

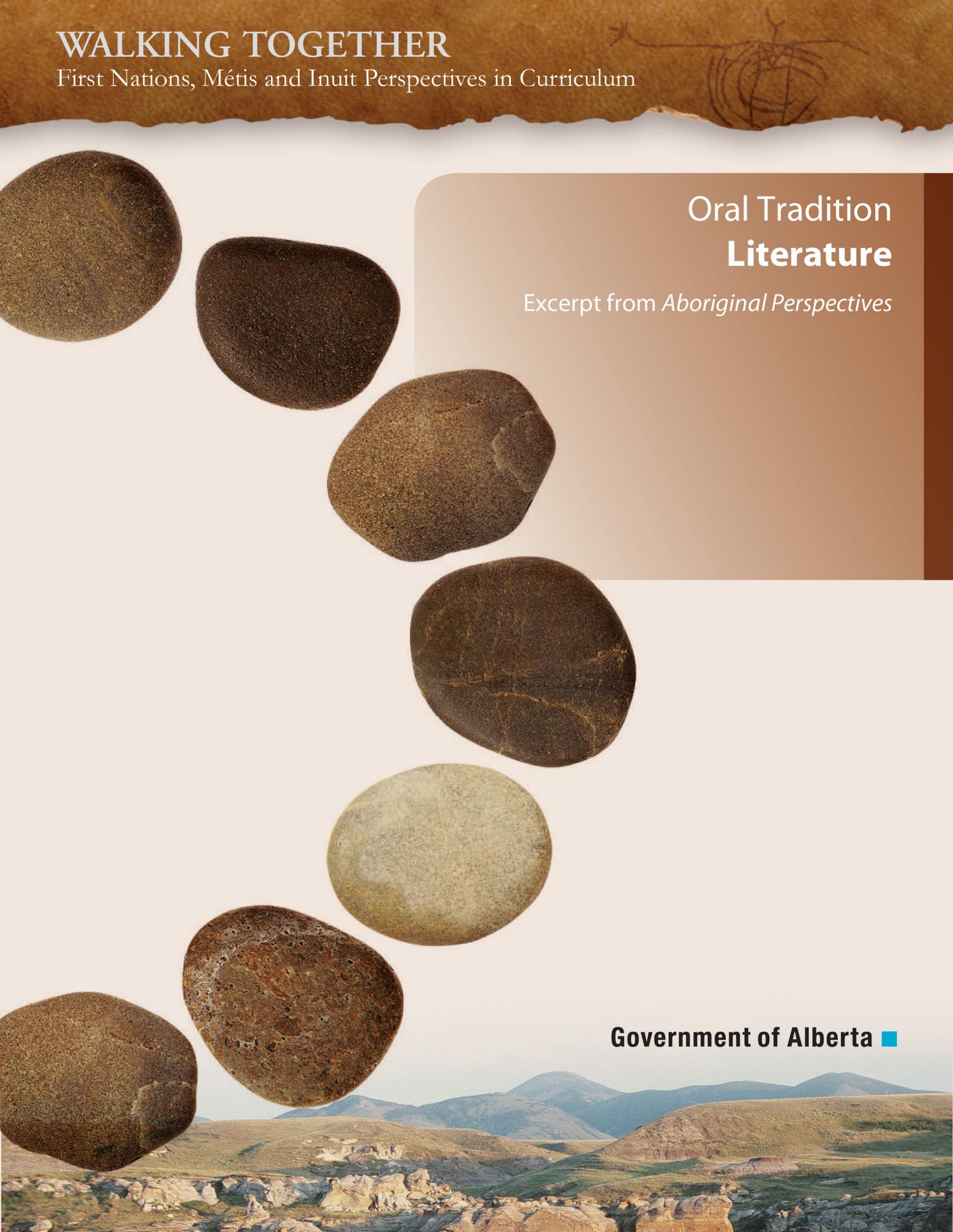
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Oral Tradition Literature

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

Government of Alberta ■





LITERATURE

Excerpt from *Aboriginal Perspectives*

LITERATURE

Although First Nations, Métis, and Inuit literature is diverse, dependent on such factors as region, linguistic group, and culture, certain themes and issues tend to appear over and over again. This is likely because similar experiences abound in Aboriginal peoples' lives as they navigate Canada's political, social, and cultural landscape.

Age is also an important factor in the kinds of experiences writers have and wish to recount in their work. As government policies and attitudes towards Aboriginal peoples have changed through time, so have the experiences of Aboriginal people in this country. Different generations of Aboriginal writers reflect this evolution in their work as they relate their own experiences.

Anishinabé author George Copway was the first Aboriginal writer in Canada to publish a book in English. His autobiography, *The Life, The History, and Travels of Ka-ge-gah-bowh*, was published in 1847. Copway, like other Aboriginal peoples who were among the first to learn English well enough to write books, was taught by European missionaries. Copway eventually converted to Christianity and became a Methodist minister. While he praised his ancestors for their extensive knowledge of the environment, he regarded Anishinabé spirituality as inferior to Christianity. Today, most contemporary First Nations and Inuit writers celebrate their peoples' spirituality.

INUIT LITERATURE

Because of their geographic isolation from most of the European people who settled in North America, Inuit cultures suffered less disruption than First Nations and Métis communities in southern Canada. The problems Inuit peoples experienced came later in history. Many contemporary Inuit writers celebrate the continuation of their traditions and questions with modern cultural influences.

Much contemporary Inuit literature shows a political consciousness and an adept use of the English language. Journalism is often a popular format. For example, Tagak Curley, who was the first president of the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, (now the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami) wrote the following passage for *Maclean's* magazine in 1986:

This excerpt on literature ©Nelson Education Ltd. *Aboriginal Perspectives*, Toronto, ON, 2004, pp. 225–232.



Our land has never been conquered. If it was, we would be wiped out of our culture. The minute we step out of our community we are in our historical environment. But not down south. Indian people have to cope with that. They were deprived of their wildlife, their land. But we have something that helped our people. Our environment is harsh. Who would want to live here?

Today Tagak Curley is a Member of the Legislative Assembly in Nunavut, representing Rankin Inlet north. His written work, along with other contemporary writers such as Alootook Ipellie, are today building an eloquent tradition of Inuit writing in English.

My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.

— Louis Riel, 1885

RECLAIMING STORIES

First Nations and Métis authors write from a distinctly different perspective. After suffering generations of cultural disruption, many write to reclaim their cultural heritage and the right to tell their own stories in their own way.

Métis writer Maria Campbell is one such writer. In 1973, she published the groundbreaking book *Halfbreed*, which chronicled her life as a Métis woman in Canada. This work was significant because it was the first book that honestly depicted the reality of being Métis.

The first chapter describes the history of Métis people from a Métis perspective. For example, she describes how Métis people did not receive land the Canadian government promised them in the Manitoba Act of 1870. It is now widely known that Métis peoples were often cheated of their land by unscrupulous individuals and an indifferent government. Although this idea is now accepted as historical fact, it was revolutionary in 1973.

Campbell states in her preface that she wrote her life story for people outside Aboriginal cultures, so they could see what it was like to be Métis. Campbell writes “A close friend of mine said, ‘Maria, make it a happy book. It couldn’t have been so bad. We know we are guilty so don’t be too harsh.’ I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: this is what it was like; this is what it is still like.”

Halfbreed is also significant because it inspired many other Aboriginal people to tell their own stories. Autobiography remains an important genre in Aboriginal literature. Many writers share their stories — good and bad — in an effort to help other Aboriginal people and to communicate their experiences to non-Aboriginal audiences.

SPEAKING OUT, SPEAKING BACK

When writers share works that come from their personal experiences, the most powerful are those that are shared experiences. Many narratives speak out against the social problems that Aboriginal peoples often experience in Canada, as well as the causes of these problems.

Margo Kane’s play *Moonlodge* deals with the abduction of children from their homes and cultures. This topic appears in many works because so many people experienced this form of



displacement, whether at residential schools, through forced adoptions, or other family break-ups. According to Statistics Canada's 2001 Aboriginal People's Survey, for example, 44 percent of First Nations people over the age of fifteen report at least one relative who attended a residential school. This number would likely be much higher if First Nations people living on reserves were included in the statistics. Although residential schools and other policies that disrupted family life are gone, the effects of the policies linger in many communities.

Humour is a characteristically Aboriginal way of discussing these serious issues. For example, in *The Rez Sisters*, Tomson Highway reveals the lives of seven women living on a fictional reserve in Ontario — Wasaychigan Hill. Expressed in the play's dialogue is the women's frustration with the lack of work for their sons and husbands, the absence of paved roads on their reserve, the hopelessness that breeds alcoholism, and the Roman Catholic Church's historic exploitation of their community.

A turning point in the play is when the women decide that they have had enough and one character announces "All us Wasy women, we'll march up the hill, burn the church hall down, scare the priest to death, and then we'll march all the way to Espanola, where the bingos are bigger and better."

Many Aboriginal writers use their work to speak back to institutions that have tried to take away their peoples' power. Marilyn Dumont's poem "Letter to Sir John A. Macdonald" speaks back to the long-dead prime minister to let him know that the Métis Nation has outlasted the railway that helped displace them from their land.

IDENTITY

Perhaps the most common issue that Aboriginal writers explore is that of identity — what it means to be a First Nations, Métis, or Inuit person. Some write about how to maintain traditions and culture in the modern world. Others write about searching for self-identity after suffering family or community breakdown.

Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe illustrates some these points in "I lost my talk."

I lost my talk
 The talk you took away.
 When I was a little girl
 At Schubencadie school.
 You snatched it away:
 I speak like you
 I think like you
 I create like you
 The scrambled ballad, about my world.
 Two ways I talk
 Both ways I say,
 Your way is more powerful.
 So gently I offer my hand and ask,
 Let me find my talk
 So I can teach you about me.



Her poem recounts her experience at the Schubencadie residential school. In it she describes losing her First Nations language, but not being taught English very well, either. She, like many others of her generation, were left on the margins of two cultures, belonging fully to neither. Her identity is a “scrambled ballad.”

Richard Wagamese is an award-winning author of Anishinabé ancestry. In his autobiographical writings, he describes his early life of alcoholism and years spent on the streets and in prison. His fictional work reflects his personal experiences.

In *Keeper 'n Me*, Wagamese writes about Garnet Raven, a twenty-year-old man who returns to the First Nation he never knew. Garnet is disconnected from his culture and ashamed of his cultural heritage. He often poses as Hawaiian, African American, or Mexican — anything as long as he does not have to admit he is First Nations. Many Aboriginal people who grew up in homes or communities outside their culture share the same experience.

Since he cannot face who he is, Garnet wanders, and like Wagamese himself, ends up on the streets of a big city. In search of answers, he travels to the First Nation where he was born and meets Keeper, an old man from the community who possesses much cultural knowledge.

In one passage, Keeper explains the significance of the hand drum “In our way we believe that the drum holds the heartbeat of the people. The songs you sing with it are very sacred. Nothin’ to be played around with. When you sing you’re joinin’ the heartbeat of the people with the heartbeat of the universe. It’s a blessing. You’re blessing the land and the water and the air with the pure, clear spirit of the people.”

Through his relationship with Keeper, Garnet finds some of the beauty and strength in his culture’s traditions. At last Garnet begins to come to terms with his cultural heritage and identity.

Garnet’s ability to pretend to be someone of many different cultures alludes to the difficulty many non-Aboriginal people have in seeing and understanding the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and peoples. Nipissing writer Wayne Keon’s poem “Heritage” squishes the names of First Nations together into one uniform, tidy box. All distinctions are lost. As seen in the following excerpt from his poem, names are broken to suit the shape of the box and ordered alphabetically to suit the order of the English language.

heritage

AlgonkinAssiniboineAthapaskanB
eaverBellaCoolaBeothukBlackfoo
tCarrierCaughnawayaCayugaChilk
atChilcotinChipewyanCreeCrowDe
lewareDogribEskimoFlatheadFoxG
rosVentre HaidaHareHuronIllinoi
sIroquoisKickapooKitwancoolKoo
tneyKoskimoKutchinKwatiutlLake
LilloetMaleciteMalouinMenomine
eMétisMiamiMicmacMississaugaMo
hawkMohicanMontagnaisMuskogeeN
ahaniNaskapiNeutralNicolaNipis
singNootkaOjibwayOkanaganOneid



aOnondagOttawaPequotPetunPieg
 anPotawatomieSalishSarceeSaukS
 aulteauxSekaniSenecaShawneeSho
 shoniShushwapSiouxSlaveStoneySu
 squehannaTagishTalhltanThompson
 TlinkiTsetsautTsimshianTuscar
 oraWinnebagoWyandoYellowknife

Some writers express a heightened difficulty establishing a Métis identity. For many years, Métis peoples were not recognized as distinct from Euro-Canadian and First Nations people. Many Métis found that they did not fit with either group.

Drew Hayden Taylor explores stereotypes about how a First Nations person should look in his essay “Pretty Like a White Boy: the Adventures of a Blue-Eyed Ojibway,” and his book *Funny, You Don’t Look Like One*. His work, like the work of many other Aboriginal writers, deals with stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples and their cultures. He reports being turned down for many acting jobs to play First Nations people because he doesn’t look like mainstream expectations of a First Nations person.

Other authors wrestle with issues of how First Nations or Métis they are. After a lifetime of searching, Métis poet Gregory Scofield writes that he did not feel he was truly Métis until he visited Batoche — a place with historical significance for the Métis Nation. He writes “The importance that I had once placed on being Cree — a true and pure Indian — seemed to disappear with the sinking sun. Suddenly, the colour of my eyes, hair, and skin seemed to belong to me, perfectly matching the prairie landscape that held such a dignified history . . . never again would I search for a place of belonging.”

ORAL TRADITIONS IN LITERATURE

Aboriginal literature has been called both very old and very new. It is new in the sense that there are less than 150 years of written works in its tradition. Before this time, the oral tradition was the primary method of expression and record.

It is old in the sense that contemporary Aboriginal literature continues to be influenced by the oral tradition. Stories, prayers, and songs that are translated into English and written down make up significant part of Aboriginal literature. In addition, many of the techniques and symbolism used by authors reflect upon the techniques of the oral tradition.

For example, many poets repeat the traditional rhythms of their ancestors’ songs and dances. Beth Cuthand, a Cree poet who grew up in Saskatchewan and Alberta, begins “Four Songs for the Fifth Generation” with

Drums, chants, and rattles
 pounded earth and
 heartbeats
 heartbeats

These lines are repeated three times; as such lines might have been repeated in an ancient song. The “pounded earth” reflects the rhythms of buffalo hoofs running across the prairie.



Many authors use Aboriginal languages in their work. This both affirms the words of the oral tradition and maintains the use of their ancestral languages. Louise Halfe affirms her Cree culture and its traditions in her first collection, *Bear Bones & Feathers*. She writes of Pahkahkos “Flying Skeleton,” a Cree spirit and Nohkom Atayohkan “Grandmother of the Legends.” She also uses Cree words throughout her work, even in titles where the English word might have sufficed, such as Nicimos (girlfriend/boyfriend) and Nitotem (my relative). Her book provides a glossary with translations of Cree words.

Allusion is another literary tool used frequently by Aboriginal writers. An allusion is a brief reference to a person, object, event, or place — real or fictitious. Allusions may be drawn from history, geography, literature, or religion.

When writers use an allusion, they assume that you share the same cultural experiences and will understand their references. Allusions help draw a circle of understanding around the audience and speaker, author, or storyteller. It is also a common technique used in oral traditions.

For example, in her poem “Helen Betty Osborne,” Marilyn Dumont alludes to the brutal murder of a Cree teenager.

Betty, if I set out to write this poem
about you
it might turn out instead,
to be about me
or any one of
my female relatives,
it might turn out to be
about this young Native girl
growing up in rural Alberta
in a town with fewer Indians
than ideas about Indians,
in a town just south of the
“Aryan Nations.”

Dumont’s allusion to Helen Betty Osborne draws not only one event, but a history of violence and racism into her poem using just a few words.

An allusion is also an indirect method of making a point, which is also characteristic of the oral tradition. Aboriginal authors, like storytellers, often leave the teaching in their work up to the reader to figure out, or infer, for themselves.

Inference is a conclusion based on reasoning rather than on a direct or explicit statement. It requires that the readers engage with the story and make a decision about what it means for themselves. It allows individuals to apply their own experiences and understandings to the writer’s topic.

For example, the main character in Piikani writer Emma Lee Warrior’s short story, “Compatriots,” is a First Nations woman. At no point in the story does Warrior actually describe her main character, Lucy, as First Nations. Instead, readers infer from the events of the story that she is.



It is a powerful tool, especially for combating stereotypes. Readers slowly gain an understanding of who Lucy is and what she stands for by learning about her as a person. They are not given the opportunity to begin an understanding of her with preconceived ideas or stereotypes.

As in other traditional and contemporary art forms, symbolism is often used by Aboriginal authors. Many of the symbols they employ are traditional and can be found in the oral tradition — various Teacher-Creator characters, buffalo, raven, eagle, spider, and countless other images from nature.

Other symbols have a more contemporary point of reference. For example, in her poem “Now That the Buffalo Are Gone,” Buffy Sainte-Marie ends with the line “Now that the buffalo are gone.” The disappearance of the buffalo is a symbol of the lost traditions and lifestyle of her people.

PROFILE: LOUISE HALFE

Saddle Lake First Nation

Cree poet Louise Bernice Halfe speaks for a generation of Aboriginal women. She leads readers into their deepest thoughts as buffalo herds disappear, epidemics decimate families, and bands are confined to reservations.

The voices in her poetry are stark, unforgiving, and evoke powerful emotion. “I have had people walk out of my readings, burn my books, or buy them from me only to give them back,” Halfe says.

Born in 1953 to parents “traumatized by residential school dynamics,” Halfe fought her own demons. While raising her children, she began to dream of her grandfather and grandmother, and wanted to explore the cryptic messages they offered.

“Sometimes I didn’t know the meaning of what I dreamt for a long time. Then it would come, and I would write. For years, I was looking in dictionaries to find the words I needed. I was always asking my husband the meaning of words. I basically taught myself to write,” she explains.

Much of Halfe’s work is derived from meditations in which she asks her grandmothers to guide her pen. Other inspiration comes from her personal life, such as when she ate rabbit stew as a child or while she spends time as an adult at the ceremonial gathering place of Kootenay Plains

In her book *Blue Marrow*, Halfe longs for the time when women “drummed, danced, lifted their dreams.” Her references to past times and ancient ceremony are heavy with cultural symbolism, which she will explain “only if you come with respect and follow protocol,” she instructs. “If I see you are sincere, and not just curious, I will assist you to dissect my dialogue.”