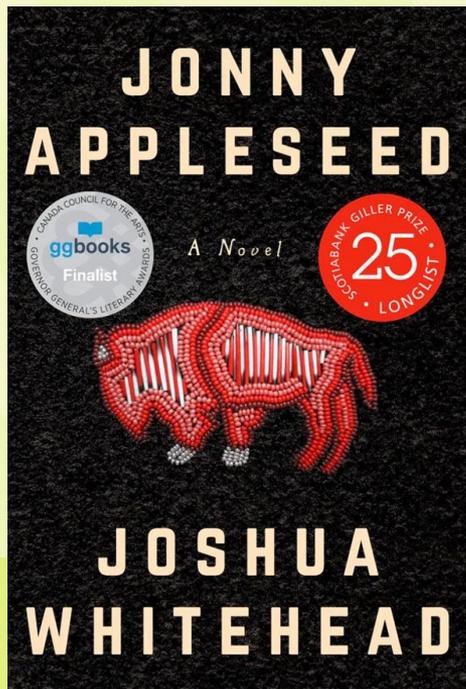


Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**



Jonny Appleseed is about a Two-Spirit Indigiqueer young man who has left the reserve and becomes a cybersex worker in the big city to make ends meet. But he must reckon with his past when he returns home to attend his stepfather's funeral.

Note to teachers:

Please note that the novel **Jonny Appleseed** contains sexual content, as well as some coarse language. The [book excerpt](#) found on Curio.ca does not contain any explicit material.

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



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Jonny Appleseed* and watch Joshua Whitehead discuss his book.



Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About the Book

Book Description.....	3
Literacy Strategy.....	3
Primary Characters.....	6
Key Themes.....	7
About the Author – Joshua Whitehead.....	7
Other Books by Joshua Whitehead.....	8
Notable Quotes from Reviews.....	9
CBC Links.....	10
Other Links.....	10
Critical Thinking Questions.....	11
Inquiry Activities.....	13

Acknowledgments

About the Book: Adapted from materials prepared by the CBC Books team
Critical Thinking Questions / Inquiry Activities: Written by Jason Himsl
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Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

Book Description

Jonny Appleseed tells the story of Jonny, a young Indigenous man who moves from his family's reserve in rural Manitoba to the big city of Winnipeg. He learns to go on Grindr to find men with Indigenous fetishes willing to pay for cybersex with him, which becomes his principal means of income when he's not in the arms of his boyfriend Tias, an Indigenous youth five years his senior. The story is told in "NDN time," meaning that the past, present and future are simultaneous; as such, the book often flashes back to Jonny's time at home on the reserve, with time spent with his mother and beloved late kokum (grandmother), their love like a

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.



“medicine” to him. (His father, a residential school survivor and alcoholic, left the family years earlier and eventually died in a rez fire.)

When Jonny learns that his stepfather Roger has died, he sets out to earn \$300 in two days from his cybersex clients to afford a trip home to attend the funeral. He recalls his complex relationship with

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

Roger, whose alcoholism led to his fatal liver disease. Roger was homophobic and beat Jonny for dancing with boys, but he also made his mother happy. Jonny continues to return to the past — recalling his coming out to his kokum; time spent in the bathtub as a young one with his mother; and getting drunk at house parties and letting men do as they pleased with his body, which leads him to finally quit alcohol.

Jonny's relationship with Tias is one of the most important in the book. He and Tias explored their early sexuality by watching each other undress and they are a salve for each other's open wounds. When Jonny's kokum passes, it is Tias who consoles

him, and Jonny supports Tias as he is haunted by the loss of his sister to the foster care system. Tias is bisexual and has a girlfriend named Jordan whom Jonny "love-hates" but eventually they become friends on their own. On the day that Jonny has earned enough to return home, Tias tells him that Jordan is pregnant, and that he's going to finish his education so that he and Jordan raise the baby properly. He and Jonny have sex one last time before Tias says goodbye.

When Jonny arrives home, he and his mother catch up over tea and bannock. She tells him about Roger's final days, about how doctors would blame his health problems on being drunk. They then have

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

a heart-to-heart about Jonny's kokum; his mother tells him that she never felt worthy of her, and that she always feared he loved his kokum more than her, to which Jonny replies, "To love me, Momma, Kokum had to love you too."

Before Jonny returns to Winnipeg, he visits the cemetery where his kokum is buried. Before he had left the rez to move to the big city, she had told him that "going south is the direction of youth, the time of summer, healing." At the cemetery, he tells her, "I think I made it, you know, travelled south and survived" before dissolving into tearful guilt for leaving her there: "Why you'd let me leave, Kokum? ... Why'd you let time whittle you to sand before you

ask me home? ... I'm sorry I never got to show you how I transform."

In the end, Jonny comes to understand the meaning of family, and comes to terms with the events of the past, no matter how traumatic. "Our bodies are a library, and our stories are written like braille on the skin. I wouldn't trade it for the world ... We're all here to tell our stories in NDN time."

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**



Primary Characters

Jonny Appleseed – the novel’s protagonist; a brutally honest young Indigenous man who has moved from the reserve to the big city of Winnipeg, where he fulfills the colonial fantasies of men through cybersex work. The intersectionality of his queerness and his Indigeneity is a source of trauma for him as it doubly exposes him to discrimination and abuse. Jonny learns to embrace his identity, though, and frees himself from this trauma through his beloved memories of his kokum.

Jonny’s kokum (grandmother) – she’s the first in the family to hear from Jonny that he’s Two-Spirit, which she accepts wholeheartedly. She also was pleased that he looked white when he was born because that would mean he’d have an easier time.

Jonny’s mother – in his words, “the toughest NDN in the world — a real hard-ass, but the kind you need.” She shows Jonny tough love through discipline, but accepts him as Two-Spirit and advises him that he’s “gonna need a whole lotta medicine” to make it in the world. She drinks too much as well, but Jonny is loyal to her, listening to her as she doles out makeup tips and lessons on how to snag a man.

Tias – Jonny’s boyfriend; he is tender toward Jonny, though also has a girlfriend named Jordan. Tias has suffered trauma in his youth as well – he and his sister lived with his grandfather then moved to foster care; he lost touch with his sister as a result, which haunts him.

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

Key Themes

★ **THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF QUEERNESS AND INDIGENEITY** – Jonny navigates both his queer and Indigenous selves, which have been sources of shame in the past but eventually become sources of strength and power.

★ **"NDN TIME"** – The concept of the past, present and future being simultaneous and informing one another is a constant in the book, through use of flashbacks, memories and spiritual visions.

★ **FAMILY/KINSHIP** – Despite having moved to the big city, Jonny remains tethered to his family, especially his mother and kokum (grandmother).

Their love for and acceptance of him as Two-Spirit is something that Jonny holds close to him.

About the Author

Joshua Whitehead is an Oji-nêhiyaw, Two-Spirit (2SQ) member of Peguis First Nation (Treaty 1) in manitowapow. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Calgary where he focuses on Indigenous literatures, cultures, nêhiyâwewin and more predominantly, sexuality and gender studies



Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

within those fields. He is the author of the novel *Jonny Appleseed* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018) which was longlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize; shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Fiction, the Amazon First Novel Award, the Carol Shields Winnipeg Book Award and the Indigenous Voices Award; and winner of a Lambda Literary Award for Gay Fiction and the Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction. He is also the author of the poetry collection *full-metal indigiqueer* (Talonbooks, 2017) which was shortlisted for the inaugural Indigenous Voices Award and the Stephan G. Stephansson Award for Poetry, and the editor of *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two Spirit &*

Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020). His book *Making Love with the Land*, which details the intersections of Indigeneity, queerness and mental health, will be published by Knopf Canada in 2021.

Other Books by Joshua Whitehead

- *full-metal indigiqueer* (Talonbooks, 2017)
- As editor: *Love after the End: An Anthology of Two-Spirit & Indigiqueer Speculative Fiction* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2020)

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**



Notable Quotes from Reviews

"Every so often, a book comes along that feels like a milestone, with revolution nestled beneath every sentence, every word. Oji-Cree/nehiyaw two-spirit/Indigiqueer writer Joshua Whitehead's *Jonny Appleseed* is one of those books . . . With its fluid structure and timelines, *Jonny Appleseed* creates a dream-like reading experience -- and with a narrator as wise, funny and loveable as Jonny, it's the sort of dream you don't want to wake up from."

– The Globe and Mail

"*Jonny Appleseed* breaks rocks and crafts them into good medicine for folks like Jonny, who might be

looking to see themselves reflected somewhere, and for whom this visibility might even mean survival. As Whitehead weaves Jonny's resonant experiences and complex identity into a compelling journey, we might also consider why stories such as his are so rare when Jonny is so willing to bring us along for the ride."

– Winnipeg Free Press

"*Jonny Appleseed* is a miraculous achievement of a debut novel."

– Canadian Art

"A radically original new voice."

– Booklist

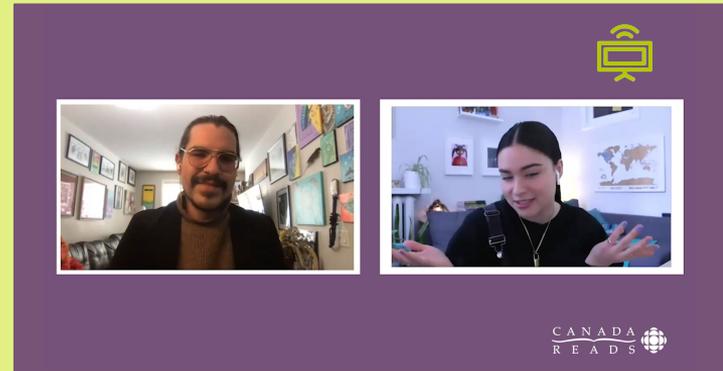
Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

CBC Links

- Canada Reads Book page: [Jonny Appleseed](#)
- Canada Reads Author page: [Joshua Whitehead](#)
- [Joshua Whitehead's Jonny Appleseed is a poetic coming-of-age novel that highlights Indigenous queer culture](#)
- [Joshua Whitehead – The Next Chapter interview](#)
- [With Joshua Whitehead's Jonny Appleseed, Indigiqueer storytelling has a spotlight at Canada Reads](#)
- [Interview with Devery Jacobs about Jonny Appleseed](#)

Other Links

- [Talonbooks](#)



Watch Joshua Whitehead discuss his book:
www.curio.ca/canadareads

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**



Critical Thinking Questions

Students will need to read the excerpt from *Jonny Appleseed* found at www.curio.ca/canadareads and may need to do some research to help them craft a response.

1. The Winnipeg Free Press review of *Jonny Appleseed* says the novel is “good medicine for folks like Jonny, who might be looking to see themselves reflected somewhere, and for whom this visibility might even mean survival.” What books have you read that you saw yourself in? What effect did this have for you?
2. Joshua Whitehead shares much in common with Jonny — he is an Oji-nêhiyaw two-spirited man who grew up in Peguis First Nation before moving to Winnipeg. Is it important to you that a writer has this type of connection to the content of their book?
3. Joshua Whitehead grew up in Peguis First Nation and Winnipeg and told a story of his communities. What is a story in your community that you think needs to be told?
4. A classic instruction for writers is to “Show, don’t tell.” This means that authors will trust readers to infer important ideas in their writing rather

Book backgrounder: Jonny Appleseed

than state them explicitly. Read the excerpt of the novel *Jonny Appleseed* at www.curio.ca/canada_reads. What details do you see that suggest that Jonny's childhood has been difficult and that his mother expects his life to stay that way?

5. *Jonny Appleseed* is a book that features a protagonist whose experiences will be unfamiliar to many readers. Why is it important that all of Canada read a book that is rooted in Jonny's singular experience? Can something so specific also be universal?
6. Joshua Whitehead describes himself as Indigiqueer. Intersectionality is an attempt to understand how different parts of us, our

"categories," combine to give us advantages or disadvantages in society. What are the parts of you that best describe your intersectional identity?

6. Joshua Whitehead has written *Jonny Appleseed* in "NDN Time" where storylines of the past, present and future are spliced together to form the narrative. In your reading experience, what are examples of books you've read that have challenging narrative structures? Do you prefer being challenged this way as a reader, or do you prefer more linear, chronological narratives? Why or why not?

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

8. Jonny, despite facing many challenging circumstances in his life, draws on those around him to find strength and joy. What are your sources for strength and joy when times are difficult?



Inquiry Activities

1. Students can adopt the role of an English teacher or teacher-librarian and then brainstorm criteria for selecting books that should be studied by teens in their English program or included in the school library collection. Have them research the criteria used in their school

and/or school board and then compare and contrast these lists with their own.

2. Students might research school- and community-based supports for 2SLGBTQ+ youth in their area. The teacher could follow this activity by inviting an outreach worker from one of these organizations to visit the class. The teacher might also invite a two-spirited individual to visit with students. (PLEASE NOTE: Teachers should consult with their board's Equity and/or Indigenous Education departments to ensure that they create a safe, respectful and welcoming space for these visitors.)

Book backgrounder: **Jonny Appleseed**

3. Students can research cultural reappropriation efforts to reclaim offensive images, symbols and especially language. Students can compare and contrast the views of supporters of cultural reappropriation with critics of this movement.
4. Have students research the criteria used to select the winner of Canada Reads, but also other prominent book prizes in Canada and around the world. Students can use their findings to create criteria for a Canada Reads-style book debate in their classroom and vote to select a winner.



Visit www.curio.ca/canadareads to read an excerpt from *Jonny Appleseed* and watch Joshua Whitehead discuss his book.