

**A reflection shared after the screening of the
'Secret Path' during the Shimmering Songs
Festival at the Fredericton Playhouse, January 19th,
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As I begin, I will talk briefly about my family history. I grew up for most of my childhood and adolescence in a town called Sussex here in New Brunswick. It is a reasonably small area and a little over an hour away from Fredericton by automobile. In regards to my family's initial arrival in Canada, my mother's ancestors came from England, Ireland, the United States and, more specifically, the state of Connecticut. They were known as Loyalists, and they came to Canada in the 1700's. On my father's side, some of his lineage comes from Norway. His great, great grandfather, Jorgen Matson, came across the Atlantic via ship. When he arrived in Canada, he eventually married a Mi'kmaq woman named Rebecca Hoar who was born in 1825 in Bible Hill, Nova Scotia. They lived in Nova Scotia for the remainder of their lives, having five children. Canada is where my family remained, in either in Ontario or New Brunswick.

In respect to the culture and history of First Nations in Canada, I do not recall learning anything from my school years. I distinctly remember, however, being in a high school course called "Canadian History," but we were not taught anything in regards to Aboriginal history in the country. In fact, the first time I really began to learn more about First Nations history and culture was when I

was an undergraduate student at the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton. I was in a course with Dr. Wendy Robbins, and she taught us about residential schools for Indigenous children in Canada. I remember wondering why I had never heard of these terrible institutions and how I had been in the dark about that terrible part of Canada's history. It wasn't a pleasant feeling to realize that these so-called schools had been unknown to me for most of my life, and I wished I had been taught about this critical issue.

This year has been very informative and beneficial in helping me learn more about these histories and cultures. It has been such an enlightening experience to learn from many of the educators in the Bachelor of Education program about something that bears such significance. For example, this year was the first time I have ever experienced a smudging ceremony. I felt so lucky to have had that chance and to have learned about what the ceremony symbolizes.

It was also the first time that I had been in a class where an Elder had visited. I enjoyed the experience of hearing Dave Perley telling the compelling story of his journey through life. One definite thing I recall him talking about was my childhood home. In Sussex, there had been some farmers who had agreed to have First Nations youth come on to their farms in order to educate them about farming practices, and how instead of any sort of education there was only terrible mistreatment towards the youth. It was shocking and shameful for me to think about how I had lived there for so long and had never been educated about this part of my own town's history. Once again, I wish I had known about this as I was growing up.

We do, however, live in a different time from when I was growing up, and younger people are becoming more educated about the importance of our history and the rights, cultures and traditions of First Nations. The school at which I have been fortunate enough to learn the intricacies of teaching, Leo Hayes High School, has teachers who have a passion for educating students about these topics. It was a special feeling to get the opportunity to discuss literature relating to First Nations with Mrs. Herron, a neighbouring teacher, one day after school. I remember thinking to myself afterwards “This is awesome. This is what I want to do as well. To help students learn about this important subject.”

Similarly, I had a discussion with my pre-service teacher, Mrs. Walker, about the story recently released by Gord Downey and Jeff Lemire. I experienced a thrilling feeling when she showed me an entire book that related to lesson plans around learning about Indigenous cultures and history through literacy. That feeling of thinking how awesome it is to have this opportunity to teach students about this important subject came flooding back.

I feel it is an essential time for educators to be living in—especially when it comes to having adequate resources to teach about First Nations histories and knowledges. I think about how fortunate I felt when one day Dr. Kress introduced me to the collection of graphic novels she had in her office, all about Indigenous issues. The enthusiasm she had when educating me about these resources was something that made me want to become a better teacher. This is something all three of these educators had in common: they are very passionate about educating others in regards to this topic, and in turn, their enthusiasm was making me more eager to learn about it.

One of the significant resources available is, of course, *The Secret Path* by Gord Downey and Jeff Lemire. I remember when I first read the story: I was getting ready to leave my house as it was the end of the week. I was pretty hungry, so was preparing to leave my room and get supper when the book, laying on my dresser, caught the corner of my eye. After this initial glimpse, the desire to read this story became far more potent than my hunger.

I remember I sat on the edge of my bed totally engrossed with what I was both reading and seeing, which I feel is a telltale sign of a significant story. While reading the story, I remember exactly where my emotions ran the highest. It was when I came to the songs “Seven Matches” and “I Will Not Be Struck.” “Seven Matches” is the part of the story when Chanie parts with his two companions—the other two boys who had fled the Cecilia Jeffrey Indian Residential School in Kenora, Ontario, with him—leaving him in solitude on this journey north towards his home. I remember distinctly how the countdown to the last match was something that I knew I would not ever forget; each match spent also increased the sense of loneliness I felt for Chanie. The sentiment I felt while those matches were being lit, and as they progressively became fewer, filled me with feelings I have never really felt while reading. It was an intertwining of panic, sorrow, and dread, for I knew what was to happen.

The following track on the album also really had an impact on me with the lyrics “We used to have each other, now we only have ourselves.” I think it is because it may be one of the most forlorn lines I have ever read. However, the more I think about that lyric, maybe over time by following the TRC’s calls to action involving education and reconciliation, and through understanding the vital necessity of implementing what that incredibly significant

document says, healing between Indigenous peoples and the rest of Canada can happen. It is possible that then we can get back to once again having one another instead of just ourselves.

A professor who once taught me in a Narrative Gerontology course likened all of us to having our own unique narrative story. He used to speak about how at the end of one's life a person can look back and wish their story had gone another way, or they had written it differently. I don't want my reflections during that time in my life to be 'what ifs.' We live in such a critical time when, as current educators involved in learning, we are not only able to be active in communal relationships but are expected to be involved. I think that involvement is a pivotal way in which we can ensure we will all have a better story, how we can all, once again, learn from one another and find each other.

A fellow student once said that to become a better teacher, sometimes you have to become comfortable with doing things that are out of your comfort zone. And this evening, speaking before you is certainly not my forte. But this was a great opportunity to briefly discuss something that is important and essential to me. I hope there are more opportunities for others in my education class and for myself to talk about the importance of healing, reconciliation, and First Nations culture and history as we go forward. I think any chance I am given, not just to educate but also to learn more about something so relevant, is an opportunity that I cannot pass up.

Thank you.

Alex Green is from New Brunswick, Canada, and a graduate of the B.Ed. program, Faculty of Education, UNB. He is currently finishing his second year of teaching at the secondary age level. This

past year Alex taught Grade 9 students in the northern territory of Poplar River, Manitoba, which is also known as the First Nations (Ojibwe) community of Poplar River. Alex tells us “it was a tremendous experience to teach there.” Doing his part as an ally and educator advancing the *94 Calls to Action*, through truth and reconciliation initiatives, is of significant importance to Alex. He looks forward to continuing this work of teacher, mentor and ally for many years.

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