



Maria Campbell
b. 1940

An dah stories you know
dats dah bes treasure of all to leave your family.
Everyting else on dis eart
he gets los or wore out.
But dah stories
dey las forever.

Stories of the Road Allowance People

I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams.

Halfbreed

If she only knew how many times I wanted to tell her, "Just take all your stuff and get out, you're white, you have no business here... But every time I started to do that, I'd see a circle of grandmothers and the circle of grandmothers had no colour.

The Book of Jessica

BIOGRAPHY - CRITICISM

Maria Campbell was born in April 1940 in a Métis community near Prince Albert National Park in Northern Saskatchewan, the eldest of eight children. Her people were of mixed Native, French and Scottish descent, and her great-grandparents, like the ancestors of many of her neighbours, had fought along side Louis Riel at Duck Lake and Batoche. Maria's dearly-loved great-grandmother, Cheechum, was a niece of Gabriel Dumont.

Maria's mother died in childbirth when Maria was 12. Her father was often absent for long periods hunting and trapping, leaving seven children including a newborn for Maria to care for while trying to stay in school and dodge the attentions of the child welfare authorities. At 14 she had to leave school to care for her youngest siblings, and at 15 she married in the hope of providing them with a more secure home. The authorities took her younger brothers and sisters anyway, and her husband decided move to Vancouver, where the marriage soon crumbled. The next few years of Maria's life were a rodeo ride of odd jobs, drug addiction and street life, relieved only briefly by spells of calm with her two young daughters. Eventually (though still very young – in her late twenties) she achieved sobriety through Alcoholics Anonymous, and found a community of her own people within which she began to understand her own conflicts about identity, and to become the dedicated Métis activist and community worker she has been ever since.

The Métis people lived (and in many ways continue to live) outside both the dominant white culture and that of status Indians, belonging to neither and marginalized by both. The community Maria grew up in was literally on the margins – having no land of their own they lived as squatters on the road allowances. In her first book, the critically acclaimed Canadian best-seller *Halfbreed*, Campbell portrays the daily lives of her people in a style that combines their powerful family and cultural connections and humourous storytelling with the blunt facts of the poverty, alcoholism and defeat that haunted them. While Campbell says *Halfbreed* was originally written as a letter to herself, it successfully addresses a white audience, showing them the history and experience of her people; illuminating the realities, largely bleak, sometimes beautiful, of a Métis woman's life in Canada.

Halfbreed appears on reading lists for courses in Aboriginal Studies, Women's Studies and English both across Canada and internationally: the Canada Council for the Arts, in reporting on Maria Campbell's selection in 2004 for their Molson Prize, states that *Halfbreed* "has become a literary classic and continues to be one of the most widely taught texts in Canadian literature".

Halfbreed is the book – and the voice – by which Campbell is best known, and with which she is most often associated, but *The Book of Jessica* is far more challenging and revealing. Although *Halfbreed* speaks candidly of poverty, oppression, drug addiction, prostitution, violence and constant racism, both subtle and overt, it slides along the surface of many of the issues it raises and experiences it recounts. This becomes clearest when it is compared with *The Book of Jessica*, in which Campbell looks inward as well as out.

Jessica (specifically the play itself) speaks primarily to Campbell's own people, and is both more honest and less literal; taking advantage of the root of theatre in oral tradition it is less linear, uses symbolism extensively, offers no explanations. It is far darker, more painful and more powerful. Comparing the two allows the reader a view of Campbell's own racial and cultural biases and assumptions, by comparing what she says (and does not say), and how, to each of her audiences, invoked and addressed. In *The Book of Jessica*, examining the development of the play, Campbell

talks about her personal struggles with issues of racism, racial and cultural identity, cultural ownership, and reconciliation. This reconciliation is internal for Campbell as well, for she seeks peace and understanding with her own white ancestry. Because *Jessica* is a collaboration between Native and white it forces an acknowledgement of assumptions, conflicts, resentments, fears, guilt and myriad other feelings around their relationship to each other, past and present, individual and societal, and to the story they seek to tell. Including documentation of that collaborative process results in a candid look at these feelings (and the larger social issues they represent) that is both provocative and refreshing.

In *Stories of the Road Allowance People* Campbell retells a collection of the stories like those she heard around the fire during the winter nights of her childhood. The stories are beautiful, powerful, mischievously fun, and beautifully illustrated by Sherry Farrell Racette, a member of the Timiskaming First Nation in Québec. Beyond this, they also represent a significant experiment in the representation and preservation of oral culture: Campbell not only carefully gathered the tales from elders among her people, but in order to keep the printed forms as true as possible to their origins she took each one through a series of translations from the original Michif through formal English and then to an orally-oriented English that is meant to be heard at least as much as read. Campbell calls this, and the effect it had on her relationship with her mother tongue, a process of decolonization of the language – a long and often arduous journey. The result is a book that truly transcends the printed page.

Maria Campbell has also written books for children, the educational *Riel's People* and *People of the Buffalo*, and the story of *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit*. She has been involved in many collaborative projects, from *Achimoona*, a collection of stories for children, to *Lives Worth Living*, a film about the recruitment of children into prostitution.

Campbell says, "I didn't start writing, making films or working in theatre because of the need to create. I did that because I needed to survive." (*Strategies for Survival* 7) And although she is best known for her creative work in various forms, she considers herself primarily a community worker. She has worked in a variety of media, genres and environments to improve the social and legal status of her people, to preserve their culture and stories, and to educate both native and non-native people about all these issues. Even within the small body of her published writings her work ranges from education to cultural preservation to social awareness and activism.

Maria Campbell is currently (2006) a sessional instructor in the Department of Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and is in demand as a guest speaker in Canada, the United States and beyond. She has received many awards and honours (including three honorary doctorate degrees) from a wide variety of groups and institutions, in recognition of all aspects of her work.

Honours and Awards

- Saskatchewan Order of Merit, 2005
- Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prize, 2004
- Order of Gabriel Dumont - Gabriel Dumont Institute, 2004
- Honorary Doctorate in Letters - Athabasca University, 2001
- Saskatchewan Theatre Hall of Fame inductee, 2001
- Stanley Knowles Distinguished Visiting Professor at Brandon University, 2000-2001
- Named Writer-in-Residence in the Department of Native Studies at U of Sask., July 1998
- National Aboriginal Achievement Award for Arts and Culture, 1996
- Honorary Doctorate in Letters - York University, 1992
- Chalmers Award for Best New Play (Jessica), 1987
- Dora Mavor Moore Award, 1986
- Honorary Doctorate in Laws - University of Regina, 1985
- Order of the Sash - Saskatchewan Métis Nation, 1984

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works by the Author

Books:

- **Stories Of The Road Allowance People** (1995)
- “Strategies for Survival” **Give Back: First Nations Perspectives On Cultural Practice** (1992)
- **The Book Of Jessica: A Theatrical Transformation** (1989, with Linda Griffiths)
- **Achimoona** (1985; Introduction)
- **People Of The Buffalo: How The Plains Indians Lived** (1983, Illustrated by Douglas Tait and Shannon Twofeathers)
- **Riel's People: How The Metis Lived** (1978)
- **Little Badger and the Fire Spirit** (1977)
- **Halfbreed** (1973)

Video and Film:

- **Lives Worth Living** (2000; co-narrated)
- **La Beau Sha Sho** (1994)
- **Journey to Healing** (1992; co-produced)
- **Joseph's Justice** (1994)
- **A Centre for Buffalo Narrows** (1987)
- **My Partners, My People** (1987; television series, co-produced)
- **Cumberland House** (1986)
- **Road to Batoche** (1985)
- **Red Dress** (1977)
- **Edmonton's Unwanted Women** (1968)

Radio:

- **Batoche 85** (1985)
- **Tea with Maria** (1973-75)
- **Kiskamimsoo** (1973-74)

Plays:

- **One More Time** (1995)
- **Uptown Circles** (1984)
- **Jessica** (1982)
- **Flight** (1979)

About the Author and/or her works (see also Related Links, below):

- *Changing voices* [videorecording]. Western Moving Picture Company. Discussion by various filmmakers, including Maria Campbell, of “the issue of cultural identity, interpretation and the changes of images seen since minority voices have reclaimed the screen”. (58 min.)

RELATED LINKS

- *Campbell Named Writer in Residence*. University of Saskatchewan News, July 6, 1998. <http://www.usask.ca/events/news/articles/19980707-1.html>
- Griffiths, Linda. *Process?* Canadian Theatre Review, Issue 97, Winter 1998. http://www.utpjournals.com/product/ctr/97/97_Griffiths.htm
- *Honorary degrees recognize entrepreneurial savvy, leadership, and courage*. Athabasca University, 2001. <http://www.athabascau.ca/media/drs01.htm>
- Jannetta, A.E. *Anecdotal humour in Maria Campbell's Halfbreed (1973)*. Journal of Canadian Studies, Summer 1996.
- *Maria Campbell: Halfbreed*. Western Women's Autobiographies Database, College of Staten Island Library, City University of New York, 2000. <http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/history/lavender/389/gorman.html>
- *Maria Campbell, Richard Tremblay win Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prizes*. Canada Council for the Arts, May 18, 2004. <http://www.canadacouncil.ca/news/releases/2004/nq127293590562656250.htm>
- *Métis Achievers Recognized*. New Breed Magazine, August 1984 (10). <http://www.metismuseum.ca/media/document.php/05194.pdf>
- Reder, Deanna. *Legislated Identity - Maria Campbell*. INDIAN re:ACT(ions) website http://research2.csci.educ.ubc.ca/indigenation/Indian_ReACTions/Indian_ReACTions/MariaCampbell.htm
- *Saskatchewan Order of Merit - 2005 Recipients*. Saskatchewan Government Relations, 2005. http://www.gr.gov.sk.ca/protocol/honours/SOM_2005.htm