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*Kiss of the Fur Queen* by Tomson Highway. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1999. 310pp. ISBN 0-385-25880-1 (pb), \$19.95. Reviewed by Jerome Stueart.

Tomson Highway is best known as a playwright, having brought *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* to the stage. Through his plays he has brought the aboriginal voice to the forefront of Canadian arts and literature. He turns his hand to novel writing in *The Kiss of the Fur Queen*, a book that is perhaps his most autobiographical work. That's a dangerous thing to say in a book review, but if you've read interviews with Highway or read biographical profiles scattered in magazines and on the web, you'll recognize the plot of the novel as the life of Highway in a fictionalized form. I don't think it's a stretch to call the work part memoir and part fiction. It is also set in the North, a North we don't often see, through eyes with which we rarely view the North. It's refreshing.

A little plot: In the novel two brothers grow up in the richly spiritual world of non-westernized northern Manitoba living the nomadic Cree life as trappers until, abruptly, the boys are placed in a residential school run by Catholics. They are renamed Jeremiah and Gabriel, denied the use of their native language and are handed a new religion to believe in. Both boys are abused by priests, something that affects both of them for the rest of their lives, but they take interestingly different pathways. Jeremiah takes a life of the mind, a life of perfection, erasing the abuse and torture of the residential schools; he concentrates on playing the piano and at one point becomes a concert pianist. Gabriel takes the life of the body, entering into the world of homosexual pleasure; he devotes himself to ballet. The novel chronicles their move between worlds—between the world of their ancestral home and ways, and the world of white Canada, the fast-track of fame, the arts, the cities and performances.

The figure of the Fur Queen, a woman who kissed their father and handed him a trophy at the end of the greatest dogsled mush of his life, appears in both worlds, haunting both boys. She is an interesting figure—half Trickster, half Weetigo (a female mythological creature who eats living flesh)—and as a reader, you really get the sense that she is there to amuse herself with these boys, not there for their good or protection, but neither there to destroy them completely. She plays with them. When we meet the Fur Queen, she is giving a trophy to their father, and becomes, in a way, the trophy of worldly success. Both boys later envision that trophy and the kiss of the Fur Queen in the pursuit of their own fame. Does she want them to escape their mem-

ories in the pursuit of their talents? Or does she want them to be consumed by those careers? Does she care at all?

Highway uses a lot of conflicting imagery when it comes to the Fur Queen, but the ambiguity is not a drawback to the novel. In fact, the trickster figure is an ever-morphing figure in Native mythology, and the Fur Queen is an admirable shape-shifting version of the trickster. Some aboriginals, though, have called Highway on the carpet for his use of the trickster figure. The question has come up about the possibility of Highway's "westernized" trickster figure being an example of appropriating and changing a figure essential to Native spirituality. Since this is a contemporary story, the metaphor of the trickster figure becomes contemporized as well, and I certainly appreciate his creative license. It's hard enough being a novelist these days without having to worry about confining yourself to mythological accuracy, especially when your audience might need the help in understanding the main characters within a culture. Highway plays with the figures to teach us, subtly crafting them so that those of us outside the culture can see them clearly, too.

He's not so subtle, though, with every Catholic priest that comes through these pages, and seems very sure of what image he wants to project about the Catholic Church. So notorious apparently are the residential schools that they were the subject of a Human Rights and Research Centre roundtable discussion, led by Highway in 1999 at the University of Ottawa, entitled *Remembrance and the Search for Reconciliation: First Nations Children and Residential Schools*. Similarly, a current investigation by the Manitoba Métis Federation seeks to uncover the history of residence abuse to Métis children.

For this alone, the novel is worth reading, if just to hear the voices that need to be heard, of the abuse that happened in residential schools. But Highway manages to give the reader more than just a bitter memoir of his years in the schools. He uses his experiences as a concert pianist and his brother Rene Highway's story as a ballet dancer to tell the story of other aboriginals who used any escape to heal or run. It has been called the novel of "the" aboriginal experience in Canada. But I say it's more than that. It's not just showcasing a culture, it's talking about humanity—and that's open for everyone to read. Limiting it to representing only the Native experience would deny it the magic and breadth it has. Come to it for whatever reason. Reading it, you'll find much more. Filled with humor, the hope in the face of tragedy is strong. And that is enough to inspire any reader, Native, non-Native, Canadian, American.

**Jerome Stueart** is finishing his PhD in English/Creative Writing at Texas Tech University, but is staying one year at Yukon College as a Fulbright Scholar, writing a novel about northern biologists and northern wildlife. He feels

fortunate to be in the North where life has to be lived to the fullest because if you stop, you freeze.

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*The Man Who Swam with Beavers* by Nancy Lord. St. Paul, MN: Coffee House Press, 2001. 256pp. ISBN 1-566-89-110-8 (pb), \$14.95 US. Reviewed by Eric Heyne.

Over the last decade Nancy Lord has been quietly building a reputation as one of the best prose writers in Alaska. Her last two books—*Fishcamp* (1997) and *Green Alaska* (1999), both nonfiction—were engaging, authentic evocations of life on and near the water in south-central Alaska. In *The Man Who Swam with Beavers* she returns to fiction, to the brief, quirky portraits of *The Compass Inside Ourselves* (1984) and *Survival* (1991), but with a twist. As she says in her acknowledgments, “This work of fiction was largely inspired by the titles and themes of stories belonging to Native Americans, particularly Alaska’s Athabaskans.” The title story is an obvious example, about a “city man, a little fat,” a grown-up version of “the child who colored within the lines,” who after walking away from his empty life “came to live . . . on a pile of logs and sticks in a lake, with beavers.” Eventually he goes all the way, in the kind of transformation common in Native American literature but generally relegated to the lower-status realm of fantasy over the last few centuries of western literature. The style and attention to details of this story are unmistakable modern and western, but Lord is reaching out in a serious attempt at cross-cultural fertilization. The point of the story, it seems to me, is to imagine a world in which a man might find himself at home with beavers, a more fluid world than most of us live in, and then to let that act of imagination serve as a lever to pry open our closed worlds.

Some of the stories are funny, and not all of them have Native roots. “Recall of the Wild” is a twist on the Jack London novel, about a modern Buck-the-wolf-dog living comfortably in an Anchorage subdivision and occasionally sneaking away to devour someone’s pet rabbit or dachshund. “The Woman Who Would Marry a Bear” takes off from a story common to many northwest coast cultures, but focuses mainly on the bride’s elaborate wedding plans; in the end the befuddled bear flees and “The wedding was quietly called off.” Other stories are completely serious, such as “The Girl Who Dreamed Only Geese,” in which the protagonist must wrestle with puberty and the death of her mother. The mix of tones, like the mix of cultures, keeps the reader off balance in a very satisfying way.

Clearly part of the appeal for Lord of writing fiction is the freedom it gives her to be other people, to imagine their very different lives from the