

biographies see Saarinen praising male Anglo Saxons active in business and politics. More “bad actors,” and biographies of females, francophones, and “ethnics,” not to mention those active in social and cultural fields, would be welcome.

More positively, Saarinen does well melding complex issues into a general history, but there are exceptions. The “nickel question”—where would nickel be refined?—gets cursory coverage for the period prior to 1907 (109, 113); by then, the “duopoly” of INCO and Mond were victorious. Still, this is not an error-prone book—sound discussions predominate, with first-rate work on “mapping” the area, the rise of governance, problems caused by both low density “sprawl” into rural areas, and tensions between Sudbury and the “constellation.”

In the end, careful readers will take issue with various elements of Saarinen’s book. One can readily imagine different themes and chronologies and alternative emphases. Clearer figures, fuller citations, and less celebratory trivia would help. But to condemn the book would be foolish. Saarinen steps boldly into the history of Sudbury and the constellation communities: casual readers interested in the Sudbury area, students of resource economies, and scholars examining declining nordicity can benefit from Oiva Saarinen’s energetic and readable work.

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***The Orenda*. By Joseph Boyden. Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2013. 490 p.**

The history we find in textbooks is too often, and too easily, simplistic. Wars are won or lost. Political systems hold sway, revolutions turn tides, technology creates culture. History tells us that one thing happened. Literary fiction, on the other hand, gives the lie to the official version. Literature, which has been shown in recent studies to improve readers’ empathy, does so in part because good fiction requires complexity. A skilled historical novelist writes characters who rise in the reader’s mind and breathe, characters who cannot be real to us unless they contain all the elements of what it is to be human: weakness, wisdom, panic, desire. In his new novel, *The Orenda*, Joseph Boyden gives us history with a beating heart, a heart plucked from a breathing human chest and consumed, warm and red, by warriors.

*The Orenda* tells the story of the Wendat (Huron) people during the waning days of their once great farming nation. The Wendat have a brutal and intricate relationship with their great enemy, the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois), a relationship that involves a retributive cycle of battle, kidnapping, and ritual torture. Into this web of violence comes a new and more sinister threat

in the form of Jesuit missionaries from the Old World, emissaries from a foreign god and instruments of greedy, power-hungry colonial empires.

But that is the large version. Boyden gives us instead the more intimate story of Bird, a great Wendat warrior, who takes a war party out in winter, encounters a group of starving Haudenosaunee, and commences to kill. When the adults are dispatched, Bird finds a young girl cowering behind a tree. He takes the girl, Snow Falls, with him back to his village, "adopting" her into his longhouse to replace the family he himself has lost to violence. In an act that will change the course of his own and his people's future, Bird also kidnaps—saving from a brutal death—a black-garbed Jesuit missionary, Christophe, known by these people as the Crow.

Boyden allows Bird, Snow Falls, and Christophe to tell their own stories in brief, alternating first-person narratives that are the great strength of this book, deftly turning the reader's sympathies in an uneasy dance of complicity and understanding. Boyden's characters make small choices with big consequences, implications that reverberate in the story and beyond. Bird's struggle is with leadership, with his desire for domination in the fight with an enemy he knows, and control over trade with a partner he mistrusts, but grudgingly allows into his world. Christophe the Jesuit struggles with faith, with a god and a world view unable to comprehend the culture of the "sauvages" on whom he now depends. Snow Falls, in contrast, struggles with loyalty, with resistance, and in her voice comes some of the novel's finest writing.

During the time I was reading *The Orenda*, I participated in a workshop on human rights in the justice and correctional systems, in my home community, Whitehorse, Yukon. The presenters highlighted the ongoing overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the correctional system. In the Yukon, where First Nations people make up about 25% of the population, they are about 75% of the prison population. And Aboriginal women in Canada are increasingly criminalized, sentenced more harshly, and imprisoned for longer than Aboriginal women.

I found myself thinking of *The Orenda*, not merely for its depiction of the roots of colonization in Canada, but also for its depiction of a different form of justice between and within tribes of First Peoples. The notions of personal and collective responsibility borne, for example, by Bird's Wendat clan, are incompatible with the principles of contemporary Western justice, and I cannot help but know that the fierce resistance shown by Snow Falls in this story (a resistance that gains her respect and loyalty even from those she struggles against in the narrative) would be criminalized today, and that a lack of empathy and cultural knowledge in which most non-natives are complicit diminishes us all.

Readers of *The Orenda* with sensitive constitutions (or weak stomachs) beware: much of the novel is concerned with torture, something Boyden depicts in achingly accurate detail. The Wendat and the Haudenosaunee fear each other for good reason. Those captured face stunningly brutal punishment: they are “caressed” with livid-bright coals; their fingernails are pulled out; they are scalded with boiling water and prodded in the eyes and ears with burning pokers, their flesh peeled from their living bodies. All this is only a start, for when they escape to unconsciousness, they are carefully revived with cool water and tender morsels of food, their wounds tended just enough to prepare them for another round of terrifying cruelty. During this torture, the strongest sing their “death song,” refuse to beg or show weakness, and this is a mark of respect in the eyes of the enemy.

In the words of Bird: “We’ve been engaged in this mourning warfare with our enemy for a long time. And this warfare says we can only begin to dry our eyes through their sacrifice.” Even Christophe, questioned by another Jesuit about why the Wendat wish to cause such pain, acknowledges his own faith’s culpability—the burning of witches, the Inquisition, the Crusades: “We don’t just allow torturers but condone them as a way to excise the fear we all have of death. To torture someone is to take control of death, to be the master of it, even for a short time.”

The casual brutality of contemporary life is well-packaged, wrapped in a computer or television screen, sold on cable television and re-written for broadcast news. Reading Boyden’s novel, which explores a time when brutality was personal, is a journey back, not only into the history of this continent, but of human experience. It forces us to question what is acceptable when survival and culture are intimately bound.

The answers are not simple. The brutality of the delicate cultural balance between the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee is hard to stomach, but there is something to the unflinching, un-judging—in fact un-simple—view Boyden gives us that forces the reader to reconsider what justice means, then and now.

With *The Orenda*, Boyden demolishes any remaining vestiges of the popular fantasy that Europeans “conquered” North America, that rightly or wrongly they subdued the First Peoples with arms, religion, and disease. Boyden shows us, instead, a picture of a people in control of their land, uneasily allowing access and passage to these intruders in the “new world.” In some ways it’s a daring—and likely controversial—portrait, for it places these people in some ways complicit in their own destruction. But this is writing that honours complexity. Boyden gives his characters that which is essentially human: power, weakness, agency. Bird and his people move

between ridicule, derision, and a reluctant tolerance for the ways of The Crows, but when Christophe finds his footing and a few reluctant followers, and when Champlain and the foreign powers that be respond to Christophe's missives with the news that reinforcements are coming, it is not hard to see that the small compromises, the uneasy allowances made by the Wendat will be paid back with a long legacy of harm.

Still, with this book, Joseph Boyden offers readers, maybe most particularly non-Indigenous readers, a great gift: a chance to see what we think of as our Canadian Nation when it was, in fact, their Nations. And to see that cultures as strong as these will always endure. In the words of Snow Falls during her first journey to Champlain's New France settlement:

More and more French are staring down at us, and for the first time I see what we must look like to them. Broad-shouldered Bird with his hair carefully shaved on one side, his cheekbones taut, the muscles of his shoulders and arms and chest enough to make a man think twice about arguing with him ... We are the people birthed from this land. For the first time I can see something I've not fully understood before, not until now as these pale creatures from somewhere else far away stare down at us in wonder, trying to make sense of what they see. We are this place. This place is us. (139)

**Kirsten Madsen**, Whitehorse

***The Rabbits Could Sing*. By Amber Flora Thomas. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012. 72 p.**

***The Cormorant Hunter's Wife*. By Joan Kane. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012. 76 p.**

Reading Amber Flora Thomas's book of poems, *The Rabbits Could Sing*, is like meeting a sharp-tongued, vivacious, outspoken woman at a party full of introspective, quiet guests. These are poems that demand attention. They want to be read aloud, full of sharp words and bright, vivid images. Her poetry grabs the reader with both hands: "The wasp's body brings the cracking all up my leg./ My shoe holds the danger to the floor" (9). Her language turns her body inside out:

Through my eyelids the sun's red diamond  
can't make me go blind, but I'm going to burn.  
My thighs tingle until the pores sweating,  
my throat thirsty again. (62)