



Stealing Little Moon: The Legacy of the American Indian Boarding Schools

by Dan Sasuweh Jones

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THE LEGACY OF
THE AMERICAN INDIAN
BOARDING SCHOOLS

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The Story

Little Moon There Are No Stars Tonight was four years old when armed federal agents showed up at her home and took her from her family. Under the authority of the government, she was sent away to a boarding school specifically created to strip her of her Ponca culture and teach her the ways of white society. Little Moon was one of thousands of Indigenous children forced to attend these schools across America and give up everything they'd ever known: family, friends, toys, clothing, food, customs, even their language. She would be the first of four generations of her family who would go to Chilocco Indian Agricultural School.

Dan SaSuWeh Jones chronicles his family's time at Chilocco—starting with his grandmother Little Moon's arrival when the school first opened and ending with him working on the maintenance crew when the school shut down nearly one hundred years later. Together with the voices of students from other schools, both those who died and those who survived, Dan brings to light the lasting legacy of the boarding school era.

Part American history, part family history, *Stealing Little Moon* is a powerful look at the miseducation and the mistreatment of Indigenous kids, while celebrating their strength, resiliency, and courage—and the ultimate failure of the United States government to erase them.

Reading Group Questions

1. How were Indigenous kids treated at the boarding schools? What were some ways the students and their families were affected by their treatment at the boarding schools? Consider both the positive and negative experiences of the students, as well as the impact on their families at home.
2. Take a look at the Before and After photos on pages 10, 11, and 35. Describe what you see in the Before images and what you see in the After. Think about how the students' physical appearances have changed, but also think about what you read in the

book. For instance, that many Indigenous tribes used physical appearance to represent aspects of their culture. Why did schools choose to alter students' appearance? Why do you think many schools took Before and After photographs? What was their purpose? How do think the students would feel or react if they saw their Before and After images next to each other? How might you feel if you had to change your appearance drastically for school? Do schools still ask students to alter their physical appearance to attend? Or has this largely been changed?



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Reading Group Questions (continued)

3. Chilocco Indian Agriculture School was a significant place for author Dan SaSuWeh Jones and his family. Four generations had different experiences there. Discuss some of the differences and similarities of the experiences of his grandmother Elizabeth (*Stealing Little Moon*); his mother Velma; his siblings; and his niece Denise during their time attending the school. What changed for each? Or what was the same?
4. What were some ways the Indigenous students resisted complete assimilation from the schools? What new ideas or customs grew out of their refusal? Think about what it would be like if you were asked to give up everything you knew about your way of life. What pieces would you try to hold on to? How might you try to do that?
5. Why is it important to learn about the history of the Indigenous boarding schools? How does this history have relevance today?

About the Author



Photo © Andreas Dick

Dan SaSuWeh Jones is the critically acclaimed author of *Living Ghosts and Mischievous Monsters: Chilling American Indian Stories* and was a storyteller and consultant for *National Geographic Encyclopedia of the American Indian*. A former Chairman of the Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma and former member of the Producers Guild of America, he is also a filmmaker who has produced work for *Sesame Street*, NBC, TBS, and other national and international networks. He worked as an honorary Imagineer and consultant for the Walt Disney Company's Disney America theme park and as a field producer for the television miniseries *500 Nations*, produced by Kevin Costner. As a bronze sculptor, he was a finalist in the competition for the American Indian Veterans Memorial at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. He holds a seat in the House of Warriors, a traditional Ponca Warrior Society.

Author Q&A

***Stealing Little Moon* was understandably a huge emotional undertaking to write. You touch on that in the book, but what was it like navigating the same memories or stories through different family members and your own recollections? Did you find a lot of differences or overlap?**

I didn't find any differences whatsoever. We're all on the same page when it comes to our experiences. I just have to say, if you look at the alumni of the schools, you'll see the success that some schools had and had with the students. Many found a home in Chilocco and other schools. The American Indian reservations, especially during the last fifty years, have been devastated by US government policies, even more than during the Indian Wars in the late 1800s. I lived through that in the 1960s. We were torn from our way of life, there was a total collapse of tribal government, and we were subjected to blatant racism. It was a disaster. My people and people of other tribes who attended Chilocco have memories of it as a positive experience. Students were close to their homes, they lived and worked with other members of a similar community and background. They supported one another.

Even though I didn't go to school at Chilocco, enough of my family did. I had heard these stories all my life, mainly from my mother and grandmother and my sisters. As I worked on this book, my sister Donna shared a lot of stories with me, many more than I had heard in the past. I knew about the horrors of other schools, but we considered ourselves fortunate to have Chilocco. It was a kind of jewel among schools. Chilocco was unique, starting with the land on which it was built. The place had been an Indian village for thousands of years. Water comes out of the ground here in artesian wells. Water is life. It causes Chilocco to be a nursery of life itself. Chilocco is a natural Earth vortex where the spirits pass from one dimension to the other. It is a place where knowledge, wisdom, and balance are a natural occurrence. Chilocco's nickname, Light on the Prairie, symbolizes that.

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Author Q&A (continued)

You are an artist who has worked in a variety of mediums, but your role always seems to be to function as the storyteller. How was it being the storyteller through words instead of other mediums you've used? Was there anything new you learned about your family or yourself while working on the book?

When anyone composes a painting, picture, or sculpture, that person starts out trying to tell a story. Something has influenced you that you want to share with other people. You want to share it in a way that has even greater impact than the story had on you. You want to enhance that impact, often through exaggeration. That's because you're dealing with one frame, not many frames or many paragraphs where there is room to explain. That one frame has to be very complex and multifaceted because it has to tell a lot. That's what I do with my sculptures. While I don't consider myself a writer in a classical way, I am a storyteller. I use all the tools accessible to me through my love for art and music. When I tell a story, the words form patterns in my mind. They have a lyrical sound that is almost like music. By capturing the patterns and poetic word combinations I can keep people's interest.

As for what I learned, there were things that came out through my sister Donna. Donna was ill while I was writing this book and she passed away near the end. She loved the school and her experience there, and she kept records of the students and classes and administrators that I was able to draw from. Chilocco had a deep impact on her. And I felt it as she shared stories from her time there. She also shared stories from my mother's and grandmother's time, stories told from a woman's point of view. This is what really impacted me. How important the woman's role in storytelling is. Women are the cultural keepers of the tribe in all ways. They raise children and are responsible for the child's education, language, and carrying on history through storytelling. It made me think that, during the boarding school era, the government was pushing to destroy our heritage by destroying the spirits of the men. They didn't think so much about the women. In the end, it has been the women who have continued passing on our heritage and reclaiming what was lost in those years.

Did you visit the Chilocco at all while writing? How has it changed since your time there as a caretaker of the land? Or since your time there installing the memorial for the students who died?

I'm always at Chilocco. It is like a second home. When I was a baby, my father made drums for the tribe and sold them as a craft. He would get bark from the trees there. He was a woodsman and survivalist, and he knew all the plants, what to eat, what to use for medicine. So, when I was very young, he would take me with him as he collected bark and food. With a long rope he tethered me to a tree so I could crawl around and watch him as he worked. The place is naturally rich in resources so today we all go back to enjoy these gifts. Besides mushrooms and medicinal plants, we find exceptional fish baits and worms to catch crawfish and fish.

Since the time I was a boy, it has changed completely. Now it is deserted. Chilocco the school has died. Buildings are fast depleting. It is becoming a ghost town. That has been sad, to be a part of a booming community and now to see it turn into a ghost town. But we still go there to find our herbs and medicines and mushrooms. Chilocco is full of those things we need. In many ways it is returning to its original vortex. I am not sad about it; in fact, I'm happy. But it is sad to see the community of people gone. In the early 2000s I was raising money to convert Chilocco into a cultural center and to make it a natural historic place. But the economy collapsed in 2004 and that effort ended. Chilocco school is now returning to the earth, completing a natural circle. However, the future is still open to the vision for such a center, to honor and protect our culture that was so ruthlessly attacked.

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Author Q&A (continued)

The book tries really hard to honestly capture the experiences at the boarding schools in America, both the positive and negative experiences your family and others had. Why was that so important to you and for readers and their understanding of the history?

Because it's a fact. That's how it is with students, alumni. That's how it is with those who called Chilocco home and for people who hated the schools they went to in other parts of the country. It's a fact of nature that we put up with that dual situation. Good or bad. Chilocco wasn't all good. There were aspects. But, overall, you have to measure a place by its impact on you. Even though it focused on teaching white ways, Chilocco helped a lot of people. In researching many other schools to write this book, I was appalled at so many situations. It made my blood boil to read the stories of children so abused and helpless. I know that more information on these schools is coming, to tell everyone what they really were. It's important for readers to know about all of them so that people will never have to go through this again. Readers must understand that it is critical for the natural forces of cultural dynamics to allow people to change their own culture instead of someone trying to change it for them.