Apple (Skin to the Core)

by Eric Gansworth · Language: EN

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Overview

Apple (Skin to the Core) by Eric Gansworth is a powerful and poignant verse novel and memoir that explores the complex experience of growing up Onondaga in the 1970s and 80s, grappling with identity, assimilation, and the legacy of colonialism. Gansworth, an enrolled member of the Onondaga Nation, Eel Clan, uses a unique blend of poetry, prose, and visual art to tell his personal story, interwoven with the broader history of Native American people in the United States. The book's title refers to the derogatory term "apple"—red on the outside, white on the inside—used to describe Native Americans who are perceived as having assimilated into white culture. Gansworth reclaims and dissects this metaphor, examining the pressures of living between two worlds and the struggle to maintain cultural authenticity.

The narrative delves into the devastating impact of forced assimilation, particularly through the lens of Indian boarding schools, which aimed to "kill the Indian, save the man." Gansworth explores how these policies affected his family across generations, influencing their language, traditions, and sense of self. He recounts his own experiences with racism, cultural misunderstandings, and the constant negotiation of his identity in both his reservation community and the predominantly white world outside. The book is a testament to resilience, the enduring strength of family bonds, and the importance of reclaiming one's narrative and heritage in the face of historical trauma and ongoing prejudice. It challenges readers to confront uncomfortable truths about American history and to recognize the multifaceted nature of Indigenous identity.

Key Takeaways

- The term "apple" (red on the outside, white on the inside) is a harmful stereotype used to describe Indigenous people perceived as assimilated, and its origins are rooted in colonial efforts to erase Native cultures.
- Forced assimilation policies, such as Indian boarding schools, inflicted deep and lasting trauma across generations of Native American families, impacting language, traditions, and family structures.
- Identity for Indigenous individuals is often a complex negotiation between ancestral heritage, community expectations, and the dominant mainstream culture.
- Reclaiming and reinterpreting derogatory terms can be a powerful act of resistance and self-definition, transforming pain into strength.

• Art, poetry, and storytelling serve as vital tools for processing historical trauma, preserving cultural memory, and asserting Indigenous voices.

• Understanding the historical context of Native American experiences is crucial for confronting ongoing systemic racism and promoting genuine reconciliation.

• Family and community provide essential support and a sense of belonging amidst the challenges of cultural displacement and prejudice.

Chapter Summaries

"Apple" and Early Life

Gansworth introduces the central metaphor of being an "Apple"—red on the outside, white on the inside—to explore the complexities of his mixed identity. He recounts his early childhood on the Tuscarora Nation, describing his family and the initial awareness of being different, both within his community due to his lighter skin and outside it in the dominant white world. This section sets the stage for his memoir's exploration of belonging, cultural navigation, and the challenges of reconciling his Indigenous heritage with the expectations of mainstream society.

Childhood on the Tuscarora Nation

This section focuses on Gansworth's formative years within the Tuscarora community. He shares intimate anecdotes about family life, traditions, and the close-knit nature of the reservation. He introduces key family members, including his parents and grandparents, painting a vivid picture of his home environment and the cultural values instilled in him. While depicting a sense of belonging, he also hints at the underlying struggles and historical trauma that subtly permeate the community, shaping his early understanding of the world.

School Days and Racism

Gansworth details his experiences attending public school off the reservation, where he frequently encountered overt and subtle racism. He recounts numerous instances of microaggressions, stereotypes, and the constant pressure to explain or justify his Indigenous identity to classmates and teachers. This section highlights the emotional toll of navigating a system that often misunderstood or devalued his heritage, making him feel like an outsider and forcing him to confront the prejudices of the dominant culture.

My Mother's Story: Thomas Indian School

A significant portion of the book is dedicated to his mother's traumatic experiences at the Thomas Indian School, a residential school for Indigenous children. Gansworth relays her stories of forced assimilation, the loss of language and cultural practices, and the emotional and physical abuses endured. This section powerfully illustrates the devastating intergenerational impact of these institutions on Indigenous families, including his mother's lifelong struggles with identity and trauma.

My Father's Story and Family History

Gansworth explores his father's background and experiences, often contrasting with his mother's. He delves into his father's stoicism, his work ethic, and the ways his own past shaped his approach to family life and parenting. This section also broadens to include other family members and the collective history of resilience and survival within the Tuscarora Nation, highlighting the strength found in community despite profound historical hardships and personal struggles.

Art as Survival and Expression

This section chronicles Gansworth's discovery and development as an artist and writer. He describes how drawing, painting, and eventually writing became essential outlets for processing his experiences, expressing his identity, and making sense of the world around him. He emphasizes the therapeutic and empowering role of creativity in navigating personal and historical trauma, asserting a voice that had often been silenced, and finding a unique way to communicate his truth.

Navigating Two Worlds

Gansworth explores the ongoing challenge of balancing his Indigenous identity with the expectations and realities of the dominant white culture. He reflects on the persistent feeling of being "in-between," not fully belonging to either world, and the constant negotiation of cultural norms and personal authenticity. He discusses the complexities of maintaining his heritage and traditions while living in a society that often misunderstands, appropriates, or devalues Indigenous cultures.

The Power of Photography

This section discusses the integral role of photographs throughout Gansworth's life and in the book itself. He uses family photographs not just as illustrations but as powerful narrative elements, prompting memories, revealing hidden histories, and offering visual evidence of his family's journey. He explores how images can capture truth, preserve memory, and serve as potent tools for storytelling, self-reflection, and connecting with ancestral pasts.

Finding a Voice and Challenging Stereotypes

Gansworth details his journey to becoming a published author and artist, and how he uses his platform to share Indigenous perspectives and challenge pervasive stereotypes. He discusses the responsibility and power of storytelling to reclaim narratives, educate others, and advocate for his community. This section highlights his evolution beyond the initial "Apple" metaphor to assert a complex, authentic, and unapologetically Indigenous identity through his creative work.

Legacy, Resilience, and Hope

The book concludes with Gansworth's reflections on the intergenerational impact of historical trauma, but also on the enduring resilience and survival of Indigenous peoples. He emphasizes the importance of remembering, honoring ancestors, and continuing to tell these stories for future generations. This final section offers a message of hope, highlighting the strength found in cultural identity, the power of community, and the ongoing struggle for justice and recognition.

Themes

- Indigenous Identity
- Colonialism's Legacy
- Cultural Assimilation
- Family & Heritage
- Resilience & Survival
- Storytelling & Art

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Apple (Skin to the Core) about?

"Apple (Skin to the Core)" is a verse novel and memoir by Eric Gansworth, an Onondaga writer and artist. It explores his experiences growing up Indigenous in the 1970s and 80s, grappling with the derogatory "apple" stereotype (red on the outside, white on the inside). The book delves into the lasting impact of forced assimilation, particularly Indian boarding schools, on his family and community, while celebrating the resilience of Native American identity.

Is Apple (Skin to the Core) worth reading?

Yes, "Apple (Skin to the Core)" is highly recommended for its powerful and unique exploration of Indigenous identity, history, and trauma. Gansworth's blend of poetry, prose, and art offers a deeply personal yet universally resonant narrative about cultural belonging, resilience, and the ongoing effects of colonialism. It provides crucial insights into Native American experiences often overlooked in mainstream education.

How does Apple (Skin to the Core) end?

Spoiler: The book concludes with a sense of hopeful resilience and a powerful reclamation of identity. Gansworth reflects on his journey of understanding his heritage, challenging the "apple" stereotype, and finding his voice through art and storytelling. It emphasizes the enduring strength of Indigenous people, their ability to adapt and thrive, and the importance of carrying forward cultural knowledge for future generations, asserting a self-defined identity.

Who should read Apple (Skin to the Core)?

This book is essential reading for young adults and adults interested in Native American history, identity, and contemporary Indigenous experiences. It's particularly valuable for those seeking to understand the impacts of colonialism and assimilation, and for anyone interested in powerful, innovative storytelling that blends memoir, poetry, and social commentary.

How long does it take to read Apple (Skin to the Core)?

"Apple (Skin to the Core)" is approximately 300 pages long. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would likely take around 4 hours to read, though its poetic and artistic elements might encourage a slower, more reflective pace for deeper engagement.

Best Quotes

“They called us apples. Red on the outside, white on the inside.”

This line introduces the central metaphor of the book, describing Indigenous people who are perceived as having lost their cultural identity by adopting dominant white customs. It highlights the internal conflict and external judgment faced by those navigating two worlds, a core theme of assimilation and identity.

“Every photograph is a ghost story.”

This quote reflects the book's unique structure, which incorporates historical and personal photographs. It suggests that images hold memories, histories, and the presence of those who are no longer physically there, emphasizing the enduring impact of the past on the present and the spectral nature of memory and loss.

“The boarding schools were designed to kill the Indian, save the man.”

This powerful statement encapsulates the devastating philosophy behind the forced assimilation policies of residential schools. It reveals the explicit goal of eradicating Indigenous cultures, languages, and identities, aiming to replace them with Euro-American values, and is a crucial historical context for the author's experiences.

“Sometimes, the only way to survive is to remember.”

This line speaks to the resilience and importance of cultural memory in the face of systemic oppression and attempts at erasure. For the author and his community, remembering their heritage, stories, and language becomes an act of resistance and a vital tool for maintaining identity and healing from historical trauma.

Questions & Answers

What is the central metaphor of "Apple (Skin to the Core)"?

The central metaphor is the term "apple," used to describe Indigenous people who are "red on the outside, white on the inside." This derogatory term implies that someone has lost their cultural identity by adopting white customs and values. Gansworth reclaims and explores this metaphor to delve into the complexities of navigating bicultural identity, the pressures of assimilation, and the internal and external conflicts faced by those living between Indigenous and dominant American cultures.

How does Eric Gansworth structure his memoir?

Eric Gansworth structures "Apple (Skin to the Core)" as a memoir in verse and prose, creating a unique and multi-layered narrative. The book interweaves poems, personal essays, historical context, and family photographs. This fragmented yet cohesive structure allows Gansworth to explore themes of memory, history, and identity from various angles, mirroring the complex and often disjointed nature of his experiences and the historical trauma he addresses.

What is the significance of the title "Apple (Skin to the Core)"?

The title "Apple (Skin to the Core)" refers to the derogatory term "apple," meaning "red on the outside, white on the inside," used to describe Indigenous people perceived as assimilated. Gansworth reclaims this term, exploring its layers of meaning from superficial appearance ("skin") to deep-seated identity and heritage ("core"). The title signifies his journey to understand and reconcile his bicultural identity, challenging the notion that one must choose between Indigenous and American worlds.

What role do photographs play in the book?

Photographs play a crucial role in "Apple (Skin to the Core)," serving as visual anchors for memory, history, and storytelling. Gansworth includes numerous personal and historical photos, often juxtaposing them with his poetry and prose. These images are not merely illustrations; they are integral to the narrative, prompting reflections on family, community, historical events, and the passage of time, embodying the idea that "every photograph is a ghost story."

What is the historical context of "kill the Indian, save the man" discussed in the book?

The phrase "kill the Indian, save the man" refers to the assimilationist policy of the U.S. government and religious institutions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This policy drove the establishment of residential (boarding) schools for Indigenous children, aiming to strip them of their language, culture, and spiritual beliefs, and forcibly integrate them into white American society. Gansworth explores the devastating, intergenerational impact of these schools on Indigenous communities and individuals.

What are some of the main themes explored in "Apple (Skin to the Core)"?

Key themes in "Apple (Skin to the Core)" include identity (especially bicultural identity), assimilation, cultural memory, historical trauma (particularly from residential schools), family, resilience, and the power of storytelling. Gansworth delves into the complexities of being an

Onondaga man growing up on the Tuscarora Nation, navigating the expectations and prejudices of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous worlds.

Who are some of the key family members mentioned in the memoir?

Gansworth frequently mentions his parents, particularly his father, a Tuscarora man, and his mother, an Onondaga woman, whose differing tribal affiliations and experiences shape his own identity. He also refers to his siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents, whose stories, struggles, and resilience contribute to the rich tapestry of his family history and inform his understanding of his heritage and community.

How does Gansworth address the concept of language loss and revitalization?

Gansworth addresses language loss as a direct consequence of assimilation policies, where Indigenous languages were suppressed in boarding schools. He highlights the profound impact of this loss on cultural identity and connection to heritage. While not explicitly detailing revitalization efforts, his act of writing and sharing his story in English, while steeped in Indigenous perspective, implicitly contributes to the ongoing effort to preserve and honor Indigenous voices and narratives.

What does Gansworth mean by "surviving" in the context of the book?

In "Apple (Skin to the Core)," "surviving" means more than just physical existence; it encompasses the endurance of culture, identity, and spirit in the face of systemic attempts at erasure. It refers to the resilience of Indigenous peoples who have maintained their traditions, languages, and communities despite generations of oppression, assimilation policies, and historical trauma. Survival is an active process of remembering, adapting, and reclaiming.

How does the book challenge stereotypes about Indigenous people?

The book challenges stereotypes by presenting a nuanced, complex, and deeply personal portrayal of contemporary Indigenous life. Gansworth dismantles the monolithic "Indian" image, revealing the diversity within Indigenous communities and the internal struggles of bicultural identity. He counters romanticized or tragic narratives by focusing on resilience, humor, and the everyday realities of living on a reservation, asserting agency and self-definition.

What is the significance of the Tuscarora Nation in Gansworth's story?

The Tuscarora Nation is significant as the place where Eric Gansworth grew up, providing the geographical and community backdrop for much of his childhood and adolescent experiences. Although his mother is Onondaga, his upbringing on the Tuscarora Nation shapes his immediate environment, his relationships, and his early understanding of Indigenous community life, contributing to the specific cultural context of his bicultural identity.

What is the author's perspective on humor in the face of hardship?

Gansworth often employs humor, sometimes dark or ironic, as a coping mechanism and a tool for resilience in the face of hardship and historical trauma. This perspective reflects a common aspect of Indigenous cultures, where humor can be used to navigate difficult realities, build community, and assert strength. It allows him to address painful topics without succumbing entirely to despair, offering moments of levity and human connection.

How does Gansworth explore the idea of "home"?

Gansworth explores "home" as a multifaceted concept, not just a physical place but also a feeling of belonging, cultural connection, and self-acceptance. For him, home is complicated by the "apple" label, the tension between reservation life and the outside world, and the historical displacement of Indigenous peoples. His journey is ultimately about finding and defining his own sense of home within his bicultural identity.

What is the overall message or lesson readers can take from "Apple (Skin to the Core)"?

Readers can learn about the profound and lasting impact of assimilation policies on Indigenous peoples, the complexities of bicultural identity, and the importance of cultural memory and resilience. The book encourages empathy, challenges preconceived notions about Indigenous experiences, and highlights the ongoing strength and determination of communities striving to preserve their heritage and define their own narratives.

Spoiler: What is the ultimate resolution or understanding Gansworth reaches about his "apple" identity?

Spoiler: Gansworth ultimately reaches an understanding that his "apple" identity is not a flaw or a betrayal, but a complex reality shaped by history, family, and personal experience. He reclaims the term, transforming it from a derogatory label into a descriptor of his unique bicultural existence. He embraces the idea that one can be both Indigenous and modern, finding strength and authenticity in the space between cultures, rather than feeling torn between them.

How does Gansworth use poetry to enhance his narrative?

Gansworth uses poetry to distill complex emotions, memories, and historical facts into concise, impactful verses. The poems often serve as lyrical interludes, offering moments of intense reflection, emotional depth, or sharp commentary that prose might convey differently. This poetic form allows for a more evocative and symbolic exploration of themes like identity, loss, and resilience, adding a distinct rhythm and texture to the memoir.

What does the book reveal about the intergenerational impact of historical trauma?

The book powerfully reveals the intergenerational impact of historical trauma, particularly stemming from residential schools and assimilation policies. Gansworth shows how the experiences of his parents and grandparents, including the loss of language and cultural practices, directly shaped his own upbringing and sense of identity. He illustrates how past injustices continue to affect present-day Indigenous communities, manifesting in various forms

of struggle and resilience.

How does Gansworth portray the concept of "belonging"?

Gansworth portrays "belonging" as a fluid and often challenging concept for someone with a bicultural identity. He explores the tension of belonging fully neither to the traditional Indigenous world (due to assimilation) nor to the dominant white society (due to prejudice and cultural difference). His journey is about constructing his own sense of belonging, rooted in self-acceptance and a nuanced understanding of his heritage, rather than seeking external validation.

What is the author's tone throughout the memoir?

The author's tone throughout the memoir is reflective, honest, and often poignant, yet also infused with resilience and a subtle, sometimes dark, humor. He approaches difficult subjects with directness and vulnerability, conveying both the pain of historical trauma and the strength of his community. His voice is authentic, personal, and deeply engaged with the complexities of his identity and heritage.

How does "Apple (Skin to the Core)" contribute to contemporary Indigenous literature?

"Apple (Skin to the Core)" makes a significant contribution to contemporary Indigenous literature by offering a unique, multi-genre memoir that reclaims and redefines a derogatory term. It provides an intimate, personal perspective on the lasting effects of assimilation, challenges stereotypes, and highlights the ongoing vitality and complexity of Indigenous identity in modern America. It serves as an important educational tool and a powerful act of self-narration.