

Excerpt from: **Jonny Appleseed**

The best advice I've ever received was from my mom when I was eight. See, my momma is the toughest NDN in the world—a real hard-ass, but the kind you need, the kind who can break rocks and divine rivers. She walked into my room all casual-like, her hair knotted into a ratty bun and wearing the old glitter of Elvis's face on her T-shirt caulked with flour. She took a liking to a thunderbird I was beading.

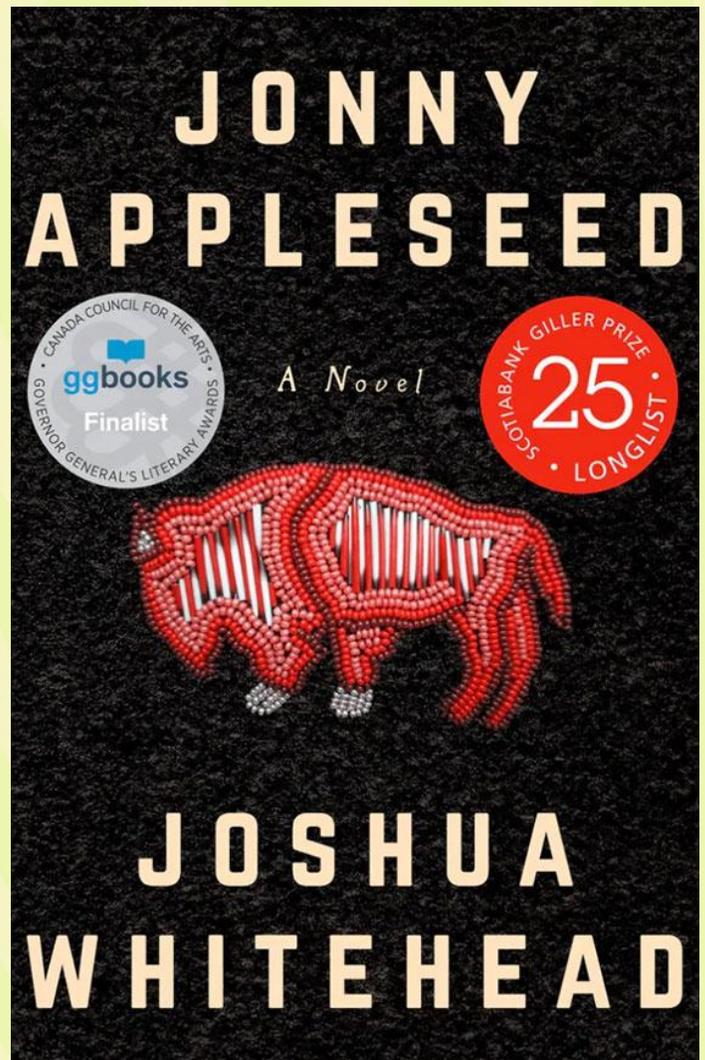
"Who's that for?" she asked.

"No one," I shrugged. Little did she know that I was actually making it to give as a gift to Brayden Walker—the first boy I ever liked. Brayden was a common Nate name, but that's what you get when you live on the rez: a million Braydens, sixteen Jasmines, and a little femme-boy-fatale named Jonny. Momma picked up the bird I was making and held it up against the window to inspect it. The little beads dangled in the dusty afternoon light, and its form created a shadowy inverse thunderbird on the floor—a great half-winged creature on the carpet not two feet from the stain from a Budweiser can.

"You know your dad was a whatchamacallit?"

"Thunderbird?"

"Yeah, that's the one. It's good," she finally said. "Real good. What you making off it?"



From *Jonny Appleseed* by Joshua Whitehead.
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"Nothing," I replied. "It's a gift."

"Boy, you better be kidding me."

When I shook my head, she furrowed her brow, revealing the chickenpox scars above her temples. That was how you knew she was real mad—a deep oval imprint that hid beneath the lines in her skin, looking like an angry eye.

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“Work like this? Boy—you’re something, you know that? Really something. Don’t you ever let me catch you doing this again.”

I asked her what she meant, half shaking, thinking she knew about Brayden and that she’d reach for her wooden spoon and give me a lickin like the schoolyard boys used to do when they’d swipe at me with their hand-me-down shoes and dirty fingernails. “You’re Oglala,” they’d tell me, “not some fairy city boy.” When they walked away, I used to mutter beneath my breath, “No, it’s ooh-la-la,” and vogue in the blood and sand. Really, I was neither—I was Oji-Cree—but to them it was all the same.

“You’re good with your hands,” she said. “And people notice that. If you want to survive out there, boy, you got to learn how to sell yourself. Work like this? Shit, you could earn an easy ten dollars selling it to them touristy white folk. Hell, maybe twenty if you looked sad enough. Listen, m’boy, if you’re good at something, don’t you ever go doing it for free, you hear me? When you grow up, you’re gon’ learn all sorts of things—find what you good at and put a number to it, you hear? And when you get that number, you double it. That how you gonna make it. Lord ain’t give you these skills so that you be making them for no punk that don’t give two hoots about you. Don’t be thinking I don’t know who this for—you like that Walker boy. I’m fine with that, son, Creator, he made you for a

reason—you girl and you boy and that’s fine with me, but what’s not fine is you selling yourself short. You gotta leave if you wanna survive, and when you do you’re gonna need the steadiness of those hands, m’boy. You’re gonna need a rock and a whole lotta medicine.”

Momma’s lesson is one I’d hold dear from that moment on—me, the rock breaker? Ain’t no NDN glitter princess ever been called that, heck, I was more like the one who got them off.