



Come Back

Rudy Wiebe

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From a 2-time winner of the Governor General's Literary Award, an intense novel of loss, memory and the limitless nature of family love.

Hal Wiens, a retired professor, is mourning the sudden death of his loving wife, Yo. To get through each day, he relies on the bare comfort of routine and regular phone calls to his children Dennis and Miriam, who live in distant cities with their families. One snowy April morning, while drinking coffee with his Dené friend Owl in south-side Edmonton, he sees a tall man in an orange downfill jacket walk past on the sidewalk. The jacket, the posture, the head and hair are unmistakable: it's his beloved oldest son, Gabriel. But it can't be--Gabriel killed himself 25 years ago.

The sighting throws Hal's inert life into tumult. While trying to track down the man, he is irresistibly compelled to revisit the diaries, journals and pictures Gabe left behind, to unfold the mystery of his son's death. Through Gabe's own eyes we begin to understand the covert sensibilities that corroded the hope and light his family knew in him. As he becomes absorbed in his son's life, lost on a tide of "relentless memory," Hal's grief--and guilt--is portrayed with a stunning immediacy, drawing us into a powerful emotional and spiritual journey.

Come Back is a rare and beautiful novel about the humanity of living and dying, a lyrical masterwork from one of our most treasured writers.

Come Back Details

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Author : Rudy Wiebe

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From Reader Review Come Back for online ebook

Dorothy Hermary says

I loved this book, but had difficulty assigning any labels to it. It is unique.

Rudy Wiebe includes insights into family relationships, depression, suicide, grief, plus more.

The story line skips back and forth between the father's perspective and that of the suicidal son's, which can be confusing. However, the bits of random thoughts amidst questioning and questing journal writing feels sadly real.

An example of Wiebe's exquisite writing:

Whom then will you cry to, heart?

Your path more and more lonely

dragging on toward the future,

toward what is already lost (p. 242)

Francine Seguin says

A good foundational story but difficult to read.

Christine says

I wanted to like this book, I expected to love it, but just never got to the point of feeling engaged enough with any of the characters. Torn between being creeped out by thinking of Gabe as a pedophile and having some sympathy for him as a young man with a clearly tortured mind. The writing is beautiful, though I'm not the biggest fan of Wiebe's sometimes disjointed rambling. Still not sure how I feel about it, and so many unanswered questions: what ever happened to A? Did she know? Did Joan?

Sara says

I received this book for free as a Goodreads First Read.

I found this book to be challenging, in both the writing style and the content. At first I was really struggling with the disjointed, run-on writing and it took me awhile to find the rhythm of Hal's thoughts. I haven't read any other works by Rudy Wiebe, so I'm not sure if this is a common theme in his writing or not.

Once I got into the story, I did very much enjoy learning more about Gabe and Hal, despite the fact that it was quite heavy. Definitely not a beach-read, but I don't imagine for a second that this was what was intended with this book. What it did achieve is to force me to think about relationships in my own life and reminded me that we can never really know what is happening underneath the surface; even (or maybe especially) with those we love most.

Anna says

This is perhaps the 4th of Rudy Wiebe's books that I have read and definitely the most powerful. A man, after 25 yrs, is trying to come to terms with his son's suicide. 24 yrs ago, in 1992 my sister aged 48, took her own life by intentional overdose, after a 30 yr struggle with mental and physical illness. Although I'm not Mennonite, my religious background(since left far behind me) was staunchly Calvinist and suicide was considered the ultimate, hence unforgivable sin. I felt while reading this, that the author must have had personal experience with familial suicide in order to be able to write so eloquently and sensitively about it. And sure enough, an online review of this book in the Globe and Mail revealed that his own son had died of suicide in 1985.

Although I was not my sister's parent, I could relate to a lot of the monologue/dialogue in this book. I could feel the pain, the questions, the doubt. I can't remember when I last read a book that dug so deeply into my being as this one has.

I think this book is definitely not everyone's cup of tea. It is depressing and I thought reading of the day-book entries was a bit prolonged. I enjoyed the presence of Owl, his wisdom, and insight, especially during the conversation about Hunger Animal.

All in all I thought this was an amazingly well crafted novel(?) and I was driven to keep reading it. I'm glad I accidentally stumbled upon it in my local small town library. Devine guidance? Who knows.

Samuel says

This was a hard book to read. Wiebe is never easy to read at the best of times because of his style, which is unpredictable and not smooth. It forces the reader to concentrate or give up. This also was not an easy story line -- a 75 year old widower reflecting on the suicide of his son 25 years earlier. Much of the story are from reading his son's journals after thinking he saw his son through the window of a coffee shop. It moves slowly, but forces the reader to reflect on the breakdown of a young adult obsessed by a girl ten years younger. It's a sad, but very powerful story.

Poetreehugger says

A hard hitting saga of grief, the permanence of grief, and the never ending pain of the loss of loved ones. The evocative descriptions of the rural and urban settings, the reality of the land, bush and trees of the Canadian prairies, shine through the story, and the characters are as real as the smooth chalky white bark of the ubiquitous poplar.

Cathi Gorham-Mol says

This story is devastating but so poetic and honestly written that every page is a humbling and thoughtful experience.

Vontel says

I have read several of Rudy Wiebe's books over the years. The last one was likely *Stolen Life*, which I highly recommend. *Come Back* is Wiebe's first novel in 10 years, and may be inspired to an extent from his own life, having had a son die by suicide years ago. It took me some time to get back to finish the last 2/3 of the book. There are many excellent reviews online of this book for a reference and excellent discussion.

I found it powerful and moving, for the presentation and exploration by a recently widowed retired professor, after a gap of 25 years, of the life and suicide of one of his adult sons in his 20's. This is triggered when he thinks he has seen him on the street outside the coffee shop where he is sitting with a friend. The novel grapples with these incredible events and themes within the context of family and community, one's own family of origin, and of the examination and re-examination of one's life as one ages. I will read his earlier memoir of growing up in the boreal forest in Sask, and then later in Alberta, as the child of Russian Mennonite refugees to Canada in the early 1900's, and then further into his life. Reviewers of this book make the links to how his life informed this novel. I think I read his memoir a number of years ago.

Patricia Hirsche says

I kept reading, expecting more to happen but the book continues on in an almost incomprehensible manner until the odd ending. I enjoyed the diary entries of the troubled son, but the back and forth in time was often hard to follow. I don't think there was enough character development to be able to understand any of the people, but that may have been the author's intent. I know the layout of Edmonton as city so the setting had meaning for me and that added a lot of interest. The time period of the end of the son's life was also familiar and I thought that using films as a sort of character was a good plot device.

Michael Hohner says

Quite possibly a quintessential Canadian novel (which is intended to suggest that it will need to read again and studied further to know for sure). The main character, Hal (Helmut) Wiens, struggles with the loss of a son. He tries to reconcile this tragedy that happened many years ago by going through boxes of documents (journals, notebooks) that were kept and organized by Hal's recently departed wife (Yo) and Gabriel's mother. I found this book a real struggle to make all the connections that were possibly being made to explain Gabriel's death by reviewing all these old documents throughout the novel. In chapter 1, Hal is having coffee with his good friend Owl. Owl sees a raven fly around the intersection and comments that she'll fly the circle. Hal comments that "she's flying the square." To which Owl retorts "Whiteman's circle." The raven doesn't make it to all the lampposts on the square before moving on, and Hal says "It didn't complete your Whiteman's circle.", to which Owl responds "Come and gone. Good sign." I think this sets the tone and is a possible trope early on for much of how the rest of the novel unfolds; never quite going full circle and certainly with some rough corners to what otherwise seems like a great novel with a really good start. I also very much enjoyed Chapter 2, as it felt like a story straight from the CBC Vinyl Cafe and I couldn't help but read it as if Stuart McLean was reading it. Again, this is a novel with a quintessential Canadian feel, but a struggle to get through as it does not seem to drive toward any sort of finite conclusion or a sense of clearly coming full circle.

Kathryn says

I feel bad giving this book a 1 star rating, 2 would be ok, but I didn't like it.

I have never read his work before and didn't realize that he was such an esteemed Canadian author, but this book did not do it for me. This is the story of Hal Wiens, a protagonist, that Wiebe has apparently written about before. Hal has Aboriginal roots (I assume) and Mennonite roots. I picked this book because of the Mennonite connection but it didn't really focus on the Mennonite aspect.

Hal was in a coffee shop with his friend when he saw a glimpse of someone who looked like his dead son. Hal bolts out of the shop and runs into the streets to find him, causing much havoc and injury to the drivers etc. Hal is not aware that he has caused mayhem as he is overwhelmed by the unresolved grief about his son's suicide 25 years prior.

Hal goes back through the journals left behind by Gabe. To quote the Star newspaper (Oct 3, 2014), "What he discovers dismays him: a portrait of a young man in the throes of a depression grounded on quite disturbing self-loathing and beset by an extremely inappropriate emotional and sexual fixation on a thirteen-year-old girl named Ailsa." (Moreso, because Gabe was 23 at the time and she was 13. But we read that he has always had a fixation on young girls, starting with Nadja Comaneci, the Romanian gymnast who earned perfect 10 at the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.)

This book was just not subject matter that I would have picked had I known, this coupled with the diary entry style for writing made it hard to read.

Joanne says

Written in almost free verse at times, this story is about the aftermath of a suicide when the Father thinks he sees his 25 years dead son walk down the sidewalk while he's sitting having coffee with his friend, Owl, on Whyte Ave.

He begins going through Gabriel's journals and diaries to try and make sense of his death.

A very poignant and moving story.

Elise Brianna says

Heartbreaking. Exquisitely heartbreaking in every way that it should be.

Lori Bamber says

I can understand why this book isn't more popular - it is as much poetry as it is a novel, perhaps more so.

And the subject matter - an adult's obsession with a young girl and his suicide - is very challenging.

But this is a beautiful book, bravely crafted. I felt enriched by it, both as a reader and as a writer.
