

# Freelance

Saskatchewan Writers' Guild

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## One Land Many Stories

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BY MARK ABLEY

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Features

# ONE LAND MANY STORIES

*by Candace Savage*



A story is like a matyroska, one of those Russian nesting dolls. Inside every version of events lies another, and another, and another, waiting to be revealed. Even the word “story” turns out to have a secret tale to tell. The etymologists tell us that “story” first entered the English language from Old French, *estoire*, about seven hundred years ago, already carrying the meaning of “a narrative of important events.” But its origins lie even deeper, in the ancient Latin *historia* and the even more ancient Greek *historein*, a verb that meant “to inquire” or “to investigate.” Thus, telling stories has always been recognized as a technique for answering questions and searching for truth.

Curiously, “story,” or sometimes “storey,” is an architectural term, as well, referring to a single level in a building. How these two very different meanings managed to attach themselves to the same pair of syllables isn’t entirely clear. But the experts tell us that the connection was likely made during the Middle Ages, when stories were often told pictorially through linear murals or bas reliefs that wrapped around the walls of churches and other public edifices. Every

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 VIOLENCE AND SUFFERING.



floor of the building had its own story to tell, so the space became a layered assemblage of narratives. Even today, the vague linguistic memory of stories as three-dimensional, spatial structures continues to inform the way we think about them. We talk about trying to go deeper into a story; we want to dig down into what happened and get to the bottom of things.

I caught my first glimpse of the layered nature, or stratigraphy, of stories back in the early 2000s, as part of the exploration that ultimately led to *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape* (Greystone Books, 2012.) That adventure began on a whim, when my partner and I made a snap decision to purchase a vacation home in the little town of Eastend, a community of some 500 people at the “east end” of the Cypress Hills but in the far southwestern corner of the province. Given that our main residence was (and is) in Saskatoon, a good four-and-a-half-hour drive to the north and east, this was not a particularly practical arrangement. It would take me the better part of a decade to recognize the layers of past experiences—my own small-town childhood, a broken relationship with the land, a yearning to bridge the gap between then and now—that made our encounter with Eastend almost inevitable.

When people ask me what *A Geography of Blood* is about, I often say that it is the story of what I was required to learn by going back to Eastend and the Cypress Hills again and again over a number of years. Admittedly, this is a cryptic response that raises as many questions as it resolves. And yet, it is true that I felt an obligation to those beautiful uplands and valleys, as if I had been called to them--by them--for some reason

of their own. And it is also true that the land itself was my most insistent and demanding teacher. “Look!” the hills kept insisting. “Look at this weird conical landform, this swarm of Ice Age eskers, this layer of river-washed stones strewn over bone dry land. Don’t you see, there’s a story here? Don’t you want to know what happened?”

Of all the places that sparked my imagination, one of the most eloquent and instructive was a stretch of steep, dissected cutbanks in the Frenchman River valley between Eastend and the all-but-vanished settlement of Ravenscrag, a short jaunt to the west. Here, the saga of the earth’s history can be read in the subtly modulated silts and clays of sequential geological deposits. From a foundational layer of gray mudstones laid down by the Bearpaw Sea some 80 million years ago, the valley walls rise, in the words of *A Geography of Blood*, “in successive striations of grayish-yellow, milk white, mauve, greenish brown, charcoal, gray and tan, each bearing witness to an episode in the earth’s long turmoil.” With the aid of a guidebook on the geology of the region, I was able to read the layered traces of a vanished ocean, an ash-spewing volcano, a cataclysmic collision with a chunk of intergalactic debris.

But if the land was capable of remembering, it also knew how to forget. According to that invaluable guidebook, there was an invisible break, or “unconformity,” in the geological deposits at the very top of the cliffs. After millions of years of archiving everything that happened, the landscape was eventually subjected to erosion by water and wind, stripping away a thousand meters of overburden and erasing the record of about thirty million years. “Yet to the unschooled eye,” I noted, “nothing looked amiss. One layer overlaid another in

complete innocence. Apparently, an unconformity could exist between the present and what we [know] of the past, and very few of us would ever notice it.”

Funny, the things we remember, the things we choose to forget. The more I thought about the smoothly deceptive storytelling of those Frenchman River cutbanks, the more I found myself thinking about more recent, human events. Ever since I was a child, I have been troubled by an unanswerable question: what does it mean to have been born and raised on the Canadian prairies, the daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter of homesteading settlers? From an early age—at home, at school, in books and films—I was welcomed into a story of epic courage and adventure, in which my own “pioneer” ancestors struggled to bring order and civility to a wild and empty land. But the hills around Eastend would have nothing to do with this seductive myth. Pretty much everywhere you looked there were signs of a deeper human story, far predating the influx of Euro-Canadian agriculturists. Ridges studded with stone cairns. Valley rims scrawled with tipi rings. Historic sites dedicated to the memory of violence and suffering. Clearly, something was missing from the origin story that I had been told so often and with so much certainty. It was marred by a gaping erasure, an unconformity.

Exploring this omission would take me, in both a literal and figurative sense, on a journey into darkness. Leaving the shining hills behind, I retreated into the flickering half-light of the microfilm reading room at the University library in Saskatoon, to spool through the files of the Department of Indian Affairs and its nineteenth-century predecessors. “Constantly meeting hungry Indians,” the newly appointed Indian Commissioner, Edgar Dewdney, noted on his inaugural visit to the Cypress Hills in 1879. “Lots of old dried [buffalo] carcasses all over the prairie.” As I read through the correspondence, it became clear that the agricultural settlement of the western plains had been predicated on an ecological and humanitarian disaster. “The Indians look very bad,” the Indian agent at Fort Walsh reported to an approving Dewdney in 1882. “I know they are not getting enough flour but I like to punish them a little.” In the hands of a ruthless and unscrupulous government, hunger had been used to manipulate and displace Indigenous people and “open” the prairies to settlers.

How do you deal with the grief?

The person who put that bleak emotion into words for

me was a Kainai cultural activist, educator and artist, the late Narcisse Blood. (Tragically, Narcisse was killed in 2015 in a horrific vehicle accident in southern Saskatchewan that also took the lives of five other people.) As I struggled to cope with what I was learning, I turned to him in the hope of hearing a different, more settled account of our shared history. His friendship and his deeply grounded vision were an unearned gift, helping give me the courage to face the truth. The same was true of my other “good teacher,” Nekaneet First Nation Elder Jean Francis Oakes, Piyéso kâ-pétowitak. Although I had obtained permission from the Chief and Council to speak with elders on the reserve, I showed up on her doorstep as an outsider and a stranger. Instead of receiving me with the suspicion and mistrust I half-expected, she accepted me with generosity and, in time, with an outpouring of memories. Our conversations formed the basis of Jean’s book, *Stories From My Life*, which we published together in 2008.

Stories within stories. Stories forgotten and remembered. Stories rooted in the land. Stories of trauma and healing. These are some of the ideas that will be open for discussion in March of next year, when I take *A Geography of Blood* on the road as the featured book in this year’s Saskatchewan Library Association One Book One Province tour. Acknowledging one another’s perspectives is a way of exploring differences, creating community and seeking truth, and I am very much looking forward to sharing stories with you. ☺

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