



# Kiss of the Fur Queen

*Tomson Highway*

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## **Kiss of the Fur Queen** Tomson Highway

Born into a magical Cree world in snowy northern Manitoba, Champion and Ooneemeetoo Okimasis are all too soon torn from their family and thrust into the hostile world of a Catholic residential school. Their language is forbidden, their names are changed to Jeremiah and Gabriel, and both boys are abused by priests.

As young men, estranged from their own people and alienated from the culture imposed upon them, the Okimasis brothers fight to survive. Wherever they go, the Fur Queen--a wily, shape-shifting trickster--watches over them with a protective eye. For Jeremiah and Gabriel are destined to be artists. Through music and dance they soar.

## **Kiss of the Fur Queen Details**

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Author : Tomson Highway

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# From Reader Review Kiss of the Fur Queen for online ebook

## Alice Montgomery says

Kiss of the Fur Queen was probably one of the most important materials which helped me become more aware about Indigenous issues. Sometimes, reading about facts isn't enough to understand the psychological and sociological impacts. In this instance, fictional novels are extremely important. They are a vehicle which can draw readers to a broader understanding. It is like walking a mile in another person's shoes. While I cannot begin to comprehend entirely the trauma that residential schools have brought to Indigenous people after absorbing material, I would argue that it is a start.

The novel begins with two Cree brothers living in a small community in Northern Manitoba. The brothers are happy and healthy, and even at a young age, they demonstrate a lot of artistic potential. One day, the eldest brother, Champion Okimasis, is swept away from his home and parents and carried off to a residential school hundreds of miles away. At this school, Champion is renamed Jeremiah. He is taught English in hopes of eradicating his native tongue. A few years later, Jeremiah's brother Gabriel (original name Ooneemeetoo), is subjected to sexual assault from a priest at the school.

Years later, Jeremiah and Gabriel find themselves living in the city trying to make their way as artists. At this point I found it rather interesting that Highway decided not to focus a great deal more on life at the residential school. This suggests that for Highway, the aftereffects of attending the residential school and being immersed in a society which seeks to eradicate Indigenous culture is much more devastating. It becomes clear that although the brothers have received an education which has allowed them to pursue their artistic interests, they become isolated individuals as a result. If they go home, they cannot fully adapt into their family life and culture. If they stay in the city, their Indigenous heritage turns them into outcasts. They appear to inhabit both worlds at once without fully being able to root themselves firmly in either world. This book is extremely valuable for a non-Indigenous Canadian or even American person if they wish to begin to understand Indigenous issues. The effects of residential schools may appear to be a facet of the past (the last one closed down approximately 21 years ago in 1996 in Canada), but the trauma is very much alive today. Although there is a slight blending of Indigenous myth that I certainly had no experience with, Highway writes in a particular way which is conscious of his audience. You do not need to be an expert in Indigenous culture to understand this novel, and any Cree words used in the novel are conveniently translated in a glossary at the back of the book.

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## Glenn Sumi says

Tomson Highway oughta stick to playwrighting.

The acclaimed dramatist (*The Rez Sisters*, *Dry Lips Oughta Move To Kapuskasing*) has penned a first novel that should have been rejected, politely, at the audition stage.

An uneasy mixture of Gabriel García Márquez and Judith Krantz – magic realism with sex and careers – *Kiss Of The Fur Queen* chronicles the lives of two brothers, Champion and Gabriel Okimas.

Terrible things happen to them at the Catholic school they're forced to enter. Later on, Jeremiah battles racism to become a concert pianist, while Gabriel struggles with homophobia to become a ballet dancer who has promiscuous-yet-mystical sex with strangers. Throughout, they're watched over by a dream-like apparition called the Fur Queen, the rez fairy godmother.

Despite autobiographical elements, the writing lacks authenticity. The early passages are way too dreamily sentimental, and Highway clutters the book with clichés. People are "still as a rock" and use "every ounce of courage" and characters and situations pack up and leave, taking with them any tension they might have

generated.

Even on the level of dialogue, where a playwright should shine, Highway fumbles. One scene where the brothers discuss religion has more ideas than drama.

*Fur Queen* does offer insights into what it's like to straddle two cultures – Jeremiah wonders how to say words like "concert pianist" and "university" in Cree. And the book's best writing comes in a colourful scene with Miss Maggie, a tough-talking arctic fox.

Too bad the rest of the book doesn't have Maggie's vitality.

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## **Martha? says**

The Fur Queen in this novel is the spirit who links humans to the spirit world. She can be a trickster, a lesson, a warning. She visits when things are dire and can lead you to decisions which will strongly impact your future, for good or for evil.

Following the lives of Champion and Ooneemeetoo Okimasis from their childhood home in Eemanapiteepitat, in Northern Manitoba, through their years at the Birch Lake Indian Residential School and onto their brutal introduction to adulthood in Winnipeg, we witness how their ancestral culture was ripped out of them, leaving them empty to find their own way.

Jeremiah (formerly Champion) embraced the Catholic teachings and erased all his native heritage, striving to master the works of Chopin and become a concert pianist. But even his raw talent would not let him be accepted into the white man's world and, worse, he no longer had ties with his own people. He spirals into alcoholism as the Fur Queen laughs on the sidelines.

Gabriel (formerly Ooneemeetoo) follows his brother to Winnipeg for high school and throws himself into becoming a dancer and a gigolo, selling himself to whoever looks his way. His vice is sex and it eventually becomes his downfall. Again, the Fur Queen watches it all.

Only through the drum beats of the Pot Latch do these boys find solace and regain the balance of their lives, learning to reconnect with their heritage through the arts.

Highway brings his readers through Residential School abuse and shows the long-standing effects it has on the children -now adults- and their communities. Neither Indian nor white, entire generations lost their way. The only way to heal is through a re-introduction to their culture.

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## **Michal says**

The writing was excellent and the story was very well-told. However, this is not an easy read, and the transitions between "real life" and the dream-like sequences are often confusing.

That being said, you begin to really care about the two brothers and their lives. The sadness in this book is almost palpable, evokes emotion, which to me is a sign of good writing.

I have a strong suspicion that I would enjoy this novel more if I were to read it again. Reading some of its reviews (after the fact) helped explain a few things that would have enriched my understanding of some parts of the story.

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## **Megan Baxter says**

Different books bring different pleasures. Sometimes it's the plot, tense and urgent and carrying me along. Sometimes it's characters, people I come to love and want to see what happens to, and who make it hurt

when bad things come. Most rarely of all, I think, it's the writing itself, the kind of writing that wraps you up and carries you along, that, rather than being at best unobtrusive, leaves me searching for just the right turn of phrase to capture how the prose makes me feel.

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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## Rachel says

### 4.5 (ROUNDED UP TO 5) STARS FOR "KISS OF THE FUR QUEEN" BY TOMSON HIGHWAY

Wow. What a gorgeous, beautiful, heartbreaking book that takes a look into Cree culture and the horrifically dark period of Canadian history regarding residential schools. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* follows the lives of two Cree brothers, Champion and Ooneemeetoo, who are sent to residential school and forced to assimilate to the dominate Catholic and white culture around them. Their hair is cut, their traditional attire banned, their native tongue forbidden, and their names changed - it sounds like something right out of a dystopian novel, and while these two brothers and their families may be fictional, the circumstances and events can be taken straight out of a history book.

The book is not a look at residential schools themselves, but rather takes a look at how the oppression and sexual abuse they faced at them molded who they were as adults and onwards in their lives. The book doesn't end right when they are old enough to go to high school, or move to a new city. Their memories and experiences follow them, and I think this was a great choice on the author's part. In Canadian history, students are often taught of the horrors children faced, but not of how it affected them later in life. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* doesn't stray away from discussing abuse and its effects on future relationships, homosexuality in the 1950s, and the pain that comes from division and not quite belonging to the "dominant" culture or the one you were born into. None of these things are easy to read about - it's dark material - but it's important that everyone faces the facts of what conditions Aboriginal children were placed in just due to who they were.

The writing itself was very poetic and beautiful, and I think was very appropriate in regards to the mythology often referred to within the book, however my one criticism of the book is that sometimes it was *too* much to fully understand what specifically was happening in certain scenes. A bunch of metaphors and lyrical text were put in place of things that would have been better explained directly. Sometimes I would have to read passages multiple times before full clarity clicked in and I was able to resume reading.

Overall, this has been one of the best books I've read this year and I absolutely recommend that people pick it up and read more about Cree culture and the dark parts of Canadian history that people don't like to talk much about. It's not an easy read in terms of what you would want to bring to the beach, but it's worthwhile and you will walk away from it feeling like you've just gained so much more understanding and compassion for these people.

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## **Abigail says**

This book is a very interesting and captivating story. Its a wonderful book and I hope to find the time to reread it.

It traces the impact of Residential Schools and forced assimilation on two brothers, both of which experienced horrific sexual abuse at the hands of a priest, and both of which had wonderful talents, one musically and the other in dance. It shows the way their lives deteriorate as a result of the Residential schools and how much healthier and ambitious they were living and trapping with their parents, as well as how much happier their parents and community were before Reserves.

Ultimately, it explores the homosexuality of one brother and the failure of the other, while at the same time weaving in Aboriginal traditions and the trickster.

The novel is political, it is heartbreaking, and it is wonderful.

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## **Tiago says**

Giving it 3 stars, even though it's more really 3.5. However, I felt it was missing something to get the following rating. Sometimes things felt rushed or even brushed over. I understand that it was its purpose, but sometimes it felt out of place or simply random. Probably will enjoy it more on a possible future re-reading.

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## **Ishita says**

Achingly beautiful, Highway presents a vibrant novel that drives home the repercussions felt by residential school survivors, for the rest of their lives. Without victimizing them, he places his main characters, Jeremiah and Gabriel, in a position of strength as masters of their own lives and fate, while intertwining traditional Cree storytelling with their urban lives. Filled with alluring prose and magical realism, this book is a passionate eye opener to this disturbing period of Canadian history.

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

Amazing book that manages to combine myth, magic, shape- and time-shifting with a gritty reality, a down-to-earth humour and an essential sadness. Take the humour and whimsy of Thomas King or Sherman Alexie; the lyrical poeticism and depth of character of Louise Erdrich; the poignancy, raw pathos and passion of Richard Wagamese and Joseph Boyden. Anchor it in a playwright's sensibility for the visual and the dramatic, and you have Tomson Highway: an original and founding voice in Indigenous literature.

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## **Rick says**

This book just didn't work for me. It was the story of two Cree brothers from Manitoba and their experience in Residential Schools and how they dealt with that for the rest of their lives. The book certainly has value from that perspective. However, I have found some of the memoirs of Residential school survivors more enlightening, regarding those experiences. I found the writing style of this novel not overly appealing to me.

The characters just didn't seem real enough... part of the problem was the mixing of the characters' visions with 'real-life' action, in a way that was difficult to follow at times. All the imagery and symbols in the visions were an important part of the book, but I have never enjoyed novels that make excessive use of imagery and symbolism .... some of it is great, but like anything else in writing, I find that very often, less is more. This book may have great appeal to some people with different tastes, especially since it is on an important subject for Canada, but I can't recommend it.

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## **Jenny says**

This book makes me wish that we all spoke Cree and that Tomson Highway could've published this book in his birth language (as he says he composes his works in his head in Cree, and has to wrangle them into English so they can go on the page).

This is a Canadian literary treasure. It's about family, god, love, death and life. It shows the destructive power of the residential school system of the '50s and the AIDS epidemic of the '80s, both of which the characters face (in fact, this book is a fictionalized version of Highway's own life story).

For me as a white reader, it provides a view into the internal life of a culture that is so different from the Western establishment. Because of this, it takes a bit more work, especially in the last third of the book to parse the ideas of circular time and trickster gods. The effort is well worth it, though, and it's a book that has stayed on my shelf for years since I first read it.

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## **Lydia says**

If people are looking into human history millennia from now, I hope they find this book. If aliens were to take form and come to my house, I'd hand them this book.

Highway takes the two lives of two young men, Champion (Jeremiah) and Ooneemeetoo (Gabriel) and gives you everything about their lives. The Residential school system, their lives in Mistik lake and the men they become. Jeremiah, afraid of his Indian identity, and Gabriel, battling with his own queerness.

This book is visceral -- it mentions blood, sweat, tears, cum, shit, all without flinching, without looking away. It points out the absurdity of colonialism and dips into one of my favourite things -- pointing out the ridiculousness of the English language. Cree is like a code, spoken softly, spoken secretly, two boys like spies against the world.

Music, in this book, behaves like a language. A language that transcends all barriers. It lifts Jeremiah out of residential school and, after ten years of not playing, lifts him out of his own personal struggles again.

I can see Gabriel so clearly, so vividly, that sometimes, while reading his chapters, I would cry. I feel his presence beside me. I wanted to wrap him up in my arms and protect him and tell him I love him. Every time he danced, I felt it. Every time he smiled, I felt it. Every time his heart hurt, I felt it.

This book is redemption and ruin all at once.

And somewhere, out there, Weesageechak, the trickster, the raven, the coyote, the Fur Queen, is dancing, laughing, singing. And somewhere, out there, Tomson Highway heard.

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### **Kimberly says**

I really wanted to like this book but for some reason I just couldn't take it anymore. I gave up after reading 90% of it and couldn't continue, even though I had only 30 pages left. I think four years of university have finally taken its toll, to the point that I have the urge to vomit when I read something so extremely literary. I really hated Highway's writing; everything is so chaotic and the story jumps around and it's so fragmented and everything is just flashing by. The font of the book also bugs me tremendously. Somehow large, double-spaced Constantia ruined everything visually. Honestly I have not suffered so much because of a book before. I HATED this book. I was so bored and pained by it and it got worse when I forced myself to read on because it's for class. I was honestly TRAUMATIZED. Honestly. It gave me so much trauma and physical/mental suffering.

This is probably an extremely biased judgement, however, considering I am near the end of my academic pursuits. I'm really sorry for this extremely negative review because it's not a true review. I didn't absorb much because I was so stressed about school and about finishing it on time. Maybe it really was the font and I don't know... Sigh...things are starting to explode I guess. For now though, it's a one-star...I will revisit this book again when I feel ready for it...years and years later...

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### **Brian says**

What a wonderful novel. Definitely a must read. I couldn't say it any better than this review that I borrowed from The Canadian Book Review.

Tomson Highway is one of Canada's best known playwrights, most notably the author of *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, both of which are Dora and Chalmer's Award winning plays. Published in 1998, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is Highway's first and only novel; containing many autobiographical points, this book takes on a lot of issues. In North American Native literature there has been a trend of authors either being too hard on their own culture or glossing over the harsher realities of Native life. Highway, a Cree from northern Manitoba, walks a fine line between these two extremes with his writing. This novel takes place over the course of around 35 years; looking at how Natives were treated in Catholic residential schools, sexuality, art, and family.

The story focuses on a pair of brothers, Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, and their journey from birth to young adulthood; in each of the six parts of the book, a different stage of the brothers lives are narrated. As you start to read this it takes a few chapters to really get into the book and get used to the language. Canadian Native lit is often written with the same style as the oral narrative, which is an important piece of their culture; if you were to read a few pages out loud this will be very apparent. The dialog is as beautiful as would be expected from a playwright of this caliber.

The topics and themes of this story are very serious subjects and are, at several points in the novel, very difficult to get through, mainly because of Highway's vivid writing. The Okimasis brothers are representative of the Native community as a whole in the early fifties; they are being pulled away from their



Cree culture and thrust into the world of Catholicism and the indoctrination that would come with attending a residential school. There are horrifying scenes of abuse and molestation as well as heartbreaking scenes of torment directed towards the only two Natives at this school. As the story progresses the focus turns to Gabriel's sexuality. As he confronts his homosexuality, in a time when this was not overly accepted, he descends into promiscuity and prostitution with constant flashbacks of the abuse he suffered at the hands of the priests. This part of the novel is so beautifully written but so hard to endure. There is so much pain in Gabriel's life and past that he really doesn't stand a chance to live a so-called "normal" existence.

My one criticism of this book, and it is not exactly a flaw of the writing, likely more so a flaw with this reader, the details used when Highway is writing about dancing and music are so detailed, with so much technical terminology, it is sometimes difficult to understand what exactly is being said. Jeremiah and Gabriel, eventually become a world-class musician/playwrite and dancer respectively. These details though certainly give the story a level of depth and believability when looking at the brothers passion for their arts.

This is a very sad book; at points there seems to be very little hope for the characters, and even at the end of the novel, it could be argued there is still none. In a short review it is impossible to touch on everything this book looks at. This is the type of novel academics could spend years and countless articles looking at. A beautiful novel, a moving novel, and an eye opening novel, I think *Kiss of the Fur Queen* will definitely be looked at as one of the great Native novels of its time along side *Three Day Road* and *Green Grass, Running Water*.

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