

Book Review

Becoming Kin

By Patty Krawec (Broadleaf Books, Minneapolis, MN, 2022)

Reviewed by Scott Fulton, January 15, 2025

The subtitle of *Becoming Kin* is “An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future”. This is a guidebook of sorts aimed at those of us who do not identify as Native or Indigenous. The goal is to open ourselves fully to the rather shameful history of relations between our culture and the Indigenous peoples who lived in the Americas millennia before colonization and settlement, as well as to consider how to successfully build relations of true kinship together going forward.

After a fascinating introduction which lays out the purpose of the book and the author’s perspective, the first section deals with the task of “unforgetting the past”. It begins with creation stories – both for Indigenous peoples and for the Judeo-Christian cultures who founded the United States and Canada. These are important, because although all creation stories have major elements of myth, they form an important center about which our current lives revolve. The next chapters tell the story of colonization and settlement, the insatiable hunger of settlers for land, and the violent removal of the people who were already living here, “to the west” into small, bounded reservations.

Then the book tells the stories of the ways used to make the Indians themselves “disappear” through assimilation. This was done through the twin processes of land allotment (in which the US government gave small lots of reservation land to individual tribal members, removing the shared land use on which their cultures depend) and the residential boarding schools (which separated Indian children from their families, cultures, and languages, to “kill the Indian to save the man”). Finally, the book discusses how government policies and our economic, legal, and child welfare systems continue to make Indians “vanish”, many decades after allotment ended and the last government boarding schools were closed. This last part of the story is, of course, shared with other people of color in our society.

This is not the history of the Indians most of us were taught through schools, movies, and books. This is also not a comprehensive, academic version of that history – for that there are many other excellent sources available. This book rather makes these stories of the past (and, unfortunately, the present) much more vivid and personal through the author’s masterful telling of the experiences of her family and her own life. As a person descended

from settlers, on what I personally consider to be the “wrong” side of this rather horrific history, it has been quite painful for me to fully accept what happened, and more difficult to know how to properly respond. However, as the book points out, if we do not go through this process of “unforgetting”, we will not be able to move forward to a more positive future.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the history of Indigenous/settler relations is that despite the apocalyptic nature of this history from the Indigenous perspective, these people and their cultures are still here, and are beginning to thrive once again. The last section of the book looks at how those of us who are not Indigenous can work toward a fruitful and healthy relationship of kinship with the world, including the Native people with whom we share our country. The book begins this by examining the Indigenous perspective on land and the other-than-human beings with whom we share this world. It is becoming stunningly clear how utterly destructive it is to view land as personal property and the contents of that land as resources to be exploited as we see fit. The ancient worldview of Native peoples – that land is a community of relatives or kin, of which we must be responsible members – is “good news” that we need to begin to really act upon.

The book then explores what “becoming kin” really means (and does not mean) for people of different cultures and histories. Our differences matter and can make things quite challenging, but it is still always possible for us to view each other as relatives, and to take on the task of forging communities together. The book closes by suggesting some specific actions to begin and expand a relationship of kinship with the Native people around us.

The author, Patty Krawec, is of mixed Ojibwe Anishinaabe and German Ukrainian descent, who lives near Niagara Falls in southern Ontario. She worked for many years as a social worker in sexual assault support and child welfare, but since 2019 she has focused full time on writing and public speaking in support of anti-racism, decolonization, and Indigenous presence. She is co-founder of the Nii’kinaaganaa Foundation, a Canadian group which helps meet immediate survival needs for food and shelter, as well as supporting Native language and cultural revitalization work.

This is an important and very well written book. However, it is also quite challenging, because it calls upon us to view our nation’s history and our personal role in it in a different and rather painful light. Truly becoming kin requires difficult work, which is, of course, as it should be. As a guide for this work, the book not only tells the story, but also, at the end of each chapter, provides questions to ponder and exercises to undertake to help process what is being presented. As the author suggests, this is not a journey that should be undertaken alone, especially if we seek to work together as a community toward becoming kin with our other relatives. For this reason, we are planning to hold a study group at the Meeting in the near future to explore this book together.