

A DOUBLE-BLADED KNIFE

Subversive Laughter in Two Stories

by Thomas King

Margaret Atwood

“When *Brebeuf and His Brethren* first came out, a friend of mine said that the thing to do now was to write the same story from the Iroquois point of view.”

— JAMES REANEY, “The Canadian Poet’s Predicament”

ONCE UPON A TIME LONG AGO, in 1972 to be exact, I wrote a book called *Survival*, which was about Canadian literature; an eccentric subject in those days, when many denied there was any. In this book, there was a chapter entitled *First People: Indians and Eskimos as Symbols*. What this chapter examined was the uses made by non-Native writers of Native characters and motifs, over the centuries and for their own purposes. This chapter did not examine poetry and fiction written by Native writers in English, for the simple reason that I could not at that time find any; although I was able to recommend a small list of non-fiction titles. The closest thing to “imaginative” writing by Natives were “translations” of Native myths and poetry, which might turn up at the beginnings of anthologies, or be offered as a species of indigenous fairy tale in grade-school readers. (Why did I overlook Pauline Johnson? Perhaps because, being half-white, she somehow didn’t rate as the real thing, even among Natives; although she is undergoing reclamation today.)

The figures in the stories and poems I analyzed ran the gamut. There were Indians and Eskimos seen as closer to Nature and therefore more noble, as closer to Nature and therefore *less* noble, as savage victimizers of whites and as victims of savage whites. There was a strong tendency among younger writers to claim Natives as kin, or as their “true” ancestors (which may have something to it, since all people on earth are descended from hunter-gatherer societies). There were a lot of adjectives.

Lacking among them was *funny*. Savage irony and morbid humour did sometimes enter the picture as a kind of self-flagellation device for whites, but on the whole Natives were treated by almost everyone with the utmost gravity, as if they were either too awe-inspiring as blood-curdling savages or too sacrosanct in their

status of holy victim to allow of any comic reactions either to them or by them. Furthermore, nobody ever seems to have asked them what if anything *they* found funny. The Native as presented in non-Native writing was singularly lacking in a sense of humour; sort of like the “good” woman of Victorian fiction, who acquired at the hands of male writers the same kind of tragic-eyed, long-suffering solemnity.

Things are changing. Natives are now writing fiction, poetry and plays, and some of the literature being produced by them is both vulgar and hilarious. A good many stereotypes are hitting the dust, a few sensibilities are in the process of being outraged. The comfortable thing about a people who do not have a literary voice, or at least not one you can hear or understand, is that you never have to listen to what they are saying about *you*. Men found it very disconcerting when women started writing the truth about the kinds of things women say about them behind their backs. In particular, they did not appreciate having the more trivial of their human foibles revealed, nor did they appreciate being laughed at. Nobody does, really. But when I heard that the nickname given to a certain priest by the Indians was “Father Crotchface,” because of his beard, it caused me to reflect. For instance, *Father Crotchface and His Brethren* would have altogether a different ring to it, no?

RECENTLY I READ, in separate “little” magazines, two outstanding stories by the same author, Thomas King.¹ They seem to me to be “perfect” stories — by which I mean that as narrations they are exquisitely timed, that everything in them appears to be there by right, and that there is nothing you would want to change or edit out. Another way of saying this is that they are beautifully written. But apart from these aesthetic qualities, which they share with other stories, they impressed me in quite different ways.

They ambush the reader. They get the knife in, not by whacking you over the head with their own moral righteousness, but by being funny. Humour can be aggressive and oppressive, as in keep-'em-in-their-place sexist and racist jokes. But it can also be a subversive weapon, as it has often been for people who find themselves in a fairly tight spot without other, more physical, weapons.

As these two stories have not yet appeared in a collection (although they will soon), you'll forgive me for summarizing.

The first one I'd like to discuss is called *Joe The Painter and the Deer Island Massacre*. It's set in a small coastal town north of San Francisco. The narrator is an Indian man; the subject of his narration is a white man called “Joe the Painter.” Nobody in the town except the narrator really likes Joe. He's loud and overly-friendly, and has the disconcerting habit of blowing his nose into the gutter, one nostril at a time: “Whenever he felt a clog in his ‘breathing-trap,’ as he called it, he'd step to the curb, lean over so as not to get his shoes dirty, hold one nostril shut

with his thumb, snort, and blow out the other one.” But the thing that really gets people about Joe is his honesty. He knows everyone’s dirty-underwear business, and announces it at the top of his lungs in the form of friendly questions, such as, “‘Howdy, Mrs. Secord, how’s the girls? Looks like you been living off pudding. Say, you pregnant again?’” or, “‘Howdy, Connie, how’s the boil doing?’”

The action gets going when Joe finds out that the town is planning to have a pageant contest in celebration of its own centennial, and that there’s some grant money available to those who wish to get up a pageant. Joe is overflowing with civic spirit, and decides to enter the contest. His entry is to be about the town’s founder, one Matthew Larson, and a long-ago incident called “The Deer Island Massacre,” involving a local band of Indians. Joe describes the event as follows: “‘Yes, a massacre. Larson’s two brothers were killed, but Larson survived and built the town. That’s how this place was started. Make a good pageant, huh?’”

At this point the narrator — whom we know only as “Chief,” because that’s what Joe calls him — assumes that the massacre is the usual movie kind, that is, instigated by treacherous Indians, with heavy losses but with eventual triumph for the whites. He’s been asked by Joe to recruit the Indians for this affair, but he isn’t so sure his friends and relations will like the idea. However, he’s overwhelmed by Joe: “‘What’s to like? It’s all history. You can’t muck around with history. It ain’t always the way we’d like it to be, but there it is. Can’t change it.’”

Before the pageant, the Indians congregate on Deer Island — “‘Just like the old days,’” as the narrator’s father says — and begin rehearsing. Joe decides they don’t look enough like Indians, and rounds up some wigs and some black yarn braids from the town. The day for the pageant arrives, and Joe introduces it in proper fashion. It is being presented, he says, by the Native Son Players. The narrator likes this. “‘Damn, that Joe was creative! Sounded professional,’” he thinks. (We, the readers, like it because it’s a really vicious touch, and because it twists on a couple of levels. It’s the kind of kitschy phrasing Joe would come up with; it plays on “Native”; and these *are* the Native Sons, although white Americans have often appropriated the designation for themselves alone.)

The first act recounts the arrival of Larson, played by Joe, who is greeted by Redbird, played by the narrator. The second act dramatizes the growing friction between Indians and whites as the latter encroach on Deer Island and want to build things on it. The third is the massacre itself, and here is where we all get a jolt, audience and readers alike — because the massacre is not perpetrated by the Indians. It’s done by the whites, sneaking up in the dead of night and butchering the Indians as they lie asleep. The Indians playing the whites open fire, making *Bang bang* noises. The Indians playing the Indians leap about, slapping little plastic restaurant ketchup packets on themselves for blood. “‘Protect the women and children,’” cries Redbird — a line straight from the wagon side of many a Western-movie Indian-and-wagon-train sequence.

The Indian actors thoroughly enjoy themselves. Soon they are all lying “dead,” while flies buzz around the ketchup and Joe soliloquizes over their bodies: “I abhor the taking of a human life, but civilization needs a strong arm to open the frontier. Farewell, Redman. Know that from your bones will spring a new and stronger community forever.”

The audience is paralyzed by Joe’s pageant. This is not what they had in mind at all! It seems, somehow, to be in the most outrageous bad taste. It has mentioned — as is Joe’s habit — something that has been deemed unmentionable. And it does so with a childlike straightforwardness and honesty that is infuriating. (As the town bartender has said earlier, “‘Honesty makes most people nervous.’”) The town is scandalized. But, after all, what has Joe done? All he has done is to re-enact history, the part of it that is not usually celebrated; and this has called the notion of “history” itself into question.

Joe’s pageant does not win. It is termed “inappropriate” by the mayor. The pageant that does win — about the founding of the first city council — is entirely “appropriate,” and entirely boring. “History,” the history we choose to recount, is what we find “appropriate.” The Indians go home, saying that if Joe ever needs some Indians again just give them a call.

The story ends where it begins: the narrator is still the only person in town who likes Joe.

WELL NOW, WE SAY. What are we to make of this apparently artless but secretly designing story? And why are we left sitting, like the audience, with our mouths open? Why do we feel so *sandbagged*? And — because he’s never told us — just why *does* the narrator like Joe?

I think the answers will be somewhat different, depending on — for instance — whether the reader is a white person or a Native person. But I assume that the narrator likes Joe for a couple of reasons. First, Joe is entirely although tactlessly honest, and for this reason he is the only white in the town who can look back at the town’s founding, see that it was based on the ruthless massacre of the earlier incumbents, and say it out loud. Second, Joe is not sentimental over this. He does not romanticize the slaughtered Indians, or weep crocodile tears over them now that they are no longer the main competition. He deals with history in the same practical, unselfconscious way he blows his nose. He doesn’t feel any sanctimonious guilt, either. He lays the actions out and lets them speak for themselves.

Third, Joe has a high opinion of the narrator. The title “Chief” is not a joke for him. He knows the narrator is not a Chief, but he thinks of him as one anyway. Joe and the “Chief” each possess qualities that the other one values.

Read in the light of the long North American tradition of Indians-as-characters-

in-white-fiction, this wonderfully satiric but deadpan story could be seen as a kind of parody-in-miniature of Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, or of the Lone Ranger and Tonto — the fearless white leader with a penchant for straight speaking and for seeing justice done, the loyal Indian sidekick who comes up with the manpower and the sound effects. It would not work nearly so well as ambush if our minds had not already been lulled into somnolence by a great deal of storytelling in which things were seen far otherwise.

THE SECOND STORY GIVES US an even more radical departure from the expected. It's called *One Good Story, That One*, and in it Thomas King invents, not just a new slant on an old story, but a new kind of narrative voice. The "Chief" in *Joe The Painter and the Deer Island Massacre* lived in a white-folks' town and was familiar with its vocabulary and ways. Not so the narrator of *One Good Story*, an older Indian who appears to spend most of his time in the Canadian bush, although he has been to Yellowknife. It's clear from the outset that English is far from being either his mother-tongue or his language of first choice. It's more like a language of last resort. However, as he uses it to tell his story, it becomes strangely eloquent. King employs this created, truncated voice to suggest, among other things, the pacing of a Native narrator. This storyteller will take his time, will repeat himself, sometimes for emphasis, sometimes for rhythm, sometimes as a delaying tactic, sometimes to get things straight.

His story is about telling a story, and about the kinds of stories that are expected of him, and about the kinds that have been told to him; it's also a story about refusing to tell a story, but we don't know that until the end of the story.

His is minding his own business at his "summer place" when his friend Napaio arrives with three white men:

Three men come to my summer place, also my friend Napaio. Pretty loud talkers, those ones. One is big. I tell him maybe looks like Big Joe. Maybe not.

Anyway.

They come and Napaio too. Bring greetings, how are you, many nice things they bring to says. Three.

All white.

Too bad, those.

What do these three want? It turns out they are anthropologists, and they want a story. At first the narrator tries to put them off with stories about people he knows: Jimmy who runs the store, Billy Frank and the dead-river pig. But this will not do.

Those ones like old story, says my friend, maybe how the world was put together. Good Indian story like that, Napaio says. Those ones have tape recorders, he says.

Okay, I says.
 Have some tea.
 Stay awake.
 Once upon a time.
 Those stories start like that, pretty much, those ones, start on time.

THE STORY HE PROCEEDS TO RELATE is not what the anthropologists were looking for at all. Instead it is a hilarious version of the Book of Genesis, a white-folk story played back to them in an Indian key, with the narrator's own commentary.

"There was nothing," he begins. "Pretty hard to believe that, maybe." Enter the creator. "Only one person walk around. Call him god." God gets tired of walking around, so he begins to create. "Maybe that one says, we will get some stars. So he does. And then he says, maybe we should get a moon. So, they get one of them too. Someone writes all this down, I don't know. Lots of things left to get."

The narrator launches into a long list of things god now "gets," a list which he narrates both in his own language and in English, and which includes several animals, a flint, a television set and a "grocery story." God then creates the Garden of "Evening," and two human beings, Evening herself — the garden is clearly hers — and a man, "Ah-damn." "Ah-damn and Evening real happy, those ones. No clothes, those, you know. Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha. But they pretty dumb, then. New, you know."

Evening discovers the famous tree, which has a lot of things growing on it, such as potatoes, pumpkins and corn. It also has some "mee-so," apples. Evening has it in mind to eat some of them, but "that one, god" re-enters the picture. He has a bad temper and shouts, and is compared by the narrator to a man called Harley James who used to beat up his wife. "God" orders Evening to leave the apples alone. He is selfish, and will not share.

However, Evening eats an apple, and being a good woman, takes some to share with Ah-damn. The latter is busy writing down the names of the animals as they parade by. "Pretty boring that," says the narrator. Writing down does not interest him.

Again, we get a long list of the animals, in two languages. But now the story goes even further off the biblical beaten track, because Coyote comes by a lot of times, in different disguises. "Gets dressed up, fool around."

And now the narrator shifts entirely into his own language, which we paleface readers can't follow at all. He even tells a joke, which is presumably about Coyote, but how are we to know? *What kind of a story is this anyway?* Well, it's changing into a story about the coyote. "Tricky one, that coyote. Walks in circles. Sneaky."

Evening recognizes immediately, from the tracks on the floor, that the coyote has been around more than once. But she feeds Ah-damn anyway, dumb bunny that he is, like “white man.” She herself is pointedly identified as an Indian woman, which accounts for her intelligence.

God comes along and is cheesed off because the apples have been eaten. Evening tells him to “calm down, watch some television,” but god wants to kick Evening and Ah-damn out of the garden, “go somewhere else. Just like Indian today.”

Evening says that’s fine with her, there’s lots of other good places around, but Ah-damn lies about how many apples he ate, and whines as well. It avails him nothing and he gets thrown out, “right on those rocks. Ouch, ouch, ouch, that one says.” Evening has to come back and fix him up.

What about the snake? He’s been forgotten by the narrator, but is stuck back in at the end. He’s in the tree along with the apples, but there’s not much to tell about him. The reason he hisses is that Evening stuck an apple in his mouth for trying to get too friendly.

The narrator’s story ends with Ah-damn and Evening coming “out here” and having a bunch of kids. “That’s all. It is ended.”

But Thomas King’s story ends another way. The white anthropologists pack up, none too pleased but putting a good face on it. “All of those ones smile. Nod their head around. Look out window. Make happy noises. Say goodbyes, see you later. Leave pretty quick.” The narrator’s last gloss is, “I clean up all the coyote tracks on the floor.”

If the narrator has a “good Indian story” to tell, he’s kept it to himself. He certainly isn’t going to tell it to the white anthropologists, who are seen as sneaky coyotes, mischief-makers, indulging in disguises and fooling around. Instead he’s fed them one of their own stories back, but he’s changed the moral. No secondary creation of Eve from a rib, no original sin, no temptation by Satan, no guilt, no “sweat of your brow” curse. The bad behaviour displayed is displayed by “god,” who is greedy, selfish, loud-mouthed and violent. Adam is stupid, and Eve, who is generous, level-headed, peace-loving and nurturing, comes out the hero of the story. In the course of his tale, the Indian narrator is able to convey to the whites more or less what he thinks of white behaviour in general. Nor can they do anything about it, as this is a situation they themselves have sought out — for their own benefit, since, we assume, they wish to use the Indian’s story as “material” — and the etiquette of storytelling prevents them from intervening in the story to protest either its form or its content.

One Good Story could be seen as a variant of the Wise Peasant motif, or “putting one over on the city slicker” by pretending to be a lot dumber than you really are; although, in this case, the city slicker category includes any white reader. We feel “taken” by the story, in several ways: we get taken in by it, because this narrative voice has considerable charm and straight-faced subtlety; but we also get taken

for a ride, just as the three anthropologists are. Perhaps we have been taken for even more of a ride than we realize. How do we know what all those Indian words *really* mean? We don't, and that is very much one of the points. The narrator himself doesn't know what "Saint Merry" means. Tit for tat. Another tit for tat is that we are forced to experience first hand how it must feel to have your own religious stories retold in a version that neither "understands" nor particularly reverences them. The biblical Fall of Man has seldom been recounted with such insouciance.

At the same time, and in the midst of our cross-cultural nervousness, we sympathize with the narrator rather than the anthropologists, just as, in *Joe The Painter*, we have taken the side of the odd men out, Joe and the "Chief," as against the conventional townspeople. Thomas King knows exactly what he's doing.

Both of these stories are about Indians who are expected to "play Indian," to enact some white man's version of themselves, to serve a symbolic agenda other than their own. Both narrators, in their own ways, refuse: the first by participating in a farcical pageant that undermines the whole "How-the-West-Was-Won" myth, the second by withholding his authentic "Indian" tales and hilariously subverting a central and sacrosanct "white" story.

What other inventive twists of narrative and alarming shifts of viewpoint are in store for us from this author? Time, which begins all stories, will tell.

NOTE

- ¹ Thomas King has published the following works: ed., with Cheryl Calver and Helen Hoy, *The Native in Literature* (Toronto: ECW, 1985); ed., Native Fiction issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* No. 60 (1987); *Medicine River* (novel) (Toronto: Penguin, 1990); ed., "*All My Relations*": *An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Prose* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990); *One Good Story, That One* (story cycle, in progress).

COYOTE LEARNS TO WHISTLE

Thomas King

Coyote tied Weasel's tail in a knot.
And when Weasel found that tail, she
knew who did
THAT.

But she says NOTHING.
She WHISTLED.
And Coyote came over to see what all that
WHISTLING
was about.

Your TAIL is tied in a knot
Coyote says this to Weasel.

Yes, says Weasel. It helps me to
WHISTLE.

Well, says Coyote, I can SEE that
It does.
And he tied his tail in a knot
and BLEW air out his mouth.

But it SOUNDED like a fart.

You got to pull that KNOT tighter
says Weasel.
So Coyote did that and tried again.

JUST farting.

Pull it tighter, says Weasel.
so, Coyote thanked Weasel, gave her some
tobacco for the ADVICE
and pulled the knot so tight that HIS
tail BROKE and fell off.

Elwood told that STORY to the Rotary Club
in town
and everyone laughed and says what
a STUPID Coyote.

And that's the problem, you know,
seeing the DIFFERENCE between stupidity
and greed.

COYOTE SEES THE PRIME MINISTER

Thomas King

Coyote went east to see the
PRIME Minister.

I wouldn't make this up.

And the PRIME Minister was so HAPPY
to see Coyote
that he made HIM a member of
cabinet.

Maybe YOU can HELP us solve the
Indian problem.

Sure, says that Coyote,
WHAT's the problem?

When Elwood tells this story, he
always LAUGHS and spoils
the ending.

COYOTE GOES TO TORONTO

Thomas King

Coyote went to Toronto
to become famous.

It's TRUE
that's what she said.

She walked up and down those
FAMOUS streets.

And she stood on those
FAMOUS corners.

Waiting.

But nothing happened.

SO.

Coyote got hungry and went
into a restaurant
to EAT.

But there was a long line
and Coyote could see it was
because the restaurant was
painted a BEAUTIFUL green.

SO.

Coyote painted herself GREEN
and she went back to the rez
to show the people what an
UP-TO-DATE Coyote she was.

And she STOOD on the rez
and waited.

So that RAIN came along.

So that WIND came along.

So that HAIL came along.

So that SNOW came along.

And that PAINT began to peel
and pretty soon the people
came along and says,
HEY, that's Coyote, by golly
she's not looking too good.

And the women brought her FOOD.

And the men brushed her COAT
until it was shiney.

And the children PLAYED with
their friend.

I been to Toronto Coyote tells
the people.

Yes, everybody says,

We can SEE that.