

Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers

Adrian M. Downey

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Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage

Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers

by Aubrey Jean Hanson

Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020, viii + 182 pages

ISBN: 9781771124508 (paperback)

Reviewed by:

Adrian M. Downey

Mount Saint Vincent University

There is a running joke in our house that I can never give a book as a gift without reading it first. When we met, my partner was a librarian, and I was a graduate student. We both loved reading, and we both loved books. So, for the first year or more of our relationship, we gave each other a lot of books. The first book I gave my partner was a copy of Thomas King's (2003) *The Truth about Stories* and, of course, I had to re-read it before I gave it to her. The same thing happened with Thomas King's (1993) *Green Grass, Running Water* and then again with Leanne Simpson's (2013) *Islands of Decolonial Love*. Sometimes I tried to hide these gifts by reading as delicately as possible, but she always knew. Today, I don't bother. Sometimes she'll ask, "what are you reading" and I'll reply, "you'll find out at Christmas!"

My partner is now a poet and a graduate student, and she enjoys reading about other writers' processes. So, when I saw Métis scholar Aubrey Jean Hanson's book, *Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers*, on the shelf at a local bookstore, I thought it would make a great gift. Inevitably, somewhere in the process of giving the gift, I opened the book myself and was immediately drawn in by the many layers of understanding presented through these conversations.

The layers I see in Hanson's book pertain to insights into Indigenous literatures, Indigenous education, and contemporary Indigenous issues. On one level, readers may emerge from the text with new titles to add to their classroom and personal libraries. On another, readers might take heart in the writers' words of encouragement about the fear of making mistakes. Deeper still, readers may see all the beautiful complexity held within these conversations and emerge from the text feeling inspired.

Comprising introductory and concluding chapters and nine interviews with Indigenous

writers, the text is diverse and nuanced. The opening chapter situates the book in the inter-related, but distinct, conversations around Indigenous education and Indigenous literatures. Hanson also articulates her work as informed by the guiding frameworks of both resurgence and reconciliation. The former “focuses on movements arising from within Indigenous communities” (Hanson, 2020, p. 25) and is clearly at the heart of Hanson’s work, while the latter “focuses on the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people” (Hanson, 2020, p. 25). These dualistic foci gesture toward the myriad audiences to whom the book may speak: teachers, writers, professors, and students of literature; teachers thinking about reconciliation work in classrooms; Indigenous writers, educators, and students; pre-service language arts teachers; anyone who reads Indigenous literatures.

Each interview is prefaced by a description of the writer’s published works and achievements. These prefaces help to introduce the reader to the writer and their works. Hanson notes in her introduction that the interviews were not selected to be representative in any capacity, but rather that they unfolded one after another between 2015 and 2018. There is, however, a sound diversity of perspectives from the writers interviewed, who include Richard Van Camp, David A. Robertson, Katherena Vermette, Warren Cariou, Lee Maracle, Sharron Proulx-Turner, Daniel Heath Justice, Tenille Campbell, and Marilyn Dumont. The writers share their own experiences with education, teaching, and writing, and there are gentle invitations to wisdom within their words.

One of the unique contributions of this book is the way Hanson asks the writers to reflect on education. Hanson brings her experience as an educator and her work with teachers, both pre- and in-service, into these conversations, offering collaborative answers to the question of why Indigenous literatures ought to matter for teachers and students. Here, the conversations turn toward learning empathy, learning through story, building relationships to the resources, content, contexts, and peoples, and engaging in reconciliation work despite the fear of getting it wrong.

Another contribution of this book is found in interconnections between Indigenous literatures and Indigenous communities. Hanson (2020) notes that one of the things Indigenous literatures can do is “create and sustain communities” (p. 19). Hanson furthers this by saying, “Writing and reading Indigenous literatures thus entails responsibility: it is not abstract material that is being handled, but rather the imaginative and written being of the communities invested in them” (p. 20). These responsibilities are discussed throughout the text from different perspectives, and they resonate even in the closing paragraph of the conclusion, which quotes from *The Truth about Stories* (2003): “Don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (King, 2003, p. 29). In my mind, nothing could be clearer as to the responsibilities of reading.

In each interview, Hanson returns to the question of “why Indigenous literatures matter”, and the answers offered continually deepen the reader’s understanding of why these are stories worth telling. Indigenous literatures resist settler colonial erasure, they reclaim the erotic, they envision new futures where Indigenous people thrive, and much more.

Daniel Heath Justice, author of *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), captures all of this eloquently: “Indigenous literatures matter because *we* do [emphasis original]” (D. Justice in Hanson, 2020, p. 117). That statement, I think, speaks loudly, and I hope we are all listening.

I gave my first copy of *The Truth about Stories* to an exchange student from China; the second copy was “lent” to a colleague. Likewise, Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) has never stayed long in my library because it always gets “lent” or gifted. Once these books are gone, I always seek out another copy because they matter to me—intellectually, politically, and emotionally. Today, as I face the prospect of finally giving *Literatures, Communities, and Learning* to my partner, I’m thinking I might have to get myself a copy, but I hold no illusions about that copy staying long. This is another book that will one day have a storied past of lendings, giftings, and readings. I think others will feel the same.

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