

Murray Sinclair, *Who We Are: Four Questions for a Life and a Nation*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2024. 476 pages. ISBN 9780771099106. \$39.95 hardcover.

Who We Are: Four Questions for a Life and a Nation is a powerful narrative of the Honorable Murray Sinclair's life work as a lawyer, judge, senator, and chief commissioner of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). However, what becomes clear throughout his book is how Sinclair saw himself not in relation to his professional statuses, but as an Anishinaabe man who holds knowledge of the law and, therefore, has a responsibility to his people. Sinclair's memoir provides valuable insight into the tensions and complexity of navigating these positions within Canada's legal and political systems while working to create a future where Indigenous peoples are free from the colonial relationship. While paying respect to Sinclair's life work and legacy, I describe what I see as the value of his approach to reconciliation, with respect to his work within the realm of Canadian law and politics. I invite those interested in and working on issues of justice, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to consider Sinclair's vision of *what could be*.

Sinclair's memoir is divided into four sections, each of which offer stories about his journey to answer the four "great questions of life" (p. 1): Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I? These are fundamental questions, Sinclair explains, that every individual must come to answer for Indigenous societies to function properly. His memoir is followed by a re-print of "What We've Learned: Principles of Truth and Reconciliation," originally published by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2015. His role within the TRC was tremendously influential, as reflected in his careful work with survivors so that they could be heard and begin healing, and as recorded in the Commission's reports which craft a standard of reconciliation that Canada must strive to meet. Yet, it is also evident that Sinclair's work with Residential School survivors was deeply personal and reinforced his own desires to better understand, and to come to love himself, as an Anishinaabe man. The TRC's reports may be a large part of his legacy, but his legacy is also embodied in the spirit of those survivors, the next generations embracing Indigenous nationhood, and the non-Indigenous people committed to living in solidarity with Indigenous struggles and upholding Indigenous rights.

In addition to his work on the TRC, Sinclair was also well known for holding the title as the first Indigenous judge appointed in the Province of Manitoba, which he described at length in his book. Within a week of entering the position, he was tasked with co-chairing the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry, commissioned to investigate the 1988 police shooting of J. J. Harper and the 1971 murder of Helen Betty Osborne. Sinclair's influence in the Inquiry ultimately transformed its scope: while investigating police errors and mishandlings of these two cases, Sinclair put forward a broader mandate to identify, with the intention of remedy, the systemic racism within Canada's criminal justice system more broadly. In the Inquiry's final report published in 1991, 296 recommendations were put forward. A major limitation with respect to the work of these sort of inquiries, however, is often the lack of political will to put recommendations into action. To no fault of Sinclair's or those similarly working to change oppressive and violent laws, policies, and procedures, the Canadian criminal justice system remains plagued with the same fundamental issues that the Inquiry identified in 1991, including the routine police murders of Indigenous men and the devastating rates of murdered and disappeared Indigenous women, girls, and Two-Spirit people to which police responses are utter failures.

Sinclair's book offers valuable context into the contentious relationship that he had with the Canadian legal system as the first generation of First Nations people to practice Canadian law

following Canada's racist ban that prohibited First Nations people from hiring legal counsel (Section 141 of the *Indian Act*, in effect from 1927-1951). His book highlights how he used law to advance First Nations justice interests and land claims, while also offering a glimpse into how personal dispossession was for his family and community, who were displaced from their homes in St. Peter's Reserve in 1913 by means of an illegal vote that had taken place a few years prior. Sinclair's life story, interwoven with his legal work, sheds light on his approach to law as a matter of responsibility.

Through his narrative, it is clear that Sinclair did not see himself as an agent of the state, and he was adamant that his work on commissions would be independent from government interference. While working in Canadian law and politics, Sinclair was admittedly less interested in learning about colonial governance and more interested in exploring how Indigenous laws and ethics could guide his approach and, eventually, craft the necessary space for Indigenous peoples to take control over the matters that affect their lives. Sinclair's storytelling of his experiences as a young lawyer, in endless conversations with Elders and communities, underscores how he envisioned law and justice based on principles of the Anishinaabe constitution. These teachings are seen throughout his narrative of his political career, including how he came to envision the Senate as "Canada's Council of Elders" (p. 237) – a group of respected individuals who come together with the collective wisdom to advise those in positions of leadership to make good decisions and prevent government abuses.

Sinclair's vision for what Canadian governance could be, when approached through an Indigenous worldview, invites thoughtful consideration for how Indigenous laws and ethics may be adopted within existing settler systems in ways that are truly transformative. His vision is very much grounded in the spirit of reconciliation, as a matter of forging the pathway for peaceful coexistence within a complicated and changing world. Sinclair's book demonstrates the necessity of building and maintaining relationships, even those marked with conflict and polarizing differences, as a fundamental part of the struggle to invoke change. At the same time, Sinclair's standards for reconciliation move far beyond the political neutralization that Coulthard (2014) describes as "the politics of recognition." One of the biggest takeaways from Sinclair's book is how he articulates reconciliation as a matter of self-determination, which will be only achieved when Canada "gets[s] out of the way and let[s] Indigenous people do their own sovereign work" (p. 248). Sinclair's work was just as much aimed at dismantling the oppressive and colonial powers within the Canadian legal and political systems as it was about forging a new pathway entirely, formed through the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being. Sinclair's book illustrates the apparent necessity of working within systems that we recognize as fundamentally corrupt, all while upholding one's ethical principles and never losing sight of the long-term vision of freedom.

While perhaps demonstrating humility, Sinclair maintained that he would not see reconciliation within his lifetime. Nonetheless, his legacy has resulted in much more than mere documents laying dormant on the shelves of old government buildings. His work offers us a framework for living in good relationships and it is embodied in the actions of the future generations. Sinclair's book offers much nuance, and many lessons, for those working to resist the colonialism of Canada's justice system and to guide the nature of settler-Indigenous relations for generations to come.

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