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# Lisa Bird-Wilson on the role of art in reconciliation

[Jane van Koeverden](#) · CBC · Posted: Apr 07, 2017 11:28 AM ET | Last Updated: April 7, 2017



Lisa Bird-Wilson is the author of *The Red Files*, a poetry collection. (Harbour Publishing, Nightwood Editions)

[comments](#) 

Drawing on archival records and family photographs, Lisa Bird-Wilson writes poignant, heart-rending poetry about the generations of abuse suffered by Indigenous children in the Canadian residential school system. Bird-Wilson puts

readers through an emotional ringer — and admits she did the same to herself while writing [The Red Files](#).

In December, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reported that 150,000 First Nation, Inuit and Métis children attended residential schools. Among those students were Bird-Wilson's own grandparents, aunts and uncles. In her own words, Bird-Wilson describes the all-consuming process of writing her first poetry collection and discusses the role of art in reconciliation.

## With love, from Lisa

"I wasn't sure how to approach it at first. I spent a lot of time in the archives, both provincially and nationally. It's so overwhelming. I focused on the community where my family went to residential school. I spent time with the photos, trying to see if they were trying to speak to me or if they had some level of detail in them that would provide something. I'd use a magnifying glass. I also combined that with deep study and reflection with reading records. I read so many records. I read and read and read.

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"I ended up with this one word in my head, and it was love. I wanted to make sure what I did somehow — this is going to sound weird — somehow gave those children, who were so anonymous in the official record, gave them love or reflected love. That was the only word that could get in my head. I really thought about my family members. I thought about my kohkum (grandmother) and my moshums (grandfathers) and aunties and uncles and looked at the pictures I had of them. Love was the emotion that kept swirling around it."

## All-consuming

"At some point I just put my head down and wrote and got into a really creative zone. I spent many weekends alone writing. Just writing for hours and hours. I would literally stay up all night and sleep for a couple of hours and get up and write again. It was very consuming, but it was also, I loved it. If I didn't love writing, I wouldn't have gotten into it. I love working with language and playing with words, boiling it down. That's the great thing about poetry."

## Honouring the anonymous

"There was a series of articles from newspapers where it referred to abuse of children in a particular school. There was an administrator who was actually criminally charged and he admitted he had done these things. He didn't even know how many children he abused. He said it was hundreds. I didn't want to let myself off the hook. When that administrator said hundreds of boys, I tried to think about each one of those children as a person. I spent a lot of time with that. I really wanted to feel that empathy. I wanted to put some meaning around it."

## Art and reconciliation

"I think artists have a really vital role to play in the concept of reconciliation. One of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action talks about the Canada Council coming up with some kind of funding to help Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists explore reconciliation.

"I visited one project in Saskatoon where they had elders who had attended residential school meet with high school students who were non-Indigenous. Each student was paired up with an elder and that elder told their story. They got a first-hand account and developed a level of empathy and understanding with that person and then those students went on their own and made art projects related to their experience with meeting and getting to know that elder. Their art projects were displayed in an art gallery in Saskatoon. Each of the students who made the piece of art had written something and had something to say about why they made the art that they did. There are just so many ways that art and artistic expression — whether it's visual arts or literary arts or dance — that can express something that is really difficult to deal with and difficult to express."

*Lisa Bird-Wilson's comments have been edited and condensed.*

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