



READER'S GUIDE

**READ THE SAME BOOK
SHARE THE SAME STORY**



The Evolution of Alice

by David A. Robertson

2015/16 SELECTION



About On The Same Page

Manitobans selected *The Evolution of Alice* by David Robertson as this year's featured book for the 8th annual On The Same Page province-wide reading initiative. The book is published by Portage & Main Press.

On The Same Page, a joint project between The Winnipeg Foundation and the Winnipeg Public Library, encourages all Manitobans to read and talk about the same book at the same time. The program includes book giveaways, author appearances and special events inspired by the themes of the book.

"I'm thrilled and humbled that *The Evolution of Alice* has been voted as the book to get all Manitobans 'on the same page.' It's especially humbling considering the amazing books I was shortlisted with; I didn't expect this. I want to thank The Winnipeg Foundation and the Winnipeg Public Library for this honour, and I hope Manitoba enjoys reading *The Evolution of Alice*," said Robertson.

"The public continues to select compelling reads for On The Same Page," said Rick Walker, Manager of Library Services. "David Robertson's book, *The Evolution of Alice*, is a heart-wrenching story, but one that also offers the reader a message of forgiveness and hope. The societal issues that underlie the story will make for interesting programming that you will not want to miss."

"On The Same Page is a great community-building project that gets people reading and talking about important issues in our community. *The Evolution of Alice* will certainly inspire some powerful conversation," said Richard Frost, CEO of The Winnipeg Foundation.

On The Same Page was launched in 2008.

Contact the On the Same Page coordinator at:

Phone: (204) 986-2802

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About The Book

This haunting, emotionally resonant story delivers us into the world of Alice, a single mother raising her three young daughters on the rez where she grew up. Alice has never had an easy life, but has managed to get by with the support of her best friend, Gideon, and her family. When an unthinkable loss occurs, Alice is forced onto a different path, one that will challenge her belief in herself and the world she thought she knew. *The Evolution of Alice* is the kaleidoscopic story of one woman's place within the web of community. Peopled with unforgettable characters and told from multiple points of view, this is a novel where spirits are alive, forgiveness is possible, and love is the only thing that matters.

"I felt I was holding my breath as I read, because of the great sorrow, mysteries, wisdom, and love in this book. Beautifully written, and such memorable characters." ~ Dora Dueck, award-winning author of *This Hidden Thing* and *What You Get at Home*

*"In *The Evolution of Alice*, Winnipeg writer David Robertson has crafted an important and contemporary story. Introducing us to Alice – a single mother living on the rez, who suffers an unthinkable loss and then has to reconstruct her life – Robertson writes feelingly of casual cruelties and everyday kindnesses. The novel follows multiple points-of-view, tracing overlapping, sometimes unexpected connections of family and community, but it is held together by Robertson's own voice, which is immediate, unflinching, and emotionally generous."* ~ Alison Gillmor, culture columnist for the Winnipeg Free Press

"After senseless tragedy, young mother Alice is pushed to the edge. Held together by her friend, and unlikely hero Gideon, Alice wanders through her evolution with remarkable grace. Her sadness is palpable, and her story is raw and biting, yet somehow soft and gentle too. There is hope in Alice. You will love her and her young daughters, but mostly, you will love the fierce way she loves them.

*Robertson weaves seemingly separate points of view in to a chorus of voices that sing our lost ones home. *The Evolution of Alice* is a story that uplifts, a tragedy not unusual but freshly told, and a read that will echo long after you've put it down."* ~ Katherena Vermette, Governor-General-award winner for *North End Love Songs*

"Pulsing at the heart of this novel are the warmly rendered inflections of storytelling voices like Gideon's, at once reflective, vivid, and vernacular. And at the novel's core, the broken but ultimately healing rhythms of Alice's "evolution" - her cycles of loving and suffering, of her family's living, dying, and ultimately hoping to live anew - bring contemporary experience on the reservation and in the big city achingly, joyfully, and always pungently alive." ~ Neil Besner, Professor of English, Provost and Vice-President, Academic, The University of Winnipeg

Watch for appearances by the author and other special events from January to April 2016.

About The Author

David Alexander Robertson, of Irish, Scottish, English, and Cree heritage, is a graphic novelist and writer who has long been an advocate for educating youth on Indigenous history and contemporary issues.

David has created several bestselling graphic novels, including the *7 Generations* series, the *Tales from Big Spirit* series, and *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story*. He was a contributor to the anthology *Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings from the Land of Water*, and his work has been featured in *CV2* and *Prairie Fire*.

He lives in Winnipeg with his wife and five children. *The Evolution of Alice* is his first novel.



Jumper

In her basement apartment, snuggled between Kathy and Jayne, Alice used the light of her cell phone to study the worn photograph of her and her girls. Grace was on the far left of the line, smiling so hard that her eyes nearly disappeared, taken over as they were by her cheeks. Next to Grace, Jayne, leaning forward on her elbows, her fingers locked together tightly, her beautiful long black hair tossed up in the air, whipping around like a flag, and a cute little half smile that made it look like she was winking at the camera. Kathy was next in the line, always slightly understated, always seeming a bit older than her years, her eyes kind of slanted down toward the sides of her face like sideways teardrops, her closed-mouthed smile creating subtle dimples on each cheek, the right cheek carrying a deeper dimple than the left, and her chin resting on her right fist. Then there was Alice, her black hair pushed back behind her ears, her eyes looking directly into the camera, directly at the photographer, her then-boyfriend Ryan.

Alice turned the phone's camera on so that she could see herself, and moved the phone beside the photograph so there was a real-time image of her face added to the family portrait. She looked back and forth, from Alice then to Alice now, and wished she'd known then what she knew now. The pain then seemed a pittance. She would gladly trade it for what she felt currently. Give me the beatings, she thought. Give me the bruises and the clothing to cover them up. Give me the shame and give me the meekness. Give me all of it, she thought, just give me Grace. Please, God, just give me Grace. She looked at her eyes in the photograph, the deception in them.

"Smile, Alice," Ryan had said. "Just try to smile."

She tried. She really did. She looked at her girls to elicit a smile. Tried to ignore Ryan crouching behind the camera. But he was right there.

"Don't ruin the picture," he said. She managed to push the corners of her mouth upward. She was afraid if she didn't he would make her pay for it later. She saw his knuckles on either side of the camera. She could almost feel them against her jaw, her stomach, her arms.

"Get your hair out of the way. It's covering your face," he said.

With shaking fingers, she did. She pushed her hair behind her ears. Looked at her girls again. She didn't want them dealing with her getting beaten again, running off to the bathroom, locking themselves inside until he left to cool off.

"Look at the camera. Look at me, damn it," he said.

She did. She looked through the lens, right at him.

"Fine. That's fine," he said with the same tone he used so often, stark and disappointed, the one that made her know she was going to get it later. She'd ruined it. She'd ruined it again. If she could go back to that moment, she would have smiled so big and so hard.

Alice re-examined the photograph by the light of her cell phone. She looked to the field behind them that stretched far into the horizon, where a line of trees in the distance looked like a strip of Velcro holding up a perfect blue felt sky; to the tire swing just visible on the right side of the picture that allowed her to reach into the heavens and watch the girls play amidst the long grass; to Grace, who would be young forever, forever in the field, filled with an immeasurable joy; then at Kathy and Jayne, who were still with her, who would age, who would find joy, who would suffer, who would laugh, who would cry.

Epilogue

On the day that Kathy couldn't sleep, the sun was setting reluctantly, splashing red and yellow and orange across the horizon and painting the walls of the girls' bedroom. Kathy always liked how the sunset cast colours against her walls, when it came in clear like it did tonight, when the Dora blanket on the bedroom window was pushed over to the side. She thought it was pretty how the colours moved like liquid against the walls as though she were inside a lava lamp. She'd been watching the light for a good while now and didn't want it to leave. She didn't want the night to come, or the sun to set. She knew it was only a matter of time, however, and that made her sad, and she started to cry. At that moment, Alice walked by on the way to her own bedroom. She stopped at the girls' bedroom door.

"Kathy, is that you? Are you awake?" Alice said.

"I can't sleep," she said.

Alice walked over to Kathy and Jayne's mattress, which rested in the middle of the bedroom. She sat down at Kathy's side and wiped some tears away from her cheek. Jayne groaned and rolled over on her side. She never had much trouble sleeping, that one. Not so long as there was a warm body for her to cuddle against.

"What's wrong, darling?" Alice said.

Kathy hesitated only for a moment. She took her mother's hand.

"Are you afraid of dying?" Kathy said.

Alice squeezed her hand.

"Sure I am. Of course I am, sometimes," Alice said.

Kathy looked away from her mother, to the bedroom walls. The colours were still moving across her walls like flames. They were dimmer now, though. They weren't as vibrant as they were even a few minutes ago. The sun would be gone soon.

"Am I going to die?" Kathy said.

Alice sighed. She squeezed Kathy's hand even tighter.

"One day you'll die. One day everybody on this earth will die," Alice said.

Kathy cried some more. Alice wiped away more tears.

“Why?” Kathy said.

“I don’t know, honey,” Alice said. “I don’t know the answer to that. It’s just the way things are. At least we’re all in the same boat. I feel good about that sometimes.”

The room had grown much darker by now. The red and yellow and orange had been painted over by grey and black.

“Do you think you can sleep? Do you want me to stay?” Alice said.

Kathy pulled at her mother’s hand. Alice lay down beside her. She took Kathy into her arms and covered her like a blanket. Kathy opened her eyes and closed her eyes and saw the same thing either way.

“Mommy, will I wake up tomorrow?” Kathy said.

“Yes,” Alice said. “That’s one thing I know for sure.”



Review

Someone you love is dead. And you? You have to keep living.

The grinding ache of loss gets authentic, articulate expression in *The Evolution of Alice*, graphic novelist David Alexander Robertson's first "words only" novel.

Not that his characters would say it that way. In the easygoing language of everyday Manitobans, Robertson's cast of damaged people try to heal and help in the face of mortality.

Tragedy crashes into the rez trailer home where Alice is rebuilding life with her three daughters, her abusive partner temporarily secure in the Stony Mountain penitentiary. Withdrawing into a hollow ache, she faces a steep, seemingly impossible climb back to wholeness.

If that's an often-told story, it gets a fresh face here, thanks to the unpretentious, engaging voices the Winnipeg writer offers, which range from close friends to strangers breezing by scenes of personal wretchedness. The intersecting vignettes Robertson pulls in add a nice variety of perspectives for the reader to enjoy, even as they give a rounded vision of dealing with death.

Then there's the spooky intervention of the supernatural. Ghosts and spirits are just out of eyesight in the lives of Robertson's characters, hanging back in a playful darkness. Their motives and origins are questionable; the power of transformation they offer, tantalizing.

In these sections Robertson's skill with descriptive visual language is at its best. The mortal world is rendered in vivid, colour-loaded language (particularly the field stretching behind Alice's home), and while spiritual intrusions receive the same treatment, they're honed down to a few chilling phrases that leave room for your imagination to stretch.

When Mistapew picks up a sleeping teenager and carries her into a flood, for example, "the water was black all around because the stars were shy that night, except for the reflection of the moon overhead which touched the water near where they stood, the soft but generous white glow rippling like a flag in a delicate breeze."

That excerpt is drawn from a chapter where two teens contemplate taking their own lives; a response to a wave of suicides in their community. It's the darkest, most urgent instance of something else that hits the reader when turning the pages of *The Evolution of Alice*: this book matters to our province.

So many Manitobans have, like a character in an early chapter, only sped by reserves on the highway. Inviting us into a rich community of characters, which stretches deeper than the headlines most of us associate with reserve life, Robertson is doing a service to everyone who calls Manitoba home.

And crafting an engaging story of one family's recovery from loss -- at a time when indigenous peoples are increasingly flexing political, economic and cultural muscle in this country -- is a gift for everyone hoping for a better future for our divided country.

Easy to read if emotionally exhausting, *The Evolution of Alice* cements Robertson's well-earned reputation as a great Manitoba storyteller in yet another form. Hopefully it will join Robertson's *The Life of Helen Betty Osborne* and his *7 Generations* series on school curriculums.

It's a book every Manitoban should read.

Matthew TenBruggencate
Winnipeg Free Press, November 22, 2014



Author Interviews

A publishing operations manager for the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (1090 Waverley St.), Robertson is passionate about aboriginal culture and issues, and often incorporates those elements in his writing, including *The Evolution of Alice*.

"The main character lives on a reserve. You'll see the struggles of living on a reserve and some of the beauty of a reserve, and what that lifestyle is like," Robertson said.

However, while the story is focusing on an aboriginal issue, Robertson said it is "a universal story of loss and grief and overcoming those painful emotions."

The novel follows a woman named Alice, a single mother who is raising three young daughters on a reserve.

"It's an interesting book. It's a collection of 29 linked stories, so there's 14 longer short stories and 15 microstories. All paint together this picture of this family who are going through the loss of a young child," Robertson explained.

The writer was inspired to write this book because he had spent a lot of time on reserves. Four years ago, Robertson visited a community in which someone told him about a family, which had been living near a highway, whose daughter was hit by a car in the middle of the night.

"She had somehow gotten out in the night and was hit and run over in their driveway, and they never caught who had done it. It was just this profound loss for the family and community," Robertson said.

The story also meant a lot to Robertson because he is a father of four young children.

"For me, writing is processing, and it was important for me to work that out, because it impacted me as well," Robertson said.

Cindy Chan

The Metro, July 29, 2014

Indigenous Women:

Children of the Broken Treaty : Canada's Lost Promise and One Girl's Dream by Charlie Angus
371.82997 ANG 2015

First Voices: An Aboriginal Women's Reader edited by Patricia A. Monture
305.48897 FIR 2009

"Just Talking About Ourselves": Voices of Our Youth edited by Marlena Dolan
819.0809283 JUS

Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine by Kim Anderson
305.48973071 AND 2011

The Strength of Women: Áhkamêyimowak by Priscilla Settee
305.48897 SET 2011

Treaty Promises, Indian Reality: Life on a Reserve by Harold LeRat
971.244 LER 2005

Novels Told in Stories:

Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits by Laila Lalami
FICTION LALAMI

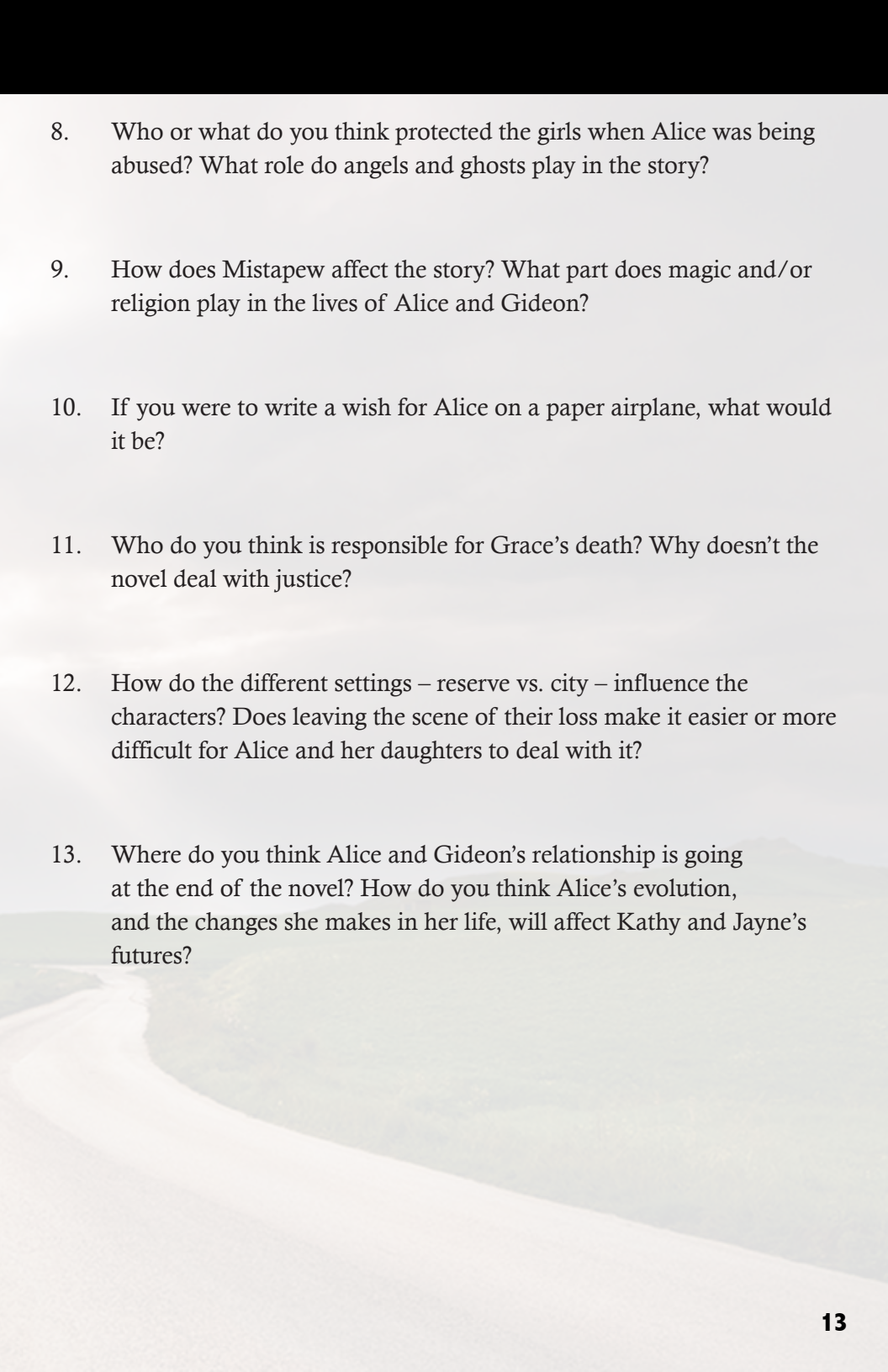
Lives of Girls and Women by Alice Munro
FICTION MUNRO

Normal People Don't Live Like This by Dylan Landis
FICTION LANDIS

Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson
FICTION ANDERSON

Discussion Questions

1. The book is called *The Evolution of Alice*. How does Alice evolve through the book? Do you think her evolution is complete when the book ends?
2. The novel is structured in sections, each with an introduction followed by a titled chapter, similar to linked short stories. Why do you think the author decided to tell Alice's story this way?
3. How do the different points of view presented in the book shape our understanding of each character?
4. Two of the chapters are written from the perspective of outsiders to the story. Both are observers who try to help central characters. What do these sections contribute to the overall narrative?
5. Emptiness is a recurring theme in the novel. Describe how and why each of the characters feel hollow inside.
6. Alice seems to be isolated from people other than her sister Olive and friend Gideon. Why do you think that is? Why do you think Alice moves away without telling Gideon, given that they are so close?
7. How do the incidents of racism, such as Gideon's experience in the department store, affect the characters?

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8. Who or what do you think protected the girls when Alice was being abused? What role do angels and ghosts play in the story?
 9. How does Mistapew affect the story? What part does magic and/or religion play in the lives of Alice and Gideon?
 10. If you were to write a wish for Alice on a paper airplane, what would it be?
 11. Who do you think is responsible for Grace's death? Why doesn't the novel deal with justice?
 12. How do the different settings – reserve vs. city – influence the characters? Does leaving the scene of their loss make it easier or more difficult for Alice and her daughters to deal with it?
 13. Where do you think Alice and Gideon's relationship is going at the end of the novel? How do you think Alice's evolution, and the changes she makes in her life, will affect Kathy and Jayne's futures?

Community Resources

Native Women's Association of Canada

nwac.ca

Eagle Urban Transition Centre

204-954-3050

The EUTC serves as a hub of information and central location for First Nation clients seeking transitional support while living in and/or relocating to Winnipeg.

“Reason to Live” Manitoba Suicide Line

1-877-435-7170

The province's only 24 hour toll-free helpline dedicated to suicide prevention.

Kids Help Phone

kidshelpphone.ca

1-800-668-6868

A free, anonymous and confidential counselling service (phone and online) for kids and teens.

Previous titles

2009



In Search of April Raintree
by Beatrice Mosionier

2010



Reading by Lightning
by Joan Thomas

2011



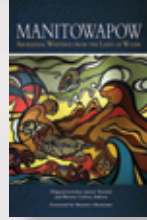
Juliana and the Medicine Fish
by Jake MacDonald

2012



*The Setting Lake Sun /
Le soleil du lac qui se couche*
by J.R. Lévêillé

2013



*Manitowapow: Aboriginal Writings
from the Land of Water* edited by
Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair &
Warren Cariou

2014



*The Lucky Ones: African
Refugees' Stories of
Extraordinary Courage*
by Anne Mahon

2015



North End Love Songs
by Katherena Vermette

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