

SPEAKING OUR TRUTH

A Journey of Reconciliation

MONIQUE GRAY SMITH



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PRAISE FOR
SPEAKING OUR TRUTH:
A JOURNEY OF RECONCILIATION

★ “Smith thoroughly and compassionately examines the history and traumatic after effects of Canada’s residential schools...Smith informs without overwhelming or sugarcoating, and she emphasizes the power readers themselves possess.”

—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

★ “Smith’s book is an effort that returns, offering diverse voices that invite the world into the reconciliation experience. Absolutely necessary.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

★ “Authentic and respectful...As a package, the book offers a perfect framework for readers actively exploring Indigenous history and current issues. Welcoming, honest, and down to earth, *Speaking Our Truth* is the tool many Canadians have been waiting for.”

—*Quill & Quire*, starred review

★ “A sensitive and extensive insight into the experiences of Indigenous people...Smith consistently empowers readers to be agents of change and provides specific suggestions to take action...Purchase this vibrant, must-have title to prompt critical thinking and open discussions.”

—*School Library Journal*, starred review

“You are holding a medicine bundle of hope...a treasury of hard truths for everyone this book finds. We are witnesses together who can all do our part in the great healing ahead. I am in awe! Mahsi cho!”

—Richard Van Camp, award-winning author of *We Sang You Home*

“Smith’s narrative tone is inviting and friendly, often addressing the reader directly...and the ways today’s children can be allies and actors in the ongoing process of reconciliation.”

—*Booklist*

“This is a book that definitely has a place in middle and high school libraries...Highly Recommended.”

—*CM Magazine*

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Jingle dancers take part in a Pow Wow in Kahnawake, QC, 2016. (Shutterstock.com)

Back cover photo: Dancers participate in annual Squamish Nation Pow Wow on July 10, 2010 in West Vancouver, BC (iStock.com)

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**For my mom, Shirley Smith, whose strength
and resilience are truly remarkable.**

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1

WELCOME TO THE JOURNEY

“Throughout this book there are beautiful teachings I have received on my journey. They come from my relatives, Elders, residential school Survivors and the many other people who have shared their ideas and wisdom.”

Monique Gray Smith

Everyone loves going on vacation, right? I know I do. Visiting family, camping, seeing new places, playing in the waves on a tropical beach...all of it can be fun!

So how is taking a journey different from going on a vacation? Well, for one thing, a journey doesn't always require a plane, a train, a bus or even a car. It does require an open mind and a kind heart, because when we go on a journey we are often attempting to understand something in a deeper way. A journey can include learning more about a country, a time period or a different culture, and it always includes learning about ourselves. Journeys usually change us. Sometimes the change may

“Reconciliation begins with you.”

Chief Dr. Robert Joseph, Gwawaenuk First Nation



reconciliation—the restoration and healing of a relationship.

In Canada, this refers to the process taken on by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to revitalize the relationship between the citizens of Canada (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), as well as the Nation-to-Nation relationships with the Government of Canada.

be so small that we hardly notice it, while at other times it dramatically shifts our thinking, our behaviour and how we look at our world.

In this book, we are embarking on a journey of **reconciliation**. This isn't a read-and-do-nothing kind of book. It is an active exploration of Canada's collective history, our present and our future. It's about how we grow as individuals, families, communities and as a country. For some of you, this may be a time of significant change in your understanding of Canada's history. It might be the first time you've thought about what reconciliation means and, more specifically, what it means to *you* and what your role in it is. Simply reading this book is an act of reconciliation. So,

good on you! Some of you may have started the journey well before picking this book up. I welcome you all to the journey. In *nehiyawewin*, the Cree language, we say *tawâw*, which loosely means “there's always room.” For you, for me, for your friends, your family, your community. There's always room.



A family camps on their way to the Red Deer Industrial Institute. UCCA 93.049P/861N

WHY DO WE NEED THIS JOURNEY?

So...*why* do we need to go on a journey of reconciliation?

In order to answer this question, we must first understand what we are reconciling.

Until the last few years, most Canadians knew very little about residential schools. Young people like you were not taught about them in school, and in many cases neither were your parents or grandparents. Some people had never even heard about them. But for over 150 years, **Indigenous** children were taken from their homes and placed in residential schools.

You might wonder how this could happen in our country. Well, a lot of it had to do with **systemic racism**. Laws and government policies were passed that allowed **Indian agents** (who worked for what was then called the Department of Indian Affairs) and the RCMP to take children as young as five years old away from everyone they loved and everything that was familiar and important to them. They were taken from their families, homes and communities and away from their land, culture and language. If parents or families attempted to stop this, they could be arrested, and the children were still taken.



Indigenous—the term that is most commonly being used now to describe First Peoples, Métis and Inuit.

systemic racism—when systems (like schools, the police or the justice system) are supported and maintained by policies, practices and procedures that result in some people receiving better or worse treatment than others because of their race.

Indian agent—the representative of the Department of Indian Affairs (now known as Indigenous Services Canada). Indian agents were in charge of many aspects of affairs in their area or on the reserve(s) they were assigned to. The powers of the Indian agent were significant and influenced the lives of First Nations people in their area.



The Red Deer Industrial Institute outside Red Deer, AB, was established in 1893.

UCCA 93.049P/839

One Voice

I do not speak for all Indigenous Peoples. I am one voice. While I love history, I am not a historian. I share this with you because there are multiple experiences, stories and ways of understanding the impact of residential schools. I am sharing with you my own understanding of a complex and painful history.

—MGS

For these children, the initial trauma of being away from family and loved ones was intensified by:

- ▶ Being separated from siblings and cousins or prevented from talking to siblings or cousins of a different gender.
- ▶ Being hungry. Children and staff received different meals. The children's food was not nourishing, and at times it was rotten and full of maggots. There was often not enough food to feed all of the students.
- ▶ Being abused. Physical, verbal, emotional, sexual and spiritual abuse was commonplace in the schools.
- ▶ Being forbidden to speak their language or practise their spirituality and traditions.

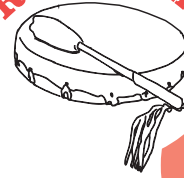
- ▶ Having their hair, which was often worn in long braids, cut—buzz cuts for the boys, and short bobs for the girls. (It is important to understand that in many Indigenous Nations, hair has significant meaning. The cutting of it often means there has been a death in the family. To children, most of whom did not speak English and did not understand why their hair was being cut, this experience was often traumatic.)
- ▶ Being forced to wear different clothes. Often the new clothes were ill-fitting and not suited for the climate in which the school was located.

Discipline was not only abusive, but also communicated a message to the children that they were *less than*.

All of this caused the significant loss of traditional languages in families and communities. It also fostered **internalized racism**, which led to a lack of pride and honour in being Indigenous.

Because of the courage of Survivors—former students—and their families, we have begun to understand what happened at those schools and the ripple effect of those experiences, which is still being felt in families, communities and Canada.

Reflections



Can you imagine this happening to you or someone you know?

What do you think this felt like for the children? Their parents? Their families?

What do you think happened in communities that had no children over the age of five?



internalized racism—when people being discriminated against begin to adopt the racist attitudes and stereotypical beliefs about their own race.

Reflections



Let's start with some basic questions to help you reflect on your own knowledge and beliefs.

Do you know any Indigenous people?

Are you Indigenous?
Is someone in your family Indigenous?

Whose territory is your school on?

Whose territory is your house on?

What do you know about the history of the territory where you live?

What do you know about the Indigenous Peoples whose territory you live on?

Canada's relationship with Indigenous Peoples has suffered as a result of residential schools as well as other legislative decisions that I will share with you in the next chapter of this book. Healing and repairing this relationship requires education, awareness, empathy and an increased understanding of the residential school legacy.

It is time for the journey and the climbing to begin.

PREPARING FOR THE JOURNEY

What to Pack

For most trips you would pack a suitcase or backpack with clothes, deodorant and a toothbrush. You *do* pack your toothbrush, don't you?

Because this journey is different, I'm asking you to pack simple things:



What to Leave Behind

How often have you gone on a trip and only used half of what you packed? I do it all the time! There are certain things I encourage you to *unpack* before you head out on this journey. These aren't things like your toothbrush, extra shirts or extra shoes. They are thoughts, attitudes and maybe even beliefs, such as:

- ▶ I've heard all this before
- ▶ Reconciliation doesn't involve me, my friends or my family
- ▶ History isn't important
- ▶ I, as one person, can't make a difference

As a key part of your journey, you will find questions that encourage you to reflect on what you have learned. You'll read stories from young people, from Elders, from residential school Survivors and their families, and from Canadians who love our country and are active in reconciliation. They have come together to share their perspectives, what they've learned about residential schools, what it means to be an **ally**, what reconciliation means to them and what they hope for Canada and all of its citizens.

“As Commissioners we have described for you the mountain. We have shown you the path to the top. We call upon you to do the climbing.”

Senator Murray Sinclair,

Chair, Truth and Reconciliation
Commission of Canada



ally— someone who listens to, stands up for and takes action in support of those who have experienced or are experiencing oppression

Throughout history, different terms have been used to describe the First Peoples of this land we now call Canada—*Indian*, *Native*, *First Nation*, *Aboriginal*, *Indigenous*. I use the terms that were the norm at specific times. When talking about the late 1800s and early 1900s, for example, I use *Indian*. For the late 1980s I use *Aboriginal*, and in the context of the present day, I use *Indigenous*.

There are a number of interviews or portions of interviews woven throughout the book. Out of respect for the interviewees and their unique way of sharing, the interviews have not been edited.



Monique at age ten.

Monique's Journey

It wouldn't be fair of me to ask you to go on a journey that I am not willing to go on myself. So I'm going to share with you a bit of what my journey has been like as I wrote this book.

When I was asked to write a book for young people about reconciliation, my first response was *no*. And not just a no, but *NO!* I was sitting at the kitchen table, working on my laptop, when the email arrived. I guess my head was moving back and forth, and I was saying, "No, no, no!" My partner asked me what I was saying no to so emphatically. I told her, but she couldn't understand why I wasn't jumping at the opportunity.

I have been sharing Canadian history from an Indigenous perspective since the year 2000, and I

have always worked to foster relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. I watched the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with keen interest. I guess you can say I'm a student of reconciliation. Maybe you can see why my partner was confused. But inside my head, yelling at me through a loudspeaker, was the voice of doubt. *Why me? Who am I to write this book?*

You see, part of my inner turmoil was because my own ancestry is both **colonizer** and **colonized**. So what does that mean? It means I am of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ancestry. It means I have family who were settlers (non-Indigenous) in this country and who have benefitted from legislation and policies that caused serious generational harm to Indigenous Peoples. My family and I have also felt the generational impacts of colonization. My mom comes from the Nanapay and Cardinal family of Peepeekisis First Nation in Saskatchewan, but she didn't grow up there. She was adopted into a non-Indigenous family in rural Saskatchewan. She grew up knowing she was an Indian, the term used at that time. All you had to do was look at her beautiful brown eyes and dark skin to know she was Indigenous. But it wasn't until 1990 that we learned about our culture and traditions, and not until 2008 that we met her brothers. So my family has had its own journey of reconciliation.

My dad is of Scottish and Lakota ancestry. His side of the family knows little about this ancestry. Keep in



colonize—to send settlers to a place in order to establish political control over it. This is done by creating new governing systems and ways of living, being and doing that make the ways of those who were there before inferior. This creates unequal relationships between the colonizer and the Indigenous Peoples.



racism—discrimination and prejudice toward a person or people because of their race.

mind, they come from a generation in which there was extreme **racism** toward Indigenous Peoples, and as a result some of them internalized and accepted it. While my sister and I have attempted to uncover the roots of our family tree, many people who would know the answers have now passed away, and our inquiries often lead to more questions than answers. I know my experience is not unique. There are generations of people in our country with similar stories. Perhaps you even see your family in my story.

There were days when tears rolled down my cheeks as I wrote. Sometimes they were tears of awe at the humanity, empathy and hope young people like you have. Other days the tears flowed as I listened to and read the stories of residential school Survivors and their families. It's not in my nature to ask for support, but I've learned over the years how important it is! I am immensely grateful to the family and friends who accompanied me on this journey and who were there to listen, dry my tears and encourage me to keep writing.

I hope you remember this as you read *and* go on your own journey. It's okay to ask for support and to provide support when somebody else needs it. Please take care of yourself on this journey. Listen and learn with your heart. I hope the book will inspire you. Some of it might hurt you and make you angry. That's okay. Use it as fuel to help make change in a positive way. ●

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Photo: Centric Photography

Monique Gray Smith is an award-winning, bestselling author and public speaker. Her books cover a broad spectrum of ages, topics and emotions. Woven into all of Monique's writing and her speaking engagements is the teaching that Love is Medicine. Her books include *Speaking Our Truth: A Journey of Reconciliation*, *My Heart Fills With Happiness*, *You Hold Me Up*, *Lucy and Lola*, *Tilly: A Story of Hope and Resilience*, *Tilly and the Crazy Eights*, *When We Are Kind* and *I Hope*. She has also created the young adult adaptation of *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Monique is Cree and Scottish. She lives with her family on the Traditional Territories of the Lək'wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples.