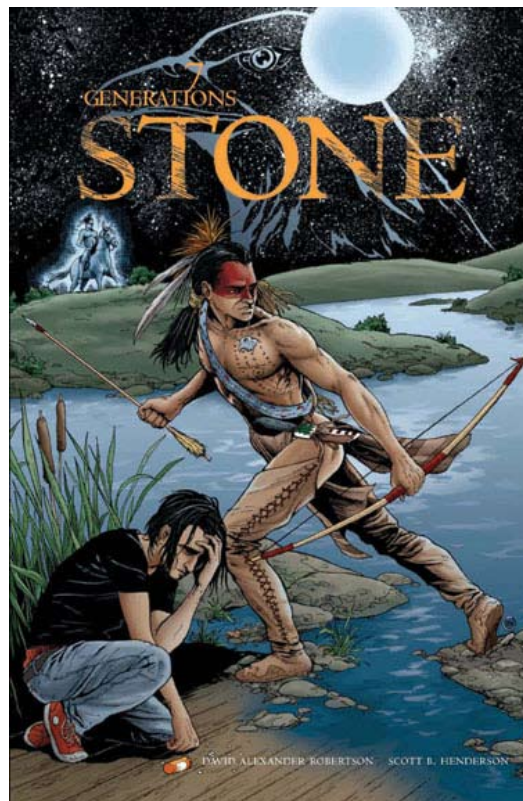


# SECRET IDENTITIES

FILLED WITH HEROES AND SHAPE-SHIFTERS, ABORIGINAL STORIES ARE TAILOR-MADE FOR MANGA, COMICS, AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

BY KENTON SMITH



Above all, Winnipeg writer David Robertson wanted to create a good comic. “Comics are an amazing medium — just look at *Maus* and *Louis Riel: A Comic-Strip Biography*,” Robertson says. “I just wanted to create one of the better graphic novels out there.” He’s talking about his most recent work, a graphic novel called *Stone*. Farther west, Haida painter and installation artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas has gone a step beyond, creating what he calls Haida Manga — “part Haida, part Asian, and all Michael,” according to his website. And with his latest, the hardcover book *Red*, “I was very consciously trying to create a new aesthetic.”

It’s not a leap to find these two Canadian Aboriginal artists creating in the comics medium, expressing themes and visual traditions rooted in Native history and culture. Robertson, who’s from the Swampy Cree nation in northern Manitoba, says, “I’m interested in telling Aboriginal stories, with Aboriginal perspectives.”

In conceiving of *Stone*, Robertson began with a clear dilemma — how to effectively teach Aboriginal history in grade schools? Experimenting with the form, he first created a graphic novel based on the true story of an ambitious young Cree woman murdered in The Pas in 1971. It took more than a decade for the case to be even partially resolved with the conviction of one man. Robertson’s book, *The Life of Helen Betty Osborne*, was published in 2008 and it still resonates deeply among readers. After that, he began the four-part *7 Generations* series with the first two entries, *Stone* and *Scars*. Spanning seven generations of one Plains Cree family, *Stone* details history Robertson learned little of in school, concerning colonialism, smallpox, and residential schools.

As a graphic work, the series repeatedly marries theme and medium. Consider the first panel of book one, showing a broken picture frame. On the lower panel of page two, the cracks running through the

TOP: The cover of *Stone*, book one in David Robertson’s *7 Generations* series.

ABOVE LEFT: Artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas.

LEFT: David Robertson, author of *Stone* and *Scars*.

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panel echo the preceding image, but likewise mirror a dream catcher in the window in another panel. An Aboriginal visual motif has been organically fashioned into a narrative device — a technique that recurs in *Scars*, published in July. It’s a recurring theme that can establish an artist and writer — see the distinct look and colour in the work of Canadian graphic novel success story Seth, with his mid-century sad sacks and his staid middle class settings. Such images’ meanings can be revealed over time, as part of an overall symmetry.

“Having read hundreds of comics, I have a strong sense of what works and what doesn’t,” Robertson says. His scripts are highly detailed in what they demand from his artist collaborator, Scott B. Henderson.

By contrast, Yahgulanaas acknowledges his work to be “in many ways a departure — yet my work is a fully consistent extension of my Nation’s visual artistic practice.” His work, he says, falls within “a tradition of innovation.” Yahgulanaas has had a rich career as an artist, writer, and thinker. He’s skirted the edges of traditional art forms, producing often-whimsical but meticulously drafted panels of drawings, but has also had highly respected shows at galleries across Canada and internationally — including Vancouver’s Museum of Anthropology and the Glenbow Museum in Calgary.

His latest book, *Red* overflows with innovation. While employing conventional devices like panels and balloons, it has a look completely unto itself. It’s easy to find designs evoking the totem pole, but Yahgulanaas gives his totems unique twists.

Like Robertson, Yahgulanaas also makes use of the recurring motif — although with *Red*, it’s more of a hidden pattern. He unfolds both the panels and pages of the comic to form a larger, holistic design — one typically found on Haida bentwood boxes, with their curved edges and symmetry — a true fusion of Haida and graphic conventions. These types of visual puns are part of the Haida tradition, Yahgulanaas explains. Just look at a totem

pole. The various components morph into one another, creating multiple layers of meaning.

As a story, *Red* re-tells a traditional Haida narrative. Yahgulanaas describes it as concerning the relationship and responsibility that exist between leader and community, but he insists that this concept is less of a current concern for his own people than it is for most Canadians. “The quality of our national leadership is much higher,” he adds, referring to the Haida nation. Still, he’s very interested in the audience outside his Haida following. “The goal is to create accessibility,” Yahgulanaas says. “And to



TOP: Panels from Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas’ *Red*.  
RIGHT: Panels from *Stone*, by David Robertson and Scott B. Henderson.





erode elitism. I'm not creating for a highbrow audience — I'm trying to make populist art, not High Art."

He adds that people often react stiffly to indigenous art, as if their reactions are being recorded. He would prefer that people not necessarily relate to his work as Haida Art, either. "People should react according to their own respective experiences." After all, Yahgulanaas asserts that Canadians of all backgrounds have a lot more in common than they may realize. "We're more similar to each other than you or I are to our own great-grandparents."

"Change is always an active player in any human society, at any given point in history," he continues. "That's why an artist can't just replay the same old tune or recipe." In the best oral tradition, the endings of his stories change with his retelling. For that matter, Yahgulanaas thinks of Haida Manga itself as a concept still in development. He's still trying to perfect it, he says, and is working on a new story now. As for Robertson — he'd also like to do some non-historical graphic novels. "Because they're awesome."

These artists may be shaped by their heritage, but they don't feel bound by history, either. And the future is wide open for both of them. 