

**Raoul R. Anderson and John K. Crellin, comp. and eds., *Mi'sel Joe: An Aboriginal Chief's Journey***

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Volume 25, Number 2, Fall 2010

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25\\_2rv05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25_2rv05)

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McKenzie, S. (2010). Review of [Raoul R. Anderson and John K. Crellin, comp. and eds., *Mi'sel Joe: An Aboriginal Chief's Journey*]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 25(2), 279–281.

Cadigan's book is required reading for those interested in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador and it will surely generate considerable discussion throughout the province.

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Raoul R. Anderson and John K. Crellin, comp. and eds., *Mi'sel Joe: An Aboriginal Chief's Journey*. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2009. ISBN 978-1-897317-42-6.

SAQAMAW MI'SEL JOE'S (White Caribou's) autobiography, *Mi'sel Joe: An Aboriginal Chief's Journey*, can be contextualized in several ways. It is the third book by an aboriginal author to be published on the island of Newfoundland.<sup>1</sup> It continues a tradition of elders and chiefs creating a space for other Aboriginal authors to write: like the body of Aboriginal literature that surfaced in Canada during the late 1960s and 1970s (written mostly by elders and chiefs), *An Aboriginal Chief's Journey* (the second of Joe's books) sets a precedent for other Mi'kmaq authors to share their stories. As Joe says, "[t]he more people I tell about us, not just the Mi'kmaq people in Conne River, but the Native Canadians, increases our chances of survival" (105). As well, the text — told to and tape-recorded by non-Native editors and compilers — follows in the footsteps of the "as-told-to" tradition, a convention that is most consistently associated with the nineteenth-century and one that has become hotly contested in the study of Aboriginal literatures. This is due to a problematic legacy of non-Native intervention in Aboriginal discourses. Thankfully, though, the book does not seem to register control or manipulation of Joe's voice, and the editorial preface shows respect and a desire to learn.

Mi'sel Joe, who became traditional Saqamaw and the Newfoundland District Chief for the Mi'kmaq Grand Council in 1982, ends his autobiography as follows: "In the last 20 years and more, we have come a long way. The future remains promising as we continue to co-operate with governments, constitutions, companies, and individuals. And I will be travelling with the community on that path" (152). *An Aboriginal Chief's Journey* proves the relevance, significance and truth of this comment.

"Worlds Apart," the first section, introduces us to Mi'sel as a young boy and his description of a colonial and traumatic education system. Beginning school in 1954 at the age of seven years, Joe talks about the manner in which his cultural values and, in particular, his language was attacked. Forced to memorize and recite catechism, "[t]he teacher referred to [the children's] broken English as "mumbling"(2), and [t]he priest, ... the ultimate power in the community, ... banned the use of the [Mi'kmaq] language and ceremonies" (5). Not surprisingly, Joe "stayed at school till [he] ran away ... [at] 14 years old" (18). The rest of this chapter recounts Joe's early life working in various trades on the mainland of Canada, a drinking problem

that Joe was able to deal with and his determination to give drink up after his granddaughter was born. Here, Joe's text seems to sit alongside such works as Cree author Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which details the abuses of Canada's residential schools, and Ojibway author Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days*, which also speaks out against both church and government.

The second section, "Struggle for Dignity," details Joe's life when he became elected chief and the many achievements he has accomplished as an activist and leader. Of particular interest is Joe's description of the occupation of a provincial minister's office in Atlantic Place, downtown St. John's, when the provincial government wouldn't release funds because Conne River (not a federally recognized reserve until 1987) wouldn't agree to their auditing demands (49). Joe's desire to maintain dignity and solidarity for his people is highlighted, and when he mentions that the Church finally relinquished its control over education and sold their property to Conne River for a dollar, the important steps between Joe's childhood and adult life are revealed.

Section Three, "Recovering Traditional Values and Ways," is a catalogue of Joe's accomplishments, as well as those of the people of Conne River, which serve to bolster an awareness and endorsement of traditional beliefs. The childhood Joe describes stands in stark contrast to the world being built in a later Conne River: for example, in 1988, a sweat lodge was built (76); in June 2000, the Mi'kmaq prayer book was returned to the community (92); and, in 2008, Joe got the province to build Eagle Island under protected status on the reserve. It would be easy to recount many more achievements here, but what this section does is clearly illustrate how a colonial inheritance is gradually being eroded with the emergence of vital and living traditional ways of knowing.

Section Four, "Community and Services," is the strongest part of the book. It contains transparent and sequential ordering of events, details contemporary services in Conne River (the clinic, employment services, the school curriculum, for example) and provides a useful definition of elders which is often hard to find in Native literatures. As Joe says, "anybody over 60 is considered a senior" but "[a]n elder is only someone that's selected by the community and given that role" (134).

Part Four, "Journeys and the Future," is a brief four pages which look ahead to further possible changes in Conne River. It is also here that Joe recounts hearing the great Salishan chief and orator Chief Dan George in the early 1980s, and, in a way, *An Aboriginal Chief's Journey* is almost immediately reminiscent of Dan George's poetic life writing *My Heart Soars*. Readers are also made aware that Joe will continue to write as well with his mention that he is currently "writing about the 1822 journey of Sylvester Joe with Cormack" (151).

If there is a weakness in this book, it is to be found in Chapter 2. Here, in his discussion of becoming chief, it is somewhat unclear exactly when Joe has served as traditional chief or administrative chief or both. The editors do provide the following information in their preface: "Mi'sel Joe is a recognized leader by virtue of be-

ing both traditional chief (conferred by the Mi'kmaq Grand Chief) and, over the years, administrative chief (elected biennially)" (xiii). Some confusion does surface here, but this is a slight concern. Overall, the book is a captivating and lovely read as it resonates with the power and fluidity of the spoken voice and as it details the life of a man and community well worth listening to. Mi'sel Joe, Raoul R. Anderson and John Crellin deserve thanks and credit.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> See Megan Coles, *hey girl* (St. John's: Stone Cold Press, 2006) and Saqamaw Mi'sel Joe, *Muinji'j Becomes a Man* (St. John's: Breakwater, 2003).

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Kathleen Winter, *Annabel*. Toronto: House of Anansi, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-802170-82-8.

I WRITE THIS AS *ANNABEL* is nominated for yet another award, this time the Governor General's. There is no question it is the flavour of the year. Even if it wins none of the awards for which it has been nominated, it may have the zeitgeist simply by virtue of its multiple nominations. To paraphrase Sally Fields, "They like it, they like it."

A one-sentence summary of the plot gives part of the reason: an intersex child is born and grows up in Labrador. What more could a jury want? Gender confusion is one of today's favourite issues and the wilderness as a location never goes out of style. Then add in the exoticism of Labrador. (Given this is a Newfoundland publication that might seem ridiculous, but never underestimate the insularity of the mainland: Last summer I phoned Toronto and when the receptionist was informed I was calling from St. John's she said: "Newfoundland! New-found-land. Newfoundland....")

But is it good? To offer my own humble opinion, it is very good. In some ways it is a significant change from Winter's earlier work, whether her columns for the *Evening Telegram* or her stories in *boYs*. As many noted of the latter, Winter seemed at her best as a miniaturist. However, while Wayne/Annabel's life is small, with its focus on Labrador, St. John's and a trip to Boston, the novel is not. This is partly the obvious — its 461 pages — but it is also a matter of style. This is especially true of the prologue, which is enigmatic in the extreme until the reader gets into the body of the novel. In the prologue, the original Annabel and her blind father encounter the white caribou: "it could have been poured from light itself and made of light."