

Actor lends voice to native stories

SHERI BLOCK CALGARY HERALD

It took Tantoo Cardinal 30 years to feel confident enough to write her first short story.

But now that it's been included in a new collection among the likes of Tomson Highway and Thomas King, it's all the confidence the acclaimed Canadian actor needs to keep going.

"It's an incredible honour," says Cardinal. "When I was offered the opportunity, the awesomeness of it struck me at the moment and I wasn't sure how my story would stand up, but I just trusted that the people who were in charge of everything are not going to put something in that's going to be shabby ... I think it was good medicine for me to be able to finally do something I've been wanting to do for over 30 years."

Our Story: Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past is the first collection of short stories from Canadian aboriginal writers. The nine stories in the book are fictional, but reinterpret history through an aboriginal perspective.

The book was officially launched Tuesday at Forest Lawn High School by project co-ordinators Dominion Institute and Enbridge Inc., along with a national contest to encourage young aboriginal writers to write their stories about Canadian history.

Cardinal says she wishes literature like this had existed when she was growing up. Born in Fort McMurray and raised in Anzac, Cardinal went to a high school in Edmonton that was one of the largest in Western Canada at the time.

Cardinal told the group of students she experienced severe culture shock and remembers feeling like she, and other aboriginal people, were being "slammed" every time she read a book.

"By the time I hit high school, I was already done with books. I barely made it through high school," says Cardinal, who now lives in Calgary. "I think it's incredibly important that people hear our history from our own perspective because that doctrine has to be done. We were really abused and misaligned through the course of this business of education and beyond."

Cardinal has since acted in numerous TV shows and films in Canada and the U.S., including North of 60, Moccasin Flats, Blood River, Legends of the Fall and Dances with Wolves.

The inaugural Canadian Aboriginal Youth Writing Challenge, also launched at the Tuesday event, encourages young people ages 15 to 18 to write their own stories about Canadian history.

"I'm fascinated to see what moments in history they consider to be important and what their perspective on it is," says Cardinal, who will serve as a judge.

The winners of the contest, who will receive a cash prize and trip to Ottawa, will be announced next spring.

Forest Lawn High School student Tina Brothers, 16, says it was inspiring to have Cardinal come to her school for the book launch. "It kind of helps for aboriginals to be inspired to write their own stories about their lives," says Brothers, who is considering writing her story, too. "I think it's really great and inspiring for kids our age to read about the (aboriginal) culture and everything."

Cardinal's contribution to Our Story is set between 1915 and 1936, a time of struggle for Metis people. Many were illiterate, and white settlers and immigrants brought in by the railroad were snatching up the available jobs.

"I hope people will get some kind of an understanding, a compassion or an empathy for when it's

a time of hopelessness. My character kind of came From a broken family and, at the same time, he had pieces here and there that gave him strength ... it's a case of find* hope and renewing," says Cardinal

For more information on the writing contest, log on to www.dominion.ca.