



Commissioner's Book Club: Indian Horse

Discussion guide

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

[Richard Wagamese](#), an Ojibway author and journalist from the Wabaseemoong First Nation, was one of Canada's foremost writers. His bestselling novels include *Indian Horse*, which earned an array of awards and was made into a feature film. He was also the author of highly praised memoirs and personal reflections, such as *Embers* and *One Story, One Song*, winner of the George Ryga Award for Social Awareness in Literature. Wagamese's work was recognized with a National Aboriginal Achievement Award and the Writers' Trust of Canada's Matt Cohen Award. He died in 2017 in Kamloops, BC.¹

Summary

Growing up in northern Ontario in the 1960s, Saul Indian Horse is removed from his Ojibway family, sent to a harsh residential school, where he suffers abuse and is denied his language and culture. He excels at hockey, but even when he rises to

¹ "Richard Wagamese," Douglas and McIntyre, 2025, <https://douglas-mcintyre.com/collections/richard-wagamese>.

competitive levels, racism and violence follow him off the rink. As an adult, battling alcoholism at a recovery centre, he finally confronts his past, facing both the horrors he endured and the healing that comes from reclaiming his story.

This is essential reading for all Canadians—not only to understand the devastating impact of the residential school system and the abuse that flourished there, but also to get a glimpse into traditional Ojibwe ways of living and how the first peoples’ relationship to the land was interrupted by the colonial project of residential schools. Wagamese perfectly demonstrates the power of storytelling to the process of understanding human rights violations.

—Commissioner Govender

Linking the book to human rights in B.C.

Human rights are about fairness, dignity and respect. They include the right to education, to safety, to family and culture and to live free from discrimination. These rights are protected in international agreements like the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples ([UNDRIP](#)).²

B.C. also passed the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act ([DRIPA](#))³ in 2019 to bring provincial laws into line with UNDRIP. These laws affirm Indigenous rights to self-determination, culture, language, land, and spiritual practice.

Today, BC’s *Human Rights Code* protects against discrimination based on Indigenous identity, race, ancestry, disability and other aspects of human identity. The addition of Indigenous identity to this list in 2021 was made to recognize the ongoing racism that Indigenous people face in BC.

Following the addition of Indigenous identity as a protected ground in B.C.’s *Human Rights Code*, BC’s Human Rights Commissioner, Kasari Govender, [released a statement](#),⁴ which included the following:

² “UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” United Nations, 2007, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/indigenous-peoples/un-declaration-rights-indigenous-peoples>.

³ “Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act,” Government of British Columbia, 2025, <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/governments/indigenous-people/new-relationship/united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples>.

⁴ “Statement from B.C.’s Human Rights Commissioner on the addition of Indigenous identity as a protected ground in B.C.’s Human Rights Code,” BC’s Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, 2021, <https://bchumanrights.ca/news-and-events/news/statement-from-b-c-s->



“Today’s announcements are important steps in fulfilling the commitments of the *Declaration Act* and I applaud them. Together we’ve taken a step to make the human rights system more accessible and inclusive to Indigenous people, but we have further to go. The *Declaration Act* can be transformative and the task ahead is to realize this transformative potential. Let us not underestimate both the need and the vision required to breathe life into these commitments.”

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. **What responses did Saul’s removal from his family evoke in you?**
 - Answers will vary.
2. **What role(s) does hockey play in Saul’s life?**
 - Hockey gives Saul a sense of purpose, belonging and spiritual connection. Yet it also becomes another site of racism, showing that even refuge can hold prejudice.
3. **How does silence function in Saul’s life?**
 - Saul learns to be silent to survive. But that silence also hides his trauma. Speaking his story becomes a key part of his healing.
4. **How does Saul’s anger and violence when he’s older reflect deeper wounds?**
 - His anger is trauma calling out—unseen scars shaped by abuse and racism. This reminds us that mental health is a human-rights issue—unaddressed trauma hurts communities.
5. **Saul turns to alcohol for relief. How might we understand this as a disability/health-rights issue?**
 - Substance use disorder is recognized as a health condition that requires support, not punishment. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) supports access to care. Services in B.C. often reflect this approach now.

[human-rights-commissioner-on-the-addition-of-indigenous-identity-as-a-protected-ground-in-b-c-s-human-rights-code/](https://www.bchumanrights.ca/book-club/human-rights-commissioner-on-the-addition-of-indigenous-identity-as-a-protected-ground-in-b-c-s-human-rights-code/).



6. What is the role of storytelling in human rights movements?

- Stories build empathy, shift minds and demand change. Saul's story helps make injustice visible and undeniable.

7. How does storytelling—writing his memoir—contribute to Saul's healing?

- Storytelling helps reclaim agency, connect to community and share truth. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) emphasized the importance of truth-telling in healing historical wrongs (TRC Call to Action #77).

8. Which human-rights protections existed when Saul was a student at residential school and which came later?

- Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect in 1982—after Saul was a child. The Ontario *Human Rights Code* was adopted in 1962 but didn't serve Indigenous children. B.C.'s first human rights legislation was passed in 1969 (and included prohibitions on racial discrimination) but did not specifically include Indigenous Identity until 2021. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission began its work in 2008 and released its final report, including the [94 Calls to Action](#),⁵ in 2015. It wasn't until 2010 that the Prime Minister of Canada apologized to former Residential School students on behalf of all Canadians.⁶

9. Do Canada's apology and UNDRIP help prevent future violations? Why or why not?

- They're crucial steps—they set legal and moral expectations. Canada passed UNDRIP into law in 2021. But enforcement funding, and real change depend on implementation and education.

10. After reading, how would you define true reconciliation for yourself?

- Answers will vary. It might mean personal and societal actions: learning truth, recognizing privileges, advocating change, supporting Indigenous-led education and other actions.

⁵ National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*, (National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, 2015), https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf.

⁶ "Statement of apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools," Government of Canada. 2008, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1571589171655>.

