

SHAPING THEIR OWN STORIES

Indigenous writers are reclaiming their stories and sharing them with the world

By Bryan Hansen

Canada's colonial past has historically left the telling and shaping of Indigenous peoples' stories to the settlers. Today, Indigenous people are reclaiming and taking ownership of their stories, recognizing that only through their own storytelling can they ensure their stories are not defined by others.

Dr. David Anderson, Spirit Name Wahwahbiginojii, of Mukwa N'dodem, Bear Clan, is an Anishinaabe/Dene member of Goodminds.com (Goodminds), a leading provider of Indigenous education resources for schools and libraries in North America and a strong promoter of Indigenous authors, illustrators and educators. He works with the Goodminds team vetting books, consulting with other organizations, and writing policy.

"It's about truth and reconciliation," Anderson says of Goodminds' promotion of Indigenous writers. "Storytelling has always been there, but of course those that came across had their own stories and not many listened to our stories, our truths, our history."

Anderson explains that there has always been a historical disparity between oral and written traditions of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures in Canada. "We talk about our Elders and our knowledge and language keepers," he says. "The people of this land didn't have libraries, didn't have scribes. We had storytellers. We were an oral society."

Despite the Indigenous roots in oral storytelling, there have been plenty of talented Indigenous writers who have put their pen to paper over the years. The last decade in particular has seen the voices of Indigenous

writers gain a lot of attention within the Canadian literary scene – writers like Lee Maracle, Cherie Dimaline, Drew Hayden Taylor and Tomson Highway, to name just a few. "We see our authors creating something Indigenous, of their own that reflects their culture, language and history, yet adapted to a [written] format created by someone else," says Anderson simply.

Denise Bolduc is Anishinaabe from the Lake Superior Territory, and a member of the Batchewana First Nation. Bolduc is an accomplished director, producer, programmer, speaker, and a contributing editor and contributor to *Indigenous Toronto*, *Stories That Carry This Place*, an award-winning anthology that is the first of its kind featuring all-Indigenous led and written historic and contemporary stories. The project grew into a larger collaboration with a new non-fiction Indigenous advisory

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Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Kegedonce Press



board, Zaagigin, an Anishinaabe word that describes when a sprout comes from the earth. “Stories created by Indigenous peoples are our root, our being,” says Bolduc. “The idea of those roots is inter-related to the advisory board and the book.”

Both the advisory board and the book represent important steps towards reconciliation through Indigenous storytelling. “These stories - when Indigenous writers have agency and are able to write stories from their perspective, their voice, their histories and experience – give dignity back, the ability to find some freedom again within the larger global world,” adds Bolduc. She goes on to say, “We are not going away. The ability to tell the truth through stories and to have agency over that – that resonates with me.”

SAFE SPACES

It is largely thanks to efforts of organizations like Goodminds and the Indigenous Toronto initiative that there is a growing focus on literature from an Indigenous perspective in Canada. Yet what many Canadians may not realize is that it is not just about sharing Indigenous stories; it is also about the creation of a safe space for Indigenous writers, which is an essential part of Indigenous storytelling.

Anderson defines this as a place where the Indigenous story and history are honoured. “It’s a place where you know where I’m coming from and have an understanding of this. Residential school trauma, language trauma – there are all kinds of trauma where I come from,” he says. “A safe place is where I feel free to explore the trauma and see the beauty of life ahead of us, and life behind us. It’s not all bad, but I have to understand that and know that whatever story I’m telling will be recognized and accepted.”

When it comes to looking to the future, adds Anderson, supporting and building a relationship with Indigenous storytellers is essential. “We need to honour the history and feel we’re safe in doing that,” he says. “The [Indigenous] publishers and editors have that understanding. You have a story to tell, it’s in you, you want to get it out and you feel honoured and respected in doing that.”

Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm is a member of the Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation, Saugeen Ojibway Nation on the Saugeen Peninsula in Ontario. She is the founding editor, and now managing editor, of Kegeдонce Press. Started in 1993, Kegeдонce Press is one of the few Indigenous publishers in Canada.



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TWO AWARD-WINNING READS

Looking for a good read? Here are two amazing recent contributions to the Indigenous book scene. Both in their own unique way highlight the struggles of Indigenous people resulting from colonialism, as well as their extraordinary resilience and perseverance.

FIVE LITTLE INDIANS

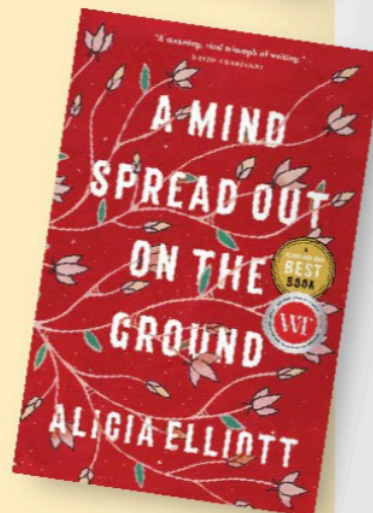
Five Little Indians is the debut fiction novel by Michelle Good, a Cree writer and member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan. The book tells the story of Kenny, Lucy, Clara, Howie and Maisie, teenagers released after many years of detention in a church-run residential school. The five teens end up in a seedy part of Vancouver, alone and without any life skills or family support. The book spans multiple decades, highlighting their struggles in building their lives against the backdrop of the trauma they experienced in the residential school.

Five Little Indians was a national bestseller and recipient of several awards, including the Scotia Bank Giller Prize, the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize.

A MIND SPREAD OUT ON THE GROUND

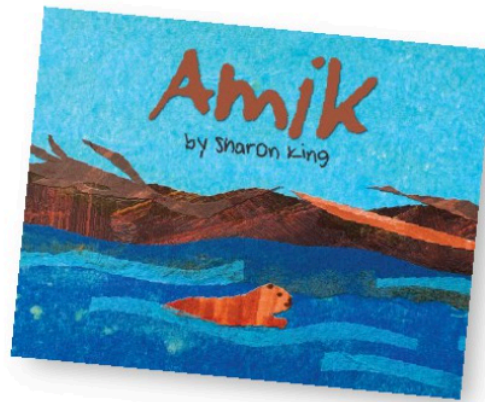
A Mind Spread Out on the Ground is a memoir by award-winning Haudenosaunee writer Alicia Elliott. It looks at intergenerational trauma through the lens of Elliot in a collection of thought-provoking, honest essays that cover the ongoing effects of the legacy of colonialism. Topics touch on everything from parenthood and mental illness to how Indigenous writers are treated within the Canadian publishing industry. Elliott writes openly about unplanned teenage pregnancy, her childhood diet of Kraft dinner and her battle with head lice. The book provides a candid look at the effects of cultural genocide and the ongoing legacy of colonialism.

A Mind Spread out on the Ground was a national bestseller and was shortlisted for the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Prize. It was named one of the best books of 2019 by the Globe and Mail, CBC, and Chatelaine.



"It's called Kegedonce Press because my grandmother is the child of Chief Charles Kegedonce Jones. Her grandfather was Peter Kegedonce Jones. Kegedonce is the dominion of orator or speaker," explains Akiwenzie-Damm. "When I started Kegedonce I was committed to pushing back against boundaries and limitations that [depicted] Indigenous writing as simplistic, children's writing, or protest literature. It was put in bookstores under 'Canadiana,' next to wildflower books and atlases."

Akiwenzie-Damm too touches on the idea of writing as a safe space for Indigenous storytellers, and notes that a safe space is a natural product for an Indigenous publisher. "Indigenous editors have greater sensitivity and awareness," she says. "A bestseller might not be a main goal for an Indigenous writer. It might be language



A selection of books from Kegdonce Press, one of the few Indigenous publishers in Canada

revitalization, or being able to share stories from their area, nation or culture to preserve and pass them down. These are as important as the number of books sold for many Indigenous writers. That doesn't have to be a discussion, we understand and support that."

NEW INSIGHT

Historically, meaning and context were often lost in translation when Indigenous stories were told from the angle of settlers. Today, Indigenous voices are being heard loud and clear from coast to coast, and inaccurate perceptions from the not-so-distant past are slowly being changed. This opens up a new world to readers of all backgrounds.

"Authors are presenting stories to say, 'There's more to us than what Hollywood has presented and what you may have grown up with,'" says Anderson. "When you read Indigenous authors, or hear Elders' stories, they're different. There's an essence to it, intuitive almost... Indigenous authors write from their heart and there's a truth to that."

That new narrative is becoming commercially successful. According to Akiwenzie-Damm, the commercial book industry has "shifted tremendously," in terms of reception to Indigenous storytelling. "When Kegdonce Press started, most publishers were not interested in Indigenous storytelling. Now it's a lot bigger with more acceptance and more writers. Publishers are actively seeking Indigenous writers."

This positive upward trend still comes with a "precariousness underneath it all which hasn't changed as much as I'd like to see," notes Akiwenzie-Damm. She goes on to explain: "Funding is more stable, but there is still so much developmental work to do for Indigenous publishing. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done. I fear this idea of Indigenous literature being hot right now, and that when it's no longer 'hot' the books won't be accepted. It's important that Kegdonce Press survive and thrive in this current climate."

While learning about the negative aspects of Canada's past relationship with its Indigenous peoples continues to be an important part of true reconciliation, Anderson stresses that it's equally important for Indigenous literature to highlight the positive, life-affirming stories Indigenous writers also have to share. Goodminds, for instance, often focuses on resiliency through Indigenous stories. "Despite all that's happened and [the systemic factors] against us, we always celebrate life," Anderson says. "We are working with our authors and customers to celebrate life with these good books that are there to share."

When it comes to the future outlook of Indigenous storytelling, the message of resiliency is "coming forward more and more" and Anderson stresses that it's an important message to share for future generations. "We are all in this together," he says, "and it's up to all of us to decide what we'll do for our children and the generations after them." ●

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