



WRITE

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CANADA**

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**Defining
Community In
and Through
Story**
8

**Copyright and
Indigenous
Knowledge**
16

**Writing While
Black**
19



Not too long ago I suffered a shock so profound that I lost the ability to read. With no capability for concentration, the letters of the alphabet were reduced to a jumble of symbols.

Sometimes they organized themselves into words, but the effort to try to wrest meaning from them defeated me. So did the attempt to connect a string of these words into a comprehensible thought or idea. Thus slipped away a lifetime habit and a necessary daily period of rest and recreation. This taught or reminded me that the greatest impetus for reading for me has always been relaxation. We read for information and knowledge, we read to know how others are thinking, we read to expand our perspective — yes to all that — but mostly I read for pleasure. I'm talking about the aesthetic delight that beautiful prose or intriguing characters or a strong narrative can give.

I would be lying if I said, as many do (and I am sure they are truthful), that my love of reading began as a young child being read to. Perhaps I was read to, I cannot remember. I date early reading from grade one when the love of a story, the feel of a book, the comfort of reading, and the eager search for “more” were all developed.

I am not worried. Reading will return, I am told by others who have gone through this (temporary) deprivation, and the way back will be through magazines. This is not to suggest that magazines are superficial or don't require attentive reading, but

often they comprise short pieces that can be read in one sitting, and they tend to offer more variety — entertainment, even — in a condensed space than many books.

And so I come to *Write*, the treasured magazine of the Writers' Union. Consistently, in surveys about priorities and expenditures, members have stressed how important the magazine is to them. Interestingly, the majority of TWUC members still prefer to thumb, peruse, and read the print version. The hiatus between the last issue of *Write* and the one you are now opening seemed long to many, but it was important that the Union pay attention to, and act on, all the concerns expressed at the time of the spring issue and subsequent resignation of the editor. Much thought has gone into a reworking of the magazine and its editorial guidelines, and a new editorial board is in place. As you know, the Union posted the advertisement for a new editor of *Write*. For this issue, we welcome as guest editor Cherie Dimaline, well-known Métis writer and editor, who has put together a comprehensive and varied package of pieces that discuss, among other topics, self-promotion, copyright, editing Indigenous manuscripts, and appropriation.

As with LP record jackets years ago, I typically take a long time to study and enjoy a magazine cover. Then I open up with an appetite to dive into a digest of reading that will inevitably tell me something I didn't know, entertain me, perhaps provoke me, and ultimately satisfy me.

Welcome back, *Write* magazine.

Contents FALL 2017

- 3 Chair's Report
- 5 Writing Rights
- 6 News

WRITER'S BLOT

- 8 Editor's Corner
- 9 Industry Q & A

DISPATCHES

- 10 Today is Different, Because Yesterday We Fought
BY LEE MARACLE
- 11 Makekwiw 150 Makekwiw
BY MARILYN DUMONT
- 12 The Importance of Authenticity in Indigenous Children's Literature
BY JENNY KAY DUPUIS
- 13 Cultural *Wihikows*: An Essay on Appropriation
BY LOUISE BERNICE HALFE
- 15 Fire for the Ghost Dance
BY CANISIA LUBRIN
- 16 Indigenous Knowledge and the Intellectual Property Rights System
BY GREGORY YOUNGING
- 18 On the Indigenous Voices Awards
BY SAM McKEGNEY
- 19 The Community is the Curriculum: Holding Space for Black Writers
BY WHITNEY FRENCH

FEATURES

- 20 "All My Relations"
BY SMOKII SUMAC
- 24 Exploding the Canon
BY DEANNA REDER
- 26 The Elements of Indigenous Style
BY GREGORY YOUNGING
- 30 Our Stories Deserve to Be Told
BY ALICIA ELLIOTT

MEMBER NEWS & AWARDS

IN MEMORIAM

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Writer's Blot

EDITOR'S CORNER /

The Way Home Is Always Through Story

BY CHERIE DIMALINE

The following is an abridged version of remarks made during the keynote address at the June 2017 Editors Canada Conference.

We hold our own territories — it's where we gather strength and rest. But we also have shared borders that are permeable, to a certain extent, which must remain peaceful, so that we can cross over to visit and relate, to make marriages and new stories. We govern our own territories, and we must understand that each territory's version of the truth or excellence is unique and based on tradition, culture, history, and worldview specific to the lands/people it comes from.

You are not lowering your standards or adopting a politically correct or charitable stance to allow in Indigenous story; you are being gifted with ceremony, and lives and stories; you are simply recognizing that part of privilege is the handicap of blindness that often keeps art, industry, and commerce single-hued. It's the handicap of privilege that leads people to argue meritocracy when we're working with all-white juries and editorial boards all schooled in Western literature who say "not to worry, the best will naturally rise to the top."

Editors have the ability, training, and understanding of story to see beyond the marketing or the theme and to delve into the actual intent as it is harnessed in the words and sentences themselves. In this way, editors lead — through craft, with skill, embodying respect. And this is why these conversations are so critical at this level, amongst ourselves, to ensure our leaders are working with the best knowledges, not just the most Western.

Working with Indigenous manuscripts requires no special induction, no secret ceremony, and no sort of status card. What it does require is craft, skill, and respect. I can't think of a sane woman on earth who would care the nationality of her midwife in the middle of labour, only that that midwife understood anatomy, medicine, and natural laws. And that her birth plan was followed so as to ensure the best possible beginning for her child from that mother's perspective of what the best is. Editors are midwives. We



only care that you have an understanding both of where the story is coming from and what the story is in itself.

I've had experience in the editing process of my books with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous editors. *The Marrow Thieves* was edited and published with Cormorant Books and upon acquisition they sent me the following note: "There are things we won't know, there are things we can't already have an understanding of. But I promise you we will always listen and we will always learn." Some elements had to be explained, but I was given space and patience to explain them rather than having them edited out. And having to champion them back in. For example: Anishnaabe storytelling often repeats itself because we move in Circles. If you were drawing a circle on a page in a notebook, if you go over it more than once you get those satisfying pressure dents through the paper that pulls the shape onto the pages behind. You know what I mean: those indentations that feel so tactile and familiar under your palm when you turn the page and run your hand over a clean sheet. That repetition is a tool. That's how we make sure the vital pieces of story — the pieces that are teachings and ceremony and history — are given the right pressure to push through to the next generations.

The quickest way to both understand what may be appropriate and what work may need specific resources is to ask your writer which specific community they are from — not just nation, but community. We are all connected to a specific family and community that has sculpted stories from our particular lands. That's where we begin. Knowing on whose land we are working, to whose Ancestors we are speaking. Obviously, not all stories are steeped in tradition, but all Indigenous story and storytelling has an origin and a worldview unique to their own community perspective.

From there, there is a lot of listening. Sometimes the context you need is buried not just in the work itself but from the history of the community. This work may take a little longer and ask that you dig a little deeper, but it's worth it in the end. Because you'll have not only done your best work, but you will have begun to draft those first few pages of your own best practices guide book — making connections and learning from a people who cherish story like no other.

One way to move forward is to have Indigenous writers and editors in influential positions, not just for Indigenous development, but so that we can all benefit from their unique understanding of story.

This is how we get it right. This is how we walk into the next 150 years — together. Preserving story with skill, cradling legacies through craft, building our collective community with respect.

Cherie Dimaline is a writer and editor from the Georgian Bay Métis Community. Her latest YA novel, The Marrow Thieves, won both the 2017 Governor General's Award for Young People's Literature and the Kirkus Prize for Young Readers.

Dispatches

NOTES AND OPINIONS ON THE WRITING LIFE

PUBLISHING /

Today is Different, Because Yesterday We Fought



BY LEE MARACLE

I took a course in compiling oral histories in 1973 with Professor Don Barnett of Simon Fraser University. I had been keen on taking the oral histories of some of our Elders in the Salish world. I wanted to tape their stories and query the cultural laws of our people.

We still had a number of individuals who were close to a hundred at that time and who had not attended residential school. Many of the Elders who had attended residential school were not well or were very influenced by the church. I wanted to document those whose memory was not tainted by Canada's attempt to de-culturate us.

The class consisted of us doing our own oral histories. We were instructed to tape our life stories, transcribe them, and order them up in a "chapter by chapter" chronological way. Dr. Don Barnett liked mine and suggested that we should publish it. I had already had some experience with the industry in 1971 when I wanted to publish a collection of short stories called *Reminiscences of the Mud Flats*. The publishers told me at that time they "don't publish Indians because Indians can't read." My response was to stand

on the corner of Main and Hastings and ask every Native person their name and whether or not they could read or write. After asking 3,500 people, I discovered that two thirds could not read or write a stitch.

I pulled together a group of youth in Vancouver and organized a province-wide project teaching Indigenous youth to read and write. Twenty-one people were hired, and it was a very successful summer project. We also got 3,500 Indigenous people to sign a petition saying they would buy my book if someone published it. (I had learned that 3,500 sales made a bestseller in Canada at the time.)

Dr. Barnett just laughed and said that it did not matter what the other publishers said because he owned a publishing house called LSM Press. The book was *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel*, and we published it in 1976.

I am still impressed with my orality at the time. I delivered a well-ordered and detailed accounting of my life, then transcribed it. My sister Joan corrected the small mistakes I made. I never did get the short stories *Reminiscences of the Mud Flats* published, and they have since been lost in my many moves. Even so, I do recall editors insisting on changes. I came to understand the language of English in its powerful deliverance of story. I also came to understand how English sabotages our sense of story. The first sentence of the paragraph of the story is the star, the jump-off

I came to understand the language of English in its powerful deliverance of story. I also came to understand how English sabotages our sense of story.

point, and altering or reordering that sentence changes the intention and meaning of the entire paragraph, and often I had to fight for my story or give up on publishing it.

There were ridiculous snags I ran into with story. One such story was *Bertha*, which took twenty-five years to publish and then, she was not popular. It was about a cannery worker from Prince Rupert who died of alcoholism — she was also a residential school survivor. No one wanted “drinking” in the story. Then there was the story of Charlie Wenjack, and at that time, no one wanted to hear about residential schools.

Today is different, because *yesterday* we fought. We published both *Bertha* and *Charlie* as chapbooks and sold them to individuals on the street. I had a lot of support from my friends at the time. I can’t picture young Indigenous people standing on a street corner selling literature today, but that is what we did. You do what you gotta do. And although I can’t picture anyone standing on the street selling posters of poetry or chapbooks, I still think the spirit of that willingness to hold each other up exists in the Indigenous Writers’ Gathering, in retweeting each other in a supportive way, and holding each other up via Facebook. Those that don’t are like my cousin who laughed at my little books as I was reading at the Native Friendship Centre. A friend of mine was there, Gilbert Oskaboose, and he told her: “I get it. I do, I get it, you have been in a cage for twenty years, and everyone poked

sticks at you and called you names, laughed at you. So that is all you know how to do now. I don’t agree with you, but I do get it.”

I am older now, my path is clear; my job is to walk writers forward, to endorse them, to educate the publishing world, to carve out a space for ourselves, and to commend those brave Indigenous publishers who have stepped up to publish Indigenous writers. It is still not an easy must, but we keep plugging, promoting Indigenous writing and publishing.

Lee Maracle is a member of the Sto:Lo nation. She is the author of the critically acclaimed novels Ravensong and Daughters Are Forever. Her novel for young adults, Will’s Garden, was well-received and is taught in schools. She has also published one book of poetry, Bent Box, and a work of creative nonfiction, I Am Woman. She is the co-editor of a number of anthologies, including the award-winning anthology My Home As I Remember and Telling It: Women and Language across Culture. She recently published Celia’s Song, If Memory Serves, and My Conversations with Canadians. Her awards include the J.T. Stewart Voices of Change Award, an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation and an Honorary Doctor of Letters from St. Thomas University. Maracle recently received the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee Medal for her work promoting writing among Aboriginal Youth, and won the 2014 Ontario Premier’s Award for Excellence in the Arts. She was also the recipient of the 2016 Anne Green Award.

The Community Is the Curriculum: Holding Space for Black Writers

BY WHITNEY FRENCH



What happens when a piece of writing doesn't have space and time to breathe? Does it stand a chance for survival?

Bringing early writing drafts into a workshop space can be an unnatural, unknown, and understandably anxious process for many emerging writers. As an educator and workshop facilitator I have been gifted with the ability to create intimate space for writers. I run many types of programming for a variety of folks in a variety of settings, but the one workshop series that continuously demands that I be relentless in my service to community is Writing While Black.

Born from the desire to gather black writers together to meet amidst an unbearable anti-black landscape, Writing While Black is a writing workshop series that seeks to develop a community of black writers who support each other's artistic projects. It is one of the many workshops that I am committed to yet my focus on this series truly highlights the most profound demonstrations of community-holding and creative spirit I've experienced. It's where I build space to remind folks that they have agency to write and space that allows the words room to stretch.

Workshops prioritize writing; it's a pressing reminder in a world that places very little value on writing — and as black folks, in a world that places little value on our contributions and, at times, our lives. The power to write our narrative, or rather to cultivate space for such writing to occur in the first place, takes effort. And even still, there is so much more to Writing While Black than just the writing.

Do we stand a chance at survival?

Since writing is such a solitary act, gathering is not only important to the process, it is sacred. The shape of this space and the dynamics of this space are constantly changing. One is decentering power dynamics, offering room to those often ignored, stepping back and listening, making difficult decisions, and excavating courage at all times. It exhausts the spirit. Often, I am compelled to do the work despite not wanting to do the work.

Days in particular that come to mind are the ones after the Charleston shooting, the death of Andrew Loku, the news of Chaleena Lyles and Nabra Hassanen. Those are the moments

when my body betrays me. The only intimate space I'm interested in is my bathtub, water banging on my skin, unable to heal, but harsh enough to stun me temporarily. "We need Writing While Black more than ever," a friend reminds me, and so, I press on.

Do I stand a chance at surviving?

Unearthing and excavating impossible scars is something to prepare for, something to move through together as community. We are cracked open to a level of freedom unknown in this community and as a result, the creative spirit comingles with deep wounds. So rare are these spaces for us, black writers, to connect, so limited is our access to each other in this country. It's important to recognize that community may be too starved for familiarity to even begin the act of writing.

Perhaps the work is shifting me to prioritize healing over productivity. It is beyond "finding one's voice" but knowing that the writer next to me, their story, can be part of my voice too. What types of works emerge from communal creation? I believe remarkable ones. Now the task of making space isn't left to one, but many. Very often, the community is the curriculum.

We are compelled to be kind to each other — to hold space for our trauma, our anger, our heartbreak, our joy, our narratives, our nervousness, and our accomplishments. Here we strip away paranoia of not being enough, read the text without explaining our Blackness, and critique from a place of compassion.

Our only option is survival.

I cannot abandon this space that is made for these moments. It is why Writing While Black exists, as a refuge, as a hush harbour, as a site of resistance. This is not the beginning of this work, or its conclusion. It's perpetual and gruelling and inspiring in the same instant. It takes time. And the vision to build communities within communities that are so collaborative, that goes beyond mere survival; it beckons us to flourish, to thrive.

Whitney French is a writer who has published in Quill & Quire, Geist, and Canthius Journal, and is anthologized in The Great Black North: Contemporary African Canadian Poetry. She is also the founder of the workshop series Writing While Black: an initiative to develop a community of black writers. Presently she is working on an anthology of creative nonfiction by black Canadians. More information about Writing While Black can be found at writingwhileblack.ca.