

Canadians will likely never visit their northern regions, but anyone with an interest in the Arctic would do well to read Ritter's account. Although it has been three-quarters of a century since she visited Spitsbergen and wrote her story, many parts of the circumpolar "Arctic wilderness" are much the same today as when she witnessed it. However, in a few years, climate change, melting ice, international shipping lanes, resource exploration and development, increased settlement, and demand for wildlife will transform the Arctic forever. The publication of Ritter's memories is an important contribution to our knowledge of what is still one of the last frontiers of our modern world. Perhaps the lessons that Ritter learned from the untouched Arctic can be imparted to others, and with a knowledge of the North and what is at stake, it is possible that people who care for wild lands will be able to influence the amount and type of development that takes place in this huge but fragile wilderness. Although the Arctic might seem to be, as many early explorers thought, a *terra nullius* or empty land of no importance, it is important to preserve this wilderness, not only for the species that inhabit the Far North but also because it is humbling for men and women to know that there are still places on earth where life is difficult and treacherous, and survival, at times, uncertain.

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***Porcupines and China Dolls*. By Robert Arthur Alexie. Toronto: Stoddart, 2002. 286 pp.**

At a time when many Native survivors of residential schools have finally found a voice and an audience, Robert Alexie's novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, first published in 2002, continues to stand out as one of the most powerful and graphic descriptions of residential school practices and the subsequent destruction that claimed entire Aboriginal communities. Alexie is a member of the Teetl'it Gwich'in Dene of the Northwest Territories. He was born and raised in Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories (NWT) and attended residential school in Inuvik. He became the chief of the Teetl'it Gwich'in in the 1990s and served two terms as vice-president of the Gwich'in Tribal Council. His early life as an adult was not easy because, like many residential school survivors, he had trouble with alcohol, drugs, and anti-social behaviour. Recognizing that he was an alcoholic, he began a rehabilitation program and starting writing a novel. Impressed by the power of the novel, his counsellor sent it to a literary agent. *Porcupines and*

China Dolls was published in 2002 and republished in 2009. A later work, *The Pale Indian*, was published in 2005. Alexie now lives in Inuvik, NWT where he continues to write.

Native people have known for years about the social destruction caused by the residential schools but there was little they could do about it. White people either refused to accept the stories or were not interested in them, and until recently the term “cultural genocide” was considered too exaggerated and inflammatory to apply to what happened in the schools. However, in June 2008 Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly acknowledged Canada’s role in the abuse of Aboriginal children and apologized in the House of Commons to all Aboriginal people. In April 2009, Pope Benedict XVI also offered his “sympathy and prayerful solidarity” to a delegation from Canada’s Assembly of First Nations over the abuse and “deplorable” treatment that Aboriginal students at Roman Catholic residential schools had received.

Alexie wrote his novel before either of these apologies was made and before the residential school issue was widely acknowledged. *Porcupines and China Dolls* is set in a small fictional village, called Aberdeen, in the Northwest Territories and deals with the dysfunctional lives of members of a Dene tribe that Alexie calls the Blue People, who represent Alexie’s own people, the Gwich’in Dene. The Blue People, Alexie explains, got their name from the fact that they lived in the Blue Mountains to the west of the Mackenzie River. Like all NWT Dene, they lived a nomadic life, hunting and fishing in their land for thousands of years until 1789 when the first European explorers arrived, followed by fur traders, and then missionaries in 1850. The Government of Canada gradually assumed more and more responsibility for the lives of the Dene and eventually decreed that every child was required to attend a residential school from the time they were six or seven years old until they were sixteen. Children were to be separated from what government officials called “deleterious home influences” and assimilated into white society by driving “a cultural wedge between younger and older Indians.” The effect of residential schools and the abuse that occurred in them was catastrophic for the Dene children and, later on, their own children. Alexie presents characters who have not only been subjected to extreme abuse of their bodies but have also been uprooted from their parents, their culture, their memories, their land, and everything that gave meaning to their lives. Some have already given up through suicide, and others are either drinking themselves to death or killing their families and friends.

Alexie’s main character, James, is considering suicide at the beginning of the novel. He puts his gun in his mouth, pulls the trigger, and waits for “his ultimate journey to Hell.” However, the gun fails to fire and over the course

of the novel we learn the story of James' first journey to Hell, which began in 1962 when he and his friend Jake, both six years old, were taken from their home in the Blue Mountains to a residential school hostel where their clothes were removed, their bodies scrubbed clean, and their hair cut short so that they resembled porcupines. The girls suffered the same treatment, but their bowl haircuts make them look like china dolls. During his stay at the school, James and his friends are sexually abused by Tom Kinney, a teacher. James suppresses his memories but they return frequently throughout his life and throughout the novel as dreams expressed in graphic and offensive language.

Trauma narratives that deal with the pain of bodily violation and sexual abuse frequently have a disturbing visceral quality that may offend aesthetic sensibilities. The language in *Porcupines and China Dolls* and the descriptions of sexuality and debauchery may seem to some readers to be unnecessarily crude but their purpose is to boldly emphasize the damage caused by European interference in Dene culture. James' memories and descriptions of sodomy and sexual exploitation reveal the brutality of the acts themselves and the person who committed them, but they are also metaphors for the cultural oppression inflicted on Indigenous people by the colonizers. All the characters who experienced degrading treatment at residential school are now engaged in their own acts of violence and self-destruction. By showing a native community at its worst, Alexie is both parodying a common perception of dysfunctional Indigenous people while at the same time attempting to break the silence surrounding the history of residential schools.

The turning point of the novel occurs when the citizens of Aberdeen participate in a disclosure ceremony in which they relate their experiences at residential school. In what is surely one of the saddest, funniest, and most powerful scenes in Native literature, Alexie marshals an arsenal of oral narration, hyperbole, personification, repetition, parody, black humour, and suspension of realism to enhance the stories of painful remembrance. Angry Native warriors grow 100 feet tall to challenge and banish ferocious demons and nightmares that appear from the walls of the community hall. There is no polite talk of counselling and "closure" but a satisfying declaration of a bloody and violent *disclosure* war on demons and terrifying memories. At the end of the ceremony, when the fires are lit and the drums brought out, there is a sense of peace and optimism that the people will survive and find their way back to the traditions of their elders. However, Alexie's narrative and his ideology defy the traditional plot formula of the modern novel with its intrigue, discovery, and perfectly resolved ending. Instead, he follows the form of oral narrative with its episodic and tangential twists and turns

that avoid analysis and satisfying conclusions. Alexie is not suggesting that a disclosure ceremony or the novel itself can solve everything. The Dene will continue to live with painful memories, their lives will continue to be difficult, and there will be tragic and sad days ahead, both in the novel and in the lives of the Gwich'in Dene. The importance of *Porcupines and China Dolls* is that the story of the residential schools and their destruction of Native culture has been made public. In the tradition of oral storytelling Alexie offers no solutions to his People's troubles, but like James, his hero, he has travelled to the edge and broken a silence that has gone on too long.

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Chasing the Dark: Perspectives on Place, History and Alaska Native Land Claims. Edited by K.P. Pratt. Anchorage, AK: United States Department of Interior. 2009.

The process of settling Aboriginal¹ land claims in what we now call North America is highly political, involving the surrender and often extinguishment of existing Aboriginal claims in exchange for defined parcels of land and other rights. In both Canada and the United States, this process often involves the collection of vast amounts of Aboriginal land use and occupancy information by governments in order to verify the transaction. This information is more than just administrative data, however; it represents a wealth of knowledge about the history and geography of the land and the story of its original peoples from pre-colonial times to the present. *Chasing the Dark: Perspectives on Place, History and Alaska Native Land Claims* represents a worthy attempt by the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) to make some of this information, collected under the auspices of section 14(h)(1) of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA), accessible to the general public.

The Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act was passed into law in 1971. The Act conveyed 44,000,000 acres and nearly \$1 billion to Native Alaskans in return for extinguishment of Aboriginal title. In addition, section 14(h)(1) of the Act calls on the federal government to transfer lands deemed to be "historic and cemetery sites" to Alaska Native corporations upon request, provided the land is available for selection.² Since 1978, staff from the BIA have been involved in extensive field work to verify the significance of over 2,000 historical places or cemetery sites across Alaska, and to certify that the land on which those sites rest should be transferred to Native corporations. In carrying out this work, government researchers conducted archeological