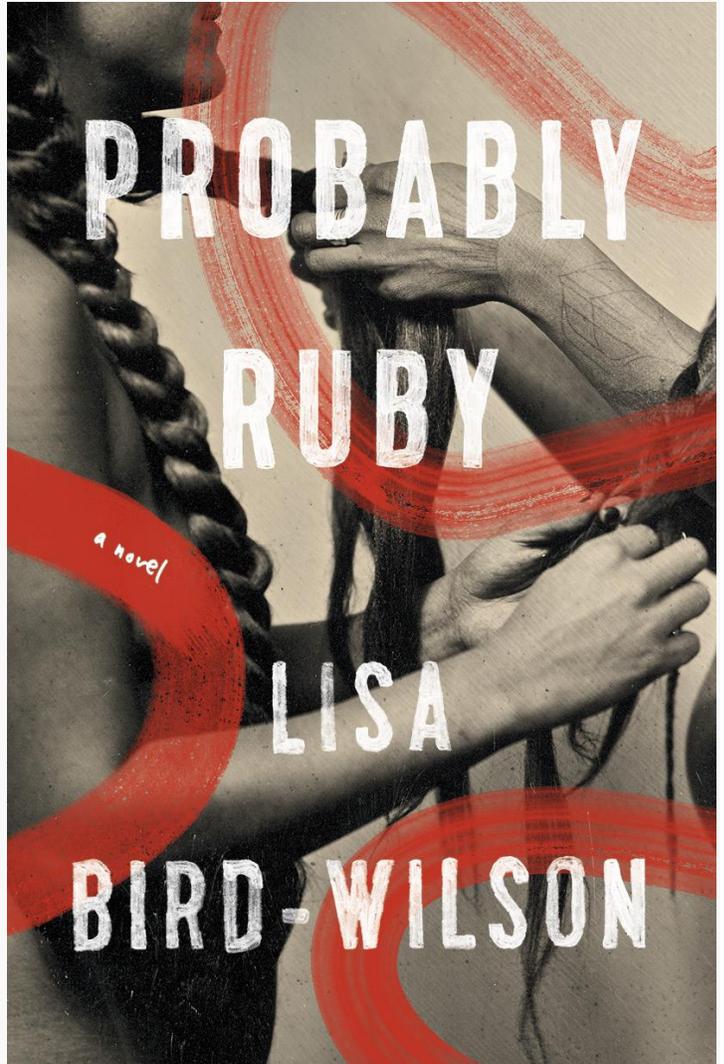


# Lisa Bird-Wilson's 'elegiac' new novel 'Probably Ruby' powerful treatise on Canada's foster-care system

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By David A. Robertson Special to the Star  
Fri., Aug. 20, 2021 | 2 min. read



Métis and nēhiyaw (Cree) writer Lisa Bird-Wilson's new novel "Probably Ruby" is a work of incredible depth and breadth. It is, on the surface, the story of a Cree/Métis baby placed into the foster care system, her ensuing trauma, and her lifelong pursuit of identity and cultural reconnection. More importantly, it's a treatise on the foster care system itself.

Ruby's experience is analogous to the experience of thousands upon thousands of Indigenous children who have been placed into, or apprehended by, the foster care system in Canada.

The novel unfolds in a non-linear narrative that Bird-Wilson masterfully weaves together with elegiac prose. It is populated with revelatory passages that are at once beautiful and raw, and demand for you to sit with them a little while. Here, for example, where the narrator observes of Ruby talking to her own children that “... she made a point of telling them how they grew in her body, that she knew them before they were even born. How they came into being. At least they wouldn’t have to imagine being imagined.” They are poetic gut punches and reveal a profound gravity of loss.

The kaleidoscopic approach to unravelling Ruby’s life, jumping back and forth from the past to the present through vignettes that showcase several multi-faceted characters, provides the reader context that Ruby doesn’t have and an emotional resonance that floods this story with heart, whether that heart has been broken or is struggling to mend.

Three chapters were previously published as short stories in the Malahat Review, “CV2,” “Prairie Fire” and the anthology “Impact: Colonialism in Canada” (which, full disclosure, I worked on). Bird-Wilson has a catalogue of work that includes fiction and poetry. She’s also an editor with Grain magazine and a founding member of the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Writers Circle.

The foster system she exposes in “Probably Ruby” is a colonial system that’s grossly overrepresented by Indigenous children who are often as young as Ruby is when she’s placed into care as a newborn, and the novel deftly explores the immediate impacts and intergenerational trauma felt by children and their families. At one point, for example, Ruby imagines saying to her unknown birth mother, “I bet your favourite colour was green and the word moss made you think of the smell after the rain” but also that “nothing smelled like rain or moss anymore after they took me away from you.”

It’s a difficult novel that challenges readers to make connections between the world that Bird-Wilson has created in the book and the country that we live in today, allowing us to see the world through the eyes of another: their struggles and their resiliencies. Her writing is never didactic, always engrossing, and the protagonist is a complex, unforgettable character who will stay with you long after the last page has been turned. “Probably Ruby” is a timely and important novel every Canadian should read.

*David A. Robertson is an award-winning writer, podcaster, and a sought-after public speaker.*