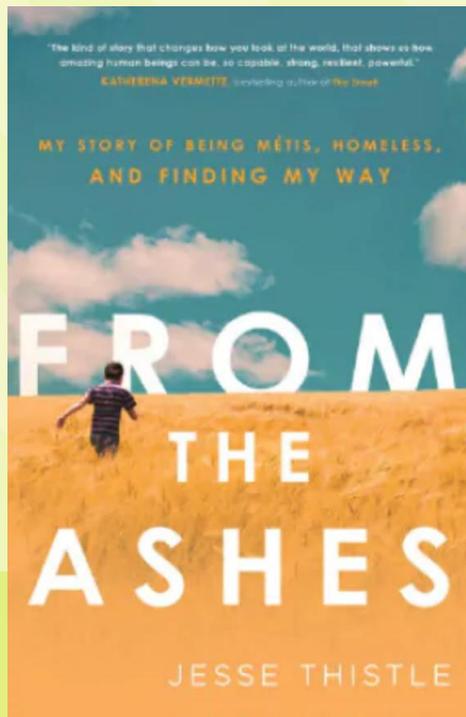


# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES



In his memoir, *From the Ashes: My Story of Being Métis, Homeless, and Finding My Way*, Métis-Cree writer Jesse Thistle describes how he transformed his life — from being homeless and struggling with addiction to winning awards in academia. Thistle is now a professor at York University and a bestselling author.

## **Note to teachers:**

### ***This document contains spoilers!***

*If you intend to read only the book excerpt provided on **curio.ca** with your students, this document gives a fuller picture of the book content.*

*If you intend to read the whole book with your students, you may wish to remove spoilers before sharing the document with students.*



Visit [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads) to read an excerpt from Jesse Thistle's *From the Ashes* and watch the author discuss his book.



# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES

## Book Description

Jesse Thistle's story begins in Saskatchewan where he lives with his mother, father and two brothers, Josh and Jerry. His father's addiction and abuse of his mother become apparent to Jesse and his siblings at a young age and they lack stability in their home life.

When Jesse, Josh and Jerry are toddlers their mother takes them and moves away to escape their father's abuse, but eventually lets them move back in with him in Sudbury when she is convinced he is sober and employed.

Jesse's father routinely leaves the boys at home alone and continues his life of drinking, drugging and petty crime. He uses the boys to assist him in panhandling

## LITERACY STRATEGY

If you are using this backgrounder directly with students, have them review the document for new vocabulary. They can highlight new words and research their meaning.



and petty theft as they struggle to survive, resorting to digging through trash in order to eat.

Eventually, Jesse's father is arrested and the boys are taken into foster care, where they end up with a family that sexually abuses them. Soon after, Josh, Jerry and Jesse end up being taken in by their paternal grandparents in Brampton. Their grandfather Cyril is strict and tough on the boys, trying to instill a sense of

## Book backgrounder: **FROM THE ASHES**

responsibility in them through hard work, while their grandmother Jackie is tough, but also caring and loving with them.

In school, Jesse has issues reading and writing, repeatedly gets into fights and struggles to stay focused and motivated while trying to make sense of the fact that his parents had abandoned him and his brothers. He also becomes aware of the stereotypes associated with being Indigenous and begins to internalize them, becoming ashamed of his own heritage.

Jesse begins experimenting with alcohol and selling and doing drugs. From there he has a series of traumatic experiences that include being drugged and

sexually assaulted, becoming addicted to various drugs, and suffering a severe leg injury that would plague him for years. He spends his early adulthood in and out of jail, living on the streets hustling and stealing to survive, and is framed for the murder of a cab driver. After cooperating with the police, he is branded a snitch and is unsafe in the areas and with the people he was around.

After multiple half-hearted attempts at getting clean, Jesse is inspired to break the cycle of trauma and addiction that he believed was his cultural inheritance. He checks into a rehab centre where he begins to work through some of the trauma and abandonment issues that led to his addiction. Through learning about and

# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES

embracing the proud resistance fighter legacy of his ancestors, he comes to terms with his past and strives to give himself a better life.

He eventually enrolls in school and becomes a scholar and professor specializing in Indigenous homelessness and addiction.



## Primary Characters

**Jesse Thistle** – Youngest of three Metis-Cree boys, he is angry and confused about his parents' abandonment of him and his siblings and becomes addicted to drugs. He spends his early adulthood living on the streets.

**Cyril “Sonny” Thistle** – Jesse’s father, a petty criminal, and drug addict. Cyril has custody of Jesse and his

siblings briefly following his mother’s abandonment and has the boys assist him in his petty crimes and drug use. Eventually he is arrested, leaving Jesse and his two brothers in the foster system. Jesse never hears from him again.

**Blanche Morrissette** – Jesse’s mother, who suffers abuse at the hands of Cyril. Blanche takes the kids and moves away, but eventually lets them move back in with their father when he promises he is clean and employed.

**Josh Thistle** – Jesse’s protective oldest brother and mother’s favourite. Josh is described by Jesse as being the darkest and most “Indian” looking, and he embraces his Métis heritage more strongly than the

# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES

other brothers do initially. He eventually becomes an RCMP officer.

**Jerry Thistle** – Jesse’s second oldest brother is proud and responsible. Jerry lets Jesse stay with him in Toronto and helps him whenever he can, until it becomes too much for him to handle.

**Daniel** – Jesse’s younger half-brother. Daniel becomes the object of Jesse’s resentment over the amount of love, time, and protection he receives from Jesse’s mother.

**Cyril Thistle** – Jesse’s disciplinarian paternal grandfather. Cyril is tough on the boys and tries to instill a work ethic and sense of responsibility in them.

**Jackie Thistle** – Jesse’s loving and protective paternal grandmother.

## Key Themes



**ADDICTION** – Jesse’s father struggled with addiction and, for much of Jesse’s life, believed that being an addict was an inevitable part of his identity. Seeing his father do drugs and petty crime had a major influence on the way Jesse saw himself. Jesse becomes an addict himself and spends years living on the streets before turning his life around and breaking the cycle.



**HOMELESSNESS** – Jesse gives insight into how a person struggling with trauma can develop an addiction and become homeless. He offers a better.

## Book backgrounder: **FROM THE ASHES**

understanding of homelessness and, in giving a face and voice to people living on the streets, tries to generate empathy for some of Canada's most vulnerable, those frequently overlooked by Canadian society.

 **ABANDONMENT** – The first source of trauma in Jesse's life was the abandonment of him and his siblings. It informed most of his decisions moving forward and stunted his emotional growth well into his adulthood. The anger and self-loathing he felt led to him forming unhealthy bonds with the wrong people and he would often abandon others as a defense mechanism to avoid being abandoned again.

 **INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA** – Jesse internalized the trauma he endured, from his father

abusing his mother to his father's addictions and transient lifestyle, which in turn shaped what he thought was his destiny. This is compounded by the trauma that has been perpetuated against the Indigenous people of Canada and passed down from generation to generation.

 **RACISM** – From the Ashes looks at how the systems ostensibly put in place to protect Canadians — primarily the education, healthcare, justice and foster care systems — are inherently exclusionary of Indigenous Canadians, emphasizing their feelings of disenfranchisement and oppression over their rights and inherent dignity.

 **PARENTAL APPROVAL** – Because of his issues with abandonment, Jesse spent his early life constantly

# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES

seeking validation and approval from his parents and grandparents, often falling short and eventually giving up.

**\* INDIGENOUS IDENTITY** – *From the Ashes* gives insight into how the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media and popular culture, as well as Jesse's own life experiences, shaped his perception of his Indigeneity as a source of shame and ridicule.

**\* EDUCATION** – Jesse is eventually redeemed through being educated on his ancestry as he begins to see education as a way to elevate his self-esteem and pride in his heritage.



## About the Author

Jesse Thistle is Métis-Cree, from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan. His memoir *From the Ashes* was an instant Canadian bestseller. He won a Governor General's Academic Medal in 2016, and is a Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation

Scholar and a Vanier Scholar. Thistle is an assistant professor in Métis Studies at York University in Toronto.

# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES



## Notable Quotes from Reviews

“A memoir of resilience, spirit and dignity from a gifted storyteller. It is, at heart, also about the many shapes that love can inhabit. When you plan to read this book, clear your schedule. It will hold you in its grasp and won’t let you go, like a great novel. It’s all the more remarkable that this is not fiction. This book will stand out in my reading experience for a long time to come.”  
– Shelagh Rogers, OC, host and a producer of CBC Radio's *The Next Chapter*, Honorary Witness – Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

“Candid and cutting, Jesse Thistle lays down his story with a brutal beauty you'll never forget. From the Ashes is a guided tour through a broken heart just

trying to keep beating, both failing and succeeding spectacularly.” – Cherie Dimaline, bestselling author of *The Marrow Thieves*

“This is a work that should not be mistaken for a redemption story — it is a love story. About family. Community. A partner. Most of all: this is a love story about Jesse Thistle. How he came to love himself. Why he is worthy of love. And, importantly, how you will love him when you are done reading. This book signals change: in our understanding of worth, our compassion in the face of harm and self-harm, and the power and possibility that can exist in spaces we try to forget about. Jesse Thistle is amazing. His story is stunning. We will talk about colonial and other violence differently on Turtle Island because Jesse lived them

## Book backgrounder: **FROM THE ASHES**

and shared them with us. With an openness, candour and generosity that is inspiring. Its uglybeautiful/hurtlove will resonate with you long after you finish turning the pages. I am proud to call him *nisîmis* (my little brother).” – Tracey Lindberg, bestselling author of *Birdie*

“*From the Ashes* hits you like a punch in the gut. It’s an unflinching, heartrending, and beautifully written story of survival against seemingly impossible odds. But it’s also a book that should make you furious. Thistle paints a vivid portrait of a country seemingly incapable of doing right by Indigenous youth or by those struggling with homelessness, addiction, and intergenerational trauma. That he survived to tell this story is truly a miracle. Still, one question haunts me

after finishing this powerful and devastating book: How do we ensure that the next generation isn’t forced to navigate a broken system that takes their lives for granted and fails them at every turn? My greatest hope, then, is that *From the Ashes* will be the wakeup call Canada needs.” – Ian Mosby, historian and author of *Food Will Win the War*

### **CBC Links**

- Book Page: [www.cbc.ca/1.5222288](http://www.cbc.ca/1.5222288)
- Author Page: [www.cbc.ca/1.5433753](http://www.cbc.ca/1.5433753)
- How Jesse Thistle survived addiction, homelessness and incarceration — and became a Canada Reads finalist (text + audio): [www.cbc.ca/1.5293752](http://www.cbc.ca/1.5293752)



# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES

- Trauma research brings pain, healing to academic Jesse Thistle (text): [www.cbc.ca/1.3350632](http://www.cbc.ca/1.3350632)
- Formerly homeless Métis scholar rewrites the definition of Indigenous homelessness (text): [www.cbc.ca/1.4373735](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4373735)
- From street to scholar: Jesse Thistle creates new definition of Indigenous homelessness (text): [www.cbc.ca/1.4376118](http://www.cbc.ca/1.4376118)
- Saskatoon StarPhoenix: Jesse Thistle builds resilience through uncovering shared Métis histories (text): <https://thestarphoenix.com/news/local-news/jesse-thistle-builds-resilience-through-uncovering-shared-metis-histories>



Watch Jesse Thistle discuss his book: [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads)



## Other Links

- ‘Back into the circle’: Q&A with Jesse Thistle on the Canadian Alliance to End Homelessness (text): [www.caeh.ca/jesse-thistle/](http://www.caeh.ca/jesse-thistle/)

# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES



## Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *From the Ashes* found at [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads) and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. A home is so much more than just a bricks-and-mortar structure where people live. What does it mean to have a home? What functions does a home provide for individuals, communities, and society?
2. Review the novel's title and make predictions about Jesse Thistle's story. How can the phrase from the ashes be interpreted?
3. What are the stigmas that homeless people face? How do these stigmas conflict with the true causes of homelessness and how might that make someone who is homeless feel?
4. Read the excerpt at [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads). What evidence of poverty, addiction, and abandonment can you identify from the passage?
5. In the excerpt at [www.curio.ca/canadareads](http://www.curio.ca/canadareads), Thistle uses animal imagery to describe his father injecting himself with heroin as Jesse looks on. Why might Thistle have chosen this imagery and how might it affect the reader? Are there other literary devices present in this passage?

## Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES

6. Thistle emphasizes the role both his family history and intergenerational trauma played in him becoming homeless. Why might it be important to consider the history of one's family in understanding an individual's homelessness? How might this consideration help us to see why Indigenous Canadians are disproportionately homeless compared to Canadians at large?
7. Do you have someone in your life who struggles with mental health and addiction? What are their positive and negative qualities? Have they sought supports for these issues?
8. Often, our worst experiences contain the foundations for us to grow. According to Thistle,

every time he was traumatized “was painful, but it was also very beautiful. These were really hard, painful, sharp memories. But I also saw there were people that were trying to help me, like the kind shop owner who gave me food or my friend at the shelter who watched out for my shoes. My brother Jerry always took care of me and took me in and I had a lot of support from my wife, Lucie. It's the good and the bad." Can you think of a bad experience you or someone you care about had that was both destructive and constructive? How did this experience both help and hurt the person? How did it lead to personal growth?

# Book backgrounder: FROM THE ASHES



## Inquiry Activities

1. Students might source some first-person testimonials from homeless Canadians to gain a sense of what life is like on the streets, and design a physical or digital board game about life as a homeless person.
2. Students might create an account at [canva.com](https://www.canva.com), gather some data about homelessness in Canada, and create an infographic.
3. Students might use a video software program to shoot and edit a 45-60 second public service

announcement about Canada's homelessness epidemic.

4. Teachers could contact a local shelter and have their students perform volunteer work that addresses an area of need for the shelter's homeless community.

Acknowledgments – Guide writer/editor: Chris Coates