



## The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America

*Thomas King*

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## **The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America** Thomas King

Rich with dark and light, pain and magic, *The Inconvenient Indian* distills the insights gleaned from Thomas King's critical and personal meditation on what it means to be "Indian" in North America, weaving the curiously circular tale of the relationship between non-Natives and Natives in the centuries since the two first encountered each other. In the process, King refashions old stories about historical events and figures, takes a sideways look at film and pop culture, relates his own complex experiences with activism, and articulates a deep and revolutionary understanding of the cumulative effects of ever-shifting laws and treaties on Native peoples and lands.

This is a book both timeless and timely, burnished with anger but tempered by wit, and ultimately a hard-won offering of hope--a sometimes inconvenient but nonetheless indispensable account for all of us, Indian and non-Indian alike, seeking to understand how we might tell a new story for the future.

## **The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America** Details

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## **From Reader Review The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America for online ebook**

### **Rebecca Foster says**

I wasn't able to read the whole thing before my NetGalley loan expired, but a thorough skim convinced me that King's is a witty, engaging cultural history of Native American and First Nations peoples. King is of Cherokee descent himself; he was born in California and lived in Alberta and Ontario before settling in Minnesota.

If his tone occasionally comes across as cynical, can you blame him? The story of native peoples in North America is one of constant setbacks and broken promises. Education initiatives and missionaries have often done more harm than good, and it's a slap in the face to call casinos "the new buffalo." Removal policies have been compounded by the insult of using reservations for resource mining and landfills. Land is crucial to native peoples' struggle for individual and collective identity, but is so often denied.

Even after statements from North America's leaders acknowledged that assimilation policies were wrong (Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper said "We are sorry" in 2008, and Barack Obama sent an official apology resolution through Congress in December 2009), it is hard to see how governments can ever make amends. The legal status of native peoples is not in stasis – as in the enduring image of the silent, noble savage – but, rather, constantly in flux.

My favorite chapter was the second one, "The End of the Trail," about depictions of Native Americans in art, film, television and fiction. People prefer idealized "Dead Indians" to the live ones, King argues, whether they appear in cowboy movies or on Land O' Lakes butter packets. It's so much easier and less embarrassing for us when those pesky Indians are contained in such ways.

One can't help but feel guilty by association when reading a book like this one, but King is a charming guide through the history everyone needs to know.

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### **Mmars says**

A reader looking for a history of Native Americans in Canada and the United States (it is that) should be aware that this work is better labeled a book of essays written by a Native American focusing on the injustices that occurred after whites discovered the continent. And King does a good job of it. It's a continuously bleak topic, but he interjects humorous asides and anecdotes to make it bearable.

There will likely be many, many detractors arguing how opinionated King is, or that he didn't bring up this topic or that. Or whatever. My guess is that whatever those complaints are, they have been addressed many times over in history books. But that isn't what he set out to do. He goes through history outlining loss of land, broken treaties, and defeats. He provides a First Persons/Native analysis of why his peoples come up with the short end of the stick. He also discusses the intent and attitude of white people from a First Persons/Native American viewpoint.

He tries to look for bright spots, but even today, the successes of tribes against governments are few. Even legislators who intend to help, often do not consult native Americans or wind up with legislation that is

detrimental rather than helpful. There is some buying of land and putting it in trust, but there are many other negative outcomes – (for example, think fracking.)

Since I finished this book, I've been noticing current issues I've come across in the newspaper regarding Native Americans.

-One is the horrifying conditions of government Indian schools. The amount of money put toward them since 2008 is abysmal. Here in Minnesota, a suburban legislator proposed state money for infrastructure at the Leech Lake reserve (without consulting the tribe, as usual) and totally pissing off the national legislator attempting to get money for the school. Just watch, this little feud, will likely leave the reservation school with nothing gained.

-One of the wealthiest tribes (casino money) in the country exists in the south suburbs of the Twin Cities. They are buying land and putting it into trust. However, they are also giving back and covering the cost of many civic expenditures. One county commissioner in particular is extremely opposed to all of this – because it takes money out of the tax base and leaves the land unreachable. Hmm.....interesting what happens when the shoe is on the other foot.

-The last article I'd like to mention was a travel page story about a woman who had visited some remote southwestern state canyon inhabited by some small tribe. (It was beautiful and stunning and quiet, but I'll bet she didn't visit it in the heat of summer.) The tours are led by natives and they were told that if they were lucky a particular "character" would visit in the evening. One of the points King talks about is how much whites love dead Indians – both literally and figuratively, meaning those in caricature/stereotype wearing headdress or warpaint. Well, this "character" was more traditionally dressed and told stories.....well, the writer was thrilled!!!!

King does, toward the end of the book, discuss some solutions/public policy that could address current white-indian relations. But, I believe the book would have been more effective had it had two sections. The first, being most of the book he's written. And a second section of suggestions for public policy wonks. I think King is well-enough versed in current issues to have done this and I think the book could have served a wider purpose.

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### **Don Mackinnon says**

I read this book because it was a selection of my book club, otherwise I probably wouldn't have finished it. I had hoped for a unique perspective on the native situation in North America, maybe some suggestions on how it can be improved and, at least an entertaining read. Instead I got a condescending rant from a leftist, professional Indian who is groaning under the oppression of the "white man" in the midst of the ivy covered walls of Canadian academia. The Indians have suffered, horribly and unjustly since the arrival of europeans in North America. Who knew! I don't think that I learned much from this except more detail. As others (including the author) have said, this book isn't a history per se. I guess that is because there is so much of the author's opinion in it. In some situations this is commonly known as "spin". I found him a less than honest narrator.

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## Lata says

I'm glad Thomas King let us know, at the outset, that this book would not be a traditional or comprehensive history text. I'm glad he let his anger show for the repeated abuses and murders committed in Canada and the US of first nations people. This book tells of a very different set of historical events from the ones we were taught in school: a history extremely sanitized and completely without regret or sorrow for the hatred and violence directed at indigenous peoples. While I was frequently upset and angry while reading this book, I actually found myself laughing out loud at King's sardonic and ironic assessments. Also, though the subject matter is not enjoyable, Thomas King's text was illuminating.

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## Ben Babcock says

Just last week, CBC News announced it was closing comments on articles about indigenous peoples, because at the moment, it cannot guarantee sufficient moderation to sustain polite discourse. In addition to the usual trolls, some people were writing hate speech motivated by a misconception of the state of indigenous peoples in Canada. And while this is reprehensible, it probably shouldn't be surprising. We white people are very good at ignoring indigenous people—until we want their land, that is.

*The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America* is Thomas King's attempt to make some kind of sense of the conflicting narratives and myths created about the European occupation of North America. I approached this book as someone who is interested in gaining a deeper awareness of indigenous perspectives on indigenous issues. I'm already sympathetic to these ideas and have a surface-level understanding of some of the challenges Indigenous people face as a result of colonialism. I don't think this book would work for someone who, say, is not so sympathetic or is actively labouring under the types of misconceptions that I hear all-too-often in Thunder Bay.

Unlike Stephen Harper, I have no trouble admitting that Canada has a history of colonialism. As King demonstrates in the Chapter 7, "Forget About It," that colonialism is ongoing. It has never stopped. And while I thought I understood this prior to reading *The Inconvenient Indian*, the implications of this continuum of colonialism only crystallized for me after reading this book.

We don't learn enough about our history of colonialism in schools. It's convenient, for instance, for us to subscribe to the fiction that we aren't responsible for anything that happened before 1867. That was Britain and France, we say—blame those European powers! (Strangely enough, we're quite happy to claim we "won" the War of 1812 despite not being a country back then, either.) But for all the noise that provincial governments make about curricula, indigenous peoples were largely absent from my education. And while I understand now that the colonization and oppression of indigenous people is ongoing, it took King's book to help me connect these two ideas—that is to say, **our education system leaves us ignorant because colonialism is ongoing**. I learned about the slavery and the triangle trade in history class, because these things are done and gone, and we can talk about them as "terrible tragedies" with the required distance of history. (N.B., I know that slavery is still a huge problem in Canada, and similarly, racism against black people is an ongoing issue we need to deal with as a society. But slavery is underground instead of legalized, and while racism against black people is endemic and systemic, it is not codified in our laws the way it is with indigenous people and the Indian Act.) But talking about our history with indigenous nations requires us to look at how things are "better" now ... and as King points out, over and over in this book, **things aren't better; we're just adept at discriminating in new and creative ways**.

It's this cyclical view that was the gamechanger for me here. I knew we had been colonialist in the past, and I knew we were being colonialist now, but King lines everything up and connects the dots in a way that shows how our current attitudes emerged from past ones. And so I can see now that a statement I might have made previously, like, "The situation of indigenous peoples in Canada is still pretty bad, but it has gotten a lot better in recent years" is just woefully inaccurate. Although it's true that some bands and nations have made great strides in some areas, others have seen setbacks; it's so difficult to quantify whether things are getting better or worse, because overall our society remains hostile and racist.

Disagree? I refer you to the CBC comments section.

Naturally, being a teacher, I'm all for education. But King has a wet blanket for me, too; he puts it very elegantly in the final chapter:

Ignorance has never been the problem. The problem was and continues to be unexamined confidence in western civilization and the unwarranted certainty of Christianity. And arrogance. Perhaps it is unfair to judge the past by the present, but it is also necessary.

He *does* go on to say, "If nothing else, an examination of the past—and of the present, for that matter—can be instructive," so education is helpful—just not enough on its own. Because when you get right down to it, our governments, past and present, have always known what they were doing. They want "inconvenient Indians" to disappear. They wish that indigenous peoples were relegated to history like they are so often portrayed in Hollywood. And if we truly are a democracy where governments reflect the will of the people—where governments refuse to take a stand about land rights or missing and murdered women or police brutality because it would mean upsetting affluent *white* voters—then the will of the people sucks, and we should be ashamed.

I was reading a recent issue of *National Geographic*, and it had an article about a national park in Scandinavia. It mentioned the Sami people, indigenous peoples of that area. I did a doubletake. I didn't know there were people indigenous to that area! (I knew there are plenty of indigenous cultures in various parts of the world, just not there.) Our society is not interested in highlighting the diversity of indigenous cultures *anywhere*, because it would mean admitting that we need to talk to the members of these cultures, to treat them like human beings, to deal with them fairly. And we can't do that, because they have land we want. Land we deserve, I guess, because we're better at exploiting it?

I should note that the above tirade is my own and not King's. Actually, despite his hefty cynicism, King is fairly conciliatory in tone. He's not here to accuse or point fingers at white people in general; he's not saying *you* are a bad person. But acknowledging our privilege and the way we interact with our racist society is important.

As King mentions, this is all about the land. It's not just a problem of racism; it's a problem of capitalism. We live in a world that rewards a certain perspective, one in which property and people are both commodities valued only for what they can produce, not their intrinsic qualities. This is a noxious philosophy, but it has made many people rich, and so they defend it. And, unfortunately, attempts to improve or replace this system have sometimes backfired spectacularly.

*The Inconvenient Indian* is an account of indigenous peoples in North America rather than a history. King explains this choice in the prologue, and I understand. He's not here to be a scholar—others have done that.

He's here to make a point. He does so eloquently and exhaustively. Each chapter is full of facts (as much as he maligns them) and anecdotes and impressive lists of dates and events. At every turn, he confronts us with the reality that the Canadian and American governments have never dealt with indigenous peoples in good faith, have broken treaties and promises whenever it suited them, and have alternatively attempted to exterminate or legislate indigenous people out of existence.

It's a grim story. But it is our story. And King does, to his credit, try to end on a happy note. While he can't point to things getting better, he highlights two "recent" massive land claims (in Alaska and in the creation of Nunavut) that have set some precedents. And he reminds us that whatever the past and present holds, the future is yet unwritten: indigenous cultures and people can change, just as the rest of society can change.

If we will it.

So educate yourself. Read this book. Get uncomfortable. Talk about racism. Challenge your behaviour and the behaviour of the friends. This won't go away unless we do something about it.

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### **Kaitlin says**

I'd give this one a 3.5\*s easily because I learned A LOT from this book about Indians/First Nations/Aboriginal people of North America. I would certainly say that this was a good start point to introduce me to a history of the continent and the people who live within it, but I did also feel a little bombarded with facts at some points of the book.

This is a book put together by Thomas King - A native Indian. He wanted to show an overview of some of the atrocities and achievements for Aboriginal peoples within Canada and the USA in just under 300pages - that's a big thing to try and do, and yet I think he did a pretty good job of it.

What I liked a lot about this is that it feels really cohesive. Each point leads into the next and the cyclical nature of the history he's recounting also helped with this. As for the 'story' it's more of a meander through the various important cases. Some of which are widely known, most of which are not. This is really the story of how Indians and First Nations people have had their land stolen time and time again by the Whites.

The things I found a little harder about this read were the sheer number of dates, examples and figures we're shown. There's such a lot of history to cover that it ends up taking up pages of the book with factual data. I don't say it's not interesting - it is - but there's also some pages where I just felt I couldn't take all of it in as much as I wanted to.

The other element which was both hit and miss for me was the cynicism/humour of this tale. We see this through the (self-proclaimed) bias of King and he's chomping at the bit to tell us about these horror stories, lives, and cases. I loved the passion and I think sometimes it worked great in between the examples to include a bit of wit/humour. At other times I think it didn't come over as well as he'd hoped and it fell a little flat for me.

Overall I really found this to be a fascinating (if one you need to concentrate on) read. I would definitely

recommend it and it's kickstarted a real interest in finding out more for me (which is always good). I look forward to reading more on the First Nations, and I would give this a solid 3.5\*s rating :)

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### **Julie says**

Truth be told, I expected a little more than this out of Thomas King, "... one of Canada's premier Native public intellectuals." (as described on the book's jacket). At the very least, we have a most disingenuous "account" of the "Indian" in North America -- but then we do have King's own *apologia* on the topic which at great length describes why this is an account, and not a history. Point well made, indeed, for he plays more than a little fast and loose with North American history as a whole.

The history of European contact with First Nations is indeed bloody, at times; unfortunate for certain; tragic, by many accounts -- as are all colonizing confrontations. The Europeans, or The Whites, as King insists on calling them, ran roughshod over many nations, North American Indians included, and so they should not count themselves as a people singled out for special treatment. This treatment was equally dispensed to Indians of India, to Blacks in Africa, and to various other tints on various other continents. They didn't pick on the lamentable North American Native exclusively, one can rest assured! (If you don't recognize my great use of sarcasm here, you are missing the point.)

Having established that The Whites are a nasty breed altogether still does not explain why King feels he has to rewrite his own North American Indian history. It is he who insists, after all, that The Whites need to know history -- to really know it -- and not hide from it. "If nothing else," King writes, " an examination of the past -- and of the present, for that matter -- can be very instructive." Yes it can.

Once King provides us with a long laundry list of injustices against his native people, he performs a little vaudevillian trick and ends the argument, full stop. He does not go on to examine the history of the First Nations before the dreadful Whites came along. He does not, for instance, remind us how the Five Nations performed a most deplorable act of war and aggression -- bordering on ethnic cleansing -- which decimated over 30,000 Huron, Neutral, Petun and Odawa.

Stop for a moment, and say it out loud. Thirty Thousand.

This conflict did not simply wound a nation -- this brought the respective nations to the very brink of extinction.

The Five Nations then went on to give a royal thumping to the Erie, on the south side of Lake Erie, leaving that nation virtually decimated. Quite a gruesome headcount, I would say. All this, without the help, aid or encouragement of The Whites. Just for s\*\*ts and giggles, by the sound of it. It would seem these offending nations stood in the way of very rich, very lucrative hunting grounds, and thus had to be eliminated.

One doesn't "bargain" after all, with the *enemy*; one does not make treaties or pacts of trade -- one just takes a tomahawk, brains the offending fool, and carries on merrily. (I suppose that's the equivalent to those filthy Whites handing out diseased blankets. So, Mr. King, in gambling parlance which you seem to enjoy, I see you one count of smallpox and raise you one count of ethnic cleansing.) We are now evenly matched.

In a special case of affection, the Mohawks decided, one warm fall day, to embark on a little exploratory voyage of pillage and rape to the land of the Hochelagas and Stadaconas. One minute they were there, and

the next, there was nary a young Hochelagan or Stadaconan brave to be found in all of Canada. This too, without the help, aid or encouragement of The Whites. This, too, because they stood in the face of some prime real estate.

Funny that -- because King cites, specifically, that what The Whites Really Cared About -- then and now, was just Real Estate. The Whites didn't care about the First Nations, specifically, he says, they just cared about grabbing their lands. ... Hummm... to that, is my response. You mean, sort of like the Five Nations cared about Neutral or Petun territory; or the way that the Mohawk cared about Stadacona territory? They cleaned up on *that* deal the way the croupier cleans the table, I would suggest! I mean, in the end you couldn't find a Neutral in the land, for love nor money.

If the biggest sin the Europeans committed was to "colonize" these North American nations, and to grab all their land, I would suggest that the precedent was well under way on this continent long before they arrived on these shores, so perhaps the sin can be forgiven a little bit? The Indian nations were not immune to warfare, pre-European contact. In fact, it was more than the norm to be constantly sending out raiding parties to kill the young men, blind or maim the old ones in most atrocious acts of violence, and take any women of reproductive age home to be assimilated into their own tribes. This was called "rep populating the nation" and was more than common practice among all tribes. Raping and pillaging didn't start with the Europeans so let us not pretend that there is a Noble Savage both in myth and in fact. He does not exist any more than the Devil Incarnate European exists. There are many shades of red, after all.

I could cite a number of other incidents, but I'm not writing a book on the topic! I'm just reviewing one that falls a little short of what it promises to do.

So, now, let's skip right along to the 20th century, and provide another pertinent example. King decries the expropriation of First Nations from Ipperwash as a most unjust, unfair measure in its time. I happen to agree with him. However, he fails to mention how those silly White Farmers up in St. Vincent Township were booted off their lands, under the same War Measures Act. These farmers don't garner mention in King's book, it seems, because they were White. They didn't receive any more compensation than the Ipperwash boys, and they never got their land back either. Hmm. Imagine that. You gotta know when to hold 'em, and when to fold 'em. The War Measures Act trumps all suits. Sorry, Bud. In the end, it seems Ipperwash did get its land back; those "white guys" expropriated for the Meaford tank range never got theirs back.

I too, deplore, and decry every act of violence that was done against First Nations. I deplore the personal violence, one to one; I deplore the violence that was done to First Nations, *period*. There is much to be saddened by; there is much to grieve; there is much to repair. And we need to get started.

## HOWEVER

and this HOWEVER is as big as it gets

Finger wagging, and finger pointing never gets anybody anywhere. Emotional bullying garners even less response with me. I shut it out -- because that's the only response it deserves.

Point for point, I can match every one of King's citations of violence; point for point, nobody wins. For every heartbreaking story of violence against aboriginal women, for instance, I can cite 10 acts of violence against women in general, that would make your blood curdle. I've worked with them. I've been in their homes. I've been in their prisons. I've been in their shelters. Nobody has the corner on the market of violence that should take any precedence over any one else, so please don't use that as a Badge. Red, White, or In Between ...

everybody bleeds the same colour.

This book is just another cheap emotional trick. It will only stir the pot of controversy, and resolve absolutely nothing. It will have a lot of people thumping their *mea culpa* chests in false guilt; it will make a lot of people angry; and it will make even more people say, *here we go again* and they will shut it all out. At the risk of irony, many will consider it white noise.

So, what would have been the point of it all?

Perhaps I'm taking this all too seriously, though. I would have hoped this would be a good book on how to begin a true dialogue for change; I was hoping for real solutions to very real, very troublesome issues. Instead I ran into a brick wall of fantasy.

But King warns us, very early on:

*Truth be known, I prefer fiction. I dislike the way facts try to thrust themselves upon me. I'd rather make up my own world. Fictions are less unruly than histories.*

I would agree. Don't let facts get in the way of a good story.

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### **Wanda says**

*"[For] me at least, writing a novel is buttering warm toast, while writing a history is herding porcupines with your elbows."*

I might never have read this book, had it not been a selection for my real-life book club. I thoroughly enjoyed the author's novel *The Back of the Turtle* last year—it was one of my 5 star selections. His humour and style are both very appealing to me and reading it was like buttering warm toast. But I'm not much of a non-fiction history reader. I feel like I did my time reading history while taking my Canadian Studies degree, and now I want to concentrate on fiction and non-history non-fiction, if you understand me there.

So, I approached this book with trepidation. And what can I possibly say about Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian*? It is well written—I would expect nothing less from so able an author. He herded his porcupines well.

It is tough. Tough on the dominant society, as it should be. For me, it was tough to read. I imagine as a white Canadian reading this, I felt very much like men feel when they read feminist critiques of modern society. A bit bewildered—okay, I know that things need to change, but how? I didn't come out of this book with a clear idea of what should be done or if there is anything that I can do to improve the situation.

I would have appreciated a bibliography or a few notes or something—to point me to other reading material should I decide to pursue one of the topics he references.

An important book in the Canadian conversation and one that should be read widely, perhaps taught in our high schools.

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### **Sue says**

In *The Inconvenient Indian*, Thomas King presents both a personal and historical view of the long history of Indian-white interactions in North America since the first explorations and settlements. Using historical facts, occasional humor, much appropriate irony in the face of events, and personal anecdotes, he presents an outline of 500 years of failed and broken compacts and treaties, attempts of varying success to, essentially, declare the Indian gone from this territory -- or at least remove their Indian-ness from them.

In his introduction, King writes,

*Truth be known, I prefer fiction. I dislike the way facts try to thrust themselves upon me. I'd rather make up my own world. Fictions are less unruly than histories. The beginnings are more engaging, the characters more cooperative, the endings more in line with expectations of morality and justice.*

But his task is history and "writing history is herding porcupines with your elbows". After reading this book, you will understand exactly what King means and know who or what those porcupines may be.

King makes a distinction between early explorers and colonists, finding that

*Explorers who treated with Indians in the early years tended to report on Indian-White relationships in generally positive terms. Colonists, who had to live with Indians, were more disposed to dwell on what they saw as the darker side of Native character. Armed with the divine imperative to subdue the earth, they were, no doubt,*

*annoyed that the virgin lands they had imagined, the empty wildernesses they had been promised, were occupied, and, gazing through the lens that seventeenth-century Christianity provided, most were only able to see the basic dichotomy that framed their world, a world that was either light or dark, good or evil, civilized or savage.*

(loc 376)

And this attitude would color relationships for the hundreds of years to follow, to the present day, including the land grabs and creation of reservations or reserves in the United States and Canada, the appropriation of resources, the virtual kidnapping of children and elimination of the right to native custom and religious practice.

I strongly recommend reading this book for several reasons. King has lived the life---he knows what he is writing about and has been "there" at some of the telling moments in the U.S. and Canada over the past several decades. He knows North American history. He also knows how to write in an engaging, sometimes folksy, style that momentarily eases the sting of his words. But these are stings that it is important to hear and feel.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in return for an honest review.

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### **Krista says**

Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian* A Curious Account of Native People in North America just won this year's RBC Taylor Prize for literary nonfiction and I must confess that I find it a *curious* choice. Although the stories he shares are undoubtedly true, he prefaces the book by saying that this is not a conventional history because then he "would be obliged to pay attention to the demands of scholarship and work within an organized and clearly delineated chronology". It is, rather, "a series of conversations and arguments that I've been having with myself and others for most of my adult life", but out of respect for history "I've salted my narrative with those things we call facts, even though we should know by now that facts will not save us". Definitely not a work of *fiction*, but I am still musing about how this book fits whatever criteria the RBC Taylor Prize committee considers.

In any event, I really *wanted* to like this book, but here are some of the problems that I have with *The Inconvenient Indian*:

Out of ignorance, disregard, frustration, and expediency, North America set about creating a single entity, an entity that would stand for the whole.

The Indian.

Or as J.R.R. Tolkien might have said, "One name to rule them all, One name to find them, One

name to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them."

After making that complaint, King proceeds to lump all of the North American settlers together as "the Whites", and no matter how systemic the policies of extermination and assimilation may have been, I am no more responsible for the massacre at Wounded Knee than I am for the racism he has personally experienced -- yet we are, indeed, all lumped together. And speaking of assimilation:

"Resistance is futile. You will be assimilated," could well have been spoken by John A. Macdonald and Andrew Jackson. Or Stephen Harper and George W. Bush.

I have no idea who Stephen Harper or George W. Bush have tried to assimilate -- lumping them together makes it sounds like a reference to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars -- but as wrong-headed as those invasions may appear in retrospect, who were they attempting to *assimilate*? Actually, every time King mentions Prime Minister Harper he does it with a sneer and that may reflect the author's views as an ivory tower elite as much as his views as a Native man. This comes off as very petty when he mocks Harper for a "stingy" apology -- which apology Harper made in reference to the abominable Residential School System in 2008 to an assembled group of First Nations in the House of Commons -- an apology that at the time was accepted and promised the beginning of healing. (King also complains that the Native elders who attended the ceremony dressed themselves like "Dead Indians" -- in feathered headdresses and buckskin -- but I fail to see how that was anyone's decision but their own.) Another complaint:

North America defends democracy as the cornerstone of social, religious, and political enlightenment because it is obliged to think well of itself and its institutions.

And:

You might wish to describe Christianity as the gateway drug to supply-side capitalism.

Throughout *The Inconvenient Indian*, King demonizes not just Christianity (for which I empathise with his view re Natives) but also democracy and capitalism. I've heard it said before that it's not fair for "the Whites" (to use King's term) to judge the Native population by how well they participate in our economy -- unemployment on reserves is often shocking -- but I honestly thought that Natives (to lump them together a la King) wanted for there to be more employment opportunities available to them (and this is apparently just another form of paternalism). And it wasn't before I read this book that I understood why Native bands push back against individual members having title to property -- I have often heard that idea proposed (not only would individuals then have some capital to invest or start businesses, but home ownership might spark the pride that would prompt people to take better care of their houses) -- but I do now see how that could lead to a band losing their entire reserve, piece by piece, within a few generations (and I agree that's more likely due to tricky developers than the Natives' inability to make good financial decisions). What I don't understand is how the individual Native bands can thrive or even survive if they don't participate in the capitalism and

democracy that surrounds them -- and King doesn't offer any solutions (even regretting the lucrative casinos that some bands have opened).

The question of "What do the Indians want?" is turned around to "What do the Whites want?" and King answers: land. That's really simplistic -- I have never in my life met anyone who wishes that the Natives would just dry up and blow away so that we can finally get their land (and I lived in Lethbridge, Alberta at the same time that King encountered terrible racism there). I *have* met many people who, like me, wonder often: how do we help the Natives? As a lumped together group, they are certainly not invisible here in Canada (and, yes, most of the news we see is negative) and I don't know one person who thinks the status quo is fine -- but that swings both ways: as much as no one wants to see children in northern Labrador huffing gasoline or a toddler in Alberta shot through the walls of her home, no one has a lot of patience for Native occupiers attacking elderly folks or reports of millions of dollars being mismanaged by tribal councils while the reserves they govern suffer horrifying poverty. King says that it comes down to sovereignty, but like a lot of people, I don't really understand what that means: for Native bands to continue to receive millions of dollars from the federal government with no accountability, even to each band's membership? For the government of Canada not to intervene on the reserves, even when they become a haven for black marketeering? Recently, the government of Canada has ceded greater responsibility for education to the reserves, along with a couple billion in new funding, but is the government not then allowed to monitor those education results?

What I do know is that *The Inconvenient Indian* is an angry book. Even the humour -- said to be hilarious and sagacious and represented in the quotes I used above -- is really just snarky and off-putting. 500 years of mistreatment by "the Whites" *should* cause anger in "the Indians" and the glacial pace of treaty settlements in Canada is a national embarrassment -- something *must* be done -- but, although King writes as though the occupation in Caledonia, for example, was justified, the rest of Canada just sees armed terrorists in masks and I don't see how this new militancy will lead to settlements. I don't know if most Natives know that the vast majority of the rest of Canada wants for them to be happy and healthy and pursuing whatever lifestyle will most fulfill them, but if they want for us all to band together to put pressure on the federal government to do the right thing once and for all, we'll need to be won over: think Martin Luther King instead of Idle No More (because blockading commuter trains and allowing yourself to be represented by the bumbling Chief Theresa Spence gains no supporters where I live).

*The Inconvenient Indian* is a valuable collection of the historical injustices done in the names of colonialism and expansionism and also an interesting look into the mind of "one of Canada's premier Native public individuals" -- it's certainly a worthwhile read -- but its anger often rubbed me the wrong way and it lacked a vision for the future; fatal flaws to me.

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## **Steve Bell says**

Great read! If the content wasn't so devastating it'd be a hilarious book. Thomas King is a skilled writer who magnificently rabbit-trails through 500 years of Indian/Settler history with his entertaining, laconic wit, unique eye and keen intelligence. Although it's a bit of an uncomfortable read if you happen to be (as I am) a white, Christian male: King, at one point refers to Christianity as the "gateway drug to supply-side capitalism." Ouch...

Read about:

- the white creation of the universal "Indian"
- Hollywood
- Indian Hobbyists
- Dead Indian/ Live Indian/ Legal Indian
- Treaties
- Indian Act
- Trail of Tears
- Conquest Religion/ Seduction Religion
- Old Unimprovable People
- the "Final Solution to the Indian Problem"
- Residential Schools
- AIM
- Land.

Always with an eye for the "ironic slant and chuckle" Thomas King's *Inconvenient Indian* gifts us with a privileged insider's look into why those damn Indians enduringly refuse to become gratefully "white and delightsome."

Anyone hoping to gain an understanding of the energy behind the current crisis in First Nations/ Canada relations should probably read this book. But I have to stress, once again, that despite the distressing darkness of the topic, Thomas King somehow turns out a thoroughly enjoyable read.

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### **Susanna Suchak says**

Thomas King makes facts, if not palatable, readable. However, when I say "readable" I mean that you will no longer forget them AND they will change your way of looking at life, history and "Indians". This particular book should be required reading in all North American high schools. Rather than have a segment of curriculum in elementary school for the study of "Aboriginal peoples" what schools need to do is put King and Richard Wagamese on the required reading lists for all students. And dare I add teachers. Perhaps then we'd stop studying a dead culture and realize that for all the genocidal efforts First Nations, Indians, Indigenous people are still here. Yes, we are inconvenient, but we have survived and we have no intention of going away quietly or otherwise.

His treatment is light handed and fair, but no matter who you are, you will learn something and be changed.

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### **Joan says**

Sure, the author knows his stuff, and certainly he shares his knowledge with wit and appealing style, but I'm left feeling that it is just the first chapter of the book I wanted to read. He seems to be tired by his tirade and has little energy left at the end for helping me understand what could be done now to move things in the right direction. I'm not sure, (and he'd dislike me for saying this) 'what it is he wants' and how he thinks we can get there.

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## **Sooz says**

so Tom King (and i can call him that cause everyone in Guelph knows him as Tom rather than Thomas) is very upfront about the fact that this is a personal story for him. yes, he says, there are facts - documented 100% accurate historically-documented facts within The Inconvenient Indian ....but .... as a First Nations story-teller, he knows you will never get the whole picture from facts alone. and he is happy to add the filling between the facts ... a filling rich in his experiences and impressions and perceptions. by sharing bits of information -like why he calls it a curious 'account' rather than history- he lets the reader know. and seriously? how can it (the genocide of his ancestors) not be personal?? Despite King's assertion that this is not a history, there certainly is a lot of history included. honestly I find the factual details the least interesting. i much prefer it when King is a little whimsical .... like here on page 79

'In Beckett's play, as everyone knows, Godot never arrives. In the Native version, Europeans never leave. In some ways I envy Vladimir and Estagon. Who knows what unfortunate turns their lives might have taken had Godot managed to land on their shores?"

Or when he presents ideas that aren't exactly his own original thoughts but still very much from his own perspective, like these little gems:

'Missionary work in the New World was war.' from page 103

'Land has always been the defining element of Aboriginal culture. Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of a people.' from page 218. he goes on to say that the non-native society -not particular individuals mind you - but the overall hive-mind attitude regarding land is more about what it is worth ... it has value not for it's mere existence, but for what can be gotten from it. it is very difficult for those two worlds to relate to each other .... impossible for them to co-exist in the same space, at the same time.

'The problem was and continues to be unexamined confidence in western civilization and the unwarranted certainty of Christianity.' from page 265 kind of sums up King's view, and it makes absolute sense to me. the western mindset has little tolerance for opposing views. sure we love Thai food and Russian novels and go to yoga and meditation classes ... we love to travel and experience other places. BUT ... we do all these things from the safe and sanctimonious, privileged place that only comes with being a member of the dominant culture. we do all these things knowing we will be comfortable and safe. we have HUGE expectations of our government to come to our rescue should we travel a little to far off the beaten path and fall off the edge of 'the civilized world'. and yeah sure we criticize our government .... but it comes across as whining more than genuine demand for change. King is right about the hive-mind of the western world. comfort and abundance and privilege and security binds us to capitalism and Christianity and all the ills of the world that come with them.

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## **Vanessa says**

Not as good as I expected, given the buzz. Too bad, because there is a need for an accessible review of North American history from a Native perspective. Such a book could do much to engage Canadians and

Americans with Native issues.

Unfortunately, this book isn't that, and it can't seem to decide what it is. At times it reads like a light and sarcastic opinion piece, other times we get lists of names and historical places with too little context. The net result is a book too hollow to satisfy a reader who wants to dive into First Nations history, and yet too dry to be a lightweight and quick read.

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### **Tom Whalley says**

This book will bum you out. It should. *The Inconvenient Indian* is (quite explicitly) *not* a history text, but an account of Native People in North America; it is a book about the ramifications of colonization and the systemic way that white culture has worked to destroy North American Aboriginal culture, written by an author who states he is more comfortable with fiction. It is *not* a history text, King explains, because he doesn't feel the huge amount of research needed for one would help with this book, yet almost every page is laden with dates, treaties, names, and examples. For a book that blatantly states it is not a history text, Thomas King wrote one hell of a history text. If more history texts had his way with prose, his storytelling ability, and dripped with as much deep-seated anger as this book does, I'd probably be a history professor by now.

*The Inconvenient Indian* isn't the be-all-end-all of Native rights and wants, and never claims to be. This book is, mostly, discussions of land ownership, cultural denial, and the historic Solutions to the Indian Problem. It is a book that deals more in modern history, and personal experience. It is full of stories and events that I'm amazed I never heard about - how I remained blind to the Occupation of Alcatraz, or the Wounded Knee Incident, I'll never know. This is, I feel, the purpose of this book. It shines a light on the real people who have either been ignored for convenience, politics, or just because their plight has been one of non-stop bummersville.

Growing up in Australia, it really pains me to see almost exactly the same things white Australians did to its native people happening here - is there a Colonization Textbook people were handed as they left Europe, or just a disgusting set of coincidences? Either way, the similarities in how white people treated the colonized are sickening.

If you're looking for a nonfiction book to read this year, *The Inconvenient Indian* is a fascinating look at cultures that have been repeatedly denied throughout North American history. If you're looking for a happy go lucky piece that answers the question "so, what do Indians even want to feel better" you should look away - as Thomas King says, the question has never been what do Native People want, but what do Whites want, and when will they stop wanting? On second thought, if that's what you wanted, it's even more important that you read this book. It might just open your eyes.

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### **Michael says**

I learned a lot from this and was blown away by King's ability to compress so much history by focusing on a limited set of themes. King does a great service in explaining the long history of Indian-White relations in North America so clearly and in using the sweep of the tragic failures to urge us all to do better in the future. This is no dry history, but a personalized account. I also appreciated his cushioning of uncomfortable truths

with ironic humor and a sense that we are all facing the problems together.

Like most of you, I have only a limited picture of this history: the distorted background of the fiction of movies and TV, some details on focal times and places from a small set of relevant books I've read, and personal experiences with Indians and their culture from the various places I've lived. Maybe I've a better picture than many because of growing up in Oklahoma, reading more than a handful of relevant books, and having worked on a reservation at one point. Still this book filled some large gaps in the big picture and in a lot of details, especially about developments in Canada. King captures the embarrassing state of ignorance in the general population very aptly:

*The sad truth is that, within the public sphere, within the collective consciousness of the general populace, most of the history of Indians in North America has been forgotten, and what we are left with is a series of historical artifacts and, more importantly, a series of entertainments. ...As a series of entertainments, Native history is an imaginative cobbling together of fears and loathings, romances and reverences, facts and fantasies into a cycle of creative performances, in Technicolor and 3-D, with accompanying soft drinks, candy, and popcorn.*

The author, a Cherokee professor of Native American literature, grew up wanting to play the cowboy instead of the Indian. He has a great riff on the appropriation of Indian themes in pop culture and commercial products. I never knew you could fold the Indian maiden on the "Land of Lakes" butter package to reveal a version with her charms showing. He draws you to an understanding of how society worships an invented Indian of the imagined past. I love King's razor sharp portrayal of Indians in three categories: "Live", "Dead", and "Legal":

*For Native people, the distinction between Dead Indians and Live Indians is almost impossible to maintain. But North America doesn't have this problem. All it has to do is hold the two Indians up to the light. Dead Indians are dignified, noble, silent, suitably garbed. And dead. Live Indians are invisible, unruly, disappointing. And breathing. One is a romantic reminder of a heroic but fictional past. The other is simply an unpleasant, contemporary surprise. ...*

*Dead Indians. Live Indians. In the end, it is an impossible tangle. Thank goodness there are Legal Indians. ...Legal Indians are Live Indians, because only Live Indians can be Legal Indians, but not all Live Indians are Legal Indians.*

I never knew the difference between how "Legal" Indians are determined in the U.S. versus Canada. The U.S. does it by certified membership in recognized tribes, usually confirmed by blood quantum, while our neighbor to the north designates "Status Indians" on an individual basis according to registration set at the time of treaties with particular tribes or bands. I also wasn't aware that less than 40% of Indians by race are Legal Indians in each country, and those that are not in that category are pretty invisible to the national governments. It's the Legal ones that are inconvenient and pesky:

*While North America loves the Dead Indian and ignores the Live Indian, North America hates the Legal Indian. Savagely. The Legal Indian was one of those errors in judgment that North America made and has been trying to correct for the last 150 years.*

*Even though disease and conflict had dramatically reduced the tribes, there were still, in the minds of policy makers, too many Indians. Too many Indians, too many tribes, too many languages,. Indians were a great, sprawling mess. What was needed was a plan to give this snarl of cultures a definitive and manageable form. So, out of ignorance, disregard, frustration, and expediency, North America set about creating a single entity, an entity that would stand for the whole.*

*The Indian.*

*Or as J.R.R. Tolkien might have said, “One name to rule them all, One name to find them, One name to bring them all, and in the darkness bind them.”*

Despite his irreverence, King calls a spade a spade, and there is no denying it:

*Throughout the history of Indian-White relations in North America, there have always been two impulses afoot. Extermination and assimilation.*

*The means of extermination didn’t much matter. Bullets were okay. Disease was fine. Starvation was acceptable. In the minds of many, these were not so much cruelties as they were variations on the principles underlying the concept ‘survival of the fittest,’ a phrase that Herbert Spencer has fashioned in 1864 and that would become synonymous with Charles Darwin’s theory of natural selection.*

*The second impulse, assimilation, argued for salvation and improvement.*

Much of the policies that fit under the first category were indirect results of displacing them from their land. The death of about 4,000 Cherokees in the forced move from Georgia and North Carolina to Indian Territory, the “Trail of Tears”, was just the tip of the iceberg. The mass relocations between 1830 and 1840 cleared upwards of 100,000 Indians from lands east of the Mississippi, breaking the spirit of many tribes. If you get a chance to visit the National Indian Museum in Washington, DC, note the wall map of all the tribes in the mid-1700’s and the disappearance of about half of them in the map from the 20th century. Mass displacements and land grabs continued into the 20th century through eminent domain for numerous dam building projects and resource development initiatives in the U.S. and Canada. With few exceptions, tribal land is not considered legally owned by the Indians, but instead as federal land held in trust or long term loan for the subset of Legal Indians.

In discussing assimilation, King covers the sad history of attempts to disband tribes as a solution. Under the Allotment Act of 1887, reservation land would be broken up into parcels and given to individuals and families, e.g. 160 acres to a head of household:

*Reservations would disappear. Indians would disappear. The ‘Indian Problem’ would disappear. Private ownership of land would free Indians from the tyranny of the tribe and traditional Native culture, and civilize the savage.*

The effect was to liquidate reservations in Indian Territory and nine other states and, after the allotment, free up the surplus land for Whites and businesses. One estimate has it that 138 million acres of Native land in 1887 was reduced to 48 million acres, much of it desert. The policy was repealed only in 1934 with the Indian Reorganization Act. Under another version of “termination”, between 1953 and 1966, the House Concurrent Resolution 108 led to abolishment of 109 tribes as official subjects of federal supervision. Canada had its own variations on “enfranchisement” of tribal members by converting them into ordinary property owning citizens.

The other mass effort to resolve “the Indian problem” was through education. King makes it clear how the many of the devastating effects of the residential schools were part of a concerted plan of erasing Indian culture. A fellow named Pratt in the 1880’s in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, invented the system of boarding schools placed far from the Indian children’s communities and banned the speaking of their own language and cultural practices. His scheme: “Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” The Catholics and the Protestants competed to gain as many converts as possible by this means. The recognition in government studies many years later that poor nutrition and health care at these schools led to mortality rates as high as 40% and to rampant physical, mental, and sexual abuse came too late for the more than 100,000 Indian children that passed through this system. Beginning in the 80’s various official bodies began to offer apologies for the policy, ending in 2008 with a public apology by Canadian Prime Minister Harper before the House of Commons and in 2009 President Obama signed a broader resolution of apology, although with no

ceremony to mark its passage. Though King finds these messages to be heartfelt, he doubts their sincerity given the absence of reparations or openings for legal liability.

But even if our whole society acknowledges the tragedy of past sins, can't we start fresh now and find a positive way to move forward? King sees hope in the activism that Indians now typically take in the face of unjust policies, garnering political power in the process. He also cites the examples of Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act in 1971 and Nunavut Land Claims Settlement of 1993, which included provisions of cash and Native corporate rights with much promise for economic sustainability and self-determination. His optimism at the end of the book is cautious but eloquent:

*Are our traditions and languages worth the fight? Certainly the easier and more expedient option is simply to step away from who we are and who we wish to be, sell what we have for cash, and sink into the stewpot of North America.*

*With the rest of the bones.*

*...So, let's agree that Indians are not special. We're not ...mystical. ..The fact of Native existence is that we live modern lives informed by traditional values and contemporary realities and that we wish to live those lives on our terms.*

This book was loaned as an e-book by the publisher through the Netgalley program.

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### **Megan Baxter says**

I have never read any of Thomas King's fiction. This is a curious omission, given how much I've liked the other media of his I've run across, from the Massey Lecture The Trouble With Stories to the halcyon days when the CBC Radio ran The Dead Dog Cafe. (The episode where Gracie and Jasper were writing political slogans will always be near and dear to my heart. I still know the Stockwell Day one off by heart.)

Note: The rest of this review has been withdrawn due to the changes in Goodreads policy and enforcement. You can read why I came to this decision [here](#).

In the meantime, you can read the entire review at [Smorgasbook](#)

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### **Jennifer (aka EM) says**

Tough one to review. King explicitly states at the outset it will be his own personal approach to a topic that spans 500+ years, consists of hundreds if not thousands of independent tribes (not a heterogeneous group - call them First Nations, Aboriginals, Native Americans, or Indians, as he prefers), and is fraught with legal, political, tribal and even linguistic complexity that crosses and differs across borders.

He acknowledges that he is more comfortable with fiction, and that he won't be presenting a scholarly, historical account filled with facts.

And he doesn't. Yet - as the chapters mount (once the Hollywood chapter is out of the way), the facts he does present, welded together by anger and - if you're familiar with his fiction, this is no surprise - the surehandedness of a seasoned story-teller, are as or more compelling than if this was more rigorously

footnoted.

And, he's Thomas King - he's got authorly, as well as Indian, credibility. So we can cut him some slack for the occasional lapse into cherry-picking and/or a feigned non-chalant irony that started to grate on me a bit.

He's not trying to persuade the reader to a particular point of view or a preferred solution. Still, the book is persuasive - even if it needs to be read in context with a lot of other fictional and non-fictional explorations of the topic.

Even if you're pretty up to date with Native history, you'll probably pick up a few tidbits here and there. What you won't find are any easy answers - because there just aren't any to be found.

When you're dealing with 500 years of messy, brutal colonization, and fundamentally two very different worlds on a collision course, is there any definitive way to make sense of it? Don't we all have to grapple with it in our own way, coming at it from our own unique perspective - either as colonist or colonized?

For me, on this topic, the question is: what happens after "I'm sorry"? How do we move forward, and to where?

I'm surprised King didn't write about the Truth & Reconciliation Commission (he was covering a LOT of ground and being as even-handed as possible in his focus on US v. Canada; I wonder if some honing in on one or the other might have been beneficial?). Also, in a subsequent edition - if there is to be one - I imagine he will add commentary about the Idle No More movement (which really got going around the time this was first published) - I'd like to hear his take on both things.

As a digression, a month or so ago we had an event at work that brought together leaders from a bunch of First Nations groups. The event started with a brief welcome to "our" offices, then we turned it over to a Cree elder, who performed a smudging ceremony. She translated her prayers into English. She called on "the spirits of all the animals, the birds, the insects, the rocks and our ancestors of this land of the Mississaugas of the New Credit" - the band that currently has an outstanding land claim on the very ground on which we were standing. Subtle but powerful moment. We thought *we* were welcoming *them*. Our colossal arrogance - entirely unintentional - but still.

This is where King leaves off ... with the land, and who has it, who wants it, who "owns" it.

It's messy. And the only way through it, I think, is honest, authentic dialogue. This book is part of that dialogue.

Still, that dialogue is not going to fix anything. It won't erase the past or heal it. I'm not even sure it can carve out a constructive future.

But is there anything else?

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**TheSkepticalReader says**

*The Inconvenient Indian* is, as it states, an account of some events that have occurred in the history of the Native people of North America. It isn't necessarily a chronological history, but more of a layman's introductory guide into this subject. So for a reader such as myself, this book was the perfect place to start.

The book covers a wide variety of topics such as (mis)representation of Indians in Hollywood, implications of mandatory residential schools, temporary treaties, wars, the (mis)conception of what Indians 'want', and more. While he does generalize at times, he is fair about providing examples that support his generalizations to quite a large extent. He tears apart common myths, stereotypes, and fabricated histories of Native people by Whites.

At times we even get an overview of the White-Indian relationships and how they've consistently disadvantaged the Indians. In forms of either annihilation or assimilation, Whites have continually sought to deal with this 'Indian problem' that doesn't seem to go away. US Presidents such as John F. Kennedy and Obama as well as Canadian PM's like Stephen Harper, despite coming out fair and liberal in the media, have grossly neglected the abuses of the Native people while also claiming they've never really involved themselves in Indian societies anyway. As King states,

*"...in the political world, apologies seem to have little to do with responsibility, and it appears that one can say 'I'm sorry' and 'I'm not responsible' in the same breath."*

King further breaks down the way North America has classified Natives into little boxes with labels such as Legal Indian, Live Indian, and Dead Indian (or Status or non-Status Indian in Canada). Despite the complexity of Native people and their tribes, they've been bundled up together unfairly and so the absolute ignorance of Whites continues to thrive even today.

Despite all of this holding truth, he also admits that Native people have their own set of faults and that sometimes they've ended up kicking themselves in the gut because of petty issues. One of the things that stands out most here is that Native people, just as Whites, also had slaves and despite the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, some Natives refused to give up this practice. While it would be unfair to judge them by the standards of the 'civilized White people', slavery in the end is still slavery and there aren't a lot of grey areas in this.

In the end, I took two things away from this book in attempting to understand why/how Indian-White relationships work (or don't work). First of which is the misconception that all Native people are the same, that they share the same culture, history, etc. They do not. To assume so is unfair to an entire continent of people and leads to more misunderstandings, prejudice, and unjust systems. Second, often Indians seemed to be asked the question, 'what do Indians want?' and very *clearly* this is the wrong question. It's never been about what Indians want. It's about what Whites want. To pretend so otherwise is a sloppy perspective of North America's history.

King writes this book with a lot of emotions, anger and frustration the most obvious. Despite the fact that this will rub some readers the wrong way, I can both understand and sympathize with his tone of voice. This is his history so yes, this is personal.

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