The scarcity of Indigenous representation in Canadian publishing

BY LIZ POLIAKOVA

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Publishing houses have had an uptick in submission calls that specifically request pieces representing BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) community members. For instance, the global publisher HarperCollins put out a call for BIPOC middle-grade books (Deziel, 2020), and the Canadian children's press Owlkids Books (2021) actively accepted picture-book submissions from BIPOC writers. This can be interpreted as a positive development in the publishing industry. However, there is still a lack of promotion for publishing houses founded by BIPOC community members in Canada. Even though there may be an increase in the promotion of trade books (works aimed at a general readership) by BIPOC authors, ownership of the mainstream publishing houses is still not representative of the diversity present in Canadian society. A survey conducted by the Association of Canadian Publishers (2019) revealed that heads of firms who identified as white made up 78 percent of the survey's 372 respondents. This article highlights the fact that the work of Indigenous-owned publishing houses is often not recognized in discussions of the history of the Canadian book trade. Indigenous presses are important members of the publishing industry, providing a way for underrepresented voices to preserve stories that otherwise would be lost to readers.

REPRESENTATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN CANADIAN PUBLISHING

In the mid-1800s, books published in Canada appropriated the images of Indigenous peoples as characters to fit the settler narrative. Often these characters were depicted as friendly sidekicks or as people who needed to be saved. In books such as *Lady Mary and Her Nurse* by Catharine Parr Traill and *The Settlers in Canada*, a children's novel by Frederick Marryat, the stories written and illustrated by white settlers often did not do justice to the rich cultural history of the Indigenous community (Edwards & Sultman, 2010).

In the 1930s, Indigenous cultures were still being appropriated to fit a narrative that was convenient for the authors. Indigenous stories were altered to be marketable and reach a wider mainstream audience. This trend continued into the 1960s. Cultural appropriation was still not a widely recognized term at the time. For instance, William Toye, who undertook research on Indigenous stories, ended up writing his own versions of the stories (*How Summer Came to Canada* and *The Loon's Necklace*) because he thought the originals would not be popular with his readers (Edwards & Sultman, 2010). The cultures of the Indigenous communities were being retold by settlers who did not understand the full importance of the creation stories. This is problematic since the authentic stories were repackaged and appropriated merely for commercial gain without accentuating the significance of their true origin and meaning.

INTRODUCTION OF INDIGENOUS PRESSES

While the Indigenous publishing industry in Canada is one of the oldest in North America, the journey began not that long ago, in the 1980s, with the establishment of Theytus Books and Pemmican Publications (MacSkimming, 2007). Theytus Books was founded in 1980 by Randy Fred. However, by 1982 the press was experiencing financial difficulties as the Canadian government started to cut funding for presses. An important addition to the Canadian publishing sector was about to vanish. No sources indicate whether the government recognized the significance of Indigenous publishing houses at the time or whether the government was developing ways to specifically support Indigenous presses. Instead, Theytus was saved through its acquisition by the Okanagan Indian Curriculum Project and the Nicola Valley Indian Administration, with Fred retaining control over the operations of the press (Edwards & Sultman, 2010). The Indigenous community saved the press, without help from the Canadian government. Theytus Books remains in operation and has been printing books for over 40 years.

Another successful Indigenous press that became a sensation in mainstream publishing came on the scene in the 2000s. Inhabit Media, founded in 2006, grew from 3 employees to 35 in the span of about a decade (Douglas, 2018). The press is an important addition to the Indigenous publishing sphere in Canada because it is the first Inuit-owned independent publishing company in the Canadian Arctic. It delivers stories to Indigenous children that are relatable and provide accurate representations of Inuit culture and traditions (Inhabit Media, 2022). Inhabit Media actively works with elders and storytellers to preserve and record the Inuit oral history in an accurate way. Even though Canadian mainstream presses increasingly accept and highlight Indigenous work, there would not have been such a wide variety of books if not for Inhabit Media. Owlkids Books, for instance, has a section on its website called "Indigenous voices," but there were only eight titles available by the end of 2021, and only two of those were picture books for young readers.

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Inhabit Media actively produces quality picture books every year.

Despite Inhabit Media's success, several small Indigenous presses are still struggling to stay afloat, unable to publish large amounts of content. Kegedonce Press, founded in 1993, publishes two or three books a year, with only a couple of employees doing all the labour (Amberstone, 2008). After so many years in operation, even Theytus Books still relies on external funding from the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, as do many other small and medium-sized presses in Canada. While the work of the publishers is often completed behind the scenes and unrecognized, these small presses continue to make a difference in the lives of authors and readers.

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WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

There are still few concrete ways to incorporate Indigenous presses into the sphere of Canadian publishing. These presses are often omitted from the general history of the Canadian publishing trade. Theytus Books and Pemmican Publications are the only ones mentioned in several studies on the history of the book trade in Canada, and only a couple of lines in a paragraph are devoted to their stories (Staines, 2021; Edwards & Sultman, 2010; MacSkimming, 2007). Some researchers do not mention any Indigenous presses at all in their accounts of the history of Canadian publishing (Lorimer, 2012). This is concerning since these overlooked presses have performed a great deal of work incorporating and preserving Indigenous voices in the Canadian publishing scene.

Concrete representation strategies need to be developed to take a step toward solving the issue. BookNet Canada, a non-profit company founded to evaluate the state of the Canadian publishing sector, released a document in 2021 outlining ways toward reconciliation in the book industry. It advocated for further support of Indigenous authors and the additional inclusion of Indigenous books in the class curriculum (BookNet Canada, 2021). Even though the report does mention Indigenous authors, it does not mention Indigenous-owned publishing houses specifically. Arguably, establishing a concrete link between Indigenous presses and schools and libraries would make it easier to preserve and feature the accurate representations of Aboriginal culture created by the Indigenous community and help with the distribution of their books.

Furthermore, while BookNet does provide a list of three Canadian funds that support Indigenous projects, these funds are not specific to publishing. For instance, there is no mention of the Canada Book Fund, the largest funding program for publishers in Canada, or how it could be adjusted to assist Indigenous presses. The Canada Book Fund does not provide stable funding to publishers since the amount varies and is not guaranteed every year. For example, Theytus Books did not receive funding from 2013 to 2019 (Canada, Open Government, 2022a). Similarly, the last time Pemmican Publications received grants from the Canada Book Fund was in 2018 (Canada, Open Government, 2022b).

Even though the Canada Book Fund (2022) does have different criteria for Indigenous presses—for example, presses run by non-minority groups need to publish 15 trade books by the end of the funded year, while Indigenous presses need to publish 10 titles—it is still not possible for all Indigenous presses to qualify for funding. Hence, small presses often get overlooked by funding agencies because they are deemed not financially viable. Kegedonce Press, for instance, can afford to produce only a couple of books a year and so is not eligible for the Canada Book Fund, but it takes chances on new authors and innovative content (Amberstone, 2008).

The history of Canadian publishing is missing a significant portion of work, which is being performed by Indigenous communities that nonetheless persevere. For instance, Cherie Dimaline, whose book *The Marrow Thieves* won the Governor General's Award for English-language children's literature in 2017, was previously published by Theytus Books (*The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy*, 2013) and by Kegedonce Press (*A Gentle Habit*, 2016) before being signed to a global mainstream press. These Indigenous presses provided an outlet for Dimaline to share the stories that helped build her career as an author. It is important not only to recognize the importance of Indigenous presses and authors, but also to actively promote them and their content to keep this vital part of the industry alive.

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