

Reimagining Canada: A Conversation with Joseph Boyden on Metis Identity, Storytelling, and Public History

Julie McGonegal
Laurentian University at Georgian College

Joseph Boyden became a well-known figure on the CanLit scene with the success of his Giller Prize-winning novel *Three Day Road*, part of a planned trilogy that now includes *Through Black Spruce*. Both novels were preceded by the delightfully funny but lesser known collection of short stories *Born with a Tooth*. Of Scottish and Metis descent, Boyden taught for a number of years in the James Bay area in which his fiction is set, and where he continues to live when he is not teaching Creative Writing at the University of New Orleans.

Anyone who has read Boyden's fiction (and as he pointed out during our conversation, he has been blessed with a wide readership) will know and appreciate its honesty, humour, and compassion for First Nations' peoples and their struggle to survive. His work explores the themes of war, addiction, abuse, and poverty—all devastating symptoms of Canadian colonialism that threaten to engulf entire communities—but is obstinately hopeful about the power of indigenous peoples to resist the legacies of colonialism through a powerful arsenal of laughter, determination, a return to the land, and cultural reclamation.

My conversation with Boyden confirmed the rumours: as a person, he is characterized by the warmth and generosity of spirit that his readers associate with his fiction. He is dedicated to his craft, but he is also fiercely committed to indigenous activism and the arts. He is an informed advocate for Native rights, and frequently offers public readings and interviews. As he said toward the beginning of our conversation, he makes himself visible as an author not so much to sell books—he has sold many already—as to raise awareness about issues such as Native suicide rates and land claims. I met Boyden at the Aboriginal Arts Festival, held in conjunction with the International Festival of Authors, in Barrie, Ontario last October. Our conversation began with the subject of activism before branching off in myriad other directions, including his recent non-fiction work on Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont, the debate on appropriation, Canada's peacekeeping identity, and the role of the arts in promoting healing and reconciliation.

JM: What I want to talk to you about first is the extent to which you make yourself available to the public. You've done more than your fair share of

interviews, and you participate in panel discussions and literary festivals. You are very much a public author; you make yourself available to your readers. Each year when the IFOA happens, there's usually some media discussion of the public author—that is, around the question of authors' decisions to participate, or of when the public reading works, and when it doesn't work. I'm hoping you can talk about why you make the decision to be active in this way, and why it is important for you to share your work in public forums.

JB: Well one of them, and I'll be honest, is that it helps get my books out to a reading public, but that's really just a secondary reason because I'm very lucky that my works have been so well-read that that's not why I do it. I think there's very important messages that I'm trying to get across; not that I'm a spokesperson, I can't speak for anyone else, I'm one of many voices. But there are certain issues in this country that are really, really important to me: youth and the suicide rates is one, as is reconnecting with the land. Even though I don't necessarily deal with them directly in my writing, they're certainly something that flavours it. So there are all kinds of reasons why I do this but I'm ultimately trying to even the playing field a little bit. There's a lot of dialogue going on about First Nations issues and often First Nations people aren't involved in them and so I want to try to enter into that dialogue—as a writer though, not as a politician or a philosopher, or as anything but a writer. I just create stories out of my head but these stories are inspired by real people.

JM: I'm really interested—even though it hasn't received as much attention as your fiction—in your non-fiction work, and particularly the Extraordinary Canadian series for which you wrote a volume on Louis Riel and Gabriel Dumont. There's so much that has already been written about those two figures, so why revisit them?

JB: Well no one had ever written a book that dealt with the two of them together. And now I realize why: I gave myself a really tough assignment. I did it very naively—I agreed to do it years ago. In 2005, John Ralston Saul and I first spoke about it. I was naïve at the time but I said “let's do Riel and Dumont together. No one has ever done that.” As I researched, I realized that they only knew each other for a year and a half. They didn't know each other until 1884 onward, until Riel's execution.

JM: Sometimes in a short span of time, great things happen.

JB: Well, I realized that that year and a half would form the structure of my book—and then fill in the backgrounds as I go. It was a really difficult book to write. I am glad that it's done—I am really happy with it and proud of myself for getting all of that history into such a small space. But it sucked the life out of me for a while.

JM: It sounds like the act of writing the novel energizes you, but the non-fiction works drain you. Is that true?

JB: Yeah. This new novel that I'm working on is really energizing me. It's an exciting project but a daunting one too.

JM: Is that the third installment in your trilogy?

JB: Well, it's really a prequel to the trilogy. It's not the third in the trilogy—not yet. I'm giving the Bird family a bit of private time. This novel is a juicy, historical epic that I'm excited about, but it's still got a long way to go.

JM: At the end of your book on Riel and Dumont, there is an Acknowledgements Section that contains a fairly long list of non-fiction works. You'd clearly done a great deal of archival research, which would partly explain why the labour was so grueling. But I couldn't help but wonder if you were inspired by any fiction on Riel.

JB: You know what inspired me? Chester Brown's comic-strip biography—if you've not read it, oh my lord it's great. I think he did a brilliant job of capturing the man's life in a comic-strip biography. I'd never read anything in the genre before—I didn't think it was my cup of tea—and I haven't read anything in it since, but he does an amazing job of capturing the spirit of the times and Riel's mind-set.

JM: I want to ask you about John Ralston Saul's work outside of the series.

JB: I have a huge amount of respect for John. We went on a book tour across Canada together because our books came out at the same time. He's a very brilliant man, and it was daunting; the only way I could deal with it was by poking a little fun. I'd say, "We're kind of like the Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. of the Canadian Lit scene right now." I was the comic relief at times to John's seriousness, though he does have a wicked sense of humour.

JM: What do you think of his argument in *A Fair Country* that Canada is a Metis nation?

JB: I think it's great. I think it's time. Drew Hayden Taylor teases and says, "Do the Metis know that we are a Metis nation?" But I think it's a reimagining of Canada that makes a lot of sense. We aren't as European as people want to do that believe. We aren't as British as people want to believe. That Metis identity was there under our noses and John [Ralston Saul] was the first to say, "Hey, look." It makes a lot of sense to me. And what will that do for First Nations' relations with the rest of Canada? It

can only strengthen them. It is “us.” It’s not “their” problem, it’s “our” problem.

JM: These are collective issues that challenge all Canadians.

JB: We have to realize that as a nation. All you have to do is read *The Globe and Mail* online anytime there is a First Nations issue and visit the Comments section to see how strong racism is in this country. It’s almost as though I am masochistic because I always go to that section after reading an article dealing with First Nations.

JM: It is unbelievable. I avoid that section because the comments are sickening.

JB: And to see that shows me how far we have to go. But we need to see it as a collective problem. And again, it’s not “them versus us.” It’s us.

JM: So you don’t see John Ralston Saul’s argument as risking appropriation, as some of his critics argue?

JB: I don’t have any concern with that whatsoever. No.

JM: In an earlier interview with Allan Ryan you say that you don’t worry about appropriation: “I’ve lived long enough not to worry about the idea of appropriation” (Ryan 301). Can you talk more about that? Are there any times when appropriation is problematic?

JB: When you are writing about a subject and you don’t understand that subject fully or you understand it only in a very small way and don’t grasp the complexities.

JM: So it doesn’t make much sense to talk about being “inside” or “outside” an identity. It’s a matter of how informed you are.

JB: That’s right. Am I allowed to write from a woman’s point of view? Am I allowed to write from an African-American’s point of view? I’ve done it and I do it all the time, at least the woman’s point of view. Am I allowed to? Only if I get it right. I’d better get it right. I better be respectful and as knowledgeable as I possibly can be if I’m going to do it.

I know that the idea of appropriation was a hot-button topic years ago but it seems to have died out—because people are going to get called out. If you’re bullshitting, you get called out on it. So I don’t really worry about it because it will be obvious if it happens, especially in fiction and the creative arts.

JM: Speaking of your rendering of the female voice, one of the things I loved when I saw you read a couple of years ago—you read from Niska’s

narrative in *Three Day Road*—was that it felt, when you read, as though she was present in the room. You did such a superb job of embodying her voice and her character. At risk of sounding hokey, it was almost like she was speaking through you. How do your characters come to you? Do they speak to you, as it were? Are they already “there” before you bring them into being through the writing process?

JB: Each one is different. Xavier was a real learning curve—a learning experience. At first his voice was very naïve and flat and over time he developed into somebody more complex and three-dimensional. But Niska is the strangest one of all. I was sitting in a coffee shop in New Orleans in the very early stages of writing the novel. I originally had Xavier and his uncle being the two main characters and then Elijah as one of the third and then I realized what a male-heavy, male-centric world I was creating. There was no female voice and that just seemed unfair—I’ve got seven older sisters.

JM: And now the female presence in that novel is so strong.

JB: Even though if you look at the actual page numbers, Niska is probably only one quarter of that novel but she still has a very [trails off]. I was sitting in the coffee shop thinking “I’ve got to have a female character,” and then an old woman started telling a story in my head. I was writing it longhand at that point. I wrote what she told me. It all started coming out.

JM: Yeah, that’s the experience I had as a reader—she spoke through you.

JB: I was channeled by something. I was very blessed that she came and visited me, and didn’t leave. But the way you see it in *Three Day Road* is the way it came out: there was virtually no editing of Niska. And I wish that happened all the time because I’d have a bunch of novels out now. That was the “easiest” writing I had ever experienced because her stories continued to flow out, and from where I don’t know. But it was neat.

JM: And as I say, that’s the experience for the reader too. Her story is a gift.

JM: To return to the subject of Riel, I have to ask you about the NDP [New Democratic Party] Member of Parliament petition just last year, in November 2010, to have Riel exonerated for the crime of treason. Is there any point in trying to rectify the historical wrongs of the past in that kind of way?

JB: Well, I certainly don’t want to change history. But if you go back and look at the historical record, the six-man jury that condemned Riel also asked for leniency. They asked for a pardon. They didn’t want him executed; the orders came directly down from John A. MacDonald. “He’s

leaving here dead,” you know. Clayton Ruby at one point restaged the trial where he acted on Riel’s behalf and had him exonerated.

So there is the need for recognizing the historical record. We did the wrong thing, and boy, do we hate to admit when we do the wrong thing.

JM: Stories are good for making us admit what we don’t want to. In a third-year course I teach in the English Department here [at Laurentian University at Georgian College], we read indigenous and non-indigenous narratives from Canada and Australia that revisit the colonial past. There are several Australian novels that revisit history, but to my knowledge there aren’t a lot of Canadian novels that do the same. Your novel, *Three Day Road*, is one of the few Canadian novels that I’m aware of that performs that kind of historical work where indigenous peoples are concerned. In Australia now, historians are taking issues with the view offered by fiction writers, so that there is a fierce debate taking place around the question of whose vision (the historian’s or the writer’s) is legitimate.

JB: Right. And that debate hasn’t happened in Canada yet. At least not where I’m concerned. And I’m surprised really, in some ways, that it hasn’t with *Three Day Road*.

JM: Yes, and that’s what I wanted to ask you: If there has been any of that kind of reaction to your novel.

JB: No, no, because historians know. World War I historians know that there was talk of creating an all-Indian regiment, that there were many First Nations, Inuit and Metis men who had signed up and the fear that they weren’t going to mix well with white people and so you better create them their own regiment. I like to open people’s eyes up to these facts that they came out in huge numbers, especially comparative to population, and for a country that was treating them so horribly, there’s something fascinating about that.

JM: There isn’t the squabbling around numbers that we’ve seen in, say, Australia.

JB: Well that might change. Someone just sent me a manuscript to write a blurb for that deals with First Nations soldiers in World War I. And it’s interesting: his numbers don’t add up with mine. We shall see.

JM: In putting center stage Canadian stories, Native stories, that aren’t common public knowledge, *Three Day Road* implicitly questions modern-day imperialism. How does its fictional reconstruction of the past force readers to question Canada’s peacekeeping mission and the War in Afghanistan? Did you have any recent conflicts in mind when you were writing the novel?

JB: When I found out it was going to be published in the U.S. and the U.K., I wondered how those readerships would respond to it because they're the "owners" of World War I. The reviews were great. They'd always say, "Just when you thought you know everything about World War I, here's a perspective you haven't [encountered] before." That made me very happy.

But you know, we are certainly peacekeepers in Canada. I think in the last 50 years or so we are going in the absolutely wrong direction. In World War I we were known as the shock troops; in a battle of insurmountable odds, they put the Canadians and the Australians up front because we were vicious. So that is certainly part of our history. And again, in World War II we were asked to do impossible things and we did them. But after World War II we started moving in the right direction of being looked at as peacekeepers and I think that this [current] desire to go backward rather than forward—that we see in [Prime Minister] Harper—reimagines Canada in terms that are too simplistic.

JM: My final question has to do with the Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission.¹ As a writer, and as a public author who participates in the IFOA and other events, what do you think writers and artists can bring to these processes—formal and informal—of political reconciliation?

JB: Well everyone closes their ears after a while to the politicians and all the talk. And the arts is just a different, and for me, more interesting lens through which to view history and the now, and the question of how we've ended up where we are. As a writer, you're given more freedom. It relates a lot to the Australian debates you're talking about: What are the artist's rights? What are the artistic boundaries? And I say, we don't have boundaries; that's not the way to look at it. We should be able to paint or write or take photos of the world as we see it and present it to the world and if it inflames, it inflames; if it cajoles, it cajoles; if it soothes, it soothes. But the artist's job is to tell the truth through lying. The writer's job is to make up the truth but hopefully it is the truth.

JM: The artist provides another dimension to the truth.

JB: And I think adding that dimension makes things more complex and complicated, but in a good way.

JM: It brings forth the human consequences, whereas political discourse is very sanitized.

JB: Yes, exactly.

JM: I'm thinking here of one of the stories in *Born With A Tooth*, "Legless Joe Versus the Black Robe," in which Legless Joe is asked to go before the commission and give his testimony. Father Jimmy tells him "that being able to say out loud that I had been bugged is part of the healing." He dismisses him, telling him "it made me feel like bugging him" (192). And then he participates in a drumming ceremony, which is much more healing for him. Do you think that Native customs and ceremonies are more meaningful than the formal political process undertaken by the federal government?

JB: Yes, they add one more layer to what is a complex situation. Absolutely. Yes, because I burn out on political discussion. That's why I am a writer. I write non-fiction but it is ultimately a side-job to whatever fiction I'm writing.

Note

1. The Indian Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission (IRSTRC) is a truth commission established by the Canadian federal government in 2005 in response to growing allegations of the widespread physical, sexual, and emotional abuse of Native, Metis, and Inuit children, thousands upon thousands of whom were forcibly removed from their families and communities as part of a project of cultural assimilation. The mandate, duties, and activities of the IRSTRC are outlined on the commission's official website (<http://www.trc.ca>).

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