a window for change can be. People experiencing addiction, homelessness, or other crises may not be able to wait weeks, navigate complex eligibility or insurance rules, or repeatedly advocate for themselves while their health, stability and capacity to seek help deteriorate. Keeping the door open means reducing barriers, creating smoother transitions between detox, treatment, housing and ongoing care, and making it easier for someone to receive help at the moment they ask for it. We cannot predict when, where or how someone will be ready for change, but we can design and build our services to ensure culturally appropriate, financially accessible, and meaningfully healing support is available when that moment comes.

4. Crime, accountability and compassion

Jesse's story includes both serious harm done to him, and harm he causes others through theft, addiction and reckless behaviour. People harmed by Jesse include store clerks he robs, family members he betrays or whose willingness to help he takes advantage of, and others he encounters throughout the book. How might our understanding of crime change if we looked not only at the harmful and criminal act, but also at the conditions that helped shape it? What might accountability look like if the goal of justice included consequences for harm, repairing relationships, addressing the conditions that contributed to harm, and supporting people to return safely to community?

- Compassion does not require minimizing harm or removing accountability. It does, however, ask us to understand more fully how people come to cause harm, and whether punishment alone can provide meaningful healing and prevent future harm. Restorative and transformative justice approaches offer different ways of thinking about accountability, repair, healing, and reintegration; Indigenous justice models may also centre relationships, community and culturally grounded responses.
- In British Columbia, organizations and initiatives such as the [North Shore Restorative Justice Society](#), [SFU's Centre for Restorative Justice](#),

[Indigenous Justice Centres](#) and [Unlocking the Gates](#) offer examples of responses that look beyond punishment alone. Many of these programs and initiatives look beyond the criminal act, and ask us to consider – who was harmed, what contributed to that harm, what is needed to repair it, and what conditions might help prevent it from happening again.

5. Recovery without a tidy ending

If there was no single reason Jesse became homeless or addicted, why would we expect there to be a single reason he recovered? What do we miss when stories of recovery are reduced to one single turning point, program, or act of personal determination? How did you feel in the final portion of the book, in which Jesse provided details of his recovery journey far more sparsely than he documented the rest of his life? Where do you think Jesse found the internal strength and commitment to recovery when he did, particularly at moments when others had stopped believing he could change?

- Earlier in the guide, we considered how no single experience or condition explains Jesse's homelessness, addiction or involvement with the justice system. The same is true of his recovery: treatment, education, family reconciliation, cultural reconnection, health care, relationships, opportunity, timing and chance all accumulate over time. Jesse also makes difficult choices and draws on an internal determination that others cannot supply for him. That personal agency matters a great deal. But it cannot exist in isolation: it is shaped by relationships, opportunities, and systems that can either support a person's effort to change or make it harder to sustain.
- The book's relative brevity about these final years may leave us wanting clearer answers to questions like "why now?" or "what changed?" But perhaps there is no single answer. Recovery can involve both an intensely personal decision to change, and the presence of enough support, safety and opportunity for that decision to take hold. Just as people's lives cannot be understood in fragments, meaningful responses cannot depend on finding a single solution. Systems need to sustain multiple pathways to treatment, housing, education, cultural connection, health care and community.

6. Métis dispossession, scrip, and the Road Allowance People

Jesse traces part of his family history to Métis communities who lived on road allowances across the Prairies. Following Métis resistance and Canada's westward expansion, the federal government used a [system known as scrip to address Métis land claims](#), issuing individual certificates for land or money rather than recognizing a collective Métis land base. Many Métis families ultimately became landless, and some settled on strips of Crown land reserved for roads and other public uses—communities whose residents became known as the "[Road Allowance People](#)." How did Canadian land policy contribute to Métis dispossession? What can this history teach us about the relationship between land, colonialism, poverty, and homelessness today?

- The history of Métis road allowance communities reminds us that homelessness and poverty do not emerge in recent histories. Scrip was intended to settle—and ultimately extinguish—Métis claims to land, but the process contributed to widespread dispossession as certificates were sold, transferred or exploited through speculation and fraud. Jesse's family history connects his later experiences of homelessness and cultural disconnection to a much longer history of Métis displacement, while also reminding us that contemporary Indigenous homelessness cannot be understood apart from colonial policies governing land, movement and belonging.
- For additional learning and resources on Métis cultures, you can explore the [Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research](#), and learn more about the [Métis Nation of British Columbia](#).