



Canadian Indigenous Children's Books Through the Lense of Truth and Reconciliation

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Abstract

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) published 94 Calls to Action designed to continue the national work of reconciliation related to the legacy of Indigenous residential schools, including those in Canada's North. This process is difficult and complex. Because story telling is a traditional Indigenous way of communicating knowledge and wisdom, this study is designed to explore how TRC themes and concepts are being communicated through children's fiction (pre readers to young adult) by Canadian Indigenous authors. To identify these books, we used the Amazon Best Sellers in Children's Native Canadian Story Books list sampled over a seven week period and supplemented with other sources such as academic library, public library and publisher lists. Books written by Canadian Indigenous authors were read and themes identified. More than 150 books met the inclusion criteria. The primary outcome of this project was a list of all of the books meeting the inclusion criteria for this study, and academic presentations and publications about the reconciliation-related themes that appear in these books.

Background

Canada undertook a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), with hearings across the country, to hear from Indigenous (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) survivors of the residential schools. Many children in many parts of the world have attended residential schools and some have had dreadful experiences. Within the Canadian Indigenous residential school experience, parents were forced by the Government of Canada to send their children to these schools, most of which were operated by Christian religious orders. More than 139 residential schools existed across Canada. As a result of the truth-telling during the TRC's work, we now know about the horrors that children who attended the residential schools suffered. Children were abused mentally, physically and emotionally. They were deprived of heating, food, and contact with family. Their names, cultures and languages were taken from them. They were humiliated, disrespected and devalued. We now know that as many as 6000 died (Littlechild, 2017).

Having learned the truths about the residential schools, Canadians must now move on into reconciliation. The TRC published 94 Calls to Action (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a) and 10 Principles (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b), to guide Canadians along the path towards reconciliation. However, the calls to action are necessarily high-level, addressing issues that need to be solved by government action and legislation. This has left many individuals, the authors included, wondering what reconciliation might look like in their lives and how they might contribute to reconciliation efforts.

To be reconciled with anyone or any group, it is important to understand the issue from that person's or group's point of view. Understanding what reconciliation means to Canadian Indigenous people is a complex and difficult undertaking and the answers are likely to be as varied as Canada's Indigenous peoples, themselves.

Storytelling is a traditional Indigenous method of passing on knowledge to younger generations. The writing of children's literature is a natural extension of storytelling traditions. Indeed, some Canadian Indigenous publishers (e.g., Theytus Books and Inhabit Media Inc.) make a point of capturing traditional stories, both to preserve them and to disseminate them more widely.

This study, then, is in the nature of eavesdropping, of listening to words not originally intended for the listener. We are listening in on the lessons that Canadian Indigenous storytellers offer to children through children's books. Children's story books are gentle, non-threatening, and create a non-judgemental environment in which to gain knowledge and understanding. Inasmuch as we have been able to gain insight into the conditions in the residential schools through children's books (Tan, Campbell, & Quaiattini, 2017), our purpose in this study is to gain insight into the ways forward towards reconciliation through these works.

Methods

Our approach to the research project was first to identify children's fiction books (age 0-18) written by Canadian Indigenous authors and within those, to identify books that addressed TRC related themes. We began our search with Amazon's list of the Amazon Best Sellers in Children's Native Canadian Story Books, which is updated hourly. We began collecting titles from this list on July 17, 2017 and continued collecting for seven weeks. We also checked Indigenous Canadian publishers' web pages, public library and school library lists of Indigenous children's books, and authors' lists. We identified over 460 books, of which 152 met our inclusion criteria. Our list has continued to grow since the end of the study period.

We excluded non-fiction works and books that we were unable to access and read. We also excluded many good books written by non-Canadian and/or non-Indigenous authors because we wanted to read the work of Indigenous writers who live within the construct of the TRC. We excluded works by Canadian Indigenous authors that did not address TRC themes. In a very few cases, we included works by non-Indigenous authors, who were obviously writing on behalf of Indigenous people, or where there was an Indigenous co-author, illustrator, or translator. For most of the books, information about whether or not an author was Indigenous was taken from author notes on book jackets, information from publishers' web pages, or authors' web pages. When this information was not available, we reviewed Wikipedia entries and searched Google for media information and other sources. If we could not verify whether or not an author was Indigenous, we excluded the book. No date or place of publication limits were applied to the list.

All of the books were retrieved from the University of Alberta Libraries' collections or borrowed from other collections. All were reviewed by one or more of the three authors, who determined whether or not they met the inclusion criteria. Differing opinions were resolved by consensus. During the review process, the authors identified themes related to Truth and Reconciliation that appeared in the books.

All titles were entered into a spreadsheet which included both bibliographic data and thematic information. An alphabetical list of the selected books was created as a resource for teachers, researchers, and librarians. The *Selected Children's Fiction by Canadian Indigenous Authors Related to Truth and Reconciliation Themes* is available as a separate document at <https://doi.org/10.7939/R3WP9TN53>.

Results

During this study, we identified several notable characteristics of this collection of books. First, the number of children's books written by Canadian Indigenous authors is much larger than we had anticipated. While we knew that there were many talented Indigenous children's authors, we were surprised that they are so prolific. Across all Canadian Indigenous children's books we identified more than 460 volumes.

Second, while residential schools existed across Canada, and were attended by students from diverse Indigenous communities, we noted there is great similarity in both residential school experiences and their legacies described in the books. We also noticed that different Canadian Indigenous cultures have taken similar steps forward on their own roads to reconciliation.

Third, and perhaps this is obvious, the books written for young children are generally less graphic, explicit, and detailed than those written for youth. As a result, some of the most difficult themes (e.g., sexual abuse) only appear in works for older children.

We identified 116 themes. These were later organized in to a smaller number of themes and sub-themes, and related to the TRC Calls to Action. Because some themes occurred only in one book, not all are reported here. What follows is a description of some of the broader themes and those that are most directly related to the TRC Calls to Action.

Reconciliation Themes Identified

How to Move Forward in Reconciliation

Several books directly address the need to move forward, and point the way forward. In "Tilly: A story of hope and resilience" (Gray Smith, 2013), Elder Sophie speaks to the need to move forward from past traumas:

“What you live with, you learn; what you learn, you practice; and what you practise you become--- until you learn a new way. (...)
“Those schools, they took our traditional teachings away and replaced them with physical abuse, sexual abuse, hunger and loneliness.” (...)
“It’s time for us to learn new ways, so that our children---the next seven generations---are free from experiencing those things that are too painful for us to even talk about.”

(Gray Smith, 2013, p. 186)

In “Pisim Finds Her Miskanow” (Dumas, 2013) readers are told that:

“The elders have been telling us for years that in order to move ahead we have to know where we are in the present and where we have been. Once you are grounded in the present and the past, you can move forward.”

(Dumas, 2013, p. 1)

While these comments are addressed to Indigenous people in the context of the books, they are also helpful messages to everyone who is seeking guidance in how to move forward with reconciliation.

One of the ways of moving forward is the practice of “two-eyed seeing”. Themes related to children trying to move between two different cultures, and often not fitting well in either, has been identified and discussed in the literature (Bradford, 2000). There are several children’s books that address or incorporate this theme. Whether a young girl returning from residential school and being rejected by her family in “Not My Girl” (Jordan-Fenton, 2014) or a young man returning to his reserve in northern Ontario, after having grown up in non-Indigenous families in “Keeper ‘n Me” (Wagamese, 2006), cultural transition and adjustment stories are plentiful.

‘Two-eyed seeing’ is a concept credited to Mi’kmaq Elder Albert Marshall (Eskasoni First Nation).

“Two-Eyed Seeing” is learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledges and ways of knowing ... and learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all.”

(The Blockhouse School Project, 2012)

While many of the stories of movement from Indigenous culture to non-Indigenous culture and back, or vice versa, are filled with difficulty and sometimes trauma, the stories often end with some measure of reconciliation, with the young person finding a place to be, and taking value from both experiences. These stories are examples of two-eyed seeing, to which we can all look as we find our way forward on the path of reconciliation.

Understanding and Respect

Two overarching and intertwined themes emerged from the children’s books. For reconciliation to occur, Indigenous people need to be understood and respected. Respect often develops from understanding. The books reveal two broad areas in which understanding is required. First, is the need to understand the trauma that the residential school survivors endured and the inequities and traumas that impact the lives

of many Indigenous people in Canada today. The second is the need to understand, value, and respect traditional cultures and ways of life.

Understanding Trauma and Inequity

There are many children's books that can help us understand the trauma endured by children who attended residential schools. These, we have documented in an earlier study (Tan, Campbell, & Quaiattini, 2017). A list of *Children's Fiction by Canadian Indigenous Authors Related to Residential Schools* can be found at: <https://doi.org/10.7939/R31C1TW8S>

The TRC Calls to Action highlighted several broad areas for action. We have grouped our themes to match those described in the TRC Calls. The books help us to understand the inequities and traumas that impact the lives of Indigenous people today. Among these themes are: intergenerational trauma; Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW); criminal justice, and health care.

Intergenerational Trauma

Intergenerational Trauma is the transmission of trauma from one generation to another. Many survivors of residential schools did not have the opportunity to learn normal family and parenting skills. They learned how to interact with others from the ways they were treated in the schools and used those inappropriate methods in their own families. Intergenerational trauma is one of the most difficult legacies of the residential schools. Zeb in "White Girl" (Olsen, 2004) explains the transmission of the suffering in this way:

"It's one of our favorite coping strategies. We hurt, we drink, we shoot cocaine, we hurt some more, we drink some more, shoot some more cocaine, and by that time we hurt so much, we hurt someone else. Turns out in the end we are all looking for a way out. And we hurt ourselves. Hurt people hurt people."

(Olsen 2004, p. 203)

In "The Pact" (Robertson, 2011), we see a father who struggles to be a good parent and husband, but leaves his family because he believes that they will be better off without him. However, in leaving, he leaves his son to grow up without a role model, transferring the dysfunction to the next generation.

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women

Canadian Indigenous women disappear or are murdered at a higher rate than non-Indigenous Canadian women. Between 1980 and 2012, there were 1181 missing or murdered Indigenous women recorded (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2013). The impact of the loss of these women is reflected in children's books. The notorious rape and murder of Helen Betty Osborne, an Indigenous teacher in training, is documented in the graphic novel, "Betty" (Robertson, 2015). "Missing Nimâmâ" (Florence, 2015) bears witness to the pain suffered by the the families of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women.

' "Tân'tè nimâmâ?" I ask nôhokom.
"Where is my mother?"
"Lost", she says. Lost?
"If she's lost, let's just go find her. "
(...)

“She’s one of the lost women, kamâmakos.”
She calls me “little butterfly. Just like nimâmâ did.
Before she got lost.”

(Florence, 2015, p.5)

Health Care

There has been a long history of family disruption resulting from people having to “go south” for medical care. In many cases, people spent years away being treated for diseases such as tuberculosis. Often patients died away from home. “Aluniq and her friend, Buster” (Pingo, 2016) tells the story the emotional trauma of a child who has been raised by her grandparents, but must return to her parents’ home hundreds of miles away because her mother, who has been away for treatment all of Aluniq’s life, is finally released from hospital. “Jon’s Tricky Journey: A Story for Inuit Children with Cancer and Their Families” (McCarthy, 2017) chronicles Jon’s travels south to seek cancer care.

Criminal Justice

Criminal justice is one of the overarching themes in the TRC Calls to Action. Indigenous men represent 25.2 per cent of all in-custody males, while Indigenous women represent 36.1 per cent of all females behind bars (Public Safety Canada, April 2017). According to Statistics Canada (2017), 4.9 per cent of Canadians are Indigenous. In “Three Feathers” (Van Camp, 2015), Indigenous justice methods are presented as an alternative to the criminal justice system. In this graphic novel, young men who have injured an old man so badly that he must rely on a wheelchair, are sent to a remote camp instead of being incarcerated. When they return, they take responsibility for their actions and offer care to the man. In “The Outside Circle” (LaBoucane-Benson, 2015), incarcerated men take part in a “warrior program” to help them to come to terms with the problems that caused them to end up in jail, and to prepare them for re-entry into society.

Understanding and Valuing Traditional World Views, Cultures and Histories

The “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People”, to which the TRC refers, recognized

“the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources.”

(UN General Assembly, 2007)

In order to move forward in reconciliation, people need to to understand traditional Indigenous cultures and histories. Understanding Indigenous traditional spirituality and world views are important first steps to understanding Indigenous cultures and histories. Traditional spiritual practices vary greatly across Indigenous cultures in Canada. In “The Seven Sacred Teachings of White Buffalo Calf Woman” (Bouchard, 2015), children learn directly about the importance of humility, honesty, respect, courage, wisdom, truth and love. In other stories, aspects of traditional spiritual practices are reinforced. In “The Outside Circle” (LaBoucane-Benson, 2015), Pete, the main character, attends a traditional sweat ceremony, which gives him strength to stand up to the gangs. In “The Vision Seeker” (Whetung, 2011), a young man goes on a vision question to receive wisdom which will help him guide his people.

In many Indigenous cultures, the relationship between people and the environment is a fundamental part of spirituality. Métis artist Christi Belcourt explains the relationship in this way:

“We are all a part of a whole. The animals and plants, lands and waters, are our relatives each with as much right to exist as we have. When we see ourselves as separate from each other and think of other species, the waters and the planet itself as objects that can be owned, dominated or subjugated, we lose connection with our humanity and we create imbalance on the earth. This is what we are witnessing around us.”

(Belcourt, Aug.7, 2014)

This relationship with the natural world is present in many of the books. Understanding the personal connectedness that might be expressed as, ‘we are the environment and the environment is us’, allows us to better understand Indigenous world views and why land development often results in difficult confrontations. “Akilak’s Adventure” (Webster, 2016) hearkens back to a time when humans and animals could take each other’s form. Akilak’s grandmother becomes a caribou to make sure that the child’s solo journey is safe. The “Water Walker” tells a simple story about a woman who goes on many walking journeys to bring attention to risks to water. Some of the children’s books show readers that the relationship between people and the environment incorporates fundamental respect for the environment.

In Neekna and Chenai, the children are told:

“We must honour our relatives, the animals, the fish, and the plants that share their lives so that we may have life. If we do not honour them and forget how important they are to us, we begin to destroy them. If their lives are in danger, so are ours.”

(Armstrong, 2007)

When fishermen thoughtlessly drop their anchor on top of the Orca Chief’s house he says to them, “Why would you drop your anchor on my roof? You should act with more respect in this world” (Vickers, 2015). When children in *The Peace Dancer*, abuse a crow, floods force the people from their homes to a mountain top. Their situation is resolved with an elder has a vision:

“I see our return home! We have really lost our way. We have not taught our children love and respect. The Creator is angry with our behavior.”

(Vickers, 2016, p.28)

Celebrating Indigenous Histories

There is a developing collection of children’s books that highlight Indigenous heroes and heroines of the past. In these books, we see history through Indigenous eyes. In “The Peacemaker: Thanadelthur” (Dene) (Robertson, 2014b), we are told a story about inter-tribal warfare among peoples in Canada’s Northwest, and the role of a woman in bringing about peace. In “The Ballad of Nancy April: Shawnadithit” (Robertson, 2014a), we learn the story of the extermination of the Beothuk people from an Indigenous perspective. Among others are: “The Rebel: Gabriel Dumont” (Métis) (Robertson, 2014d), “The Poet: Pauline Johnson” (Mohawk) (Robertson, 2014c), and, “The Chief: Mistahimaskwa” (Plains Cree) (Robertson, 2016).

Celebrating and Preserving Indigenous Culture, Language, and Traditional Knowledge

A large number of Canadian Indigenous children's books help us understand Indigenous culture. For example, forced hair-cutting is a recurrent trauma theme in many residential school and Sixties Scoop stories. In "Tilly: A story of hope and resilience" (Gray Smith, 2013), we are given some insight into the cultural significance of hair. Billy, a Cree man who, as a child, was taken into foster care during the Sixties Scoop, explains:

"... in our teachings a braid is real important, and (...) wearing two of them means both parents are living. So when that lady cut my braids off, it was like she cut off my connection to my family and to who I was."

(Gray Smith, 2013 p. 168–169)

Some Indigenous cultures have formal mechanisms for the appropriate care of children and strong cultural norms relating to the community care of children. The perils to communities who do not properly care for orphans is a common theme in many Inuit children's stories, for example, "The Orphan and the Polar Bear" (Qaunaq, 2011). The Sixties Scoop removed thousands of Indigenous children from their homes and placed them in non-Indigenous homes, where it was assumed they would have better environments in which to grow up. Inuit have a culturally-appropriate alternative for children whose parents cannot raise them. "Nala's Magical Mitsiuq" (Noah, 2013) and "Families" (Unaapik, Unaapik, & McCluskey, 2017) are stories that include traditional Inuit adoption, an ancient practice that ensures that children have a healthy home.

Cultural activities and practices are also preserved and taught in children's books. "Secrets of the Dance" (Spalding, 2009) tells the story of a child's experience at a potlatch, a ceremony which was suppressed by the Canadian government. "P'esk'a and the First Salmon Ceremony" (Ritchie, 2015) describes the St'sailes people's ceremony that thanks the river and the salmon after the first catch of the year, while "The Curse Of The Shaman" (Kusugak, 2006) includes traditional Eastern Arctic Inuit marriage practices.

There are several books which address help readers understand specific Indigenous naming practices. For example, in "Goose Girl" (McLellan, 2016), a young girl who shows an affinity for wild geese, the bearers of the souls of the dead, is given a related nickname at a traditional Métis ceremony. Similarly, Deal (2016) gives us insight into the significance of Inuit naming practices in *How Nivi Got Her Names*. David Bouchard (2015) in "The First Flute [Whowhoahyahzo Tohkohya]" describes the importance of names:

*"Names should be respected. They should be valued. They should be honoured.
When a name is given to an adult, it is often given based on the life that person has lived.
The name is a statement about the person he or she has become.
When a name is given to a child, it foretells what kind of a person that child will become.
If a child is given the name He Who is Kind to Strangers, that child is destined to live a life of kindness.
I know this to be true because I once knew a kind man who as a child was given that name."*

(Bouchard, 2015)

Loss of language is well documented in children's books related to residential schools. Children were punished for speaking Indigenous languages. However, there are now many books celebrating and preserving Indigenous languages. There are several ABC and first word books which are designed to help

children learn Indigenous languages. Some examples are, “Owls See Clearly at Night: a Michif alphabet” (Métis) (Flett, 2010), “Discovering words: English, French, Cree” (Auger, 2013). Other books, such as “Stolen Words,” show progress in reclaiming the languages. In this story, a little girl who learns Cree at school, goes home and teaches the language to her grandfather, who lost his language at residential school.

Traditional skills and knowledge are also preserved in many of the books. For example, “Niqinniliurn-ingmik” (Memogana, 2016) is an Inuvialuit work that explains in a story, how to go about catching and smoking fish. The series of stories about Kamik (Baker, 2016; Sulurayok, 2015; Uluadluak, 2012) describe the process of training and caring for a growing sled dog. “Our First Caribou Hunt” (Noah, 2015), “Dipnetting with Dad” (Sellars, 2014), and “Fishing with Grandma” (Avingag, 2015), all document traditional hunting and fishing practices. “Very Last First Time” describes children going under the landfast sea ice at low tide to collect mussels. Children reading “A Walk on the Tundra” (Hainnu, 2011) will learn about the harvesting of plants and berries. Among these traditional knowledge books, “Mamaqtuq!” (The Jerry Cans, 2017), deserves special attention. “Mamaqtuq!” is a board book for very young children about seal hunting. It is an example of two-eyed seeing applied in everyday life. The hunters use a gun, rather than a traditional hunting tool to kill the seal. They cut up the seal in the boat and eat it raw. This book is based on a song by the alt-country, throat-singing, sometimes reggae band, The Jerry Cans, who sing in Inuktitut, and joyously celebrate the traditional gathering of food. Like the other books, “Mamaqtuq!” gives us the opportunity to listen in while Indigenous authors pass on traditional knowledge to children.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, while we relied on Amazon’s list as our primary source of book titles, we do not know how the algorithm that creates that list operates. We have no way of validating the scope of material that it retrieves or excludes. While we supplemented the list with other sources, we are aware that our search was not exhaustive and we may have missed relevant titles.

Second, in some cases, it was difficult to determine whether or not some authors were Indigenous Canadians. While we reviewed many sources looking for this information, it is possible that we have erred in excluding some authors who are Indigenous Canadians, or including some authors who are not. We are happy to receive more information about authors.

Third, in identifying themes, we allowed the themes to arise naturally from the reading of the books. We are influenced by our background knowledge and experiences and acknowledge that other readers may identify other themes in these works.

Conclusion

Canadians are at the beginning of the reconciliation process related to residential school legacy. The TRC Calls to Action are broad and high-level and individuals may struggle to understand how they should respond. Children’s books offer a non-threatening and non-judgemental environment in which to gain knowledge and understanding about Indigenous people, their histories and cultures. This study has identified many children’s books, written by Canadian Indigenous authors, that help us to understand the truth and legacy of the residential school experiences and also point the way forward to reconciliation through mutual respect and understanding.

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