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Michelle Good: 'Imagine the terror of the children' — 'Non-Indigenous Canada, this is the time to raise your voices'

Michelle Good *Toronto Star*

4-5 minutes





WhatsOn

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Michelle Good is the author of “Five Little Indians,” a novel about the survivors of residential schools and the effects of their experience on subsequent generations. She wrote it in answer to the question people often ask about survivors: “Why can’t they just get over it?” The book has won almost every major literary prize in the country. She is a member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation.

When I was still quite little, my mother told me of her friend, Lily, a fellow inmate at the St. Barnabas Residential School in Onion Lake, Saskatchewan. This was not the story one would expect about school chums. No, this was the story of how a little girl, taken without consent from her home and community, hemorrhaged to death from tuberculosis while her little classmates stood by helpless. Imagine that for a minute. Imagine that little girl, her lungs filling, blood bubbling from her mouth. How terrifying to be alone with no proper treatment or care, no one to comfort her, no mother to protect her. Imagine the terror in the children who witnessed.

As Canadians are beginning to learn, Lily was one of thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of children who died in residential schools.

This is not new knowledge. It was known at the time, and we have known it forever.

Dr. Peter Bryce in his role as chief medical officer for the Department of Indian Affairs reported the findings of his review of the health conditions in residential schools to the powers that be. He told them that if the goal had been to create a mechanism for the effective transmission of tuberculosis, they had achieved that with the residential schools. Did the department hasten to improve conditions and provide proper care for the children? No. Instead, Bryce was fired and the department declared that while it was true the children died at a much higher rate than they did in their home communities, that was not enough to deter the state from its objective of a final solution: an end to the “Indian Problem” and the Indian Department.

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Not only did they let those babies die at a rate Duncan Campbell Scott himself estimated to be as high as 50 per cent in some schools, they often didn't even notify the parents of the deceased and, as the truth finally begins to become undeniable to non-Indigenous Canadians, they didn't even record their deaths or mark their graves in a way that would stand the test of time, or at all. Even now, the Church partners in this heinous colonial partnership, continues to hem and haw about making their records available to those who would find a way to identify and send these babies home.

Non-Indigenous Canada, this is the time to raise your voices.

The time is right now to stand up to those who continue to deny the intentional genocidal objectives of these schools. If reconciliation is ever to be achieved, it is time for you to promote responsibility for undertaking your own education of what was done to us in the name of colonization. Trauma has a half-life. It continues and continues and continues. Reconciliation will never come to fruition until non-Indigenous Canada accepts responsibility, acknowledging the brutal truth of residential schools, and commits itself to supporting Indigenous self-determination politically, culturally and economically. Indigenous peoples have carried the weight of this tragedy for far too long. Canada must now wade in and carry the weight of its responsibility for all of this.