Children's books on contemporary North American Indian/Native/Métis life: a selected bibliography of books and professional reading materials

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Résumé: Du matériel pédagogique vraiment professionnel, des romans sans parti pris et des essais adaptés à tous les niveaux de jeunes lecteurs, qui permettent de pallier l'incompréhension des élèves à l'égard des populations autochtones, sont maintenant disponibles. Deux bibliographies viennent compléter l'examen d'une question qui occupe l'avant-scène de l'actualité canadienne.

Books for children and young people can portray realistically what it is to be a Native person today in Canada.

During my five years as a volunteer teacher at the Canadian Museum of Civilization I became concerned about stereotypes of Native people, particularly the stereotype of them as a people living in the past. At the Museum children have a wonderful opportunity to examine artifacts, but afterwards many of them probably believe that what they learned about the past is what it still means to be Native. In much of Canada the Native population is small and not highly visible. Many children could ask out of ignorance, "Where do the Indians live now?"

What suggestions do Canadian books make in answer to this question? As an example, the "Kids in Canada" series shows all Canadian kids as modern, except in Selwyn Dewdney's The hungry time (Toronto: Lorimer, 1980) – sensitively written, but one that tells the story of a Mississauga family of long ago. Sometimes titles have unfortunate connotations: W. Ferry's Vanishing Communities series (Toronto: G.L.C., 1980) is about life long ago for hunters and gatherers, but the books were recommended to me as books about Native people in modern times.

Believing that good books can counter over-emphasis on the past, I started a research project on anti-racism and on books without bias. I here present my findings and recommendations, together with two reading lists. The first (Bibliography A) consists of references to professional reading materials, the second (Bibliography B) suggests books for children graded by level and coded as to Native participation in writing, illustrating, and publishing.

It is my understanding from talking to Native people that they wish to be called "First Nations" or "aboriginals" or "Native and Métis". (In the United States they are called Native Americans.) My bibliographies presented here
are only concerned with Indians, not Inuit, so I use the title "Indian/Native/Métis".

In general, research shows that "between ages two and five, children become aware of gender, race, ethnicity, and disabilities," and furthermore that if we want children to like themselves and value diversity, then we must learn how to help them to resist the biases and prejudices that are still too prevalent in our society" (Derman-Sparks, et al., Teaching young children to resist bias, 1). It is encouraging to note that children can learn to become unbiased. And books, of course, can help children to resist prejudice by creating a positive atmosphere at home and at school.

More specifically, articles in the Interracial Books for children Bulletin cite research showing how children's attitudes and achievements are affected by racial bias in books: "Reading and discussing six stories that portrayed American Indians positively caused non-Indian participants to become significantly more positive toward Indians. . . . In one of the few studies to look at both negative and positive effects of books, one group of children read positive stories about Inuit people while another group read negative stories about them. Students who read the positive stories developed more favourable attitudes toward Inuit people; students reading the negative stories became more negative in their attitudes." (Campbell and Wirtemberg, "How books influence children. . . .",3) Comparable results of Canadian studies on improving children's racial and ethnic attitudes are reported by Allan Melenchuk and Deloris Jack in the journal MC: Multiculturalism, issued by the Canadian Council for Multicultural and Intercultural Education.

Many children, according to American researcher Arlene Hirschfelder, still view "Indian people as far removed from their own way of life. . . . historic/traditional. . . warlike and hostile. . . . Most children do not recognize the great diversity among Indian people which existed in the past and continues today" (American Indian Stereotypes, 7-10). In Images of Indians held by non-Indians: a review of current Canadian research, Katie Cooke describes the stereotypes perceptible in Canadian public opinion, school textbooks, movies, television and so on. Her research report was issued by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in 1984.

My own research began with studies of criteria for evaluating stereotypes. Two research teams who have done invaluable work in providing annotated bibliographies and evaluation criteria are Catherine Verrall, Patricia McDowell and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in Canada, and Beverly Slapin, Doris Seale and Rosemary Gonzales in the United States. In Resource reading List 1990, Verrall asks, "What is a stereotype?" and answers "a fixed image, idea, trait, convention, lacking in originality or individuality, most often negative. . . . Stereotypes rob individuals and their cultures of human qualities and promote no real understanding of social realities. . . . Native heritage is viewed as a relic of the past belonging to some earlier phase of human development with
no part in the present" (7). A checklist of 12 questions to use in evaluating books for anti-racism appears in Slapin's *How to tell the difference*. Other lists include 15 questions in Verrall's *Resource Reading List*; 7 points to check in Saskatchewan Education, *Beyond Bias*; 16 headings covering many questions in Scott and Makokis, *Native Awareness*; 10 quick ways to analyze children's books issued by the Council on Interracial Books for children; 10 "Don'ts" in the Council's *Unlearning "Indian" stereotypes*.

Let me explain and comment on Slapin's criteria.

She suggests first that we look at picture books: "In ABC books, is 'I' for 'Indian'?' Although Slapin cites a 1964 book to illustrate the import of her question, this type of objectification of Native people, which dehumanizes them, still persists. Pictures of primitively-dressed Indians depicted in a modern setting still appear in books, cards, and posters. In *Unlearning 'Indian' stereotypes* (1977) and *Books without bias* (1988), Native people write about their dislike of this treatment and the misconceptions it perpetuates.

Slapin next asks, "In counting books, are 'Indians' counted? Ten little Indians. . . and then there were none" (4). Strangely, some consider it petty to object to this portrayal of Indians. But Native people, in *Unlearning 'Indian' stereotypes* (1977), point out that it objectifies them and, further, that it romances and trivializes the killing of Indians who historically have suffered genocidal destruction (19).

Citing a 1983 book, Slapin notes another problematical depiction. "Are children shown 'playing Indian'?" (4). To define a Native person by suggesting that one can "become Indian" by donning symbolic dress, enacting a role, or playing a game is to trivialize, diminish, and degrade Native people. Today, old "native lore and Indian princess" type of games are being replaced by Native values activities such as those discussed in Verrall's *All my relations*.

"Are animals dressed as 'Indians'?" (Slapin, 6) is another of Slapin's questions—one we would do well to apply to a much-loved Maurice Sendak book. The tradition continues in Graeme Base's glorious new book, *The eleventh hour: a curious mystery* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1988), where a handsome Bengal tiger comes dressed "as an Indian, with arrows, spear and bow" and a magnificent feathered headdress. This perpetuates yet another stereotype.

"Do 'Indians' have ridiculous names, like 'Indian Two Feet' or 'Little Chief'?" (Slapin, 7). Sometimes we still accept stories where a Native person is simply "the Indian" or "Injun Joe."

The distortions which Slapin's questions expose are also addressed by The Council on Interracial Books for Children: "Books are not merely frivolous entertainment. They are part of society's general culture... and reinforce and perpetuate its racism... To the extent that Native people continue to become inhuman, objectified 'Indians'... peoples of the past or creatures of fantasy... all alike... to the extent that children are taught to fear 'Indians'... to that extent continued aggression against Native people is supported" (20-21).
In this light, we should continue to examine Slapin’s other criteria for evaluating books. Some criteria need no comment or alteration to suit a Canadian point of view: "Look for stereotypes" – portrayal as primitive crafts people, simple tribal people (8); "Look for loaded words" – insulting overtones, racist adjectives, metaphors such as "eyes like a wolf’s" (11); "Look for tokenism" – Native people depicted stereotypically or as "whites with brown faces" (12); "Look at the lifestyles" – culture portrayed as backward, religion described as "superstitions" (18); "Look for standards of success" – Native people contrasted unfavourably with white middle-class suburbia (23); "Look at the role of women" – completely subservient to men? (25); "Look at the role of the Elders – dispensable, querulous, petulant, demanding? (26); "Look at the dialogue" (21). To illustrate the importance of this last imperative, Slapin cites lines from Lynne Reid Banks’ *The return of the Indian* (New York: Doubleday, 1986): "Woman see. Soldier come village. Braves fight." A review in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly* by Opal Moore and Donnarae McCann points out what is wrong: "grunts, growls, snarls, barks and shouts. . . broken caveman-style dialogue" (27).

Other points made by Slapin deserve amplification in a Canadian context. For instance, "Look for distortion of history" and the manipulation of words like "victory", "conquest", "massacre" (13). *Beyond Bias*, published by the Community Education Branch of the Saskatchewan Department of Education, reminds us to check interpretation regarding land ownership and land claims. For instance, bias is shown in the statement that "the land was sparsely populated and needful of civilizing influence. . . not used to capacity" (4). This shows an ignorance of Native tradition and culture. Native people in the Canadian west saw themselves as caretakers of the land and they stressed the importance of living in harmony with nature; these attitudes were very different from those of white settlers who valued the acquisition of land and property.

Slapin advises that we "Look for the effects on a child’s self-image. Is there anything in the story that would embarrass or hurt a Native child?" (27), Native people in Canada have taken a strong stand on this point. In Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *The little house on the prairie* (1935) we read, "Their eyes were black and still and glittering, like snake’s eyes. . . . The naked wild men stood by the fireplace. . . . she smelled a horribly bad smell." In February 1989 a resolution condemning this book was passed by Alberta Chiefs at a conference for Treaty 8 Indian bands. Teachers and others who use the book should be aware that it needs careful interpretation and bridging, maybe paraphrasing. Slapin quotes an American Native woman, Doris Seale, on how, as a child, she reacted to this in the classroom – how she used to sit, with dry mouth and pounding heart, head down, praying that nobody would look at her (11). In *School libraries in Canada*, Beatrice Culleton writes about Grade 5: "We’re reading about the Indian torturing and scalping. I hear the other students making noises of shocked horror. My eyes are glued to the words. My head is bent. I don’t want
to look up. I don’t want to see if anybody is looking at me accusingly, or repulsively" (47-52).

I would emphasize some other criteria: look at the copyright date. A number of old books, products of another era, are still on library shelves. These books discuss "red Indians", "primitive peoples" in contact with "civilization", etc. If these books are being used now, they should be introduced with care. "Look for bias by omission." Are Native people simply not there in much of Canada’s history or modern life? Are they simply mentioned at the beginning of the book? Are they there in history but totally ignored in modern times? "Look at the author’s perspective." Is there an ethnocentric bias which leads to distortions or omissions? Are Arctic lands seen as "faraway places"?

Finally, "Look at the author’s or illustrator’s background" (Slapin, 28). What is there in the author’s background that qualifies him or her to write about Native peoples in Canada in an accurate, respectful way? Are Native consultants being used? Are Native people involved in the writing, translating, illustrating or publishing of the book? Are Native people reviewing books? Is their part acknowledged? The Ojibwa poet and story-teller, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, writing in the Toronto Globe and Mail, reminds us that non-Native writers too often borrow from or "appropriate" from the Native experience: "Stories are not just entertainment. Stories are power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of a people. Stories are how a people, a culture thinks. Such wonderful offerings are seldom reproduced by outsiders" (A-7).

Recently there has been a flowering of writing by Native people in Canada. The article by Thomas King and the book by Penny Petrone are recommended summaries. Petrone devotes 26 pages to the period 1970-1979 and 58 pages to 1980-89 and writes of a number of books for young people. Native writers and Canadian writing, edited by W.H. New, contains lengthy articles originally published in Canadian Literature.

Bernice Culleton, LuAnn LaSalle, and Iris Loewen eloquently describe the work of Pemmican Press, the Métis publishing house in Winnipeg which publishes many children’s books about modern Native life. Culleton writes: "An important factor in the kinds of books we publish is that we can change the image of Native people to a point where they will be truly accepted as part of Canadian society. . . . We are doing REAL Native books" (51). It is interesting that research on U.S. materials leads me to believe that there is no American equivalent of Pemmican Press for children’s books. It seems that this is an area where Canadians are ahead.

Catherine Verrall in her Resource reading list 1990 from the Canadian Alliance for Solidarity with Native Peoples, raises another essential problem: "How can this book best be used in a school curriculum to enhance a variety of themes, not only ‘Native studies’?" (7). In November 1990 Pemmican Publications was proud to announce the acceptance of Ruby Slipperjack’s Honour
the sun into the Newfoundland Department of Education Grade 11 curriculum, under Canadian Literature: Heritage Studies. The novel is now used in a core course in English Studies for graduating classes.

For teachers, June Sark Heinrich in *Unlearning "Indian" stereotypes* offers pointers for correcting the most common errors made in presenting subject matter about Native people:

1. Don't use alphabet cards that say A is for apple, B is for Ball and I is for Indian.
2. Don't talk about Indians as though they belong to the past.
3. Don't talk about 'them' and 'us'.
4. Don't lump all Native Americans together.
5. Don't expect Native Americans to look like Hollywood movie 'Indians'.
6. Don't let TV stereotypes go unchallenged.
7. Don't let students get the impression that a few 'brave' Europeans defeated millions of 'Indian savages' in battle.
8. Don't teach that Native Americans are just like other ethnic and racial minorities.
9. Don't assume that Native American children are well acquainted with their heritage.
10. Don't let students think that Native ways of life have no meaning today.

Educators, librarians, and parents can keep the criteria and stereotypes in mind and counter them with recommended books on contemporary life.

The books listed in Bibliography B, many of them by Native writers, are well worth examining. But are they, in fact, available and being used? Fitzhenry and Whiteside, for instance, publishes and distributes a large number of such books, but at a recent bookfair in Ottawa, a city with a small Native population, very few such books were on display. It is unfortunate that all Canadians cannot be exposed to this good material. We should be promoting books about modern Native life as being interesting to all Canadian children, not just to Native children.

In 1989 as part of a Carleton University Anthropology course, I conducted a Research Project to investigate the availability of good children's books on contemporary Indian/Native/Métis life in eighteen Ottawa area public libraries, school libraries and bookstores. The librarians and booksellers filled out a questionnaire which asked: "What books, fiction and non-fiction, would you suggest on modern Indian/Native/Métis life? If the books contain both historical and modern information, how many pages are on modern?" I asked about Primary, Junior, Intermediate and Secondary levels. I also made my own investigation of the holdings of these and other libraries, Carleton University, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and the National Library of Canada. My findings can be summarized as follows:

Although there were good books available on the subject of contemporary Native life, they were limited in number, not well-known and hard to find.
Librarians and booksellers were cooperative and generally interested, but they lacked confidence and knowledge in the area.

Books on Native legends and history were better known, while books on modern times were not familiar. People tended to confuse historic and modern, and Indians and Inuit.

The subject of modern Native life was considered of limited interest. The public was reported as uninterested, and I was told that books don’t sell. Books on recent times were found to be best for Primary (kindergarten to Grades 2 and 3) and Secondary (Grades 9-13) levels. There were fewer recent books for Junior and Intermediate levels.

A number of Native authors are now published, including young people. But Native authors were not well-known. Canada has several Native publishers, but their books were found to be mostly unavailable.

Fiction, plays, poetry and young people’s writings can be recommended, but some librarians and booksellers didn’t think of suggesting these categories. Most non-fiction books about Native people contain only a few pages on modern times. Books about Indian communities were unknown.

A number of recommended older books are still in print. But some excellent ones have been allowed to go out-of-print. Bad books are still on shelves, and are being published and bought and borrowed.

Many recommended books are from small publishers. For Native people the U.S. border is not relevant; American books are often valuable. Black stereotypes and the problems with books on Afro-Americans seemed to be better known than Native stereotypes and books.

On the basis of my research, I would make these recommendations:

1. The subject of modern Native life should be considered of interest to all Canadian children and young people.

2. Librarians, educators and others should purchase the Verrall et al. Resource reading list 1990 and consider the criteria for evaluation, order some of the books, and perhaps remove some books from the shelves; they should introduce some of the older material to children with careful interpretation and bridging.

3. We should all ask for the books and promote them to librarians and booksellers, publishers, curriculum writers and educators. We should try to influence publishers to use Native authors, consultants, illustrators and reviewers, and include larger sections of non-fiction books about contemporary times.
4. When introducing children to books on modern Native life, we should make use of books by Native writers and publishers, and fiction, plays, poetry and young people’s writings.

5. Librarians and booksellers should make the books easier to find. Consider separating Indian and Inuit books on the shelves, noting the Nation of the Native people described, and making a list of fiction by theme and by time.

My bibliographies follow as a selection aid for those wishing to obtain books and information about contemporary Indian/Native/Métis life. Ninety books are recommended in Bibliography B for children and young people to enjoy. They are arranged by reading level and theme, but the level is intended to be a rough guide only, particularly in the distinction between Junior and Intermediate. All books are believed to be in print. Some U.S. books are included. Publishers’ addresses are provided at the end. Native input is indicated, as well as whether the books are in Verrall’s annotated Resource reading list.

BIBLIOGRAPHY A

PROFESSIONAL READING FOR THE SELECTION OF NATIVE MATERIALS


King, Thomas. "Other stories, other voices: contemporary Native writing is a culmination of a literature, oral and written, that has always been with us." Toronto Star 31 March 1990: M12-13, M20.


Verrall, Catherine and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. All my relations: sharing Native values through the Arts. Toronto: Canadian Alliance in Solidarity with Native Peoples, 1988. [119pp.]


Forthcoming


Posters

"Respect my child: he has a right to be himself. A mother to a teacher." West Bay Indian Reserve, Manitoulin Island: Ojibwa Cultural Foundation.


Ted Nolan "Education can keep you in the game."

BIBLIOGRAPHY B

CHILDREN’S AND YOUNG PEOPLE’S BOOKS ABOUT CONTEMPORARY NATIVE/INDIAN/METIS LIFE

Key


CCL 61 1991 37
Primary - kindergarten - Grades 2/3

Themes: Universal situations; Everyday modern Native child and family; Life in Native communities; Life in the North

Primary fiction

---. Kyle's bath. Illus. Wendy Wolsak. Winnipeg: Pembican, 1984. $4.75. [NP] [CV].
---. Old enough. Illus. Wendy Wolsak. Winnipeg: Pembican, 1986. $4.75. [NP] [CV].
Loewen, Iris. My mom is so unusual. Illus. Alan Pakarnyk. Winnipeg: Pembican, 1986. $4.00. [NP] [CV].
Wheeler, Bernelda. I can't have bannock but the beaver has a dam. Illus. Herman Bekkering. Winnipeg: Pembican, 1985, 1984. $5.75. (Cree/Saulteaux) [NA,NP] [CV].
Wheeler, Bernelda. Where did you get your moccasins? Illus. Herman Bekkering. Winnipeg: Pembican, 1986. $5.75. (Cree/Saulteaux) [NA,NP] [CV].

Primary non-fiction

Bear, Gail. Learning about the Indian reserve. Saskatoon: Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre. $5.50. [NA,NP] [CV].
Panchano, Jane. Changing times: Bobby and Mary at home. Chisasibi: James Bay Cree Cultural Education Centre, 1985. English/French. $9.00. (Cree) [A,P] [CV].
Panchano, Jane, and J. Rabitt Ozores. James Bay Cree ABC in song and pictures. Chisasibi: James Bay Cree Cultural Education Centre, 1983. $12.75. (Cree) [A,P] [CV].

Junior – Grades 3/4 – 6

Themes: Life in the North; The reserve and the city; Adventure; Struggles/issues; Life in Native Communities

Junior fiction

---. A time to be brave. Spirit Bay series. Toronto: Annick, 1985. $3.95. (Anishinabe/Ojibway/Chippewa) [CV].
Pederson, Joan, and Pamela Jacobson Quigg. Treaty days. Canadian families series. Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1985. $3.95. [CV].

Junior non-fiction

Benedict, Rebecca, and Charis Wahl. St. Regis Reserve. PONA series (People of Native ancestry). Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1976. $3.95. (Mowhawk) [NA] [CV].
Hill, Bruce. Six Nations Reserve. Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1987. $4.95. (Iroquois) [NA] [CV].
Monture, Sharon, and John McSweeney. Fort Albany Reserve. PONA series. Markham: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1976. $3.95. (Cree) [NA] [CV].
Intermediate – Grades 7 – 8

Themes: Child finds himself/herself; Adventure; Friendship; Challenges at school and at home

Intermediate fiction

Alexander, Wilma E. *The Queen’s silver*. Toronto: General, 1990. $4.95 (Mohawk).
Wilson, Eric. *The unmasking of ‘Ksan*. Toronto: Totem, 1986. $3.50. (Gitksan) [CV].

Intermediate non-fiction

Bingham, Sam and Janet. *Between sacred mountains: Navajo stories and lessons from the land*. Sun Tracks series. Project of the Rock Point Community School. Tucson: University of Arizona, 1984, 1982. $35.00 U.S. (Diné/Navajo) [NA,NP] [CV].

Secondary – Grades 9 – 13

Themes: "Telling it like it is"; Hard times; Life stories; Realistic plays; Short stories and poems by Native writers, many young; The city and the reserve; Native youth finds him/her self; Adventure; Challenges; Native voice; Role models.

Secondary fiction

Bruchac, Joseph, editor. *Songs from this earth on Turtle’s back: contemporary American Indian poetry*. Greenfield Center: Greenfield Review, 1983. $9.95. (various Nations) [NA,NW,NP] [CV].
Craven, Margaret. *I heard the owl call my name*. Toronto: Totem, 1975, 1967. $3.95. [CV].
### Seventh Generation: Contemporary Native Writing

<table>
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<tr>
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<td>Hodgson, Heather</td>
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<td>Theytus</td>
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<td>Hubert, Cam</td>
<td>Dreamspeaker</td>
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<td>James, Janet Craig</td>
<td>My name is Louis</td>
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<td>1988</td>
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<td>Joe, Rita</td>
<td>Song of Eskasoni: more poems of Rita Joe</td>
<td>Charlottetown</td>
<td>1988</td>
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<td>Kenny, George</td>
<td>Indians don’t cry</td>
<td>NC Press</td>
<td>1982, 1977</td>
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<td>King, Thomas</td>
<td>All my relations: an anthology of contemporary Canadian Native writing</td>
<td>McClelland &amp; Stewart</td>
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<td>Sawyer, Don</td>
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<td>Honour the sun</td>
<td>Pemmican</td>
<td>1987</td>
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<td>Smith, Barbara</td>
<td>Renewal: the prophecy of Manu: book one</td>
<td>Theytus</td>
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<td>--- Renewal 2: Teoni’s giveaway</td>
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<td>Wheeler, Jordan</td>
<td>Brothers in arms</td>
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### Secondary Non-Fiction

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<td>Ashabranner, Brent</td>
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<td>Burger, Julian</td>
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<td>Harris, Michael</td>
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<td>Hollow, Kitty</td>
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<td>United Indians of all Tribes Foundation</td>
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<td>James, Becky Mackie</td>
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<td>Fifth House</td>
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<td>Toronto</td>
<td>1986</td>
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<td>Richardson, Boyce</td>
<td>Drum beat: anger and renewal in Indian country</td>
<td>Summerhill and the Assembly of First Nations</td>
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<td>Richardson, Patricia Logie</td>
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<td>Calgary</td>
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<td>Thom, Margaret M., and Ethel Blondin-Townsend</td>
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<td>Tootooosis, Kevin</td>
<td>Profiles: professional aboriginal people of Saskatchewan</td>
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