

OUR STORY: DIVE INTO CANADA'S ENRICHED HISTORY

BOOK REVIEW

Mavis Lei

Mavis.cayla.lei@gmail.com

Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Student,
English 3390

Our Story: *Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past* brings together a collection of nine authors, each sharing an influential moment in Canadian history. Some key themes addressed in this collection include topics such as resistance, resurgence, reclamation and the importance of land and relationship to land.

The collection starts with Brian Maracle's 'The First Words.' In his short story, he tells the Iroquois story of creation and life of Turtle Island. A. Qitsualik's short story 'Skraeling' is about the historical meeting of Inuit and Tunit people, who are running away from the Vikings who have just landed on shore. Basil Johnston's 'The Wampum Belt Tells Us' is the story of Europeans landing on Turtle Island and the prophecy of their arrival. Johnston also describes 'settlers' arrival in relation to Weendigoes as the Indigenous groups fought and helped to feed and teach the

settlers while the Europeans fought to take away Indigenous lands. Weendigoes are creatures in Anishinaubae mythology that devour their victim's flesh, bones, blood, and soul. These creatures had never-ending hunger touring one land to another. Tantoo Cardinal's story 'There is a Place,' tells the life of Métis life before the Métis settlement. From 1915-1928, Métis lost their livelihoods to Europeans, and their way of life changed to fit into the settlers' lifestyle. The story shows the depletion of fish stock as a threat to Métis natural life.¹

Jovette Marchessault's short story 'The Moon of the Dancing Suns' illustrates life for Indigenous families during World War two and its impact on Indigenous veterans. In 'Coyote and the Enemy Alien,' Thomas King writes the story of racism and Japanese internment camps in Canada. 'Hearts and Flowers' by Tomson Highway illustrates the beauty of art while encompassing the historical day Indigenous people gained the right to vote. Lee Maracle's story 'Goodbye, Snauq' tells the tragic and sad story of Snauq, which was once a village and home to Squamish people that was sold to the Canadian government and its transformation to False Creek in what is now known as Vancouver. Lastly, Drew Hayden Taylor's story 'A Blurry Image on the Six O'clock News' retells the land dispute between the Mohwak people and Oka, Quebec known as the Oka Crisis through the lens of a failed marriage between an Indigenous man and a non-Indigenous woman.²

Each piece of work celebrates Indigenous people's important connection with the

¹ Tantoo Cardinal, et al. *Our Story: Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past* (Anchor Point: Anchor Canada, 2005) pp.11-124.

² Cardinal, et al., *Our Story*, pp.125-244.

land. Whether it be from working the land, protecting the land or the overall relationship to the land, each story encompasses the influence earth and nature have on all communities.

In 'The Wampum Belt Tells Us', the narrator gives praise to Mother Earth.⁴ From her, all things come and go, the circle of life comes from Mother Earth, and there is a relationship between the community to protect Mother Earth. The protection of mother earth is also in Taylor's short story as he recounts the Oka Crisis. However, these stories also include the misuse of land by settlers and those who did not protect the land. 'Goodbye, Snauq' is an example of settler's misuse of land; the land used to be prosperous and full of life, but the land has now been drudged of water and are no longer usable for traditional purposes.

The collection emphasizes the importance of storytelling in Indigenous communities. When reading this book, the reader gets to shift between the different narratives of many Indigenous people in Canada. No two communities are the same, and these stories again are proof of this. Because each story is different and encompasses different traditions and myths, and stories passed down from generation to, it is eye-opening to see all the different perspectives of Indigenous life. Readers will find it useful in exploring more history from the perspective of those who were colonized and not from the colonizer.

Although the story follows the narratives of Indigenous people, the terminology used in the book is outdated. Terms such as 'Aboriginal,' 'Indian,' and 'Savage' were used to describe Indigenous people and are considered offensive terms to use. Readers,

however, are encouraged in specific stories to see these terms used as an act or reclamation against the harms of colonial terminology placed upon them.

Lastly, Qitsualik, in her contributors' notes, states she did not want her story to be easily understood and read by everyone. She wanted readers to learn as if they were part of the community, and I believe all readers should interpret the collection as such. Because much of Indigenous history is not commonly known or taught, a certain degree of research may be needed for those with no previous background to understand. When reading about Japanese internment camps, the Oka Crisis and Snauq, I needed extra research in order to understand the stories properly. It would be helpful for readers to get an understanding of history of Indigenous timelines in Canada.

Overall, this short story collection brings together an array of history in Canada focused on Indigenous people. These stories showcase the passion of Indigenous people and the struggles faced in Canada because of settler colonialism, and the fight to keep Indigenous lands clean and prosperous as it once was.