

READER'S GUIDE

Chasing Painted Horses by Drew Hayden Taylor

INTRODUCING *Chasing Painted Horses*

When Ralph Thomas comes across graffiti of a horse in an urban alleyway in the early hours of the morning, he is stopped in his tracks. He recognizes this horse.

A half-asleep Indigenous homeless man sees Ralph's reaction to the horse and calls out to him. Over the course of a morning's worth of hot coffee on a bitterly cold day, Ralph and the homeless man talk and Ralph remembers a troubling moment from his childhood when an odd little girl, Danielle, drew the most beautiful and intriguing horse on his mother's Everything Wall, winning the competition set up for children on the Otter Lake Reserve. The graffiti of the horse is eerily similar to the chalk image drawn 20 years earlier. But how? Why?

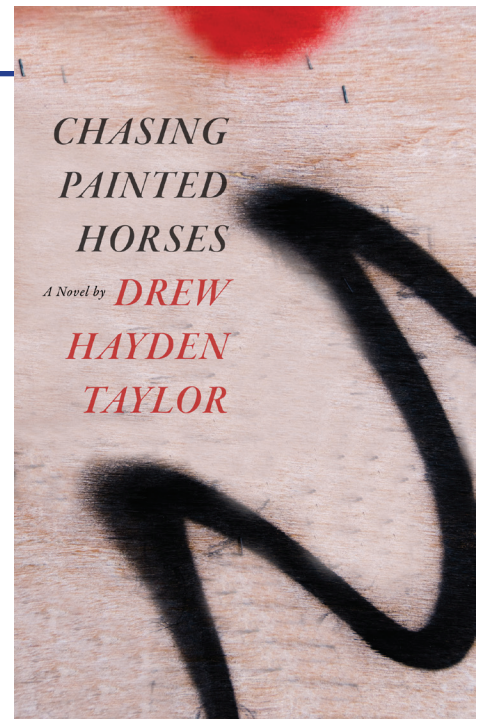
Ralph has lived with many questions that arose from his eleventh winter. What did the horse mean — to him, his sister, his best friend, and, most importantly, the girl who drew it? These questions have never left him.

Chasing Painted Horses has a magical, fablelike quality that will enchant readers, and haunt them, for years to come.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Impacts of Colonialism – From the library's short hours and the poverty on the Reserve to the lack of support for Danielle and her family and Harry's life on the streets, the novel shows how colonialism has affected Indigenous people and their cultures. Not all of those effects are obvious. "Colonialism has its fingers in every pie on the reserve." (p 90)

Artistic Expression – Danielle's paintings of the horse are compared to the Mona Lisa (p 137), and described as "alive" (p 47, 71), as "real and powerful" (p 68), and as "something that was supposed to instill either confidence or fear, depending on who was looking at it" (p 214). It is both impressive and unnerving, and clearly provides something intangible for both the artist and the viewers. "Pictographs, Ralph thought. Or Petroglyphs ... It was true: the more things changed, the more they stayed the same. What his ancestors had done on rock walls, this generation of this society was struggling to do on brick." (p 13)



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The reference to the painted horse in the title is clear, but what is Taylor getting at when he uses the word “chasing”?
2. How does the depiction of Harry defy stereotypes of Indigenous people? Of homeless people?
3. What does the horse represent? How does its meaning change and develop over the course of the novel?
4. Taylor weaves in a lot of non-Indigenous cultural references (Odysseus on p 80; the Mona Lisa on p 137, the Twist on p 146, for example). How do these references contribute to our understanding of the impact of European culture on Indigenous culture?
5. How are the relationships in Ralph’s family indicative of Indigenous culture?
6. Why might it be easier for Ralph to be a policeman in Toronto than it was in an Indigenous community? How does that related to Ralph’s identity as an Indigenous person?
7. How are the impacts of colonialism visible in the Otter Lake Reserve community? In Toronto?
8. Why does Taylor describe Danielle’s painting of the horse as a “crack between the worlds that Danielle had somehow forged open ...”?
9. How does the novel reflect the challenges faced by Indigenous people? How do the various characters meet those challenges?



ABOUT DREW

Drew Hayden Taylor has done many things, most of which he is proud of. An Ojibway from the Curve Lake First Nation in Ontario, he has worn many hats in his literary career, from stand-up comedian at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C., to Artistic Director of Canada’s premiere Native theatre company, Native Earth Performing Arts. He is an award-winning playwright (with over 70 productions of his work), a journalist/columnist (appearing regularly in several Canadian newspapers and magazines), short-story writer, novelist, television scriptwriter, and has worked on some 17 different documentaries exploring the Native experience. Most notably, he wrote and directed *Redskins*, *Tricksters and Puppy Stew*, a documentary on Native humour for the National Film Board of Canada.