*The Creator’s Game: Lacrosse, Identity, and Indigenous Nationhood* by Alan Downey

Reviewed by Tom Fabian, University of Ottawa

Alan Downey’s critically acclaimed book on the socio-cultural history of lacrosse in Canada could not have been published at a more pivotal time. Since the operationalization of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2008-2015), Indigenous rights – encompassing identity, health, environment, citizenship, and justice – have been at the fore in Canadian politics. Even sports, traditional games, and leisure activities have become a focal point for Indigenous policy work and non-profit organizations. What Downey demonstrates *The Creator’s Game* is that the history of lacrosse mirrors Indigenous-Canadian relations since the 1800s, and, thus, there is much we can learn about settler-colonialism through the lens of sport. From the appropriation of lacrosse in the mid-1800s “and subsequent popular texts infused with romantic portrayals of noble or bloodthirsty savages, to the barring of Indigenous athletes and the constant exclusion and institutionalized discrimination” (185), lacrosse can be read as a text through which to better understand the story of Canada. Indeed, in writing *The Creator’s Game*, Downey has positioned himself as a leading voice in Indigenous sport history.

 Although there are chapters covering a broad range of topics related to lacrosse –performativity, residential schools, the West Coast experience, box lacrosse, and the Iroquois Nationals (national team) – it is impressive that Downey offers a continuous history, with each topic presented chronologically. Moreover, the introduction to each chapter tactfully weaves Indigenous epistemologies with the topic at hand through the tales of the Dakelh cultural hero and Trickster-Transformer ‘Usdas. Allegorical in nature, the playful narrative in these introductions – reminiscent of Hofstadter’s *Gödel, Escher, Bach* – “help introduce several issues while navigating the ambiguities, contradictions, and uncertainties in the historical record” (24). The core content of each chapter is thoroughly researched, with a robust breadth of sources and usage of oral histories. The insights and anecdotes throughout the book are both engaging and educative. For instance, the discussion on the racialization of Indigenous lacrosse players as superior athletic specimens (79) can be likened to similar racist overtones in the media portrayal of Black quarterbacks in the National Football League today. Similarly, Downey’s explanation of residential school lacrosse is both academically astute and to the point: “The claim to a national sport and the notion that lacrosse represented a civilized Canadian identity became so pervasive that it was used to further cultural genocide at residential schools” (87). Then, of course, there is also intrigue in the enthusiastic description and political analysis of the 1936 Mann Cup championships (157), a riveting series of events worthy of a Hollywood script. But it is the final chapter, about “Reclaiming the Creator’s Game,” which best culminates the sordid history of appropriated lacrosse and exemplifies the resurgence of Indigenous cultural heritage. The Iroquois Nationals are, quite literally, a national lacrosse team that represents the Iroquois peoples at international matches and competitions, including the World Lacrosse Championships. In fact, the Nationals are the only non-sovereign nation to participate in any world championships. Their very existence questions the authority of nation-states within broader international affairs and, as Downey explains, their formation “created one of the largest concerted, and arguably most visible, [Iroquois] and Indigenous sovereignty movements in recent times” (211).

 For all its wonderful qualities, however, there were only two points of concern in*The Creator’s Game*. First, a few of sections seemed tacked on, and underappreciated in the overall narrative. An example is a reference to the Oka Crisis (1990), a violent land dispute between the Mohawk people and the government of Canada, which was briefly mentioned just prior to the conclusion. Another example is the section on women in chapter 5, which is not mentioned elsewhere, includes random examples of participation, and mostly discusses men’s teams. Granted, Downey has discussed gender issues in Indigenous sport elsewhere (see: Downey, “Engendering Nationality,” 2012). These structural concerns, though, seem easily rectifiable in a second edition. The second point of concern is with the framing of some of the interview questions posed to Indigenous community members and Elders. Although ethical approval and consent were likely granted for all interviews, there were, at times, leading questions that strung lacrosse into a commentary on other topics. Such as, on page 136, when Downey prompts an interviewee: “So that just carries over to sports?” This type of leading question makes it seem like the framework of the interview was not geared towards sport, or lacrosse. The interviews, though, were carefully conducted and well-presented, in general. This criticism is more to illuminate the fact that *The Creator’s Game* is not just about lacrosse, but about Indigenous identity and nationhood, as well.

 Downey’s oeuvre draws on Indigenous epistemologies, oral histories, and archival sources to present an all-encompassing story of the resilience and self-determination of Indigenous peoples through the sacred sport of lacrosse. Without listing statistics, glorifying players, or focusing on the evolution of the sport, *The Creator’s Game* is an ideal text for undergraduate classes on sport history, sport culture, or Indigenous sport. The playful chapter introductions, Indigenous methodologies, and serious sport scholarship combine in a timely, impactful, and much-needed book on Indigenous citizenship and nationhood in the broader history of settler-colonial relations in Canada.