

Nicola Campbell crafts her words

by Gillian O'Reilly



"I heard an elder speak of the importance of our languages and our culture. He said that our words are powerful; our stories are elastic; our languages are music; they dance, they move and they are medicine for our people. He said they are a spirit within themselves and we are only the channel that brings them to life. I write because I know what he said is true."

Nicola Campbell is very conscious that words have power and a discussion about her writing includes words like "respect," "honour" and "conscientious." She chooses her words carefully and thoughtfully. It's evident both in conversation, when she pauses to select the right phrase, and in the process of her writing – she rewrites often and with care. In the past three years, she has produced two superbly crafted books for children – books that are imbued with the resilience and strength of her First Nations cultures.

Not only was she a self-described "bit of a bookworm" but she had a model in her aunt, the noted author Maria Campbell (Halfbreed, *Red's People: How the Métis Lived* and other titles). "She was a big inspiration to me," says Nicola.

Creel/Méts from Saskatchewan on her father's side and Interior Salish of Nlaka'pamx (Thompson) and Nlax (Klkanagan) ancestry on her mother's side, Nicola Campbell grew up in BC's Nicola Valley surrounded by family. Her father died when she was a baby, but she grew up with her mother, her aunts and uncles and her grandpas. There were lots of family gatherings and activities – hunting, fishing and berry picking – and she heard many stories including those about residential school.

A graduate of the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at University of British Columbia, she has written adult and children's short fiction, poetry, screen plays and is working on her first novel. She didn't particularly intend to write for children. However, after taking the First Nations Introduction to Writing, she enrolled in Writing for Children taught by author Barbara Nickel. An assignment formed the basis of what became *Shi-eh-eh-ko* – the story of a little girl, going out with various members of her family in the days before she first goes to residential school and finding a way to keep those memories to sustain her through the long months ahead.

Nicola describes the writing of *Shi-eh-eh-ko* as a "kind of an accident" because she didn't set out specifically to write a story about the residential school experience. "I don't even know how it came out. I remember thinking of the first days of residential school, how a child would be feeling, how a family would feel, and about everything that would be considered important to pass on to the child."

She wrote the main part of it over the school year, where it was critiqued and critiqued again. She put it away for two years and then took it out and rewrote it before sending it off to a publisher.

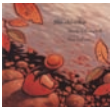
Her second book, *Shin-chi's Carve* is the sequel to *Shi-eh-eh-ko*, describing *Shi-eh-eh-ko's* return to residential school, this time accompanied by her little brother *Shin-chi*. Now *Shi-eh-eh-ko* is the teacher, guiding her brother as to what to remember and what to expect from school life and how long they have to wait until they can return to their family – when the sockeye salmon swim upstream. With honesty and gentleness, Nicola Campbell carefully balances the hope and strength within the children with the harsh treatment of the residential schools.

Nicola knew when she finished *Shi-eh-eh-ko* that there would be a sequel and she says the story came faster. However, because she was dealing with historical content, "I wanted it to be true, but to be gentle and to honour and educate. It was pretty tough and emotional too because I would think about my elders and wanted them to feel the love I had for them. It was so important that I did a good job."


She has been participating in traditional cedar dugout war canoe racing for eleven years and has worked the canoe into the stories. "It kind of crosses traditional territories between Interior Salish and Coast Salish," she says, explaining that they had dugout canoes in the Interior but "not when our parents were going to residential school." However, she notes that "there are so many teachings involved with paddling and canoe racing" and describes the canoe as a source of building strength within oneself. So, when she was writing *Shi-eh-eh-ko* and trying to figure out where *Shi-eh-eh-ko* would go with her father, she thought it would be appropriate to have them go out in a canoe.

Nicola would like to write longer fiction and is planning to do her MFA in Creative Writing in the next few years. However, with a son who is less than a year old, she confesses that recently, "about all I've been doing is being a mom," but adds that she has a lot of poetry that she has been editing and re-editing.

Admitting that she spends "a lot of time being really conscientious," Nicola says she enjoys rewriting and editing, but adds ruefully: "I wish I was faster at it."




Whatever her speed, it is evident that we can expect more well-crafted books – whether for children or for adults – from this new voice in Canadian and First Nations writing. ✦




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