

Richard Wagamese's *Medicine Walk* is the moving story of sixteen-year-old Frank Starlight, his biological father, Eldon, and 'the old man', as Frank calls him, the non-Indigenous man who raised him. Eldon is disconnected from his Indigenous roots and severely addicted to alcohol – he uses it to suppress 'bone deep shame' over his role in traumatic events from his life. Though Eldon made a few unsuccessful attempts to connect with Frank, he's been largely absent from his son's life. He knows he is dying and asks Frank to take him into the backcountry of interior BC, to an east-facing ridge he visited as a youth, the only place he's known a sense of peace. He wants to die there and be buried 'warrior style'. Frank says, "You ain't no warrior." Eldon says he was once and he needs to tell Frank about that and a lot of other things. "It's all I got to give ya," Eldon says.

Frank, who learned to hunt from the old man, and who taught himself how to survive in the backcountry, knows the ridge and reluctantly agrees to take Eldon. The two men, along with the mare, Frank's horse, go on a forty mile journey through the wilderness. Along the way, Eldon tells Frank about his life and the traumatic events that shaped it – events that he hasn't told anyone else.

None of the characters are talkers, and the dialogue is sparse, but always spot on. Each word rings with truth and each conversation carries layers of meaning. The old man taught Frank not to be afraid of his feelings, or expressing them. In an early scene nine-year-old Frank takes down his first buck and weeps while the old man watches with care. The old man tells him he has to give thanks to the buck and, when Frank asks how, the old man advises him to speak from his feelings. Frank lays a hand on the buck, closes his eyes and lets the sadness wash over him. Then he says the most perfect nine-year-old sentences, "Thank you," he said. "I'm sorry about this. Whenever I come here I'll think of you. I promise."

The ability to feel and express feelings is one of the main differences between Frank and Eldon. Frank's inability to face himself – he was never taught how – results in tragedy for Eldon, Frank and the old man.

The novel is filled with gorgeous passages describing the backcountry. The prose is sublime, full of rhythm that invokes the sense of wilderness and the beauty of all life. "The ground was a mass of pine needles, roots and rocks. Here and there a small copse of aspens or birches lent a dappled look to the slant of the path and the horse nickered at it."

Frank's connection with the wilderness, along with the old man's parenting, underpins his wisdom. Though he is wise for his age, he is still a sixteen-year-old boy longing for family and his Indigenous roots. The connections between the three men are complex and full of humanity and the novel quietly builds to a moving and deeply satisfying ending.

Darla Tenold's review