

Women,

CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL ISSUES,
AND RESISTANCE



Shirley Bear, *Wigist Eb eskum ok'niss, (Let's play golf), 1991*
A tribute to the women warriors at K'nesatki
Serigraph on paper

BOOKLET

2



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Cherylynn wonders who is hiding their faces in this wonderful painting by Shirley Bear, Maliseet artist, on the cover of this book. Are all Canadian women hiding, or is it the children, golfers, or white society? Who?

CHERYLYNN'S GROWN-UP JOB

I've learned at least one thing: if high school kids think you don't know exactly what you're talking about they run right over you. It's like the old cartoon-- you are the Road Runner being completely flattened by Bugs Bunny, only you don't pop up again.

Trouble is, now I know exactly what my friend Bonita means about Aboriginal people, and how they are treated by ROC (the rest of Canada), but my grade 10 class disagrees with me. Why? Because the Aboriginal "truth" is different from the "truth" some members of the class get from their families and friends. And they are some mouthy kids.

Take residential schools. From the Aboriginal point of view, you've got loss of language, family, spirituality, hunting and gathering, nomadic housing, and love. It feels like the high school class has been told and told these "facts."

Yet those students whose relatives worked in residential schools think teachers and staff were doing the best they could, they thought what they were doing was right: English, a little strong discipline, civilizing Christianity; manners that would allow the Indians to assimilate.

I'd rather win than fight.



I remember a story, told to my university class by Dorothy Christian, a brilliant Aboriginal doctoral student at UBC First Nations House of Learning. Christian said that where she grew up, near Penticton, BC, there was a very elderly grandmother who pulled a gun on the government official who tried to take her grandkids to residential school.

I think this will be a good answer to those in my grade 10 class who say only bad parents would “let” their kids be taken away. As if those parents had a choice. The Indian Agent was in total control of the lives of Aboriginal people who lived on reserves until the 1960s.

But how can I get them to see beyond their own privilege? My students are picturing their own Grandmas in a 4 bedroom back split, SUV in the garage, with her coffee perk full. In disgust their grandma takes all the grandkids to Tim’s for donuts when the Indian Agent comes calling. The students are picturing the Indian Agent appearing at the post-2000 urban homes of middle class white people who can just say “no.”

I’m sure I can get my students’ attention with scalping though: If I tell them that the law on scalping is still on the books in Nova Scotia they will actually feel sick.

“Imagine it,” I’ll say. “The 1756 proclamation that offers a bounty for each Mi’kmaq scalp has never been struck down.

“We need to start looking at what’s actually going on out there, some of the things that are not healthy for any community. Be observant. You know about the high suicide rates, bullying, and



mental health issues that are part of Aboriginal life. Maybe we are not doing what we need to do to help out, to give them hope. Maybe we can give hope to young people your age: tell them it's not all crap, it's not all negative, all adults are not dishonest and hypocritical and suspect, and there are people who can be trusted. Integrity is really important to me and I want it to be important to all of you."

Preaching is not a good idea, I realize. Our group of friends has been talking a lot about "integrity" lately, though.

Some of us who have stayed friends since grade school are now working in the so-called "helping professions." Even Nate teaches English as a Second Language. He is still pretty rough, doing his guy thing, but I like him. We are preparing Nate to teach overseas. Bonita, Nate, and I, along with the others, support each other at work whenever we can.

I decided to ask Bonita and several Elder women to visit my hard to reach class. Bonita says the Elders will help my students understand.

It surprises me how easy it is to find an Aboriginal Elder and set the visit up. Bonita assists. The Elders are very gentle and soft spoken. A trip to the local Friendship Centre (everybody can find this resource through the Association of Friendship Centres) makes the connection, and we arrange to pick up the Elder.

The class has researched an appropriate gift. They present tobacco to a kind-looking woman visitor with long white hair. You could hear a pin drop.



“My students can’t always live the negative,” I tell Bonita. “They can’t always live in hate, jealousy, and racism. There has to be something the students are for. A better world they are trying to build.”

Maybe the students will find it today. One of them says they wish they could talk to the Elders all the time. It makes them feel so peaceful.

We can’t do this all the time, I think. But once a month I’ll be back to the Friendship Centre to pick up a guest.



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His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada presented the Member of the Order of Canada insignia to Shirley Bear, C.M.
Credit: Sgt Ronald Duchesne, Rideau Hall



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His Excellency the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada presented the Order of Canada (Member C.M.) to Joan Glode, C.M.
Credit: Sgt Serge Gouin, Rideau Hall



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BONITA'S GROWN-UP JOB

At 25, I'm working with native women in trouble. My people. It's heaven.

"I make enough money to have my very own apartment. My own. No roommates. No family. Nobody wiping their feet on my bath towel. The apartment's small, but it's mine," I tell Cherylynn.

Best yet, my mother can no longer tell me what to do, who to see, and where to live. Cherylynn can drive herself in her own car to see whomever she wishes to visit, including our mothers if she wants to.

"Such is adult freedom," I chant.

We meet about twice a month in our fave bar with Nate and a few others we went to school with, who are also teachers or social workers.

However, I'm so angry I could spit when half-way through the fall term I go to visit Cherylynn's grade 10 class.

Everything is totally obvious: Colonialism. Racism. Denial of responsibility. Yet these non-Native folk, kids really, are going on as if they've just discovered these terrible things.

OK. I can just walk away, including from my friend Cherylynn—well, at least from her teaching problems. If I can't stand the heat I can get out of the kitchen. One of the students had this big insight: Mi'kmaq people helped the first settlers to not freeze in the dark, and kept them from starving.



So the students ask: “What’s that got to do with the Drunk Indian on the street?”

Actually nothing, I realize. I do not want to have anything to do with Mr. Drunk either. That is not the history I own.

I’m walking. These boots are made for walking.

Then I look at Shirley Bear’s painting. It’s in our book. Just look. *Cultivating Canada: Reconciliation Through the Lens of Cultural Diversity*, page 17. A woman whose face is muzzled. Is that me? A woman who is giving birth to the Nations and protecting life. I want that to be me.

“A tribute to women warriors at K’nesatkii” writes Shirley Bear in the book.



Beauty and pain can be intertwined. To own a scarred history is no simple feat when one has the option of identifying as Native or non-Native. That is a privilege in itself. The shame, however, is not unique and many do not/have not self-identified as Native.

So I will visit Cherylynn’s high school class again. I will explain about the brave women warriors. I will explain



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that the parents were not stupid and lazy to have their children taken away. If I'm lucky and smart I'll grow into a warrior. And brave? I'm not so brave. I'm frightened.

Next visit, the Elders calm the high school students right down. Elders speak softly, so you have to pay attention in order to hear. We sit in a circle and listen to what people say, giving each person a chance to talk.

The Elders do not tell you what you said was wrong.

Their respectful listening to the young people, to all of us, is a gift.

NATE'S GROWN-UP JOB

"I'm really impatient to leave Canada," I'll say to anyone who will listen.

It would be especially great to take a break from Mom. Does she believe she can walk on water?

To escape a possible wife from my little home community, picked out by Mom, I'm going overseas. Mom actually expects me to stay close to her and live the same old same old life, the way many of her friend's adult children have. No way.

Travel is the answer. I must get away.

I keep hearing from Bonita and Cherylynn about how bad Aboriginal people have had it in Canada. It's like a broken record with them. My people have had it just as bad. Maybe even worse. I am escaping.



Dr. Joan Glode(2nd from left) with the All Nations Drums, Halifax.
Photo: April Maloney.

Many of the white students with whom I grew up don't actually believe what we've been taught about Aboriginal Rights. Most of us feel this can't be true. Our ancestors couldn't have done something like that. It's rude, it's ignorant. Steal land! Sign false treaties! Break all our promises! Abuse children in school? Snatch children for adoption? Our ancestors couldn't have done all these things. It's completely wrong and very inappropriate. Get us away from these unbelievable Canadian Studies and Native Studies courses.

I suspect Aboriginal peoples are drunks, don't work, are not educated, and don't care about their children. My former classmate Bonita is an exception.



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Now that we are older I get along fairly well with Bonita, and mostly keep quiet about my opinions. What is this stuff Bonita is always going on about?

Bonita says Aboriginal people use their land, their fish, the animals they hunt, everything, for a spiritual purpose? Truth is they drink, they smoke, they party, they make tons of kids, they walk around with their braided hair, and they work the system. I certainly keep that rant to myself.

"I'm out of Canada, teaching English as a Second Language," I told Cherylynn, Bonita, and the others at one of their get-togethers.

I'm free at last.

Weeks later the group, including Bonita, gets together to help me get my lesson plans sorted out to go overseas.

"I'm tired of teaching English as a Second Language to rich university students who come to Canada with their oil sheik fathers' money," I tell everybody. "Overseas, the students will need me more, really look up to me."

In the new fall term, I am gone.

The first good thing in my new country is the guys, the men, seem really in charge. Men are not always pussy footing around trying to make chicks feel good.



No driving for women – good! Seems like a great idea, since women aren't good drivers anyway. Not much education for women – good! No dressing like hookers just to tempt me – good! I think these restrictions might be a little much, but I'm not complaining.

Then one day, after I've been in this new country for four months, I see a woman in the market with no fingers. A co-teacher of mine who is showing me around states:

"A punishment from her partner probably."

In my weekly email to Cherylynn and Bonita, I describe the no fingers woman. They lecture me:

"Wake up guy! What do you think we've been telling you? Don't you know about 600 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada? Don't you know that on average, every six days a woman in Canada is killed by her intimate partner? Don't you know old buddy Nate that on any given day in Canada, more than 3,000 women, along with their 2,500 children, are living in an emergency shelter to escape domestic violence? What do you think we've been trying to tell you all these years?"

I am shocked because the woman with no fingers in this new country is old. She is old enough to be my grandmother. And now Bonita and Cherylynn are telling me it happens in Canada too.

Actually, deep down inside, I knew this. Dad always said you



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should be able to control women just by raising your voice. You shouldn't have to hurt them.

I realize I miss my grandmother. We are the best of friends. Why aren't I at home making her life better?

Nobody's grandmother or mother or daughter or wife or girlfriend should be mutilated like the old woman with no fingers. Not white people, black ones, yellow ones, or even red Aboriginal people.

I write back to the group at home:

"I'm on my way back home at the end of this term. There's work to do in Canada. I may even help out Bonita and Cherylynn with some of their projects!"



SOME QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION AFTER READING BOOKLET #2

1. Which character do you identify with the most in the story—25 year old Cherylynn, Nate, or Bonita--and why?
2. If you could change one action or statement of any of the characters (Cherylynn, now a high school teacher; Nate; now a teacher of English as a Second Language; or Bonita, now a social worker) which statement or action would you change and how?



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