



Invisible North: The Search For Answers on a Troubled Reserve

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A vivid first-person account of life on a troubled reserve that illuminates a difficult and oft-ignored history.

When freelance journalist Alexandra Shimo arrives in Kashechewan, a fly-in, northern Ontario reserve, to investigate rumours of a fabricated water crisis and document its deplorable living conditions, she finds herself drawn into the troubles of the reserve. Unable to cope with the desperate conditions, she begins to fall apart.

A moving tribute to the power of hope and resilience, *Invisible North* is an intimate portrait of a place that pushes everyone to their limits. Part memoir, part history of the Canadian reserves, Shimo offers an expansive exploration and unorthodox take on many of the First Nation issues that dominate the news today, including the suicide crises, murdered and missing indigenous women and girls, Treaty rights, First Nations sovereignty, and deep poverty.

Invisible North: The Search For Answers on a Troubled Reserve Details

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From Reader Review Invisible North: The Search For Answers on a Troubled Reserve for online ebook

Brian Hickey says

Invisible North is a true 5/5 star accomplishment, and a trip that was emotionally charged on a number of levels. Writing a truly objective review proved to be tougher than expected for during its last couple of chapters my heart was pounding, I was angry, I felt ashamed to be Canadian, I was upset as to how little I actually knew about the plight of most Native People living on reserves, and most of all, it left me wanting to help. (Thankfully, Shimo provides the reader with a number of resources to do exactly that at the end of the book). What the book accomplishes is astounding in that through its exhaustive investigative research, it not only informs but evokes a sense of empathy and urgency that is visceral and somewhat tangible. Because of this, I simply couldn't put the book down as it left me craving more. Simply put, Alexandra Shimo is one beast of a writer and this book will go down as one of the best pieces of Canadian historical nonfiction. Yes, it is that good.

Shimo, a journalist from Toronto, decides to follow up on a story written about a reported E.coli breakout in Kashechewan's water supply, a small reserve in northern Ontario with a population of about 1800 people. To get a true feel for the story, Shimo decides to spend 6 months on the reserve to get a true sense of the stories related to the water crisis. As she becomes exposed to the deplorable living conditions that this community is faced with, the discovery of a much bigger revelation ensues, catapulting the reader into the true breadth of the book. It is here where Shimo touches upon issues such as the reserve's youth and the highest suicide rates in the world, the overcrowded living conditions, the staggering rates of tuberculosis, diabetes, arson, sexual assault, unemployment, and infant mortality, many of which being derivatives from the fallout of disastrous government policies such as the Indian Act and perhaps the ugliest instance in Canadian cultural genocide, the Residential Schooling system.

Though I found much of Invisible North's content to be daunting, sickening and infuriating, because of the way in which it is written, it serves as not only an informative wake up call, but an empowering read as you begin to see how resilient the community is in the face of such adversity. I found it fascinating in learning how Cree spirituality is explained and used as a means towards the notion of developing a truly sovereign Native society. Like all great pieces of narrative fiction, though it's a short read, the book is filled with exceptional investigative journalism, scandal, emotion, and dramatic personal accounts. Alexandra Shimo commits so much to the book that she too begins to become unravelled in the face of the community's harsh living conditions.

"Reconciliation with Native People is still the most pressing social justice issue Canada faces". It is the ugliest part of Canadian history and as Shimo's Invisible North illustrates, what most Canadians don't know is that Native people on most reserves, (in this case those that live in Kashechewan), continue to live in conditions that rival most Third World populations. This book is a brilliantly written wake up call to the bulk of a Canadian population that is uninformed, largely because of what the media decides is newsworthy, and of course, because of how much has been swept under the rug.

Though we have made huge strides in the realm of creating a progressive, inclusive society that values civil liberties, it baffles me that in 2016, our history books still don't reflect the truth, in this case how Canadian policy continues to drastically mishandle Native People and Native Culture. It is easily the ugliest aspect of Canadian history, and one that needs to be fully understood if we are to move forward as a country that values the rights of all of its citizens. If we don't know our past, how are we to shape our future? This book is a concise, poignant example of this cultural dilemma, and because it does such a brilliant job exposing the truth, I truly hope that it will be studied long after its publication.

As others have mentioned, I too cannot recommend this book enough. Though it serves as somewhat of a microcosm to represent the living conditions in most of the First Nation reserves, it is a deeply moving personal account, one that will open your eyes and in turn, make you want to be a better person. Bravo Alexandra Shimo. I have no doubt that this book will attain the immense praise it so rightly deserves.

Alexandra Prochshenko says

Record high suicide rates, unemployment, alcoholism, floods, poverty, hunger, HIV rates, diseases, the absence of doctors and fire department, mouldy houses where children sleep in shifts because there is no room for everyone at night... what country comes to mind?

Well, surprise-surprise, it's a First World spot named Canada.

I never thought that I could say: "This is the book that everyone has to read," but here I am, saying it. *Invisible North: The Search for Answers on a Troubled Reserve* is the book that all Canadians must read, unless they've already educated themselves on First Nations issues in our reserves. These people live right beside us, in Ontario, but they live in "The Fourth World" conditions. (38)

This book totally messed me up. I was so furious and ashamed when I finished reading this. I still am. Government and media used to ignore First Nations issues, but in 2005 the news about water plant made it to newspapers, which slightly helped the community. "By all accounts it was worse [before 2005] than when I arrived five years later, when similar, albeit slightly improved conditions – crippling poverty, record-high suicide rates, traumatized and overwhelmed people – cause me to have PTSD." (145)

Is this how people should live AFTER they got help? In Canada? Seriously?!

As somebody wrote above, Shimo's book is shockingly eye-opening. It's also very well-written, the language is easy, chapters are short and packed with the information, statistics and data, but the work is also very emotional. I applaud Alex Shimo for exposing her weakness and bad things she thought or did. The book is available at libraries. There are some links in "Getting Involved" chapter, check them out.

We need Native sovereignty in Canada. No one should live like this.

Nicola says

I am giving this book 5 stars because for a short, concise read, this book provided vital information and understandable context that every Canadian should have to understand the tragedy of life on reserves. In my ignorance of the political and social reasons for indigenous peoples entrapment in reserve life, I never knew the right questions to ask to understand better, and, frankly, the questions I wanted to ask seemed so obvious that I knew I had to be missing something. This book connected the dots for me and now, unfortunately, I can fully share in the national embarrassment and the horror of the Canadian legacy of injustice towards our indigenous people.

Kimberley says

This book contains a lot of information that is hard to read, especially if you're like most Canadians who think First Nations are being treated well in this country. However, it's an important book and I encourage people to read it, learn and advocate. It is an embarrassment to our country that we let anyone live in these conditions.

Natasha Penney says

Bravo Alexandra Shimo for your profoundly personal, painful and powerful insights you shared in this book of a trip to the Kashechewan reserve in Northern Ontario to uncover the truth behind a water crisis.

What the author found, in addition to an interesting water crisis story, were deplorable living conditions, staggering poverty, a cycle of defeat and a close-up view of the inequities forced on Canadian First Nations peoples forced to endure the daily humiliations legislated by the Indian Act. This book is powerful education on the realities of life in Northern Reserves and the no-win situation they find themselves in when trying to deal with poverty, addiction issues, suicides and mental health issues, discrimination and family violence. The Band Council tried - they went to extraordinary lengths to call national attention to their plight. But all it received in response was lip service to the "intent" of various treaties and then silence. Want to open a greenhouse? The ministry doesn't have money. Want to operate a seasonal business so you can feed your family in a place where grapes cost \$14 a bundle, but your welfare cheque is \$342? Nope. You're a bad investment risk because there also isn't money for a fire department so arson is rampant and returns won't be secure. Want more housing? No money for that, either. Mental health initiatives? Sure. For Band-Aid solutions that do little to address the roots of the problem. Send a kid to a "southern" hospital for treatment, by all means, but will there be follow-up when the children are back on Reserve? Of course not.

The realities took a personal, emotional and psychological toll on the author, who left the reserve sick, under attack for being a lesbian and an outsider, and having turned to alcohol and sleeping pills to cope with the depression, the flight or flight instinct that emerged when she felt threatened, and physical ailments from alcohol, poor eating and lack of hygienic conditions.

But Shimo got to leave. That's what strikes me. She tells a powerful story and her work is valuable and brave and hopefully consequential. But the strength for me is that when she reached her breaking point, she could leave and surround herself with a supportive network of family and friends in Toronto; get access to world-class healthcare and take the steps necessary to regain her emotional, physical and psychological strength. The people she left behind - the residents of Kashechewan, are not that lucky. They have never been that lucky. If things continue as they have been - with the Indian Act reducing First Nations as a population of problem-makers that needs to be handled rather than full Canadian citizens with rights to self-determination for traditional hunting and fishing practices, where to build their homes and how they seek meaningful employment, land rights and self-identity - they may never be lucky. And that's where the injustice lies. That our government is complacent and willing to let these well documented and provable inequities persist in place of true dialogue, meaningful change, and willful empowerment.

Her approach is fact-based, strong, unarguable and impossible to forget. Successive governments who use the Indian Act as their guiding post have failed First Nations peoples in this country. They've (at times) deliberately ignored their issues and turned a blind eye because it wasn't expedient or convenient. They've played guardians to a group of people they've reduced in name and spirit with an approach that refuses them any self-determination. Perhaps its time we all acknowledge this approach doesn't work. It's time to look to First Nations communities for solutions. They know their issues best. They know their people and their capabilities. I'm praying we can FINALLY learn from these mistakes.

Patsey says

Should be required reading. Maybe I'm naive but I don't see that Shimo has any political motivation for this book and has simply written of her experience - brutally and honestly. Now what will we do with this knowledge? I am ashamed. I will do better.

Penny (Literary Hoarders) says

Right now there is a debate about books in Canada, called Canada Reads. The theme this year (and has been in different variations of the same theme in the last few years) is What is the One Book Canada Should Read Now? Invisible North is not in the running this year, and it's a shame. This is definitely one book every Canadian should read now.

Conceivably, this book is short enough to be read in one sitting. But I was unable to do that. I had to put it down after each chapter in order to 1.) calm down because I would become so enraged at what I was reading, and 2.) to absorb how absolutely disgusting, devastating and horrible life on a reserve is.

I have pretty close to every single page marked off with yellow sticky notes, some pages have 3 or 4 on the same page. It's devastating. It seems too coy to just apply sticky notes to a page in a book. It's disgusting how the regulations or laws or whatever it is that the federal and provincial governments conduct themselves with the Indigenous population and is so ass-backward it's appalling. Canada and Canadians have a lot of work to do to resolve this incredibly important issue and it needs to be heard far and wide.

Alexandra Shimo only spent a few months on the reserve and came away with PTSD, severe mental and physical health problems, a growing dependency on drug use in order to cope but she was able to escape.

Oh, I could go on and on, but, if Canada needs to read one book right now, this is the one. Thank you Dundurn Press for sending a copy of this book to me. It is appreciated.

Wendy Caron says

Highly recommended read for those who are interested in the issues confronting indigenous northern communities. It is very readable and presents lots of information on many issues; interestingly from the perspective of a non-indigenous visitor. Brought to mind observations made by Julie when she was doing a medical rotation in Moose Factory and had occasion to work the clinic in Kashechewan.

Margi says

Wow, what a great but incredibly depressing book. Sheds light on a snapshot of life on reserve. Good explanations of the relationship between First Nations and the federal government explained in ways slightly different than usual. I have a small amount of knowledge about these issues and felt I learned some new

things in this book.

David Quinn says

Every country has its dirty little secrets and Invisible North tells of Canada's modern day mistreatment and neglect of the native Indians in Kashechewan First Nation. Source material comes from the author's personal experience on the reservation and from research.

The subject matter is very bleak but I would recommend this book or something similar to raise awareness that human rights abuses still exist in countries with strong reputations for progressive human rights policies. This book is a good choice because it's relatively short and the author's style is straightforward and uncomplicated. I particularly liked the section at the end of the book where the author offered suggestions to the reader about how he or she could help. It was very practical and thoughtful.

I was only mildly bothered that the author made no mention of trying to interview any members of the ministry that oversees Indian affairs. I don't think those interviews would have changed the story but it would have provided a sense of balance.

I was a little uncomfortable reading about how the present day USA treats its Native Indians far better than Canada treats theirs. America's greatest sins against Native Americans date back nearly two centuries ago but I find it hard to believe they're treated very well in the present day. The author never tried to make the argument that Indians are treated well in America, only that they're treated much better than Indians are treated in Canada. That's such a depressing thought.

Kendra says

Probably the best, and hardest, book I read all year. Invisible North: The Search For Answers on a Troubled Reserve makes you understand way more about the unfairness of Indian Act and the struggles of indigenous people in Canada.

Zoë says

One of the most eye-opening books I've ever read.

This book is part of my "Truth and Reconciliation" reading, and I picked it up one evening because I figured a memoir would be relatively easy bedtime reading, in terms of language if not content. That assessment turned out to be correct: it's a short book written in a very readable style, blending an account of Shimo's months on a northern Ontario reserve with background about the history of the reserves and the treatment of Indigenous people by the Canadian government. The copyediting sometimes leaves something to be desired, but I can forgive that because the content is so powerful.

I was constantly shocked by some new revelation about how the government's actions. There's just so much disturbing policy that led to the terrible living conditions of Indigenous Canadians on reserves. Until the very recent past, people living on reserves weren't even allowed to visit other reserves without permission from the government of Canada? They weren't (aren't?) allowed to trade with each other? They're forced to buy

from one government store that can use its monopoly to charge obscene prices? Etc.

Then there's the Sixties Scoop: a government policy of kidnapping Indigenous children from their families and giving them up for adoption to non-Indigenous families. They would claim that they were taking the child to see a doctor, and the child just wouldn't come back. The policy was supposed to be for neglected/abused children, but they assumed all children on reserves were neglected/abused.

And there were "the anti-trade sections of the Indian Act, which banned Aboriginals from doing business with each other unless the transaction was approved by the Ministry, laws that were only revoked in December 2014." In general, the reserve isn't allowed to do anything without permission from the government, and the government pretty much always says no.

The account as a whole is chillingly dystopian. All money is controlled by the Ministry, which gives (or more often, doesn't give) funding according to its whims, with no explanation or accountability. The result is that people are afraid even to talk to a journalist about their terrible living conditions, because angering the Ministry could result in the withholding of money that they need to survive.

I don't know what's more shocking: the horrible laws that forced Indigenous people into poverty, or the fact that I had literally no idea. I grew up reading multiple Canadian newspapers daily, and I had no idea.

Shimo has an explanation for that too: "The main theory used to explain these conditions is that they are the unfortunate remnant of policies that we now acknowledge as a historic mistake. As a national myth, so oft-repeated it has gained the familiarity of a nursery rhyme, it has the advantage that any wrongdoing is embedded firmly in the past." This definitely rings true to me. I remember being taught very briefly about the residential school system, and coming away with the impression that it was just one of those unenlightened things that nineteenth-century people did; I don't think I learned until a couple of years ago that it had continued into the 1990s.

Anyway, I could quote more and more passages, but I'll limit myself to one final extended quote about how the reserves came to be where they are today:

"And it was easy to continue moving First Nations persons around, as if they were unwanted bedroom furniture, long past the era of Herbert Spencer's Survival of the Fittest and nineteenth-century colonial expansion. This is where Canadian history differs from that of other developed countries, such as the United States and New Zealand, which also committed mass displacement of their indigenous people, but mostly stopped after the nineteenth century....

"In 1956, the Ministry decided that the Sayisi Dene were not getting enough to eat and therefore needed to be moved. (In fact, they were, but the department had miscounted the number of caribou in the herds.) The spot chosen, just outside of Churchill, Manitoba, named 'Camp 10,' was a rocky, windy outcrop measuring three hundred by six hundred feet, devoid of any trees, sanitation, or fresh water, and accessible only by foot.... Children found food by scavenging in the local dump. Dumpster diving was seen as necessary but highly dangerous, as Camp 10 was located in the polar bear migration path. Within five years, an estimated one-third of the original Sayisi Dene population had died from disease and malnutrition....

"Or there's the Mushuau Innu.... Without consultation, they were loaded onto boats and transported two hundred kilometres to a location lacking trees and hunting.... It too was located on a rocky outcrop without running water.... It was believed that the Innu would simply shift from hunting caribou to becoming full-time fishermen, not because they had any desire or proclivities for their new profession, but because the new site 'was not too far from fishing grounds.' The rock was considered too expensive to dig, so houses were built without sewage systems. Waste and garbage began to accumulate."

And it just goes on. I'd say this is essential reading for any Canadian, because it manages to convey a powerful and important message wrapped up in a short and easy-to-read memoir. Shimo's original purpose was to investigate a water crisis that was possibly exaggerated for media attention, but the book goes so far beyond that that the main goal sometimes seems like a distraction from the real story. Whenever I started to think that that was enough about the machinations surrounding the water crisis, Shimo would move on to something more important like the children's suicide crisis.

Anyway, it's not a perfect book, but it's extremely eye-opening and highly recommended.

Friederike Knabe says

I am asked to write an extensive review. A summary will appear here later. Overall, an important, depressing, challenging read on the ongoing devastating conditions in northern remote First Nations reserves. Hope is always just over the horizon, promises are made and change can't come soon enough.

Kate says

Journalist Alexandra Shimo goes north into the remote Northern Ontario reserve of the Kashechewan, she plans to write about a water crisis that broke out on the reserve in 2005. She discovers instead the depressing conditions that Canada's aboriginal people live under and the terrible human rights violations that occur to this day.

I had thought as a nation that we had a despicable record of lies, broken treaties and abuse of Native Americans, but the violence that Canada has perpetrated is unspeakable. It shouldn't surprise me, given the way Ottawa has treated her own Maritime Provinces, especially what they did to Newfoundland and Labrador. It does point out that the natives of British Columbia did fare better as they refused to enter into any treaties with the government. Colonial powers have always had a tendency to view native populations as sub-human and child like incapable of self government, then set up conditions to insure that they will never have either the education or economic stability to ever be able to self-govern.

The conditions on the reserve are so bleak that Alexandra begins to break down both physically and emotionally before she can finish her own research and interview process. Even the health workers and teachers and others government employees generally work for two weeks then are flown out for R&R before they brake down physically and emotionally...this is done at great expense, yet Ottawa, has no concern for the natives who are given no escape from the conditions that non-Natives find unbearable and given no relief or funds to lift them out of the abject poverty the government has assigned them to.

A bleak read ,but one that is important because without visibility of human rights violations nothing ever changes.

It is not easy to provide services to remote native populations, this I am well aware of as my son participated twice in summer joint armed forces medical clinics in the farthest reaches of Alaska. Where Native Americans often made 3 week treks on foot dragging injured family members in sleds, that had been wounded or injured months earlier to have bones reset, and infections illnesses treated for that brief few weeks each summer. We as a nation have to do better, but we also need to pressure our neighbor to the North to revamp their policies.

Tracy Morton says

I am privileged! I know this. Sometimes it's good to have a reminder and this book certainly gave me one. It amazes me that people have to live this way in Canada. I'm ashamed that we have people living in third world conditions or fourth world conditions First Nation communities are being called. I have to wonder if we would grow to have a better social consciousness if we were forced to read more books like this in highschool instead of so many classics.
