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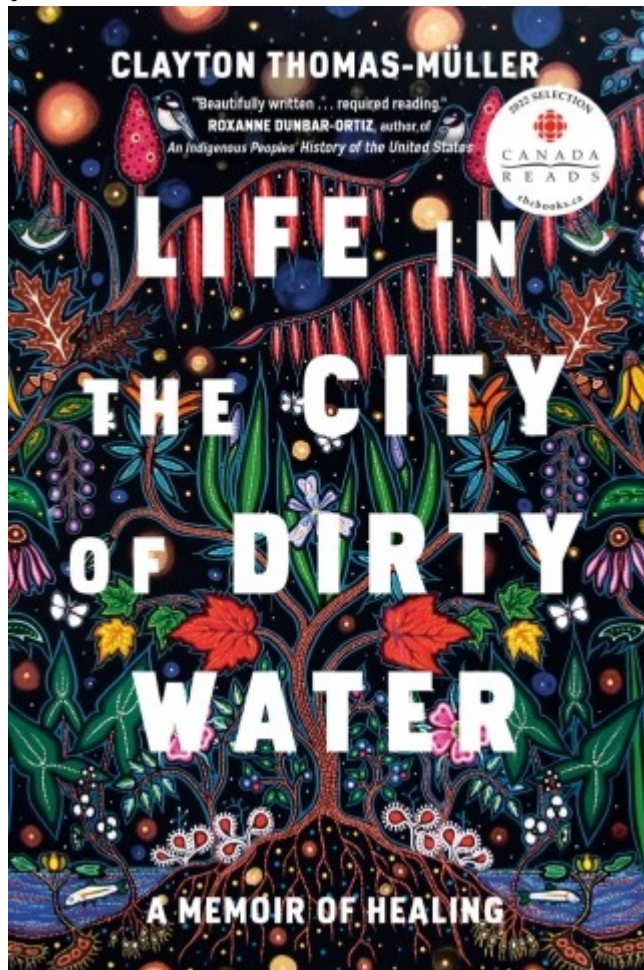
## Decolonizing Reading Club: Life in the City of Dirty Water

News

Anonymous (not verified)

September 7, 2022

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*As an environmental organization working in Indigenous territories, and as treaty people, LWF recognizes our obligation to actively practise reconciliation. To us, this work must include amplifying Indigenous voices, respecting Indigenous knowledge and affirming Indigenous rights.*

*In January 2021, LWF and [the Lake Winnipeg Indigenous Collective \(LWIC\)](#) collaboratively created a reconciliation reading club. Our goal is to equip LWF and LWIC staff with knowledge, terminology and perspectives that will help us integrate actions of reconciliation and antiracism within our professional work and in our personal lives.*

*The topics, ideas and truths we encounter may be difficult and provoke uncomfortable feelings. Having honest conversations about the impacts of colonialism and racism are not easy, but they are incredibly important.*

*As we read new books, we will be sharing our reflections on our website, as well as in our newsletters and through e-updates. We invite you to join us on this learning journey.*

### **Life in the City of Dirty Water by Clayton Thomas-Müller**

Everything is connected.

This idea is repeated throughout *Life in the City of Dirty Water*, a 2021 memoir written by Clayton Thomas-Müller, who is a member of the Treaty 6-based Mathias Colomb Cree Nation (also known as Pukatawagan) located in northern Manitoba, and a longtime environmental and Indigenous rights activist.

Thomas-Müller's book is a collection of personal anecdotes which jump across time, place and subject matter: a childhood marked by violence and racism; his time managing a gang drug house; his journey of cultural and spiritual reconnection; and a career which has taken him literally around the world in pursuit of environmental and social justice.

Throughout, he reminds us over and over again that we are all connected to the natural world and to each other. "One of the mysteries of creation is how closely saving yourself and saving the world are linked," he writes. "If you don't take care of the world, you will only end up harming yourself. And if you don't take care of yourself, you won't do the world any good. We're all part of the world. It is an illusion to think any of us can be separate."

Thomas-Müller was trained on the use of narrative-based storytelling during his work as an environmental campaigner, and his memoir serves as an example of this strategy in action. By offering compelling (sometimes shocking) personal stories, he creates connection with his readers while also challenging our assumptions and encouraging us to consider how individual experiences fit within larger issues of collective concern. Here, those issues include the intergenerational trauma passed down by survivors of Canada's residential school system, systemic racism, the consequences of natural resource extraction, and the connection between Indigenous rights and environmental policy.

Born and raised in Winnipeg and having come of age around the same time as Thomas-Müller, I enjoyed being able to relate to certain familiar places and activities. However, my experience of this city – and indeed, my life's journey – has been profoundly different. I recognize this difference is in part because of my racial identity, my family's economic status, the area of town I grew up in, and the values and dominant messages I was exposed to during my upbringing.

Reading someone else's similar-yet-very-different account of growing up in Winnipeg was jarring, but also an effective reminder of how the capitalist, colonial systems in which we live privilege some and oppress others. In turn, our individual, lived experiences within these larger systems influence our perceptions of the world – including our approach to problem-solving, our outlook on conflict, and what we consider to be effective communication and acceptable compromise. "Truth" can be subjective, and I can't – nor shouldn't – expect everyone to think or act like I do. Or, as Thomas-Müller puts it: "everybody is a product of their own environment and everybody's reality is real to them."

The other idea I took away from *Life in the City of Dirty Water* is that there is no one correct way to make change. Within the ongoing work of restoring and protecting the health of our shared lands and waters, for example, there is room for multiple tactics. We humans are complex and imperfect – but we also have power to make an impact, if we are brave enough to step into that power and use it. Environmental justice isn't an abstract concept: it is a series of concrete actions.

"[T]he fight for the fate of the planet is going on all the time, and we're all involved. It's not just good guys and bad guys. All of us play a role on both sides," Thomas-Müller writes. "[W]e all consume more than we should. We all live a lifestyle that Mother Earth can't sustain much longer. The point isn't to divide us up into good guys and bad guys. We shouldn't divide at all. The point is for all of us to find a way to act better."

By: Marlo Campbell, LWF Communications Director

**Staff reflections on other books can be found on our [Reconciliation Reading Club web page](#).**

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