

Medicine Walk

By Richard Wagamese

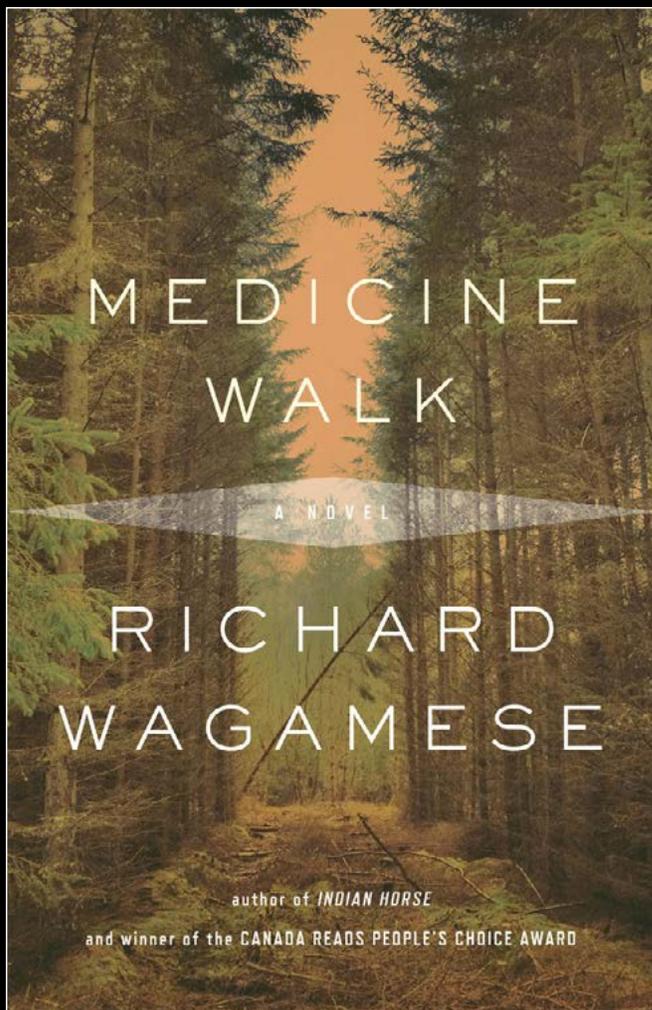
READERS' CHOICE 2017

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL



BOOK CLUB

2017 READER'S
CHOICE



**November/
December 2017
Discussion Guide**

**AMNESTY
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About this month's featured author,
Richard Wagamese

Richard Wagamese (October 14, 1955 – March 10, 2017) was an award-winning Canadian author and journalist from the Wabaseemoong Independent Nations in northwestern Ontario. Wagamese was best known for his 2012 novel *Indian Horse*, which was featured in our Book Club in 2015. *Indian Horse* won the Burt Award for First Nations, Métis and Inuit Literature in 2013 and was a competing title in the 2013 edition of Canada Reads. The film *Indian Horse* premiered theatrically at the 2017 Toronto International Film Festival. Wagamese worked as a professional writer since 1979. He was a newspaper columnist and reporter, radio and television broadcaster and producer, documentary producer and the author of 13 titles from major Canadian publishers.

Wagamese's parents and extended family members were among the tens of thousands of Indigenous women and men forced to attend Residential Schools in Canada. Wagamese called himself "a second-generation survivor" because of the impacts that he experienced. In many of his works, he drew from his own struggle with family dysfunction that he attributed to the isolating church-run schools.

Richard Wagamese is remembered not only for his powerful writing that reflected on the legacy of the residential school system, but for his generous and loving spirit.

The Amnesty International Book Club is pleased to announce our Readers' Choice winner for 2017, *Medicine Walk* by Richard Wagamese.

In this heartbreaking story about redemption, forgiveness and past regrets, Wagamese writes a magnificent story. A novel about love, friendship, courage, and the idea that the land has within it powers of healing, *Medicine Walk* reveals the ultimate goodness of its characters and offers a deeply moving and redemptive conclusion.

Wagamese's 2014 novel *Medicine Walk* addresses efforts to preserve culture and heal a divided family — as a teenage son and dying father who barely know each other embark on a journey through the backcountry of the B.C. Interior so that the father can be buried according to Ojibway (Anishnaabe) custom.

This guide will examine current initiatives to help address rights violations experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada, and how the novel illustrates these themes.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. We appreciate your interest and would love to hear from you with any questions, suggestions or comments you may have. Just send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at:

Amnesty International,
312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

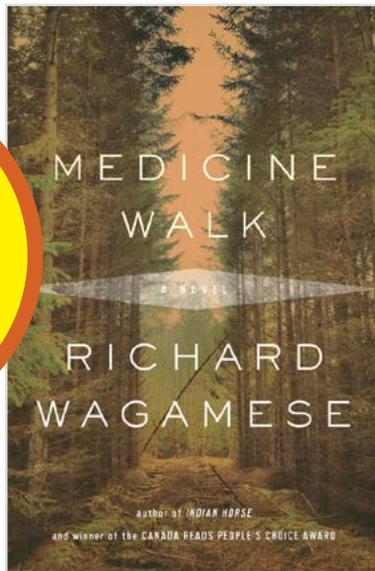
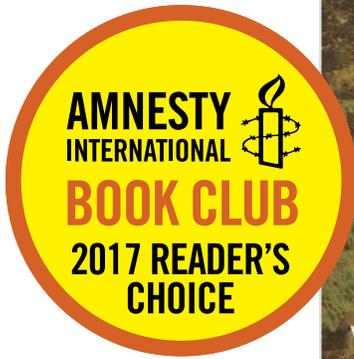
Discussion questions on *Medicine Walk*

Questions from the Amnesty International Book Club

1. What did you think of *Medicine Walk*? Which aspects did you appreciate, and which aspects were most challenging?
2. Why do you think the author used the anonymity of the characters at the beginning and again at the end?
3. Franklin seems to accept the role of listener on the journey with his father. Do you think he was committed to hearing everything his father had to say? What do you think Franklin felt about all he learned?
4. What allows for forgiveness, in a general sense? Do you think Eldon expected to be forgiven after telling his story? Do you think Franklin forgave him? If not, what do you think Franklin got out of the journey?
5. Bucky appears to be a complex character, yet remains mostly unexamined in *Medicine Walk*. Why do you think that is?
6. What is the significance the time spent in Becca's cabin?

Further discussion questions

1. The plot unfolds slowly with a focus on characters. Was this effective?
2. How does Wagamese draw us into the plot even though one can sense where the story is heading?
3. Is *Medicine Walk* a commentary on the problematic nature of reconciliation on a grander level? Is Wagamese using *Medicine Walk* to explain his experience and feelings surrounding reconciliation in Canada as a whole?
4. Discuss the cultural aspects of the story. What symbols and imagery does the author use to enhance and support Aboriginal culture?
5. Was the outcome of the story redeeming? For who?
6. What will you take away (internalize, synthesize) from this book?



This month's Reader's Choice selection was made possible by you, our book club members. With several hundred votes for 2017's Readers' Choice, *Medicine Walk* was the favourite pick from our readers, with Katherena Vermette's novel *The Break* not far behind. Clearly this is a book club that is passionate to hear more from Indigenous authors! Read on to learn more.

The novel revolves around the story of Franklin Starlight, who is called to visit his father, Eldon. He's sixteen years old and has had the most fleeting of relationships with the man. The rare moments they've shared haunt and trouble Frank, but he answers the call, a son's duty to a father. He finds Eldon devastated after years of drinking, dying of liver failure in a small town flophouse. Eldon asks his son to take him into the mountains, so he may be buried in the traditional Ojibway manner.

What ensues is a journey through the rugged and beautiful backcountry, and a journey into the past, as the two men push forward to Eldon's end. From a poverty-stricken childhood, to the Korean War, and later the derelict houses of mill towns, Eldon relates both the hardships his life and a time of redemption and love. In doing so, Eldon offers Frank a history he has never known, the father he has never had, and a connection to himself he never expected.

BACKGROUND



Supporters in Vancouver promote the Site C / Peace River Valley action during *Write for Rights*.

Site C Dam: human rights at risk

In September's guide, we provided an overview of issues that Indigenous Peoples face in Canada. Among those mentioned was the land rights of Indigenous Peoples. The widespread failure to protect Indigenous peoples' rights to lands and resources, or to ensure timely resolution of outstanding land disputes, undermines the ability of Indigenous peoples to maintain ways of living on the land that are vital to their cultures, health and well-being. It also denies Indigenous peoples the opportunity to make their own decisions about the best forms of economic development needed to meet the needs and aspirations of their communities.

The Site C dam in British Columbia's Peace River Valley is a multi-billion-dollar hydroelectric project that is being built amid strong opposition from First Nations who stand to see vital animal habitat and cultural sites swept away by the project. If completed, the Site C dam would turn an 83 km long stretch of the Peace River Valley into a reservoir. More than 20 km of its tributaries would also be flooded.

There is no dispute that construction of the dam, and the flooding of the banks and floor of the Peace River Valley, will have a severe impact on the First Nations and Métis families and communities who depend on this

unique ecosystem. In fact, a joint federal-provincial environmental assessment concluded that the dam would “severely undermine” the cultural practices of First Nations and Métis peoples, would make fishing unsafe for at least a generation, and would submerge burial grounds and other crucial cultural sites.

First Nations strongly opposed the project throughout the decision-making process and two First Nations, West Moberly and Prophet River, took on the extraordinary cost of fighting for their treaty rights in court. Their struggle has been supported by the Union of BC Indian Chiefs, the Assembly of First Nations and many others - including local farmers and other landowners in the Peace Valley.

Site C violates human rights

Government officials in British Columbia say that they have consulted with Indigenous peoples about Site C. But consultation is not supposed to be a hollow exercise: its purpose is to protect the underlying rights set out in Treaties, the Canadian Constitution, and in international human rights law.

The rights have not been protected. In fact, they’ve been largely ignored.

The federal and provincial governments have not even assessed whether the harm that caused by the dam is compatible with Canada’s Treaty obligations. And there has been no serious consideration of the possibility that the harm done to Indigenous peoples being so great that the best course of action would be to find another source of energy.

Amnesty International is not anti-development. We recognize that resource development can provide livelihoods and income necessary to ensuring a decent quality of life for everyone. But we have joined with First Nations and environmental groups to oppose the Site C dam because it’s clear that the human cost is much too high.

International human rights law—and rulings by the Supreme Court of Canada—have made it clear that decisions with the potential for serious harm to the rights of Indigenous peoples should only be made with their mutual agreement, or free, prior and informed consent.

This is the standard that should be applied to the Site C dam.

It’s a matter of basic justice for people who have already suffered from decades of displacement, impoverishment and other harms resulting from decisions imposed without their agreement.



“The damage that Site C is going to do, I don’t even know how to explain it,” says Georges Desjarlais, who is training to be a spiritual leader for the West Moberly First Nations, as the province of British Columbia is pushing ahead with construction of a massive hydro-electric despite opposition from Indigenous peoples who rely in the waters and shores of the threatened Peace River Valley to hunt, fish and conduct ceremonies.



Call on the Canadian Government to halt Site C



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Writers take action on Human Rights Day 2016 in Toronto against the Site C dam in the Peace River Valley, British Columbia

TAKE ACTION NOW

The Site C dam in northeastern British Columbia is one of the largest resource development projects currently planned anywhere in Canada. BC Hydro has already begun construction of the Site C dam, including clear-cutting large areas of the valley floor in preparation for eventual flooding, even though legal challenges by First Nations are still before the courts. The BC First Nations Summit called that decision “a major step backwards” in relations between the province and First Nations.

The newly elected government of British Columbia submitted the Site C dam to a public review of whether or not it makes economic sense. Ultimately, however, economics alone should not be the deciding factor. All governments in Canada must uphold their commitments to respect and protect the rights of Indigenous peoples.

You can join a growing movement of over 120,000 people across Canada who say that the human rights of Indigenous peoples must not be ignored. Sign the petition at: <http://bit.ly/site-c-action>

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In memory of Catherine Brunelle

Amnesty International and our Book Club lost a very special friend at the end of July when Catherine Brunelle, our Marketing Coordinator since September 2015, died at the age of 35. While Catherine's time with us was brief, she touched everybody she worked with through her warmth, friendliness, optimism and love of life. Unbeknownst to us, the cancer that would ultimately claim her life had returned around the time she began working with us, but she never complained and was a very creative and productive colleague, and a joy to work with.

During her time with us, Catherine was responsible for producing our discussion guides, as well as marketing the book club to recruit new members.

To honour Catherine—a remarkable colleague, wonderful human being and terrific writer—the book club team (Rosemary & Julia) have chosen Catherine's novel *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending* as a bonus book for November/December, in addition to the Readers' Choice of *Medicine Walk* by Richard Wagamese, who also died earlier in 2017. Reading these wonderful books makes it even harder to accept that these authors will not be writing any more in the future.

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending is the remarkable story of nine generations of women, and captures elements of their lives which are both universal and also quintessentially Canadian.

While Catherine has left us, she has left behind this remarkable book which demonstrates both her art with the written word, insight into the human condition and her social conscience.

We know that we are just a small part of the family, friends and community who are missing Catherine, and want to express our condolences to those who share this sorrow.

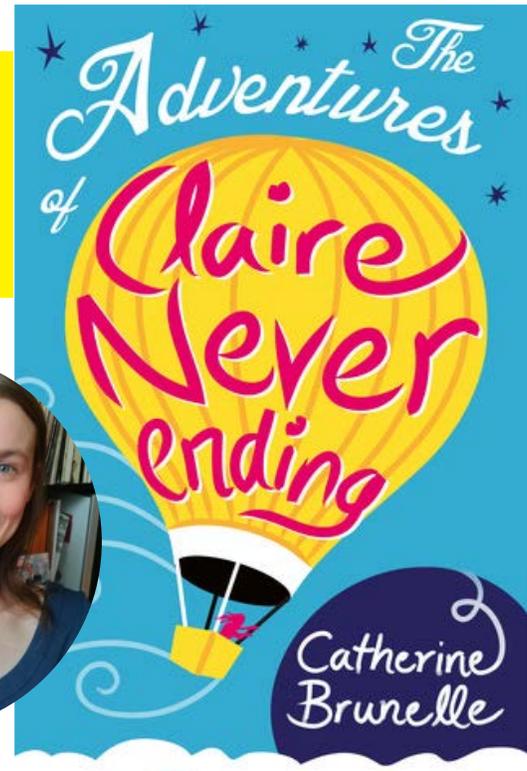


This is how Catherine Brunelle described herself on the author's page of *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*:

“Catherine Brunelle is a Canadian novelist and blogger. Born in Canada, she met the love of her life in France, studied creative writing in England, swam Lake Balaton in Hungary, ate gelato in Rome, lived a summer in Jasper, and currently calls Ottawa her home. Happily married, she is busy typing on her laptop while attempting to carpe diem with her best friend and husband, Zsolt.”

May you all have friends and colleagues as wonderful as Catherine in your own lives.

—From Rosemary & Julia, the Book Club Team



The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending by Catherine Brunelle



Catherine Brunelle's novel, *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*, is the additional Book Club selection for November/December.

Claire ripples between generations of women, carried as a middle name within one family, in this very special story of magic, pregnancy, adventure and love never ending. Meet Amelia Claire Earl in the present day as she discovers she's pregnant just before flying around the world in her hot air balloon; move backward in time and meet her mother, Liz, in 1980, two months pregnant and fighting-off ghosts; then onto 1958 where Dorothy, Liz's mother, is three months pregnant and running through the forest in chase of a snowy owl; and so forth through the generations to end in 1826 as the ninth and original Claire sails over to conquer the 'new world'. Expect wanderlust, postcards, mother-in-laws, heart break, middle names, witchcraft, ancestors, sore backs, hunger strikes, best friends, husbands, independence, and heaps of courage in this story of Claire Never Ending.

The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending is an adventurous novel of nine generations of women who share the middle name of Claire. You can purchase the book at CatherineBrunelle.com, and you can also encourage your local library to acquire it.

Discussion questions

1. What did you think of *The Adventures of Claire Never-Ending*?
2. How did the backwards in time trajectory affect the story line? Especially knowing that the mother figure of any given story will be the young and pregnant protagonist of the following chapter.
3. What did you think of the way Brunelle tackled Canada's darker past of exploitation and discrimination towards the country's original inhabitants, Indigenous Peoples?
4. In what ways did the novel touch on women's issues, particularly the relationship between mothers and daughters, and the complexities of pregnancy and parenthood?
5. What did you think of the way the end tied up with the beginning of the novel? Did it explain the title somewhat?

MORE ABOUT THIS ISSUE

120,000 CANADIANS STAND WITH THE PEACE RIVER

Learn more about Amnesty's work on Indigenous rights at:

<http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/issues/indigenouspeoples/indigenous-peoples-in-canada>

or contact our Campaigner for the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Craig Benjamin, at cbenjamin@amnesty.ca.

Learn more about the Site C campaign at: <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/campaigns/site-c>

Read our report *The Point of No Return* (available in English, French, and Spanish) (August 9, 2016), also at: <http://www.amnesty.ca/our-work/campaigns/site-c>

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COMING UP IN JANUARY 2018

Brother by David Chariandy

Recommended by guest reader Lawrence Hill

The Amnesty International Book Club is thrilled to announce that our January/February book is going to be *Brother*, the long-awaited second novel from David Chariandy, whose debut, *Soucouyant*, was nominated for nearly every major literary prize in Canada and published internationally.

Brother was recommended for the Amnesty International Book Club by guest reader Lawrence Hill, acclaimed author of several books including *The Book of Negroes* and *The Illegal*.

An intensely beautiful, searingly powerful, tightly constructed novel, *Brother* explores questions of masculinity, family, race, and identity as they are played out in a Scarborough housing complex during the sweltering heat and simmering violence of the summer of 1991.

The discussion guide will be sent out January 2018.

In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

