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Schools' mission: take the Indian out of the child

By **DENE MOORE** Special to the Star
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Are we pioneers or perpetrators? Victims or survivors?

These are the questions that haunt us, as Canadians, as we wrestle with the legacy of [residential schools](#) and the history of indigenous peoples in our country.

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Joan Crate, author of *Black Apple*. (DAVID CHITTICK / SIMON & SCHUSTER)

In her latest novel, *Black Apple*, Alberta Metis writer Joan Crate takes on this difficult topic with the story of Sinopaki, a young Blackfoot girl taken from her parents at age 7 to attend a residential school for girls.

Stripped of all she has known, including her own name, surrounded now by strangers in an unfamiliar and hostile environment, Rose Marie learns to navigate this new world until her familiar childhood home and her family are distant memories.

Crate's beginnings as a poet are in evidence as she invokes the cold Prairie winters "the sun was just an old yellow seah stuck on the classroom window" and the strict, sterile environment of the school

With frustrating diligence Crate avoids the more sensational narrative of the residential school experience. Sexual and physical abuse are weaved only fleetingly through the fabric of the story.

The absence of overt violence, for the most part, removes the option of any easy understanding of the haunting legacy of the schools' mission to "take the Indian out of the child." Rather, the pain of loneliness and loss of identity are the real villains of *Black Apple*.

Crate, whose first novel, *Breathing Water*, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Book Award for Canada and the Books in Canada First Novel Award, makes a point of explaining her approach in an afterword to the book, anticipating perhaps that some readers may question her portrayal of the religious staff and their motivations and the residential school experience of Rose Marie, given the grim and emotional stories recounted to the recently completed Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Black Apple should certainly spur discussion. And that, for a society still struggling to come to terms with a shared and troubled history, is its gift.

Dene Moore is a freelance writer and editor and a member of the Metis community.

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