

Resource	The Outside Circle: A Graphic Novel by Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Kelly Mellings
Product	The Outside Circle Book Backgrounder including background information, plot synopsis, main characters, key themes and critical thinking questions.
UPE Course Connections	
EDUC 435: Literacy, Language and Culture	It explores the connection between learning and culture (connecting to course theme of Culturally Responsive Literacy). The Book Backgrounder also explores why teachers should teach using graphic novels, including the benefits of reading graphic novels in improving student visual literacy.
EDUC 450: Diversity in Learning	The graphic novel explores the cultural importance of Indigenous knowledge. This resource and discussion of learning from elders can help students better understand learning and education in Indigenous cultures and communities. It also shows how learning can look in different environments. Pete receives an education while incarcerated in different correctional facilities and programs.
EDUC 460: Specialization I	This would be an appropriate resource for students in the Social Studies or English Language Arts specialization. Introducing them to a variety of Indigenous literature, including graphic novels, is important as they begin their focus in their teachable subject area.
Suggested Themes	Indigenous Identity, Traditional Knowledge, Addiction and Incarceration, Forming Healthy Relationships
K-12 Connections	Recommended age range: Grades 11-12 Subjects: Social Studies and English Language Arts Curricular Outcomes: Respond to a variety of texts, Visual literacy, Respect others and strengthen community, Justice and conflict resolution, Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous perspective and experiences, Identity and Family.

The Outside Circle

a graphic novel about positive change

Introduction

Set in Edmonton, this graphic novel is about two Indigenous brothers surrounded by poverty, drug abuse, and gang violence, overcoming centuries of historic trauma and bringing about positive change in their lives. It is written by Patti LaBoucane-Benson and based on her doctoral research in Indigenous healing and reconciliation. It is illustrated by Kelly Mellings. The novel was selected as the winner for CODE's 2016 *Burt Award for First Nation, Inuit and Métis Literature*. It is recommended for grades 11-12.

Note: This document contains spoilers!

Synopsis

Pete is a young Indigenous man living in Edmonton and wrapped up in gang violence. He sells drugs to help care for his younger brother and his mother who is a heroin addict. After a confrontation between Pete and his mother's boyfriend, Pete finds himself in jail. Initially, Pete stays connected to gang activity inside the prison system but soon realizes his current path of anger and violence has made him a negative influence on his family. Pete is selected as part of the *In Search Of Your Warrior* program and transferred to a healing centre where he begins a process of rehabilitation that includes traditional healing circles and ceremonies. Pete learns about family, Indigenous history and ways of life. He begins to see how his life fits into a bigger picture. After a powerful experience in the woods, he

receives the spirit name Waking Bear. Pete embraces this new name, taking off his old "mask" and embracing his true self. After graduating from the program, we see Pete taking the difficult steps to cut off ties with the gang and reconnect with his family including his ex-girlfriend and young daughter.



Important Characters

Pete

A young Indigenous man involved in gang violence. Pete is full of anger and resentment. He goes through a journey of healing and transformation to become a true Warrior, protector and provider.

Joey

The younger brother of Pete. Joey is taken into foster care when Pete is arrested. He later runs away and becomes gang-involved before dealing with his own arrest. Joey reconnects with Pete at the end of the story.

Elder Violet

An elder at the Healing City. She helps guide Pete through his journey of healing, teaching him history, tradition and a new way of life. She encourages him to release his anger. After receiving the name in prayer, she gifts Pete with the spirit name Waking Bear.

Uncle Ray

Ray has been diligently working on reconnecting his family after years of separation. He comes to visit Pete in prison. After some persistence, Pete agrees to meet with him and Ray shares important stories from their family's history. Ray helps look out for Joey while Pete is away.

Crystal

Pete's ex-girlfriend. Pete leaves Crystal when she reveals she is pregnant. They reconnect after Pete's journey of healing as Pete embraces his new role as Shayla's father.

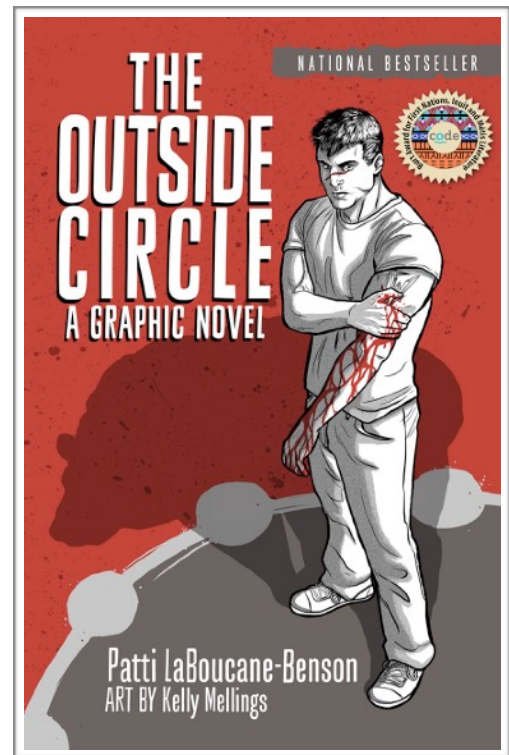


Figure 1. Cover of *The Outside Circle* by P. LaBoucane-Benson, 2015. House of Anansi Press.

Key Themes

Anger

Pete is full of anger. He tells us so throughout the story. During recovery programming, when asked to select five adjectives to describe himself, Pete chooses “Angry” twice. Pete learns that anger can be a gift that motivates change but rage is destructive and violent. With the help of Elder Violet’s teachings and guidance, Pete reconnects with tradition. New paths open up for Pete and he must be willing to let go of his anger to move on.

Identity

Part of what causes Pete’s anger is that he has no sense of identity. Much of his frustration stems from not knowing who he is or who he should be. The program helps him explore his identity through an examination of history. Pete realizes how his life is connected to a bigger

picture. He later embraces a new identity after receiving the spirit name Waking Bear.

Family

This is a story about family. Pete’s motivations and decision making are based on his desire to provide for and protect his family. He searched for a familial connecting in gang-life but didn’t find it. In one of the most powerful scenes of the novel, when asked to draw a multi-generational family map, Pete is only able to list three names; Mom, Joey and Pete. He breaks down in anger and feels like his family has been taken from him. Traditional teachings about “The Outside Circle” help Pete better understand his place in family and society. He redefines his role as son, brother and father. At the end of the novel, we see Pete’s family growing.

WHY GRAPHIC NOVELS?

- **Visual Literacy– graphic novels help students develop their ability to interpret information in the form of an image. Connecting images and words at the same time engages more of our brains!**
- **Visual supports can aid reading and comprehension for English language learners and students with some learning disabilities.**
- **When given the chance to study graphic novels, studies show students are more encouraged to read and engage more than they normally would.**

Critical Thinking Questions

1. What is the meaning of the mask that sometimes appears on Pete’s face?
2. As part of the *In Search Of Your Warrior* program, Pete is asked to list 5 adjectives that describe how he feels. What five adjectives describe how you felt while reading Pete’s story?
3. What is the significance of the title *The Outside Circle*?

About the Author and Illustrator

Patti LaBoucane-Benson

Pattie LaBoucane-Benson is a Métis woman and the Director of Research Training, and Communication at Native Counselling Services of Alberta (NCSA). She has a Ph.D in Human Ecology, focusing on Aboriginal Family Resilience. She is a recipient of the Aboriginal Role Model of Alberta Award for Education. She lives in Spruce Grove, Alberta.

Kelly Mellings

Kelly Mellings is an award-winning art director, illustrator, and designer. His work has appeared in comic books, magazines, apps, museum exhibits, and online games. He is the co-owner of the acclaimed illustration, animation and design firm Pulp Studios. He lives in Edmonton, Alberta.

MEDIA AND OTHER LINKS

Check out these videos, articles and websites to learn more about The Outside Circle.

- The Agenda with Steve Paikin interview with Patti LaBoucane-Benson: [Click Here](#)
- An Educator's Guide for The Outside Circle prepared by We Love Children's Books: [Click Here](#)

We Love Children's Books. (n.d.) An Educators's Guide to The Outside Circle. Greenwood Books.

Wong, S., Miao, H., Cheng, R., & Yip, M. (2017). Graphic Novel Comprehension Among Learners with Differential Cognitive Styles and Reading Abilities. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 33(5), 412-427.

References

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- McGuire, G. (2015, September 24). 5 Reasons to Teach with Graphic Novels. *First Book Canada*. Retrieved July 02, 2020, from <https://www.firstbookcanada.org/blog/2015/09/24/5-reasons-teach-kids-with-graphic-novels/>
- Moeller, R. (2016). A Question of Legitimacy: Graphic Novel Reading as "Real Reading". *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 59(6), 709-717.
- The Agenda with Steve Paikin. (2015, Jul 10). *Patti LaBoucane-Benson: The Outside Circle* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/HdSyhhSDIwI>