

AN OPEN LETTER TO TED CHAMBERLIN BY WAY OF REVIEW

If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground.
J. Edward Chamberlin.
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2004. \$22.00.

Review by Susan Gingell, University of Saskatchewan

Dear Ted,

Thank you so much for my copy of *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? Finding Common Ground*; I can't tell you how many times I've asked students, colleagues, and friends to listen to this or that passage in the book. In writing this review, I wondered at first if you'd find it odd that I want to talk about style before substance, but decided that you'd see a choice between them as a false one, akin to the choices between imagination and reality, word and world, upon which so much of your book turns. I chose the medium of the open letter principally because I felt you were talking to your readers as much as writing to us, using personal anecdote and colloquial language, issuing impassioned directives—"Think about it" (19, 29) and "let's be clear what this means" (129)—and reaching out in your rhetoric to engage us with more than rhetorical questions, like the one about the Rastafarian song "By the Rivers of Babylon": "Songs like this don't really bring the dead back, or take you home, do they?" (75). These are questions that seduce us toward agreement before you provide answers, the passion of the response as powerfully persuasive as *what* you say: "Oh, but they do; they surely do" (75).

Other stylistic features also help readers to climb aboard the train of your thought and travel far along its lines. Sometimes it's the way you tell a story to make a point (which can later be economically referenced as analogy) when you've discussed a story from another context or part of the world, and by this means you build the case for the common ground you're looking for. I was immediately taken by your tale of yourself as a child trying to eat peas with a knife, as did Mary Kozak, the Ukrainian woman who helped your mother with housework and was dear to both your parents. And I smiled when you said that the habit your parents were quite prepared to accept as proper for Mary they saw as simply bad manners when you tried it—because the ceremony was not yours. What gave the story even more resonance was the way you made it echo when explaining linguistic relativity or the embarrassed reaction of Judge McEachern – like that of your parents watching you bring someone else's

eating style to your family table – to the Gitskan elder Antgulilibix wanting to sing as she shared her *ada'ox*, which recounts the Gitskan past, in the courtroom that was hearing her people's land claim. Often you lend a poetic texture to your prose by marrying through sound a number of things we've come to see as contradictions, opposites, of each other, things like myth and math, Genesis and genetics. And I found myself primed to assent to your argument about the common ground between the multiple forms of *Them* and *Us* that both inevitably constitute our ways of being in the world and threaten us with extinction if we cannot find the common ground of wonder, the mystery of paradox, that is at the heart of all our stories. Similarly, I'm prepared to recognize the danger if we cannot come to recognize the way we all both believe what metaphor is telling us and don't believe, and thus learn to do the same with stories, theirs as well as ours.

The way you wear so lightly the considerable learning acquired during your tenure as researcher for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and director of an international project on oral and written traditions is enormously winning, and the book calls forth admiration just for the range of your examples as they run from Australian Aboriginal resistance oratory to African praise songs, cowboy lyrics to blues laments, creation stories to constitutions, nursery rhymes to national anthems, and modern Western canonical poetry to ancient and contemporary riddles and charms. If there's one kind of voice I barely caught though, Ted, it is the voice of women. I'm simply not satisfied by your following up your discussion of "I am a Man of Constant Sorrow" with the parenthetical note:

For those who are wondering where the women were, there was another version written by Sara Ogan, a young miner's wife in Harlan County, Kentucky, who had to leave her home because her family was blacklisted from the mines for taking part in a strike. It was called "Girl of Constant Sorrow." (99)

I'm troubled at the book's androcentricity (just five women actually speak in your book, four if you don't count Billie Holiday singing someone else's lyrics). So my heart lurches a little before I can applaud the serious attention you pay to the sometimes-sentimental poems and songs that have given ordinary people pleasure, strength in times of trouble, or a model of moral behaviour to aspire to, works like Ian Tyson's hymn to western painter Charlie Russell, "The Gift," and the "Invictus" and "If" of Victorian England. You're sure right, though, that singing the blues somehow lends comfort to our hurt hearts.

That you avoid notes signaled by superscript numbers caused me some consternation, but after reading the volume through the first time, I found most of my questions about sources were answered in the notes I then discovered at the back. Still, I occasionally felt slightly frustrated by the lack of information that scholars usually convey in endnotes, like examples of the Aboriginal stories you mention (but don't exemplify)

when explaining that both Aboriginal peoples and European transplants to North America told stories that wondered about the others with whom they now shared a continent but who seemed not to behave in a civilized manner. Yet because I know that many readers are turned away by a book with footnotes, and given the crucial importance of what the book is trying to do—about which, more in a moment—your making the book reader-friendly to a broad audience did seem to me more important than providing detailed scholarly apparatus.

I have to admit that I don't really buy your assertion about the scope of the book's aim: "This book has a modest ambition: to give the reader a sense of how important it is to come together in a new understanding of the power and the paradox of stories" (239). Even what you immediately go on to say suggests a far greater significance for the work: "If we can do this, I believe we will be able to understand how the contradictions that are part of the art of storytelling are also part of the nature of our lives *and our conflicts over land*, and how the way we divide the world into Them and Us is inseparable from the way we understand the stories themselves [emphasis added]." So much in your book commands a respect for the Aboriginal peoples and other dehumanized and murderously oppressed peoples of the world, and your proposal that Canadians return underlying title to the country, now vested in the Crown, to the First Peoples of this land is surely an immodest proposal, if also an original and potentially promising one. But when you explain that such a return would change nothing and everything, replacing one legal fiction with another while yet also "finally provid[ing] a constitutional ceremony of belief in the humanity of aboriginal peoples in the Americas" (231) and a model for other nations with similar histories of land appropriation, I could have wished that you had not characterized that return—without qualification—as a "trick" (229). Wouldn't it have been better to choose a different term when so many Euro-Canadians' actions in relation to Aboriginal peoples and their land must seem to have been tricks to those peoples? I just can't convince myself that this trick will align easily in their minds with their own trickster traditions. Had you been a little clearer about the need to match symbolic with material actions, which I know you believe in, my worries might have been diminished.

In the end, though, this book, which seems to me the result of a lifetime of reflection, is one for which I'm grateful. It's a humane celebration of our capacities to serve human needs in story and song, believing them and not, welcoming equally the strange and the familiar. Oh, and for the final gift of a great answer the next time I'm pressed to explain just what it is people like me do at the university, a thousand thank-yous, Ted:

I tell stories. That's what we all do there, in ceremonies of belief and disbelief, of wonder and surprise. We tell stories about evolution or the decline and fall of the Roman Empire; we imagine the drama of a Big Bang or a Great War; we sing songs

about justice and freedom or chaos and order. And we make up new stories and songs. We call the old ones teaching and the new ones research. (234)

Yours in admiration,
Susan Gingell