

Aboriginal writers tell it like it was in n~

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At Lumberman's Arch in North Vancouver there is a huge hole in the earth. It was created very recently, but represents the longevity of a people.

Writer Lee Maracle used to take her children to see that huge hole when they were small. She wanted them to know just how connected they were to this place and to the "friendly tribes" that belonged to the area.

"That hole is all the shells from our history of being there dug up," Maracle said. "They dug up all the shells from our village there and used them as road material. Clam shells, oyster shells, mussel shells..."

To some that hole might be an iconic reminder of what was and what now is for the Musqueam, the Squamish, the Tsleil Watuth, a sad void in a city filled to capacity with new peoples, their industry, their modern lives. But to Maracle that hole is exhilarating, tremendously inspiring.

"Longevity; connecting one to another. The number of grandmothers behind you are infinite. The number of grandfathers who brought food here are infinite."

It's about history, that hole.

And so is a new book published by Doubleday Canada, commissioned by the Dominion Institute and sponsored by Enbridge. It's called *Our Story: Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past*.

The Dominion Institute is a non-profit organization founded by a group of young people who wanted to change the perception that Canadian history is boring. The institute put together a list of Aboriginal writers and invited each to

contribute a fictionalized account of a defining moment in history that was personally important.

"One of the interesting things, questions, that was raised quickly that we actually had to ask ourselves was 'What history are we asking them to share,'" said Alison Faulknor, managing director of the Dominion Institute. "We had to sort of ask ourselves 'Are we asking them to write about Aboriginal history? About Canadian history? When does that narrative begin?'"

The institute decided that there would be no constraints put on the writers. They could write about whatever, or whose ever, history that inspired them.

What we get in *Our Story* is a mix of history from before European contact, like in Brian Maracle's fictionalized account of the creation story of the Iroquois, to contact and conflict with the newcomers, such as in Drew Hayden Taylor's work about the Oka crisis.

Tom King's work is called *Coyote and the Enemy Aliens* and tells the tale of the Japanese internment in Canada during the Second World War. A strange choice, perhaps, but King says in his contributor's note before the work that when he hears the story of the Japanese internment, he thinks of Indians, because the Japanese experience is "strikingly similar to the treatment that the Canadian government has always afforded Native people."

"Each [author] really specifically and quickly picked a story, which was interesting," said Faulknor. "These were stories— at the back of their minds they felt were important to tell. I think each author felt very strongly and felt a commitment to making sure that Canadians learned about this moment in history. It might be a moment that we know about well, like Oka, but just looking at it from an Aboriginal perspective. Or it might be about a specific community or an individual that isn't necessarily a period in history that we learn about in history textbooks. So I think they each felt very personally committed to the story that they told and felt it was important that it reached a greater audience."

Lee Maracle's contribution is about Snauq, now known as False Creek in Vancouver. Her story tells us about Khahtsahlano and the group of people he led who occupied Snauq, and then the gradual loss of Snauq to the European

settlers. Perhaps more specifically, it tells of the absolute loss of Snauq recently in the courts to the Squamish, and the settlement that was made to compensate for it.

Goodbye, Snauq is about conflict, emotional conflict in coming to terms with the past in order to fully participate in the future.

"I think that about represents where we are at as Indigenous people, generally," said Maracle, who had the story of Khahtsahlano turning in the back of her mind for the past 20 years. "I wanted to capture that conflictedness in a character because so many of our people find ourselves in that situation and that it speaks to the kind of conflict of giving up Snauq as well, and at the same time the \$92 million represents development, which we need badly to enter the modern world."

Maracle had second thoughts about her subject matter given that the settlement was still pretty fresh in the minds of those involved.

"It's controversial. The Squamish, the Musqueums and the Tsleil Watuth actually argued about who owned Snauq."

She said a number of people didn't want the settlement and their objections were two-fold. "One is that Squamish originally came to live at Snauq as a result of an earlier epidemic when the Tsleil Watuth people were killed in huge numbers, so they asked the Squamish people to come and help them repopulate their villages, which they did. And then later it became a Squamish reserve...

"Plus the [Tsleil Watuth] agreed not to make any land claims further into the area, which means that we've lost it forever, which is a big ache for some people."

In the end, Maracle reconciled her own conflict and was glad to contribute the story to the Dominion Institute's project. She hopes the stories in the book will help people face themselves.

"If you are Aboriginal you'll face what has happened to you and find some way to reconcile yourself to it, and if you are not Native you will face what was done to us and find some way to reconcile yourself to it personally. I think that's what

story does anyway. That's what my hope is."

Faulknor wants readers to stop and consider history from a new perspective and she quotes from the foreward of Our Story by Gov. Gen. Adrienne Clarkson, who writes: "When we read a work of literary art, it should never be a purely didactic exercise, a moralizing lesson. It is something that pleases us and helps us to understand what we haven't experienced, what we might not have known that we didn't know." That's the impact Faulknor hopes the book will have.

To keep the momentum going, the Dominion Institute has developed a second part to the Our Story project, and that is an Aboriginal youth writing challenge where young people will get the chance to play author. They get the chance to write a fictionalized account of a moment in Aboriginal history and like the professional authors published in Our Story, the moment is left up to them to choose.

The contest entries must be in by May 6, 2005, and an announcement of the winner will be made on June 21, 2005, National Aboriginal Day. Rules and regulations for the contest can be found on the Dominion Institute Web site at www.dominion.ca.