

Three Day Road
By Joseph Boyden
***** out of five stars

“A compelling, exquisite journey”

Three Day Road is a compelling, exquisite and important debut novel. The plot is uncomplicated - two friends, Native Canadians from James Bay, leave their land to fight in WWI, hoping to return as heroes - though its non-chronological narrative adds some complexity. It is the setting, character development, and especially thematic elements that Boyden weaves so expertly around the simple plot that astonishes. And it is the deft wordplay, imagery, foreshadowing and subtly recurring motifs that both advance the narrative and invite readers to reflect momentarily on the novel's depth and the author's craft.

The novel begins with Xavier, injured physically, mentally, and spiritually, returning home from war. His aunt, Niska, is there to meet him and to take him the three days' journey downriver to their traditional lands. Xavier's childhood friend and companion in war, Elijah, has not returned. The story is narrated by Xavier and Niska over four distinct time frames - their foundational family history and identity; childhood, identity and friendship; war and identity; and post-war journey home, healing and identity. Each time frame often involves flash backs, adding as noted above to the narrative complexity.

Three Day Road considers identity via connection to the land, and the family, community and nationhood that emerges over time from those connections. It considers what it means to be French or English or Canadian or Cree or Ojibway, and how identity changes – or not – in the face of foreign or hostile settings. And it considers identity in terms of our relationships to those closest to us, to those in authority, and to those who have prejudged us (or whom we have prejudged).

The genocidal residential school system in which native Canadians were forbidden their own culture and subjected to forced assimilation puts the issue of identity front and center early in the book. It is not until after the mid-point that it becomes clear that the book is also a re-telling of events foundational to Canada's identity: the role of Canadians in WWI, in particular Vimy and Passchendaele. The repeated imagery – for example the charred forest after a fire in Canada as Xavier and Elijah paddle down river to enlist, and the charred timbers of a bombed-out village in France that confront them later - links the themes. So too does the wordplay: Xavier's last name is bird; Elijah dreams of flying; they move together from one sniper nest to the next. Boyden's mother's maiden name is Gosling, adding to the avian allusions. Religious symbolism is also central - several events take place in or refer to churches, and there is strong reference to the Holy Trinity. Finally, Boyden pays homage through repeated imagery – peeing on a handkerchief to offset the effects of mustard gas; reference to rabbits – to Timothy Findlay's literary masterpiece *The Wars*. But while the homage, wordplay, imagery and symbolism permeate the book, they are subtle, part of the novel's foundation, and left for readers to reflect and appreciate.

Along with *Through Black Spruce* and more recently *The Orenda*, *Three Day Road* forms a trilogy that traces the Bird family over several generations. The books explore identity and Canada's origin myth, and in a case of life imitating art also raise questions about the author's own identity. The novel's post-script 'about the author' section ('my heart is part Irish, part Ojibwe') and subject matter, as well as Boyden's assertions of Metis heritage in the media suggests that he is writing of his own culture. That he is not launches him into the contemporary discussion about voice and authenticity, and while this is a worthwhile discussion it hopefully will not prevent readers from appreciating the mastery Boyden exhibits in this impressive debut novel.