

Voices of the True North

Strong and Unrestrained

BY MARYLYNN MILLER OKE

The Northern writing duo, Margaret Pokiak-Fenton and her daughter-in-law, Christy Jordan-Fenton, export the true North experience to all points of the compass through raw emotion and unfettered storytelling. Christy explains what telling the universal truths about life way up there can teach us all.

Stories inspired by a young Margaret

The relationship between Margaret and Christy extends far beyond the usual in-law dynamic. The co-authors of gripping award-winning memoirs and accompanying picture books, including *Fatty Legs: A True Story* and *A Stranger at Home*, are deeply connected through compelling storytelling that was years in the making.

Margaret grew up in an Inuvialuit community on Banks Island in the High Arctic. Storytelling was an integral part of culture, distribution of traditional knowledge and everyday life, especially during long, inescapable, landlocked winters.

As for Christy, who is a poet and author in her own right, she was inspired to write about Margaret's colourful childhood, including her harrowing experiences in residential schools of the 1940s. Christy felt an intrinsic desire to share these stories with her own children to build their self-esteem and instill a sense of pride about their heritage.

The visual and visceral art of storytelling

"Margaret comes from a culture of storytelling... very visual storytelling," explains Christy. "String games, shadow puppets and dancing. For far northern peoples, the winter is a time for exploring story, travelling by dogsled, hunting wolves, and frozen oceans that limit shopping to once a year. Her experiences are very different because she comes from the High Arctic."

Their co-authored books, *Fatty Legs: A True Story* and its sequel, *A Stranger at Home*, spawned picture books for younger children, including *When I Was Eight* and *Not My Girl*. The vivid works paint contrasting pictures of Margaret's life as a young girl. One, as a free-spirited and determined Margaret growing up in a vibrant Inuvialuit community rich with tradition, who can't wait to go away to learn to read. The other, as she struggles to preserve her identity and spirit while enduring the harsh and often cruel realities of residential school. The life-altering legacy of her experience lives on in *A Stranger at Home* and *Not My Girl*. Ultimately changed, she struggles to re-adjust to life with her family in Tuktoyaktuk, NWT, after living away for two years.

"Of course, Margaret's stories are coloured with tales of travelling by dog sled and by schooner, which were unique experiences shared only by those in the Far North," reveals Christy. "Her stories also explore the pain of losing a traditional name, a language and skills necessary for daily life, and what it takes to reclaim them. She has been able to share how important Inuvialuit culture and cultural identity are to youth in general, because of her experiences. And so, while the books are written in English, we have used some words in Inuvialuktun throughout, and have framed them with elements of her cultural perceptions."

The vulnerable path to empowerment

According to Christy, no matter the subject, the story is most important. In addition to sharing residential school history, Christy and Margaret wanted to take the most human approach possible in their work and share deeply personal moments that delve far below the surface.

"I think, in a way, every artist seeks to find the universality through the unique, and that can only be done by exposing the very core emotions of a situation," shares Christy. "The ones that everyone feels alone in having, but then they read about someone living a life very far removed from their own life, and they can still connect to the feelings and share in that experience."

For Margaret, the process of writing about her painful journey proved to be a very vulnerable, yet ultimately empowering, experience for her.

"Taking the risk of being deeply personal and sharing your truth can be very freeing in a personal sense, but can also create good medicine for others and where they are with their own personal stories," reflected Christy. "It took immense courage for Margaret, and the way audiences have held her and her story is a very beautiful thing."

Revealing the diversity of the North

Within their storytelling, Margaret and Christy also want to emphasize that the diversity found within Canada also extends into the Far North. They want to emphasize that not all northern communities are the same.

"In Canada we are always talking about diversity, but so often that takes place in an urban context, and northern voices and rural voices get marginalized," states Christy. "What literature there is out there about the Inuit often takes place in the Eastern Arctic. The distinct traditions of the



Christy Jordan-Fenton



Margaret Pokiak-Fenton

Western Arctic and its peoples gets lost. So it is important to give voice to these experiences. It is also important for children to have stories that reflect their own culture.”

Christy feels literature plays a key role by demonstrating that northern peoples like the Inuvialuit do exist today, and that many are still living in traditional ways.

“The more children are exposed to northern stories, the more they realize that the culture is still alive, and the High Arctic is not just a big empty space,” she said.

Bearers of tradition, knowledge and life lessons

Christy adamantly feels that northern storytellers, including Richard Van Camp, Alooook Ipellie, Mindy Willet, Margaret’s brother James Pokiak, Johnny Issaluk and Michael Kusugak, are as diverse as the work they produce reflecting and examining northern experiences.

She believes that northern storytellers are very articulate when delving into themes important to the northern experience, including connection to the land, community and overcoming adversity. She also feels their perceptions yield “something very profound.”

“We could just name so many authors who are some of the finest in Canada, and the world for that matter. The North is so deeply connected to storytelling. And for urban readers, a lot of the experiences being written about could seem like sci-fi, except they are real, or could be real. Open their books, whether they are fiction or non-fiction, traditional stories or reference books. Children can’t help but get lost in worlds that stimulate their wildest imagination. And they can go to the places the stories and the knowledge come from. They’re real.”

Christy and Margaret also love to share life lessons embodied by the Inuvialuit, including resilience and the ability to thrive, with their young readers.

“Anyone can find inspiration from how adaptable, strong and vibrant the Inuvialuit are. All those characteristics people love about the character of Margaret in the stories are inherent to her people. What child doesn’t need stories of adventure and adaptability and thriving through adversity?”

Life now for the Fentons

After working for the Hudson’s Bay Company, Margaret met her husband, Lyle, in the 1960s. They now live on a farm near Fort St. John, British Columbia, with Christy’s family alongside horses, pigs and wildlife. Most summers, however, Margaret still heeds the call to her northern home where she likes to participate in traditions such as preparing whale. According to Christy, Margaret loves life here and enjoys quiet time to sew, work as an artisan and create traditional crafts.

However, storytelling seems to follow them no matter what place they call home.

“We are still very much influenced by the nature that surrounds us, but we also belong to a community where storytelling is important,” said Christy. “There are fewer distractions and options for entertainment in our community, and so people still gather to share stories as a main source of entertainment.”

As for Christy, she likes the quiet life on the farm. Having previously enjoyed a wide variety of global experiences, including the infantry reserve, foreign study, working with disadvantaged youth and teaching wilderness survival, she is planning a trip to India to write children’s books about stories of empowered Dalit women.

Both Christy and Margaret have become frequent travellers. It is a role that Margaret enjoys as she loves meeting and speaking with children. Although Margaret could never imagine leaving her beloved home, Christy admits that she can envision living in a locale without winter.

Going forward, they hope to take the art of their unique storytelling to film.

“We’re hoping to make a documentary about her life and her stories,” said Christy. “But first we will have to slow down long enough to catch our breath.”

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