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Why Indigenous Literatures Matter

Daniel Heath Justice

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018. 306 pp. ISBN 9781771121767 (paperback)

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“This book is avowedly political” (16) proclaims Daniel Heath Justice in the introduction to *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Such statements can turn a reader off in these heady times of political hatred and polarization. However, unlike with much overtly political literary criticism, and unlike with much political commentary, Justice’s book is not a case of preaching to the converted, and neither is his tone angry. It is often matter-of-fact: “To argue for and produce Indigenous writing as such is necessarily to engage in political struggle and to challenge centuries of representational oppression” (17). In other words, for a Cree or Anishinaabe or Mi’kmaq author, or a Cherokee such as Justice, the mere act of putting pen to paper can be an act of rebellion.

Justice has cast a wide net and written a book that anyone can read and enjoy – from the Indigenous literatures specialist to the lay reader. Aware that he is speaking to a diverse readership, Justice does not assume his reader is familiar with the wealth of past and present Indigenous creations.

For those of us whose knowledge might not extend far beyond Thomas King, Tomson Highway, and perhaps a smattering of individual works by Drew Hayden Taylor and Eden Robinson, the book’s appendix, “A Year of #HonouringIndigenousWriters,” is a good place to begin. There, we are offered a daily diet of writings by Indigenous authors new and old. The menu begins with “1 Jan: Beth Brant/Degonwadonti (Bay of Quinte Mohawk), 1941–2015. Multi-genre writer. *Writing as Witness*” and concludes with “31 Dec: Mary Kathryn Nagle (Cherokee Nation). Playwright, lawyer. *Sliver of a Full Moon; Waaxe’s Law*.” If this list seems like a cross between a New Year’s resolution and Harold Bloom’s imposing 1000+ list from his *Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, it has the virtue of being a manageable inroad to an Indigenous canon.

May 26 is devoted to “E. Pauline Johnson/Tekahionwake (Mohawk), 1861–1913. Poet, speaker, activist.” Canadianists and Canadians of a certain vintage will be



familiar with her poem “The Song My Paddle Sings” and its facile rhymes that sing of the Great White North (“West wind, blow from your prairie nest, / Blow from the mountains, blow from the west”). Instead, Justice spends some time with “The Cattle Thief,” a poem in which a Cree man has been killed for his hunger-driven transgression of stealing livestock. Written in the voice of the daughter, the poem contains these accusatory lines, addressed at the whites that murdered her father:

You have killed him, but you shall not dare to touch him now he’s dead.
You have cursed, and called him a Cattle Thief, though you robbed him first of bread –
Robbed him and robbed my people – look there, at that shrunken face,
Starved with a hollow hunger, we owe to you and your race!

We may recognize Johnson’s easy rhymes and narrative verve, but, as Justice deadpans, “[t]his isn’t the Pauline Johnson many Canadian readers grew up with; this isn’t the Johnson that Canada regards as its own” (68). Thus, in addition to giving readers tips for “new” reading, Justice lets us re-discover authors we think we know as we read our way through the year.

Justice’s chapter titles seem at once grandiose and old-fashioned in this age of non-reading: “How Do We Learn to Be Human?” “How Do We Behave as Good Relatives?” “How Do We Become Good Ancestors?” and “How Do We Learn to Live Together?” are among them. If such questions seem overly ambitious, Justice makes a convincing case for why stories, still the driving force of literature, matter. His arguments are not new, but neither do they sound dryly intellectual (stories are the epistemological framework crucial to cognition and making sense of the world) or semi-tautological (“The truth about stories is that that’s all we are,” in Thomas King’s phrasing). Justice provides gentle and mellifluous reminders.

Stories matter because they are “agents of both harm and healing” (21). If the stories told about you have robbed you or your people of voice, they matter deeply and painfully. Stories matter because, “[a]lthough we are born into human bodies, it’s our teachings – and our stories – that make us human” (44). Stories matter because “[w]e know ourselves only through stories. The unstoried life is a terrible thing to comprehend, a soul-deep desolation” (45). Stories matter because they let us see “that others beyond ourselves have identities, desires, loves, fears, and feelings, and that our own behaviour can either enrich their lives or diminish them” (78). Literature is a pathway to understanding oneself and an imaginative bridge between people.

Justice has stated in an interview that his book project “started out of spite.” He’d had enough of countering claims that there is a dearth of Indigenous writing. This assertion is insulting because it robs peoples of a literary culture, while serving as a justification for not including Indigenous literatures on syllabuses. The boldest



statement Justice makes in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matters* comes just two paragraphs after his early claim that he is being “avowedly political”: “We are sorely in need of more accountable kindness in our critical work as well as in our relationships, and it’s my fervent hope that this book holds that principle firmly at its centre” (18). I cannot remember the last time a work of criticism wore such a hopeful heart on its sleeve.

Why Indigenous Literatures Matter fulfils the author’s fervent hope. Beautifully written, solidly argued, resplendent with textual examples and close readings of those examples, Daniel Justice’s generous book belongs on every Canadianist’s shelf.

