The whole world is a story: In conversation with Five Little Indians author Michelle Good

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In honour of the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, BLG hosted Michelle Good, award-winning author of the book *Five Little Indians*, for an honest and emotional conversation with partner and co-chair of BLG's Indigenous Peoples Action Committee, George Wray. A writer and member of the Red Pheasant Cree Nation in Saskatchewan, Michelle worked with Indigenous organizations for 25 years before obtaining her law degree and becoming an advocate for residential school survivors.

George: Was it a difficult book to write?

Michelle: It took nine years. That is the best way of expressing how difficult it was. This is not a subject you take on lightly, because it has the power to hurt people and I really wanted to make sure that I got it right – so nine years it took.

George: Did you feel a burden, as though you weren't writing a novel just for yourself or as an author? Was there more to it during those nine years?

Michelle: Absolutely. It came out of a real deep and abiding frustration year after year after year, seeing comments in newspapers, hearing people talking about residential school survivors and talking about the ongoing suffering in our communities and with this ubiquitous and horrible question: "Why can't they just get over it?"

I wanted to try to answer that question. That is the reason the book doesn't take place mostly in the school. It moves into their life after school and what a challenge it was to try to achieve a modest life, carrying a tremendous burden of psychological injury.

George: There's five different characters with different perspectives. They emerge from a similar experience and make different lives for themselves out in the world. Were these fictional characters?

Michelle: They absolutely are fictional characters. They are characters that came to me through the creative process, but you can't separate your own knowledge and your own experience from those things.

There's no way that one character can carry the weight of the entire experience of survivors. They are fictional and there are nods in the book to my mother's experiences at residential school and my grandmother and so on, but these are fictional characters.

George: Having worked with residential school survivors your entire life, being an advocate and a lawyer, why did you turn to fiction?

Michelle: Because I was mad! I saw that the truth of the story was not being received through factual, academic, nonfiction work – because there's a ton of that out there. The heart of it, which is the long-term intergenerational impacts, was not coming through. The entire world is a story and especially with Indigenous culture. Our oral history is this fabulous social institution meant to convey our history and our truth and I thought I just have to tell this like a story and reach into the hearts more so than the minds.

George: You use this braided narrative, with five characters as a literary mechanism. How important was this to telling this version of the story right?

Michelle: One reason for the braided narrative is because storytelling is circular. It's not linear. Visualize a braid with five strands. That's how I outlined the book in my mind, weaving one story with another, but with the ongoing connection between the stories and the intent of telling each individual story in a way that connects to the others.

George: As lawyers and especially litigators, we 're often told to tell the story of our clients. But, this is more than just a story, right?

Everything is a story. The whole world is a story. Stories in the Indigenous context are not like storybooks. Story in Indigenous culture is an ancient social institution that has been designed carefully to pass down the truth of our history because our history isn't written.

George: As an advocate for residential school survivors and a former lawyer, did that help or hinder your writing of the book or your ability to tell a story?

Michelle: People ask me sometimes, "What was it like to transition from being an activist to going into law school and now going through the MFA and into writing?" and I don't see it as a switch. I see it as just moving into different ways of doing what I set out to do in the first place. My work as a lawyer gave me a certain discipline that I might not have had before and it helped me focus on telling the story. Because as lawyers we have to tell those stories in a very sometimes economical but powerful way. My lawyer experience really contributed to that.

George: There 's a line in the book "I couldn 't leave you there after what they did to you. We finally got to go home, you and me both. " It's heartbreaking. In the context of uncovering the remains of Indigenous children who attended these residential schools – what would justice look like to them and their families?

Michelle: We knew for forever that these little children were buried and hidden on the grounds of residential schools, but nobody would listen to us and there was so much resistance, in spite of the fact that the Truth and Reconciliation report in 2015 laid out a very specific roadmap for the government to deal with missing children and burials.

What justice would be is for those little kids to be able to go home, because that's all they wanted. And for the state to assist with that in a meaningful way and not have to be convinced that they need to do the right thing. That would be justice, because those kids, they need to go home so they can be released in a proper way.

George: Some of the five characters in your book got to go home, but it was a different home than the one they left. Give us some insight into what that meant in terms of telling this story .

Michelle: I wanted to present a slightly different concept of intergenerational harm. Most people think of intergenerational harm as the child goes to the school and then the child is traumatized, the child goes home and has a relationship and the trauma is conveyed to their own children through observational learning. Children watch trauma responses, and that's what they learn and that's one way that intergenerational trauma works.

But I also wanted people to understand that it's far more circular than that. The first child that was ever taken to residential school was when intergenerational trauma started, because the elders, the grandparents, the parents, the aunties, the uncles were deprived of their role in raising that child.

There's a scene in the book that focuses on an empty and dilapidated playground in an Indigenous community and I was trying to ask the reader to imagine virtually every Indigenous community in Canada devoid of children. And how that not only impacted the child but the entire community, the cultural and social structure of the community.

Imagine it's your child being away for school 10 years. And then, one day, they just show up home.

George: When you were writing the book, what were your hopes and expectations for it?

Michelle: My hope for the book was what actually happened, but my expectation was that it would be for a niche audience. A small audience would go, "Oh wow. Here's a story." For it to have the phenomenal reach that it's had is a dream come true. There's more hearts and minds that are choosing to step into the reality of these stories.

George: So "truth and reconciliation. " It's a phrase. It 's a process. What do you expect from it?

Michelle: What do I expect or what do I want? I hope that it can bind us together in a sense of recognizing the truth of Canadian history and understanding that if we are to achieve reconciliation, it requires substantive change. Imagine the scales of justice. In order for that balance to be achieved, something from the side of the scale that's not the Indigenous side of the scale has to move over. You can't achieve balance and maintain the status quo.

I think people get very nervous about the land back movement but I don't know if people know that only 11 per cent of the Canadian land mass is owned privately. Eight-nine per cent is Crown land, almost evenly split between provincial Crown and federal Crown land. So, it wouldn't hurt very many people, if anybody, to see land returned to Indigenous people.

Crown land is also a myth. In the 1100s in Great Britain it was established that only the king could own land. That's where the tradition of Crown land comes from. It's all infused with doctrine of discovery, of terra nullius. It is such a powerful myth that even when the highest court of the land acknowledges that the title of a group like the Wet'suwet'en or the Tsilhqot'in is unextinguished, they are not recognized as having absolute title to their land. Their title is still understood as a burden on Crown title. What that prevents is a meaningful sharing of resources that would allow us to return to a state of self-sufficiency. Believe me, nobody in the Indigenous world likes the relationship where we are corralled and living on these tiny places that are only ink spots compared to our traditional territories.

But we also don't want the whole world. We just want enough so that we can end that relationship of dependency and engage in our own way of governing, our own way of establishing economic systems and so on.

George: So Truth and Reconciliation is more than just a healing process. There 's something more that we need or Indigenous persons need.

Michelle: It is a healing process, but that healing process is more than – no disrespect – it's more than land acknowledgments. It's about rejigging our social structure. Because if we don't, then the nature of the relationship stays the same, and that's not reconciliation.

George: In trying to understand the concrete steps that we must take – I'm a non-Indigenous person – how can I participate in reconciliation?

Michelle: I hear this so often when I talk with folks, and I like to relay a story. Because the whole world is a story! We changed the constitution. Indigenous people represent a tiny percentage of the population in Canada and when the 1969 White Paper of Pierre Elliott Trudeau and John Chrétien came out, at that time virtually everybody was a residential school survivor. Chief George Manuel, the second president of the National Indian Brotherhood, which would become the AFN, had a Grade 3 education. Nonetheless, we changed the constitution. So imagine what non-Indigenous people with their privilege – and I don't say that with disrespect either – could do. But it involves intention. It involves dedication. And it involves organization.

I have spent my whole life trying. There has to be a commensurate response from non-Indigenous Canada and I believe that that's difficult for people to wrap their heads around but it's something I want people to just think about.

George: I think it 's too easy for non-Indigenous people to use their unfamiliarity with Canada's history or Indigenous people as an excuse or a crutch and I think we need to learn, we need to read the stories, and we need to get involved and help make change.

Michelle: In 2000 I did research on the history of residential schools. At that time you had to do it in the dusty archives, you had to do it in the libraries. You had to be physically present. Now this information is so incredibly available. It just takes will. You can get into the archives online. So if you want to contribute, accept responsibility for your own education, and then raise your voice. I know it sounds very idealistic but it's

the only way. I say the Truth and Reconciliation Commission didn't come up with calls to think about it. They came up with calls to action, and that's what's needed is the action.

This interview has been edited for length.

Michelle asks us to take responsibility for our own education. Here are some resources to get you started:

- ***The Path*** *is a 5-module online course about the history and realities of Indigenous Peoples in Canada.*
- *The* ***Settlers Take Action website*** *has several resource guides to learn about whose traditional territory you live on and the history of Canada not told.*
- ***Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action*** *.*

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