PROFILE

Thomas King, still not the Indian you had in mind

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Author Thomas King has been nominated twice for a Governor-General’s Award.

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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A knock on the door at a house in Guelph, Ont., brings a tall, thin man. He fills the doorway. "Did you bring the whole tribe?" Thomas King asks in mock horror. "Come on in. I just baked an apple pie. It's right out of the oven. We'll let it cool, then have it with some coffee."

Mr. King has been expecting writer Drew Hayden Taylor, his partner Janine, and myself for the past hour. He almost turned down the interview. He doesn't like interviews or many interviewers. "I dislike talking about myself. It's boring. I've heard all the stories before."

On the way to the kitchen, a large, plain white canvas dominates one wall in the living room. "That's the White Whale," Mr. King says. "I stretch canvas for Helen." Helen Hoy is his life partner, muse and, until he retired this year, a fellow professor at the University of Guelph's department of English literature. "She paints, and the White Whale is my way of reminding her that she's got work to do."

In his work space is a poster produced by the House of Anansi Press. The Usual Suspects features a scowling Margaret Atwood wearing a black leather jacket in a mock police lineup. Two burly six-foot-plus figures tower over her. Thomas King is on one side, writer Michael Winter is on the other.

Every room seems to whisper of a life and hints to a future. A Jane Ash Poitras painting in an upstairs hall demands an explanation. "I sent her some pictures of my two children and she did this painting. That's our son and daughter," Mr. King points to the two children in the painting.

"I sent her those photographs. She used them. She knew I'd have to buy it," he says, grinning.

There's barely a mention or sign of official awards or prizes. His Order of Canada is mentioned only when talk turns to a recent event at Toronto's Roy Thomson Hall for the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. There is nary a word about shortlists for a Commonwealth Writer's Prize or nominations (twice) for a Governor-General's Award. There's no shrine for his Canadian Authors Award or Queen's Jubilee Medal. Instead, the talk is about apple pie, the house and writing.

"I have a new book coming out in November," he says. "It's called The Inconvenient Indian. Non-fiction. Sort of." The "sort of" slips by almost unnoticed.

"I decided not to call it a history because it's not a proper history," he explains. "I'm calling it a narrative history. I know what a history looks like, with footnotes and all. This is more of a narrative history. I think I say in the book that it's more of an adult conversation that I've been having with myself for most of my life."

"Doubleday wanted me to come up with a book that was similar to the Massey Lectures because they wanted it at universities and high schools. They wanted to make native history accessible. Normally, you get a chronological history with lots of dates – and I do have lots of dates. I've got 470 dates in 266 pages. But it really is a kind of running conversation with myself."

A poster at the top of the stairs shows an old passenger liner riding a wave to North America. It's in Italian, a promotion for a shipping company from the mid-1900s.

"We know it's America because there's an Indian peering out from behind palm trees looking at the ship. This Indian is wearing a full Plains headdress," Mr. King chuckles to himself. "This is what they thought of us at the time. This is the image they had of Indians."

That poster took on added meaning once Mr. King decided to write a history book with a difference. In fact, the poster has been transformed into the cover for The Inconvenient Indian.

Thomas Hunt King came into the world in 1943 in Sacramento, Calif. His father was Cherokee and his mother was Greek. There's German in there, too. His family history could be a book in itself.

"[Sherman] Alexie and I had a bet about which one of us could put the other into their book first," Mr. King says. "He won the bet. Here," he says, passing Mr. Alexie's book Indian Killer to Mr. Taylor. "Read from this paragraph on."

Mr. King left the reservation in 1980 to attend university and become a teacher, it says. He made it through one semester before he ran out of money. Too ashamed to return to the reservation, he worked on a fishing boat for a few years, then was struck by a hit-and-run driver while on shore leave. Too injured to work, and without access to disability or worker's compensation, he was homeless for most of the past 10 years.

"Hmm," Mr. King smiles at the memory. "That's actually almost accurate. Except I wasn't really homeless. I just didn't stay in any one place for very long."

The official version has Mr. King working in a bank, then signing on to the crew of a fishing boat before heading off to New Zealand and Australia. He returned to the United States and enrolled at the University of Utah where he graduated with a PhD in English literature. After that, he moved to the University of Minnesota and became the chair of American Indian studies. Somewhere in all of that, he was also an activist and a journalist.

Somehow, this brought Mr. King to the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, where he taught Native Studies for about 15 years. This was where his writing really began to take shape.

"I felt at home – really at home – perhaps for the first time in my life," Mr. King says of his time in Alberta. He became a Canadian citizen. He finagled Helen Hoy into his life. He began to work with writers such as Tomson Highway and Richard Wagamese. He developed a distinctive and critical voice that often took his adopted and former countries to task for their native policies.

It wasn't long before he hammered out his first novel, Medicine River, to much critical acclaim. Then one after the other came a children's book, A Coyote Columbus Story, nominated for a Governor-General's Award, followed by the novel that really made a splash in Canadian literature – Green Grass, Running Water. This book earned him his second Governor-General's Award nomination.

Two other titles come out that same year: One Good Story, That One and Borders,as well as another novel, Truth and Bright Water. By then, Mr. King was also doing a weekly comedy show for CBC Radio called The Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour.

Dead Dog Café takes two characters from Green Grass, Running Water and plunks them down with the author, Thomas King, who plays the cultural third wheel and confused butt for most of the humour. The show turned Indian stereotypes inside out and upside down. It put a big red clown's nose on the cigar store Indian. The show also made Thomas King a household name on both sides of the international border.

In 2003, Mr. King – the first indigenous person to do so – delivered that year's Massey Lectures, five lectures on one topic to different audiences across Canada. Then, the perception is, Tom King dropped out of sight for the next nine years.

Not so, he replies. "You produce what you can produce while you produce it. Between 2003 and now, I ran for federal office for the NDP. I built this house. I was the contractor on this house. And we raised my grandson."

He was also awarded the Order of Canada in 2004, the same year former Winnipeg Mayor Glenn Murray took Green Grass, Running Water to the Canada Reads series. In 2005, Mr. King published a collection of short stories called A Short History of Indians in Canada. It won a McNally Robinson Book of the Year Award. Then he wrote and directed a short film about Indian stereotypes called I'm Not the Indian You Had In Mind.

"But if I don't have anything to publish, I don't publish it. If I don't have a good idea or a good piece that I've done, then nothing happens. There's a thing called 'commercial speed' for writers which is one book every year. That's for genre writers. I don't know if it's written anywhere but if you're a literary writer, and you want to keep your place in the great mandala, you publish every two or three years. I haven't done that."

"If I have to ask myself what I've done in the past week, month or year, I'll never have any peace or satisfaction. Because it means that all I've done in the past isn't worth anything, and all I'm worth is what I can produce in the next little bit. I can't live my life like that."

The Inconvenient Indian is due out in November. "The voice is very much like the Massey Lectures – a little more strident, I suppose. A little less forgiving. I guess you could call this a kind of historical journalism. I'd agree with that. I suppose my journalistic instincts crept back in."

"I think it'll do well. I wrestled with it for six years. But I'm at the age where I don't really care any more. I used to be really concerned about what people thought of me or said about me. But not any more. I don't read reviews. I suppose some people won't like this book. They'll criticize me for writing it. And that's just fine with me."

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