

**David**  
**Ray Robertson**  
Thomas Allen Publishers, Toronto, 2009

Ray Robertson's *David* is a fascinating historical novel that reveals a largely unknown portion of Canada's past. The Underground Railroad and the gradual movement to the freedom of slaves are significant parts of our history and frequently the focus of both historical and fictional writing. *David*, however, tells the story of a man who was born a slave in Jackson, Louisiana in 1847, but whose freedom was purchased as an infant by the radical Black rights advocate and Presbyterian Minister, Reverend William King.

The Reverend King brought a number of freed slaves to Canada and established the famous Elgin Settlement: a community for Black refugees near Chatham, Ontario. Here, the Reverend gave these refugees a second chance, providing them with land, education, and religious guidance. Ray Robertson develops his imaginative story around this real historical figure who made an important contribution to Black history.

Robertson, a Chatham native, creates a rare portal into a bit of local history, accented by a cast of complex characters who expose some of the deeper issues facing freed slaves in late Victorian Canada. David King, named after his benefactor, is the bright young protagonist and intended successor of the Reverend. From an intense educational upbringing, David grows into a brilliant and audacious man. Through his education and nurtured intellectual curiosity, David finds the tools to question the cultish devotion of the Reverend's followers, and to begin the struggle for a new form of freedom.

David's story is a narrative of self-exploration, a slow unfolding of his life story through recollection. The novel begins in 1895 with the news of the Reverend King's death, which triggers David's journey through the past. His memories span from his early childhood in Elgin through to his adolescence. These reflections are snap shots of significant moments in his life, and almost all of them involve the Reverend and a lesson learned through his guidance or criticism. It was expected that David would enter university to study theology, but in 1895, he could not be further from the pulpit. The gradual rift that would grow between himself and the Reverend began early on as he discovered issues with the Bible and other scholarly texts on their discussions of freedom and slavery. When he was no more than fourteen years old, David began secretly purchasing and drinking whiskey, breaking one of the Reverend's most stringent rules. Finally, after his last and most damaging confrontation with the Reverend over the death of his mother, David left the Elgin Settlement and his faith in God behind, and began a new life in Chatham.

Outside the sheltered community of Elgin, David faces life as a Black man in an often intolerant white community. Through lucrative employment as a grave robber and eventually owning his own illegal tavern, he becomes one of Chatham's wealthiest citizens and most successful businessmen. Overcoming racism, ignorance and hypocrisy, he defies contemporary stereotypes in order to make his own way. Although he takes pride in these accomplishments, David finds himself a middle-aged man far from contentment. Despite all of his successes, he cannot quite convince himself that he took the best path through life, and his unresolved quarrel with the Reverend begins to haunt him.

David's narrative is laden with wise proverbs and metaphors, most ingrained in him by either the Reverend, or through his own studies. Although unable to reconcile with the Reverend's ideas, David begins to realize how much his estranged mentor contributed to his own development, for better or for worse. As a Black man living in a white man's world, David feels the bitter wounds of repression, but even though he was born a slave, he never actually lived as one. The wounds of his past are from a different kind of bondage. Throughout the novel, David makes many references to "incomplete liberations" in history: the American Civil War, England's invasion of Matabeleland in Africa, America's "freeing" of Cubans from under the Spanish government. David believes he shares the illusory false freedom that these nations experienced under the pretenses of emancipation, and he somberly states, "woe unto them about to be liberated"(p. 217). It is this hardened resentment of his own emancipator that he comes to question and even regret in his later years.

As David revisits his past, he must also evaluate his day-to-day life. His only true companions are his dog, Henry, his childhood friend, George, and his lover, Loretta: an ex-prostitute from Germany and the one person in the world who knows David better than he knows himself. Robertson develops their relationship into a delightful back-and-forth of dark humour and mutual affection. Together they enjoy scandalizing Chatham with their mixed-race relationship and unconventional lifestyle. It is clear through their interactions that Loretta understands David, and knows that despite his material gain, he still feels a void that all of the whiskey and William Blake in the world cannot fill. She continuously challenges him to look beyond his immediate obligations to what his soul really yearns for, and pulls him from the brooding pessimism that has illustrated a lifetime of bitterness. Above all, Loretta helps David find the forgiveness he had given up on with the death of the Reverend, and finally embrace the happiness he paid for so dearly. In the end, Loretta is David's true savior.

*David* is a wonderful read where complex issues are expressed through eloquent language. With David and Loretta, Ray Robertson has introduced two of the most magnetic characters in modern Canadian literature. Historical accuracy and vivid depiction of time and place is coupled with imagination to offer a fascinating alternative to a deeper story. Not only does this novel make an important contribution to our growing knowledge of local Black history and life in late Victorian Canada, it is a powerful and timeless insight into the human condition.



**Sarina Ryan**