

BOOK REVIEW/CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

MEHLMANN, G. (2008). *Gifted to learn*. Edmonton, ab: University of Alberta Press. (2008). 325 pp. \$24.95 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-0-88864-498-5).

Gifted to Learn is a touching and at times humorous memoir of a woman teacher which spans over twenty years in the profession. It is also a memoir of a Native woman living in 1960s Saskatchewan, a time and place of great racial discrimination. Written clearly and accessibly, the book is an informative read for teachers young and old, as well as for academics interested in Native Studies. Organized thematically rather than chronologically (which can, at times, be confusing and repetitive), themes are illustrated with stories about students that not only add perspective to the issues but provide a human quality. These stories allow the reader to connect and identify with both the author's critical thoughts and opinions, as the teacher, and the student's feelings and inhibitions, as the learner. These excerpts provide the reader with a two-fold interpretation of the classroom situation, fostering sympathy and understanding for both students and teachers, along with the realization that a teacher always does more learning than teaching.

Mehlmann demonstrates how teaching goes beyond a paycheck: it is a life dedicated to students and to the constant improvement of teaching methods in order to better instruct and empower future generations. For her, teaching aims to instill childrens' minds and hearts with passions and dreams, to guide and mentor them in such a way that these become achievable. Achievement and success, however, are two words that are rarely used to describe Native students in Canada. Mehlmann had to overcome many obstacles in her long student and professional career—confronting stereotypes, discrimination, and labelling of Native peoples as the “other” (Razack, 2004), as those to be conquered and assimilated. After all, the dominant history of Canada found in textbooks omits mention of racism towards Natives, writes Mehlmann. Born of a Cree father and Sauteaux mother, Mehlmann was raised in the Cowessess First Nation Reserve. Her parents, having gone to residential school in their youth, hid her from the Indian agent (whose function was to take Native children from their homes on the reserves and place them in residential schools), in the hope

that she would be spared the evils that would torment her throughout her life. Consequently, Mehlmann only began schooling at the age of ten when a school was finally built on her reserve. Years later, when telling the truth about her family roots and modest upbringing during her entrance interview for teacher's college, the male interviewer stated that if it were up to him, she would not have made it through the front door.

In 1960s and 1970s Canadian society, it was bad enough to be a woman, but to be a Native was unheard of in the teaching profession. The impact of modernism and secularism in the 1960s and 1970s points to many profound changes in society, where a teacher more frequently witnessed difficult experiences (such as divorce) and their effects on children and learning. The new wave of immigration at this time also meant that Mehlmann had to adapt to teaching students from different cultural backgrounds. She makes comparisons between immigrants and Natives, as both are discriminated against and marginalized in Canadian society. The infusion of political issues from this historical period makes *Gifted to Learn* an informative read for Canadian historians, offering a critique of globalization, technology, education policy (especially funding), and issues regarding feminism and Natives. In addition, Mehlmann's memoir, drawn from archival sources from her local library and stories passed down from her family, also offers a local history of Saskatchewan.

Given that Mehlmann comes from a long tradition of oral story-telling (her talent in this area demonstrated throughout her memoir), it is evident that such pedagogy would have greatly benefitted her students and herself, especially regarding Native history. For example, Mehlmann describes how one of her professors in teacher's college did not just read a story about an old woman, but actually became an old woman: she dressed up, used props, and told the story from her point of view. It is surprising that Mehlmann strongly endorses this method but does not mention using it herself. In fact, Mehlmann explains how she would have liked to "illustrate [the truth about Native history] by telling [students] about [her] own life," but that she "didn't tell the children any of these things" (p. 90). Although Mehlmann had initial motives for keeping her heritage a secret, why did she not use her story-telling skills and personal knowledge of Native history in the classroom? Instead of using her experiences as a Native woman in her teaching, Mehlmann admits to limiting Native history to what was written in the text for fear of what the parents would think if they knew their child's teacher was Native.

Nevertheless, after gaining a master's degree in Native Studies, Mehlmann ended her teaching career in order to contribute to the development of a new history curriculum for Saskatchewan's public schools. Here Mehlmann was finally free to accept her heritage and by cooperating with scholars and teachers, some of them Native, and felt proud and content to contribute to change: that is, to the development of an inclusive curriculum, one that voices the silences and

fills the gaps allowing for the Native version of the story to be told, and one that hopes to eliminate prejudice and stereotypical beliefs. Chapter thirteen includes descriptions of many interesting methods of “hands-on” learning that may benefit new and older teachers, as well as a “how to” guide for teaching Native history in a way that addresses pertinent questions on the issue. All in all, this memoir serves as an honest account of a Native woman who, although faced with much discrimination, fought not only for improvement in school curriculum, but for justice, the empowerment of women and Native peoples, and the right to learn for all children.

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REFERENCES

Razack, S.H. (2004). *Dark threats and white nights: The Somalia affair, peacekeeping and the new imperialism*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press.

