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## Our home and native land ... really

**OurStory: Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past** By Tantoo Cardinal, et al. Doubleday

Canada, 250 pages, \$32.95

REVIEWED BY WARREN CARIOU

Canadian historians have recently begun a wholesale reevaluation of the roles of aboriginal people in our history, but despite this laudable shift of focus, the practise of Canadian history remains largely unchanged in one crucial respect: Native people continue to be treated as the objects of research, rather than as the creators of historical knowledge. *Our Story* attempts to address this inequity by providing us with nine stories about the past, written by some of our most distinguished aboriginal writers. The result is a collection that promises to redefine our ideas of what history can be.

The most important thing about these extraordinarily varied stories is that they give us detailed and moving accounts of aboriginal people as human beings with their own highly developed understandings of time, space, progress and value. Native people are subjects here, not objects, and readers are invited to share that particular subjecthood, to glimpse perspectives on the past that they may never have considered or imagined.

Sometimes this viewpoint allows us to see the standard Western history in an uncanny looking glass that reveals its distortions, its oneness, its contingency. However, this book is not merely a critique. It is, instead, a home for many different worlds of historical possibility.

We can see this clearly in Brian Maracle's *The First Words*, an Iroquois creation story, recounting the activities and the teachings of the creator, Shonkwaya'tison, and his relations. The most remarkable thing about this story is the fact that it is included in this collection – that it is treated not as an anthropological artifact, but as an act of living, historical memory. Maracle writes, "The Creation Story is more than just a story. We take its teachings to be the guiding light in how we conduct our lives." Seeing this narrative as a kind of history, rather than as a myth or a legend, gives us valuable insight into Iroquois understandings of time, reality and responsibility.

Basil Johnston's *The Wampum Belt Tells Us* is another masterful history in the oral style, focusing on the period immediately before the War of 1812, when Anishinaubae people in the Lake Simcoe region were called upon to aid in the defence of Upper Canada. The Wampum Belt is a repository of Anishinaubae history; and its lessons form

the basis of the community's decision to support the Canadians against the incursions of the "Long Knives" to the south.

However, in the following years Canada reneges on its promise to protect the Anishinaubae people from European settlement, and in the ensuing

disarray, the Wampum Belt itself is lost. Its absence becomes a potent symbol of indigenous historical sensibility being displaced by the acquisitive logic of settlement history, with its dreams of manifest destiny.

In *Goodbye, Snaug*, Lee Maracle revisits the place that is now known as Vancouver's False Creek, trying to come to terms with the colonial history that has taken it away from the native people who once inhabited it. She hearkens back to Squamish Chief Khahtsahlano's laments for the inlet that was radically transformed during his lifetime by dredging, pollution and real-estate development. "The magic of the white man," he says, "is that he can change everything." Despite the devastation of these changes, Maracle chooses to include herself not only in the past of this place, but also in its future. She writes, "Khahtsahlano dreamed of being buried at Snaug. I dream of living there."

There are several other delicacies at this banquet of alternative histories. Thomas King's coyote story provides a wry and damning comparison between the internment of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War and the various ways in which colonial governments have entrapped and contained aboriginal people.

Tantoo Cardinal provides a haunting allegory of Métis history in her story of a man returning to his children after an unforeseen trauma has prompted him to temporarily abandon them. Tomson Highway's *Hearts and Flowers* is a beautifully modulated hymn to the power of art and also a solemn recognition of the day in 1960 when Canada's native people were "recognized as human" in the eyes of the government, by being granted the right to vote in federal elections.

Not all of the stories are so successful. Jovette Marchessault's fable of the Blessing Path is marred by clichéd phrases, likely the result of a faulty translation from the French, and Drew Hayden Taylor's examination of the Oka crisis never gets beyond dull platitudes and wooden dialogue. But as a whole, this is a remarkable collection, one that should be read by everyone who wants to expand his ideas of what the past can mean.