

Spirituality and Addiction: The Role of Twelve-Step Programs in Eden Robinson's *Blood Sports*

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Abstract

In her novel *Blood Sports*, Haisla author Eden Robinson exposes the damage—spiritual, moral and physical—that Canada's First Nations have suffered from residential schools. Most notably, *Blood Sports* focuses on one prime legacy of these institutions: addiction. Fuelled by the destruction of culture and traditional Aboriginal belief systems, characters embrace drugs and alcohol, and the story's psychopath (a cocaine addict), Jeremy, represents a national psychosis—Canada's lack of reconciliation and complicity in trauma/genocide. One character, Paulie, however, is able to 'let go and let God' and get clean despite the Catholic framework of AA and NA (programs she follows) and Catholicism's legacy in her culture (residential schools). This chapter considers how Paulie (representative of a grave statistic) is able to heal by adopting and believing in a 'power greater than herself' and suggests that Paulie's process of recovery (her employment of a 12-step program) might be suggestive of the truth and reconciliation process that underlies national healing campaigns. Through an examination of twelve-step programs, this discussion tries to make sense of how Paulie's 'spiritual awakening' is made possible despite a world plagued by the following epidemic problems: paternalism; the protection of abusers in closed communities or families; heavy and sick prices that come with gifts, or seeming gifts; the hiding of abuse behind socio-economic privilege; the ownership of the individual; few or no choices; and sanctimony directed at those who have little or no power. These problems plague the world of *Blood Sports*, and they are traceable to the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. This novel seems to point at compassion and self-forgiveness as driving forces in the step towards a spiritual experience that allows for freedom from addiction (and perhaps collective trauma).

Key Words: Addiction, Aboriginal, Aboriginal spirituality, Canada, reconciliation, twelve-step, self-forgiveness, compassion.

Blood Sports, by Haisla (Aboriginal) Canadian author Eden Robinson, is Robinson's third book in a series which includes a short-story collection, *Traplines*, and a novel *Monkey Beach*.¹ Robinson, with *Blood Sports*, picks up on and continues the story she was telling in 'Contact Sports,' an almost novella length work she included in *Traplines*.²

Traplines' 'Contact Sports' is the story of protagonist Tom Bauer; his romantic 'crush,' Pauline, and, perhaps, 'enemy' in *Traplines*; and his psychotic, cocaine-

addicted cousin, Jeremy, who is capable of anything destructive. Tom, who lives with his alcoholic single mother, Christa Bauer, meets his twenty-four year old cousin, Jeremy, for the first time since childhood when Jeremy (for reasons not fully disclosed) comes to stay with Tom and his mother in their downtown Vancouver apartment. We learn that Jeremy has been kicked out of the army for some reason, perhaps because he killed someone, though this fact is never fully revealed. There is something wrong with Jeremy. Seriously wrong. He is not only an addict but also a full-blown psychopath. Jeremy quickly begins to own Tom, giving him money (from his drug sales), forcing Tom to dress the way Jeremy wants, and, inevitably, controlling Tom's every action through psychological and physical force. Then, there is Pauline—the girl at school whom young teenager Tom has a crush on. When Jeremy finds out about Tom's feelings, it's not long before Jeremy is dating Pauline. This whole scenario might not sound that crazy so far, but, by the end of 'Contact Sports,' Tom has arranged for Jeremy's most prized possession—his silver Jaguar—to be stolen by a downstairs neighbour so Tom can get some money to help himself get out of Jeremy's sinister and enclosing grip. Jeremy, having fed and encouraged Pauline's growing cocaine addiction, has convinced Pauline, with the promise of giving her a pound of cocaine, to bring Tom to him in a house attic above a raging party so he can torture Tom as a form of punishment for stealing his car (but, even more so, for Tom exerting his self will—which he should have given over fully to Jeremy). And Tom will have burning cigarettes shoved up his nostrils with Pauline repetitively kicked in the head by Jeremy as she has given Tom mushrooms before handing him over to Jeremy (presumably Jeremy wanted Tom to feel the most pain possible).³

Blood Sports continues this story but opens with Tom and Pauline in love and with a two-year-old daughter, Mel. Jeremy is in jail for some reason, presumably well deserved (though we learn he is about to get day parole), and Pauline is almost three years straight and sober, a member of Narcotics Anonymous and practising her twelve-step program with every fibre of her being. Things are going well, it seems—but not for long. Tom is kidnapped where he works, brought home to a torn-apart apartment, and Mel and Pauline are missing. Tom will be tortured in this book by a thug named Firebug (who makes Jeremy's torture of Tom in *Traplines* look like a cakewalk). And, finally put together (for safe keeping) by their captors in a basement cage in an old house somewhere, Tom, Mel, and Pauline will escape only to be re-captured hours later by Jeremy now (who holds a captive Firebug) and who demands, in the novel's last lines, that Tom kill Firebug with the gun Jeremy hands him.

Now, what I find interesting about this world and story (and there are many things to find interesting as well as disturbing) is the fact that Pauline—or Paulie, as Tom calls her—has maintained her straight edge and sobriety in the midst of a past (revealed in *Traplines*) haunted with sex crimes, murder, extortion, threats, and torture, and in the present world of *Blood Sports* where the latter crimes grow

exponentially. She bears a tattoo on her body—1 July 1995⁴—marking the day she went clean—and she has been totally clean for about two years, though her attempts to kick go back to 1993 and are registered in letters written to her faithful sponsor, Jazz. The chapter appropriately entitled ‘Surrender’ (a reference to step one in twelve-step programs)⁵ is almost exclusively dedicated to the process Pauline has gone through to kick and stay sober and, more specifically, *her ability to use a twelve-step program and its principles to maintain her straightness*. For example, ‘Surrender’ begins with a letter written by Jazz to Paulie, and the letter underscores the role that twelve-step programs will have in Paulie’s life:

October 9, 1993

Paulina-baby,

I’m not your judge. You aren’t sitting in my court, and I don’t pass my punishments down to you. You did the best you could with what you had. The things that keep you confused and miserable you put into the hands of your Higher Power. Let go and let God.

Hugs and much respect,
Jazz⁶

What is most interesting about Pauline, an addict, and *Blood Sports* is the manner in which Pauline might be seen as representative of a grave statistic in Canada—the number of Aboriginal/First Nations people who suffer from addiction—perhaps a result, amongst other things, of large problems that threaten their worlds. Though Robinson is well known for not outing her characters as First Nations (indigenous peoples), taken together, her three works—*Traplins*, *Monkey Beach*, and *Blood Sports*—reveal haunting patterns that are representative of the plight (and strength) of many of Canada’s indigenous peoples and of some very disturbing realities that have grown out of colonialism and problematic Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations. Let’s consider, for a moment, the larger world Pauline is operating in—the large problems which beset the narrative (not just specifically Pauline) and the world of which she is a part.

First, Jeremy tries to systematically buy Tom in a sick, perverted way. He continues to buy Tom gifts, often after he has physically abused him and even though Tom protests. And Tom inevitably finds there is no way out of Jeremy’s control. Secondly, and more than depicting the ownership of the individual and lack of freedom, *Blood Sports* is also a novel about family and about staying silent and shutting up about abuse because people *are* family (patterns repeated in Robinson’s other works). It is perhaps Tom’s letter to the law that spells out the greatest example of sick family connections as Tom protects family at any length and is also rightfully terrified of family. Tom claims the following, though we and his mother (who, on June 4, 1998, has asked that the law find a way to keep her

nephew in prison because he has her ‘Tommy so terrified’)⁷ know this is not the truth: ‘At no time did I witness assault, sexual assault, ‘pump and dump’ scams, money laundering, extortion, threats, unlawful confinement, kidnapping, or homicide while I was living in Jeremy Rieger’s condominium.’⁸ Third, in the same letter, we also discover the paternalism which Jeremy has enforced upon his Aunt Chrissy, though, inevitably, she is able to shirk such force at least once when she fears for her own son’s life and kicks Jeremy out of their house:

The thirty-seven thousand dollars Jeremy Rieger spent for my mother to attend the Twelve Oaks Rehabilitation Centre was offered as a Christmas gift, not a loan. When she is not receiving social assistance, my mother makes minimum wage. She would never accept a loan of that magnitude. I have the Christmas card and the envelope that Jeremy Rieger gave her when he presented her with the chance to stay at Twelve Oaks.⁹

What a present! Who could ever get sober or kick if the person footing the bill and personal ‘clean up’ were an abuser?

To interrogate these patterns is to discover that they mirror some very real problems which plague Aboriginal/Canadian communities: heavy and sick prices that come with gifts, or seeming gifts (such as the manner in which the Canadian government has tried to patch up its abuse of First Nations communities and peoples with money); the protection of abusers in closed communities or families (often a characteristic of First Nations reserves which must try to shelter their communities from government and other outside interferences for survival’s sake); paternalism (such as the government’s treatment of Aboriginal peoples as wards or children); and few or no choices (the reality of worlds plagued by genocide).

Now, against a background of these specific traumas and problems, the addict Pauline (though Robinson does not define her as Aboriginal) must negotiate getting clean (and perhaps we should consider here that Pauline might be representative of not only an addicted individual who tries to get clean in a messed up world but also of *communities* of people—Aboriginal peoples—who attempt to get clean while embroiled in national/epidemic trauma). To go one step further, by considering these things, it is possible to suggest that *Blood Sports* is making a point and/or providing a lesson about how not only individuals but also communities can heal.

Most notably, the novel relentlessly reminds us that all addiction (regardless of the drug) is a loss of self-control. As Tom says early on in the novel, speaking about Paulie’s parents, ‘Paulie was their first addict, and they thought she was lower than them because they were just alcoholics.’¹⁰ There is a heavy irony here. Paulie’s parents are just as messed up, though they live in a nice neighbourhood and house and can afford to drink expensive alcohol in a basement that boasts a

selection of fancy antiques. And, here, I would argue that this novel quickly becomes a novel about not judging and that it points to a need for compassion. At the novel's very beginning, for example, we have also been exposed to the sanctimony and lack of compassion in hospitals, care units that should be care units but which carry righteousness despite their supposed professional training. Tom reveals the treatment he and Paulie received during and after the birth of their daughter, Mel: 'We'd had to disclose about Paulie being in Narcotics Anonymous. The whole week we were in the hospital, they acted like we were going to break out the rigs and turn our room into a shooting gallery.'¹¹ More than the novel pointing to a need for compassion and an erasure of sanctimony, though, *Blood Sports* is about the self hatred that comes with addiction and trying to get clean and the need to forgive oneself.

Blood Sports seems to be making a key point. Although the world might be as out of control as one's worst addiction, forgiveness—and, as I will argue, self-forgiveness, in particular—is the first step in healing and kicking. This is the key to embarking upon and maintaining sobriety/straightness. In a letter to Tom, dated October 1993, several months after she had brought Tom to Jeremy to be tortured, Paulina writes the following:

October 18, 1993

Dear Tom,

This is the hardest letter I've ever had to write. Except for the one I wrote Mom. And the one I wrote Dad. And my ex-friend Carrie. Okay. This is still a hard letter.

It kind of is the hardest letter because you already forgave me in the hospital and I lost respect for you. But everyone here [mandatory rehab] says forgiving someone is actually a sign of strength and that weak people can't forgive anybody, especially themselves.¹²

Two months later, in another letter to Tom, Paulie admits: 'No one's forgiven me for anything. You are the first'.¹³

Paulie is following the ninth step of NA/AA¹⁴ by revealing to Tom how she has wronged him and saying sorry. But she has also, and perhaps most importantly, performed the first step of surrendering, admitting her life is 'unmanageable' and admitting 'powerlessness' over her drug; and it is this step which is predicated on the ability to forgive herself, even if this is not made explicit in a description of the twelve steps.¹⁵ It is strange, perhaps, that Robinson presents a character holding on for dear life to the twelve-step principles of NA, taken directly from the foundational text *The Big Book, the Basic Text for Alcoholics Anonymous*. *The Big Book* was written by Bill W. and Doctor Bob, both staunch Catholics who followed the Catholic/Christian regime of confession and repentance to provide the twelve

steps that form the foundation of the AA (and now NA) program.¹⁶ And it is this very institution—the Catholic Church—that provides many a nightmare in the history of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations in Canada.¹⁷ Church (largely Catholic) and government-run residential schools, mandatory school systems for Aboriginal youth which operated for about six decades across Canada, designed to systematically remove any ‘Indianness’ from Canada’s indigenous populations, come complete with histories of severe abuse and psychological trauma inflicted upon generations of Aboriginal people, and the traumatic effects of this abuse plague Aboriginal communities and peoples to this day.

Robinson relentlessly addresses the legacy of residential schools in all her works, most notably in *Traplines* where Uncle Josh’s systematic rape of his niece over the years reveals itself to be a pattern of behaviour he learned in residential school as a child where he was raped for years by Father Archibald.¹⁸ If one considers Robinson’s different texts together, in fact, Robinson’s output thus far consistently points a finger at the residential school system as the main form of psychosis in the worlds she depicts—Jeremy, perhaps, might really be a metaphor for a national problem. Despite the history of residential schools and the manner in which it haunts and terrorizes the worlds of *Traplines*, *Monkey Beach*, and *Blood Sports*, Robinson, however, gives her addicted character Paulie agency through a twelve-step program to kick the drug that threatens to take her life.

I am not here to promote twelve-step programs, AA or NA, or to denigrate them, but to make sense of the comment Robinson’s *Blood Sports* makes. Looked at from *Blood Sports*’ perspective of an addicted *individual*, confession (steps 4, 5, and 8 in twelve-step programs), repentance (step 9), and forgiveness seem to work. Looked at from the perspective of national patterns, perhaps confession and repentance might also work—and more about forgiveness later. At a macro level, we might consider, for instance, the basis of truth and reconciliation work in nations (such as South Africa) plagued by those same things that dominate *Blood Sports*—violence, torture, extortion, paternalism, etc. And we might consider that it is the bearing of witness which is crucial in national healing campaigns. What will be or should be forgiven is a much more complicated issue (and perhaps some things are never meant to be forgiven at national levels, especially when holocaust and genocide are involved). However, forgiveness of self (the self *abused* by those things addiction leads to) is tied to self-actualization. It is tied to the gaining back of self respect which does not come *ipso facto* from a fancy rehab program (though one might get sober/straight in fancy quarters) paid for by an abuser (like Tom’s mother, Chrissy, sent to clean up by psychopath Jeremy) but from an individual’s choice and ability to forgive oneself (the basis of self respect).

I do not think ‘to surrender,’ in Robinson’s worldview presented in *Blood Sports*, is ‘to surrender all’ to Jesus Christ. It could be (if that’s the higher power one so chooses), but it needn’t be. It is essential to underscore, for example, the latter part of step 3 in twelve-step programs: ‘Made a decision to turn our will and

lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*' (which should really read 'her/him/them' most obviously, in this instance, to account for the matriarchal and polytheistic natures of many indigenous religions).¹⁹ Indeed, it would be problematic to suggest a specific form of Christian redemption would be in Robinson's mind, given the Christian and Catholic stranglehold which wrought havoc on generations of Aboriginal peoples in the residential school system and which forcibly tried to (and, in many cases, did) destroy traditional Native belief systems.

It is most important to recognize that Robinson's work does not deliver sentences that should be given at national levels. However, Robinson's writing does reveal *a process* that is necessary in an epidemic national abuse scandal that might operate like addiction itself (which grows in a rapid, consuming and sinister manner). In this process of trying to heal from an insidious growing disease, certain things are highlighted: first, the disease can be passed between generations; second, the person who is seeking recovery from addiction must surrender; and, third, and most significantly, in order to surrender, one must forgive oneself and give up self-hatred.

This is key, Robinson seems to suggest in *Blood Sports*. Paulie must forgive herself for a lot: 'every spit [she] rained down on Willy Baker,'²⁰ the man who stole Jeremy's jag for Tom and the man she helped Jeremy beat senseless in retaliation; the torture she helped to inflict upon Tom; the extortion tapes she helped Jeremy make; the things readers aren't told. This doesn't mean that Robinson is pointing to the need to forgive the Father Archibalds out there who destroyed Native youth. *Blood Sports* does not suggest one should surrender to an oppressor. Rather, her work suggests that, in order to heal or recover, the one in need of recovery (whether an individual or collective) must admit one is ill and be ready to forgive the self (often more difficult than forgiving an 'other').

It is *specifically a Native community* beleaguered by addiction issues traced to systematic abuse that Robinson addresses in her works which, ironically enough, do not 'out' Native characters. It is the sanctimony directed at those who have little or no power and the hiding of abuse behind socio-economic privilege that pop off Robinson's pages. It is the following question which is at the heart of *Blood Sports*: what do individuals do if the government and its helpers are consistently looking down their noses at them (as Paulie's parents look down at her), or if no atonement has been made for such a legacy of abuse as that which has happened in Canada (if crimes such as Jeremy's are never witnessed except by the one taking the punches and cigarettes up the nostril like Tom)? Addiction and escapism techniques might be the result, *Blood Sports* seems to suggest. The paradox, of course, reveals itself in the following reminder found in Paulie's NA handbook: '[...] [t]he only alternatives to recovery are jails, dereliction and death.'²¹ That is, in and of itself, addiction leads to no real escape but demise.

There is another paradox to be found, however: addiction, though never cured, can be arrested. And the first step in arresting addiction, or beginning recovery, takes two things, really (which might function not only at an individual but also national level): self-forgiveness and a witness.

Whether national problems—what could be called the hangover of genocide—in Robinson's works reflect addiction or whether addiction in her works reflects national problems, her work points to prerequisites for healing: the need to forgive self and the need to be heard. This combination is the basis of successful kicking. This combination is also the basis of truth and reconciliation.

Notes

¹ Eden Robinson, *Blood Sports* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006); Robinson, *Traplines* (Toronto: Knopf, 1996); Eden Robinson, *Monkey Beach* (Toronto: Knopf, 2000).

² Eden Robinson, 'Contact Sports,' in *Traplines*, 71-182.

³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁴ Robinson, *Blood Sports*, 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 155-81. See also endnote 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² Robinson, *Blood Sports*, 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁴ *Narcotics Anonymous*, 5th ed. (Chatsworth, California: World Services, 1982).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ For a brief introduction to this history, see 'Residential Schools: A History of Residential Schools in Canada,' *CBC News*, Canada, 16 May 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/story/2008/05/16/f-faqs-residential-schools.html>.

¹⁸ For another example, see Robinson, 'Queen of the North,' in *Traplines*, especially page 213.

¹⁹ *Narcotics Anonymous*, 5th ed., 17.

²⁰ Robinson, *Blood Sports*, 173.

²¹ *Narcotics Anonymous*, 8.