earch Of Raintree

Critical Edition Edited by Cheryl Suzack

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier

In Search of April Raintree





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In a letter to American poet Constance Webb, noted political activist, intellectual visionary, and Caribbean writer C.L.R. James captures the spirit and character of collaborative working relationships. He states, "One person writes but in the world in which we live all serious contributions have to be collective;... Although one mind may unify, the contributory material and ideas must come from all sources and types of mind...." (qtd. in Grimshaw 10). James' words could not more appropriately describe this project. From its inception, this new critical edition of Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* has been collaborative in nature and ambitious in spirit.

The catalyst for this edition is the continuing relevance and value of In Search of April Raintree for contemporary Canadian readers. Mosionier's representation of the life stories of two Métis sisters, who suffer the breakdown of their family relations and the injustices of the social services system, offers a powerful examination of the effects of racism in society. The author's treatment of a harrowing rape trial in which the defendants justify their actions on the basis that the woman was Native and a prostitute reinforces the connections between material realities and social injustices. Yet, as many essays in the collection illustrate, In Search of April Raintree appeals to readers through its emotional as well as through its literary and political merits. Helen Hoy's "Nothing but the Truth': Discursive Transparency in Beatrice Culleton" notes how one of her students felt "distraught" and "off-kilter" for 24 hours after reading the novel. In "The Only Dirty Book': The Rape of April Raintree," Peter Cumming remarks that in anonymous surveys students consistently

place In Search of April Raintree at the top of the list of books that have meant the most to them. The novel owes its success as much to its ability to emotionally engage readers as to its consideration of familiar themes, values, and ideas. As Heather Zwicker points out in "The Limits of Sisterhood," the novel works through the "simplicity of its literal story, the story of sisters."

The publishing history of In Search of April Raintree also attests to its continuing appeal and broad readership since its first publication by Pemmican in 1983. In its first nine years of circulation, the novel sold over 82,000 copies, and continues, on average, to sell 6,000 copies a year with Peguis (Hoy 182). To date, it has been translated into three languages (German, Dutch, and French), and anthologized in such wideranging collections as Our Bit of Truth: An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature (1990), Kitchen Contemporary Women's Prose and Poetry (1992). Sociology (1996). It is a novel that crosses disciplinary boundaries to engage with issues of racism and the socialization of Native children, "truth-telling" and the representation of social discourse, and First Nations literary history and the quest for identity. The essays represented here cross cultures as the collection draws on the experience and expertise of contributing scholars from a variety of cultural backgrounds. As the first critical edition of a Native Canadian text, the collection aims to engage current debates in literary criticism and to intervene in the field of Native Canadian literature.

In the collection's opening essay, "Deploying Identity in the Face of Racism," Margery Fee examines the relationship between the "discourse of race" and state-controlled definitions of Aboriginal identity. Fee's analysis of the implications of revisions to the Indian Act with Bill C-31 and the inclusion of Métis as a category of Aboriginal identity illustrates how state-controlled definitions of "Nativeness" rely on concepts of "ethnic purity" for their legitimacy. They thus retrench identity as a fixed, stable category and overlook the multiple connections of Native peoples across historical,

social, and political boundaries. Claiming that Mosionier's novel "rejects whiteness or Nativeness as simple, clearcut identities," Fee proposes that the category "Native" be rethought as both a fluid and contested site of identification in order for these affiliations to be recognized. Her essay focuses attention on the author's attempts to theorize Native identity not as an inherent category, but as a tool to use in ever-changing social relationships.

Janice Acoose in "The Problem of Searching' For April Raintree" demonstrates how Mosionier's novel thematizes the absence of positive narratives of Métis culture and history in her exploration of the Raintree sisters' quests to recover a sense of self and community. Connecting Mosionier's construction of a "dis-eased narrative voice" with the exclusion of Métis nationalist writers like Emma LaRocque and Howard Adams from public discourse, Acoose argues that In Search of April Raintree resists readers' attempts to find within it representations of Métis culture and history. Instead of offering a vision of Métis cultural identity, the novel "opens a space for critical discourse about the formation of identity and the transmission of culture." Acoose argues that by resisting readers' expectations, the novel encourages readers to look beyond the text and to take responsibility for their education. In this manner, Acoose suggests, readers "may come to know something about Métis history and culture."

In "Abuse and Violence: April Raintree's Human Rights (if she had any)," Agnes Grant analyses In Search of April Raintree from a position that is seldom recognized, yet has emerged with increasing urgency in light of the history of Indian residential schools in Canada: the position that considers the rights of the child. Drawing attention to the plight of April Raintree as she is relocated from the poverty of her birth family to the racism of her foster family, Grant argues that "there is no movement in Canada today, nor has there ever been one, that examines the rights of children the way feminists have explored the abuse of women." Grant illustrates how Mosionier's novel documents the vulnerability

of Aboriginal women and children to poverty and racism while simultaneously insisting on the theme of resistance and renewal.

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's "The Special Time" explores the personal events that have shaped her continuing engagement with issues of racism and suicide. Speaking of her struggle to overcome the devastation of suicide within her family, Mosionier describes how her response to the problem was transformed by Jane Elliot's "Blue-eyed/Brown-eyed" exercise, a program in racism awareness that allows individuals and groups to experience negative stereotypes commonly assigned to "people of colour, women, and other 'outsiders' in society." In her affirmation of the need to provide respect and dignity to individuals and communities, Mosionier raises the question of the nature of our individual and collective responsibility to each other, a question that is explored by many of the papers in this collection.

In "What Constitutes a Meaningful Life?: Identity Quest(ion)s in In Search of April Raintree," Michael Creal explores the "narrative quests" of April and Cheryl Raintree to illustrate Mosionier's engagement with questions of social ethics and moral issues. Creal suggests that the central spiritual issue for contemporary society is the problem of what constitutes a meaningful life. He argues that Mosionier's depiction of the quests of the Raintree sisters for a sense of self and community critiques the values inherent in contemporary society that jeopardize April and Cheryl's ability to regain a meaningful sense of themselves and their community. His essay shows how Mosionier's novel prompts readers to scrutinize social values in order to begin questioning the society that we participate in making.

Identifying the need for a broader understanding of the interaction of material realities and the shaping of narrative, Jeanne Perreault's "In Search of Cheryl Raintree, and Her Mother" considers the social and physical realities facing many people of Native heritage. These include "illness, infant mortality, foster care, alcoholism, rape, domestic violence against women, prostitution, and suicide." As Perreault

writes, "representing these violations against her characters is not only an aesthetic choice for Mosionier. It is essential to the informing discourse of the novel." The statistics she relates provide invaluable information about the effects of systemic poverty and racism. They also illustrate the strength and commitment of Native peoples to redefine identity and to restore community values. Interwoven with the realities of systemic racism and economic impoverishment, as Perreault's paper illustrates, is a commitment to cultural revitalization, holism, and community that affirms the spirituality and survival within Native communities.

In "Nothing but the Truth': Discursive Transparency in Beatrice Culleton," Helen Hoy examines early critical responses to In Search of April Raintree to critique reviewers' assumptions that the novel offers "uncrafted testimony" and "artless" narrative. Hoy observes that "in a novel in which the telling of truths and half-truths proliferates both socially and personally, in which 'lies, secrets, and silence' are both inflicted upon April and her sister Chervl by foster parents. social workers, and history books, and prove to be a destructive component of their interactions, honesty and truth seem to function as talismans." Hov argues that readers need to be "wary" of the novel's appearance of "art-less craft." We need to attend to its layered discursive registers, to its simultaneous "craft" and "craft-iness," for, as Hoy suggests, "if novelty, authorial self-expression, and originality of execution give way in Culleton's aesthetic credo to instrumental and communal values, then her writing may require different methods of evaluation" and the commitment on the part of readers to recognize these as "artistic achievements."

Jo-Ann Thom, in "The Effect of Readers' Responses on the Development of Aboriginal Literature in Canada: A Study of Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, and Richard Wagamese's *Keeper'n Me*," also credits the artistic achievement of *In Search of April Raintree*. Noting its importance for many Canadian Aboriginal writers, Thom contends that *In Search of April Raintree* "showed would-be Aboriginal writers that they could work in the

medium of fiction to create narratives that do not claim to tell a true story but that nevertheless reveal 'truths." Thom draws on students' responses and new voices in contemporary Aboriginal literature to illustrate how the "truths" of systemic racism and cultural dislocation that Maria Campbell and Beatrice Mosionier examined are reimagined by contemporary writers like Richard Wagamese as narratives of cultural healing. Thom suggests that contemporary authors not only recognize and extend the work of previous Aboriginal writers, they also transform racist discourse into narratives that affirm Aboriginal culture and identity.

In "The Only Dirty Book': The Rape of April Raintree," Peter Cumming contends that the revised version of In Search of April Raintree represents a seriously flawed adaptation of the original novel. Cumming notes how the edited version "obsessively sanitizes the overt sexuality and violence and swearing" of the original, and thus compromises the elements of verisimilitude that give the unrevised text so much political force. Focusing on the pivotal rape scene in both novels, Cumming questions the principles of revision that would remove the passages signifying violence against women, yet retain the racist slurs directed against the protagonist's Native identity. Cumming argues that if the rape scene metaphorically represents relations between Native and non-Native people, then the effect of its revision is to seriously depoliticize Mosionier's indictment of a society that simultaneously disempowers April Raintree both as a Native and as a woman.

In the final essay in the collection, "The Limits of Sisterhood," Heather Zwicker considers the implications of sisterhood in *In Search of April Raintree* in order to examine how Mosionier's novel theorizes the following questions that are at issue within feminism: how might we conceptualize community among women without asserting similarities or identities where there are none, and how do we celebrate difference without giving up on the possibility of solidarity? As Zwicker suggests, "the novel resonates with the metaphoric

implications of sisterhood, demonstrating that even within a relationship as close as literal sisters there exist irreducible differences between women that make community a vexed and difficult, but nonetheless crucial, venture." Through an analysis of the political views that the Raintree sisters adopt-April decides to assimilate and thus becomes a proponent of "liberal quiescence," Cheryl embraces her Métis inheritance and articulates a position defined by "identity politics"—Zwicker argues that "the disintegration of the relationship between April and Cheryl as the novel unfolds serves to demonstrate the inevitable disintegration of a feminism that fails to respond to the need for a community founded on mutual responsibility and recognition of difference." Zwicker's essay raises compelling questions for readers about the relationship between political commitments and constitutive realities.

The essays presented here initiate debate, contribute to critical perspectives on Native Canadian literature, and attest to the continuing strength of stories to inspire and move us. If, as Merle Hodge suggests, "the proper role of fiction in human societies includes allowing a people to read itself—to decipher its own reality" (205), then Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's In Search of April Raintree provides readers with a compelling narrative whose complex perceptions and powerful illustrations represent its determined attempts to decipher reality. These essays affirm its complexity, celebrate its achievements, and gesture toward what Jeannette Armstrong calls "a new order of culturalism and relationship beyond colonial thought and practise" (8).

Cheryl Suzack Editor

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Notes

¹ I have opted to retain the terms of naming that individual authors use in their essays. Readers will note that authors make reference to Native, Aboriginal, Indigenous, and First Nations in accordance with their individual preferences.

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In memory of my sisters, Vivian and Kathy

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Beatrice Culleton Mosionier

A Note on the Text

For this new edition, corrections have been made to the text of *In Search for April Raintree* to improve legibility and style. They include corrections in spelling, punctuation, ellipsis, formatting, and style.

The numbers in the margins of the text are the corresponding page numbers of the 1983 and 1992 editions.

Chapter One

Memories. Some memories are elusive, fleeting, like a butterfly that touches down and is free until it is caught. Others are haunting. You'd rather forget them, but they won't be forgotten. And some are always there. No matter where you are, they are there, too. I always felt most of my memories were better avoided, but now I think it's best to go back in my life before I go forward. Last month, April 18th, I celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday. That's still young but I feel so old.

My father, Henry Raintree, was of mixed blood, a little of this, a little of that, and a whole lot of Indian. My sister, Cheryl, who was eighteen months younger than me, had inherited his looks: black hair, dark brown eyes which turned black when angry, and brown skin. There was no doubt they were both of Indian ancestry. My mother, Alice, on the other hand, was part Irish and part Ojibway. Like her, I had pale skin, not that it made any difference when we were living as a family. We lived in Norway House, a small northern Manitoba town, before my father contracted tuberculosis.

Then we moved to Winnipeg. I used to hear him talk about TB and how it had caused him to lose everything he had worked for. Both my Mom and Dad always took this medicine and I always thought it was because of TB. Although we moved from one rundown house to another, I remember only one, on Jarvis Avenue. And of course, we were always on welfare. I knew that from the way my Dad used to talk. Sometimes he would put himself down and sometimes he counted the days till he could walk down to the place where they gave out cheques and food stamps.

It seemed to me that after the welfare cheque days, came the medicine days. That was when my parents would take a lot of medicine and it always changed them. Mom, who was usually quiet and calm, would talk and laugh in a loud obnoxious way, and Dad, who already talked and laughed a lot, just got clumsier. The times they took the medicine the most were the times when many other grown-ups would come over and drink it with them. To avoid these people, I would take Cheryl into our tiny bedroom, close the door, and put my box of old rusted toys in front of the door. Besides the aunties and uncles out there, there were strange men and they would start yelling and sometimes they would fight, right in our small house. I would lie on my cot listening to them knocking things over and bumping into walls. Sometimes they would crash into our door and I would grow even more petrified, even though I knew Mom and Dad were out there with them. It always took a long time before I could get to sleep.

There were days when they came with their own children. I didn't much like these children either, for they were sullen and cranky and wouldn't talk or play with us or else they were aggressive bullies who only wanted to fight us. Usually, their faces were dirty, their noses were runny, and I was sure they had done "it" in their pants because they smelled terrible. If they had to stay the night, I remember I would put our blankets on the floor for them, stubbornly refusing to share our cot with them. Once Mom had let a little girl sleep with us and during the night she wet the bed. It had been a long time before the smell went away.

My mother didn't always drink that medicine, not as much as my father did. That's when she would clean the house, bake, and do the laundry and sewing. If she was really happy, she would sing us songs, and at night, she would rock Cheryl to sleep. But that was one kind of happiness that didn't come often enough for me. To prolong that mood in her, I would help her with everything, chattering away in desperation, lest my own silences would push her back into her normal remoteness. My first cause for vanity was that, out of all the houses of the people we knew, my mother kept the cleanest house. Except for those mornings after. She would tell her friends that it was because she was raised in a

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