

Augie in the Library

February 27, 2017, Saskatoon

Augie Merasty died this morning. His youngest daughter, Arlene, phoned first, then his older daughter Joanne, then Anne Pennylegion of the Saskatchewan Library Association. They were all stricken by his sudden passing, Arlene perhaps the most. It hit us with the weight of unexpected things. I thought Augie had more time left, because even in the throes of cancer, diabetes, alcoholism, and life on the street, even in his eighties, he had always bounced back. Some say he died at eighty-eight, some say eighty-seven. Depends who you ask.

He died around the time that I was packing up a supply of his books in preparation for my One Book, One Province tour of Saskatchewan. This tour is taking me to eleven communities: two in Saskatoon, one in Regina, and eight more in mostly rural Saskatchewan. At each venue I will speak about the process of putting together *The Education of Augie Merasty*, Augie's memoir of a brutal existence in St. Therese Residential School from 1935 to 1944. The northern junket up to Prince Albert and beyond is now in jeopardy. The original idea was that I would present with Augie and daughter Arlene. I would talk about the making of the book, and Augie and Arlene would take the story into his life as a father, hunter, fisherman, trapper, boxer, jack of all trades, survivor, memoirist. This was going to be the highlight of the tour of the new edition of his book, and we were all up for it. Most exciting of all, I would get to gab with Augie one more time.

Right now I am preparing for my Saskatchewan Augie tour, but without Augie in the world any more. I've already had a warm-up for the tour with a presentation at a Catholic High in Saskatoon, one of two high schools that pulled the book from the curriculum because some students dreaded the possibility of engaging with its dark truths. So I talked with the students about such things as truth and reconciliation, and about the historical connections between the two. A devoted teacher and a nice bunch of teenagers, but a minority of them were probably not ready for a plunge into the cold hard realities of torture, sexual violence and predation. The other school in Saskatoon simply cancelled my visit, probably because of similar fears. They're studying this book at the venerable girls' private school in Toronto, Bishop Strachan, but Saskatoon is perhaps a little too close to home for such truths.

I'm hoping for a better reception at my first official venue, Regina's First Nations University of Canada, four days from now. For one thing, there will be relatively few high school students.

Tuesday, February 28, Saskatoon

I broke my personal record for e-mails today. Also my record for radio/ TV/ newspaper interviews. Each one of them was a response to Augie's death. Exhausting but very touching.

Wednesday, March 1, Prince Albert

I spoke at the celebration of Augie's life at First Nations University on the University of Regina campus. More than a hundred people gathered there, and, by my own guess, almost one third of the people were indigenous. Students, political leaders, elders. A very responsive audience. A wonderful audience.

After my own presentation, Blair Stonechild, the respected indigenous writer and historian, gave us his oddly pleasant recollections of residential school. They contrasted a lot with Augie Merasty's student days, apparently because his own parents lived closer to the school and supported him. I was reminded of Senator Lynn Beyak's remarks about "the abundance of good" that unfolded in residential schools. I was also reminded of countless statements to the contrary. There was nothing good about

the many children who went missing without reports being filed. There was nothing good about the countless acts of rape and torture the children had to endure. There was nothing good about all the unmarked graves of children far from home. For a moment one could almost believe that the tragedy of residential schools in our country had been exaggerated. God save us from comfortable assertions in the presence of great tragedies.

The M.C. for the event was Colleen Murphy, who is a key organizational presence behind the One Book, One Province initiative. After getting her Master's degree in library science at McGill, she returned to Regina and joined the University of Regina library, where she is now Associate University Librarian. She is a big force in the Saskatchewan Library Association. When I think of how much energy gets put into programming in a given library, I think of Colleen Murphy, and how her labours never seem to tire her. What does Colleen know about pressure, deadlines, and hard work that I don't?

The One Book, One Province initiative is an award presented to one book per year in Saskatchewan. This year Augie's book will be promoted by all the libraries in the province. This comes with a tour of the province from the southeast to the north and down to the southwest during the month of March.

The melty muddy month of March. Readers of my little adventure should see my car today. It is so filthy it makes me proud.

One last memory from the FNUC presentations. One of the indigenous leaders at my presentation came up to me after my talk, and after Blair Stonechild's recollections of a benign and non-traumatic experience at residential school. The man told me in confidence that his own experience at residential school was much closer to Augie's nightmare than Stonechild's relatively easy time. His last words to me were "You never forget it, David. It never goes away."

If there is a chance for me to act on the need for reconciliation in this country, in this year of reconciliations, this is it. Augie delivered the truth to me in handwritten stories from 2001 to 2009, stories of shocking brutality that came through the re-opened trap-door of his memory. He began with a comforting catalogue of gentle memories of all the brothers, sisters and priests who cared for the children with kindness and love. Then he made for the dark corners of his life at St. Therese Residential School, where he was singled out for torture, sexual assaults and cruelty from about the age of seven until he left the school around age fourteen.

That is the truth. How might this reconciliation work for me? What exactly can I do?

Thursday, March 2, 2017, Estevan

I drove down here expecting to hear a great deal about the oil and gas industry, or about the slow recovery of the oil patch, or about the many vacant apartments and condos. Something about the cycle of boom and bust in oil and gas-rich regions. Nope, not a word.

Instead, I get a battalion of wonderful librarians. The director, Kate-Lee Nolin, is young and energized. You can't imagine any program too daunting for her to embrace. Rebecca, an artist and art instructor, as well as a children's librarian, showed me around the lovely work-space. Victoria is a high-energy librarian and part-time novelist. She talks of her current manuscript with the passion of a true writer. Diana had supper with me in the library (provided by librarians from their own kitchen), and as we waited for the patrons to arrive she told me ghost stories. I would like to read her job description.

How many writers on the circuit get this kind of attention? Maybe all of them do. These librarians are delightfully bookish, keen, progressive, welcoming, smart. I could go on.

My presentation went off well. I was tired from the drive, flat, sleepy, but the library patrons woke me up. They had something in common with the librarians here, and they asked some good questions. At the end of my presentation, during the applause and that feel-good moment when you know things went well, I happened to glance to the left of our little enclave, and I saw three indigenous

women. They too had been listening to my memories of Augie. The librarians couldn't see them, and when I spotted them, it was too late to invite them in.

I did not know whether to be happy that they had come to the reading, or sad that they couldn't bring themselves to join the rest of us. As I write these words, I think the latter emotion is starting to take over. This is the country I live in, and it has to do better.

Saturday, March 4, Saskatoon

Kever and I slept in till 9:30, clinging to each other. This is what home means to me. Today I am recovering from too little sleep and too many clicks on the road. I used to have more energy for these marathon drives.

Sunday, March 5, Saskatoon

The northern junket is on! Augie has already been buried with great dignity. He had a funeral while I was talking about him in Regina. He had a celebration of his life when I was in Estevan. Now he will be honoured in the presence of a wider audience at a college gym in Prince Albert. A gym? Why in a gym? The writer Mark Medley has written a big obit for him in *The Globe & Mail*, but he is even bigger news in P.A.

Wednesday, March 8, Prince Albert

By my count, there is close to two hundred and fifty people in the gym. I did not expect this because the weather has so severe. The librarian who worked hard to organize this big event, Ann Liang, is stranded in Moose Jaw. Her replacement is the ever-adaptable Regan Balfour, a capable and self-assured young librarian at the Saskatchewan Polytech College. She is assisted by two other librarians but (God forgive me) I have forgotten their names! Kever is there, grinning with anticipation. She sits in a chair in front of the risers near my friend, Steven Whitehead, who is visiting from the U.K. Pete, the bookseller from Turning the Tide bookstore in Saskatoon, sits at a table in a corner of the gym stacked high with copies of Augie's book. Just as the ceremony is about to begin, our elder for the day arrives. I've already met her before, Augie's sister Gertie. She might still be in her seventies, but only now do I realize what a beautiful face she has, a warm smile, a calming presence. To everyone she is Gertie, and no one mentions a last name. A few white teachers and officials from the college are out there, but perhaps ninety per cent of the audience is made up of Cree and Métis students and other indigenous members of the community.

Needless to say, I am thrilled to behold this audience.

I talk for about forty minutes of my symbiotic relationship with Augie. Obviously he could not have assembled a book like this without me, but just as obviously, I could never come up with this riveting story without Augie. He suffered for it but he delivered it. His life was not lucky, but our coming together felt lucky to me, this marriage of two different minds made in Heaven--because, in 2001, Augie simply dropped out of the sky. I happened to pick up a telephone on the right day, and soon after that, the story began to unfold. Frequently, Augie was hard to work with and impossible to find when I needed him to answer questions and to finish his manuscript. Frequently, I dreamed of chucking the whole project. Only now can I see that, when we had to be, Augie and I were a good team.

I move away from the lectern to a warm applause, and Arlene approaches the mic. Her sister Katherine is up there too. Katherine has just told me about Augie's favourite park bench, the one on River Street with a view of the big bridge over the North Saskatchewan River. This bridge, she told me, was the one from which her brother fell to his death, and no one could save him. This was the last

moment of his life, and Augie sat on his bench and observed it countless times as though he might commune with his boy's last moment in the world.

Arlene Merasty has never had problems standing up to a big audience, be it live or televised or recorded on national radio. She tells stories about her father in front of a hushed audience, and the one I will cherish the most is the story about her dad's trapline. One winter afternoon Arlene, her dad, and some other family were relaxing in Arlene's place in Prince Albert. Augie rose up and declared that he was going to check his trapline. Arlene had no idea what Augie meant, as they were living in the middle of the city. Hours later Augie returned to the house with a pole at the back of his neck suspended over his shoulders. On one side of the pole hung three dead rabbits, and three more on the other side of the pole. Augie gutted and cleaned the animals and they all had a great feast.

"What did you do?" Arlene asked her dad. "Raid a pet store?"

"My trapline," Augie replied.

"What trapline?"

Augie replied, "The golf course."

With her memories of her father, Arlene absolutely stole the show. There is a lot of love in the hall today.

I took my place at the book table to do some signing, and the line of readers was very long. One of the students in line, perhaps nineteen or twenty, declared, "Mr. Carpenter, I want you to know, we did this book real deep!" Reactions like that to Augie's story really make me smile. At a time when some educators push books to the bottom of the agenda, it's wonderful to encounter passionate readers and their teachers. Today they treat Augie's memoir like a saint's relic. And the testaments keep on coming all along the line, Cree and Métis readers and their devoted teachers. Today we are all part of a sad beautiful story.

Bookseller Pete and Kever head back south to Saskatoon, and Steve Whitehead and I head north. I have one more gig to do today, and as the evening comes on, the weather turns very cold. Highways 3 and 4 up to Meadow Lake take us through some stunning winter scenery. Both highways weave in and out of hilly copses of aspens and willows and many clusters of pine and spruce. The idea of Saskatchewan as a flat prairie with ruler-straight roads has disappeared away to the south of this region. So does any notion of spring. The snow is deep, and the icy patches reach well beyond the shoulders of the road. Steve and I pull into Meadow Lake just as a chilly-looking sun sinks behind the hills.

The library in Meadow Lake is beautiful and, like the one in Estevan, it looks almost new. Our librarian host, Tawn Marshall, bristles with enthusiasm and organization. She takes us through the library and calls attention to the personalities of, and in, each room. She knows her patrons as though they were also her neighbours. She has created a display of Augie's book and some early pictures of Augie and his family, and the ghostly monolith of St. Therese Residential school. I can't help but see this careful display as a shrine to the sad lives of the children of this institution.

Just as I am about to make my presentation, I spy an old student of mine, a fabulous story-teller of Métis descent. Bernice rises up to give me a big hug, and I remember the stories she would tell during the lunch hour at the Gabriel Dumont Institute back in the early 1980s. Am I that old? During my presentation to about twenty patrons, Bernice reminds us that Métis people in Saskatchewan are not part of the treaties signed so long ago by First Nations leaders. Therefore, they have no legal standing in the Truth and Reconciliation talks and compensation hearings. Bernice was always politically astute, but now I'd bet she could write a book about this plight.

When Steve and I got back to the Super 8 Motel, I was suffering from mental fatigue. All the driving and the two sessions in two different towns had finally gotten to me. Slept like a baby. When I

got up the next morning, the temperature was minus 36 degrees celsius. Windchill was 45 below. And much to Steve's and my surprise, unplugged though it was, my car started!

Monday, March 13, Saskatoon

Today I am gathering with about one hundred lawyers learning about indigenous law, and many of them seem very young. Perhaps they don't think of themselves as youngsters, but when you're as old as I am, perhaps most of humanity seems to look amazingly young. Dan Shapiro is there, almost the only familiar face. I've known him for decades, but even Danny looks absurdly young.

Maria Campbell began the day with her presentation about Métis traditions and spirituality. (Maria looks decades younger than me. Get over it, Carpenter.) She does it all without notes as she always has. Spellbinding. As usual. John Burrows talks to us about treaties and their legally binding implications from the perspective of native spirituality. He talks about the sacred quality of rivers, how each river has a spirit and how each river was meant to flow. John too is a spell-binder, and filled with the kind of wisdom that non-indigenous people like me must try to internalise. How easy would it be for my buddies at the English Department to swallow Burrows's wisdom that the river has a spirit?

After my own brief presentation the lineup for books and signatures is once again quite long. After a couple of dozen friendly lawyers, I run out of books.

Saturday, March 18, Shaunavon

Kever has invited herself along to accompany me down to the southwest corner of Saskatchewan. It's time to introduce her. She is the artist Honor Kever, my wife of twenty-seven years. Our car has gained tonnage from the amount of mud that clings to its undercarriage. We are greeted at the Shaunavon library by the librarian, Joanne Hoffman, Kelly, her young assistant, and by the Chinook district head librarian and organizer par excellence, Jean McKendry. The official name of Shaunavon's facility is the Grand Coteau Heritage and Cultural Centre, and it lives up to its grandiose name. The facility houses a gorgeous library on one side and a suprisingly large museum on the other. Our two-hour visit isn't nearly enough to appreciate this facility, which stands out like a crocus in the shadows of Shaunavon's downtown.

Thanks to a surprise showing of some of our own friends who live in the south, we managed a crowd of fourteen people. A small audience by this tour's standards, but a quality audience to be sure. Lots of challenging questions and enthusiasm.

By about 4:00 pm, Kever and I hit the road for our overnight lodgings. This time we get to stay at Jim Saville's Spring Valley Guest Ranch near the hamlet of Ravenscrag. The gravel roads are formidable. Our little Corolla seems to swim through the mud, but a night with Jim at his valley kingdom is worth a little mud on the car. Everywhere up in the table land and down in the coulees meltwater flows through the ditches and feeds the trout streams beyond. The Frenchman River is swollen to the size of a canal. The gophers have popped out and the hawks are buffeting with hungry intentions over the windy sky.

The last two hundred metres are the most exciting as I point our car downhill and slide into a parking stall at Jim's ancient house. There are log cabins on either side and a barn for the cows and chickens. Between the house and the barn is an old country church, a sacred space for troubadours, line dancing, mystic flautists, cross-dressing divas, bluegrass bands, and Jim's latest spectacle: a steam punk musical review. He gives us a big hug and then leads us on a tour of his costumes, manikins, show photos and props, which, in a sense, is a tour of his highly creative life. Which cries out for a major documentary.

Inside, the old house is getting renovated. Right now, it's new bathrooms upstairs. We sniff our way into the kitchen, where Jim is preparing pike fillets in a secret sauce that will have to remain secret in this article. A dazzling performance. When at last the conversation slows down, Kever and I ascend the stairs to our bedroom. We fall asleep to the yipping of coyotes.

Sunday, March 19, Maple Creek

I am greeted at the library building by Gail Sharp on a sunny, windy afternoon. She is tall and elegant, and she has been devoted to this facility for many years. Like the one in Shaunavon, the Jasper Culture and Historical Centre is more than a library. But unlike the Grand Coteau Centre, this is a stately old building, a former school that houses a large museum celebrating the past of this ranching community and its prairie wildlife. Gail Sharp volunteers to open it up nearly every day of the week, and I can hardly blame her. This must be one of the most welcoming buildings in downtown Maple Creek. Its cool gloomy spaces and Maple Creek's past both seem to envelop you as you move through the building.

Donny White welcomes us into the speakers' venue, and his Partner, Allan Holtemeyer, sets up the room and the mic. Donny has, until his retirement, been a museum curator in Southern Alberta, first at the Glenbow in Calgary, and then for a longer stretch in Medicine Hat. He is semi-retiring back in his hometown of Maple Creek. In fact, the room where I will be presenting is a former classroom where he once was an elementary school kid. Jim Saville also went to this school. A number of the people who file into the room for my presentation, librarians, teachers, retirees, ranchers, have also been schooled in this building. And once again, the ubiquitous Jean McKendry is there to greet us. It is a lively and welcoming bunch of people. Some of them tell us that, in the wake of the oil and gas boom, Maple Creek has become a retirement haven for warmth-loving westerners. Every year Maple Creek records some of the warmest, hottest temperatures in Canada.

Monday, March 20, Swift Current

Up until now, the book sales have been very good, even among the smaller audiences. But in Swift Current, they have been spectacular. The library is stuffed with avid readers who have already read Augie's story. It's a larger venue for a larger crowd in a building that includes a beautiful art gallery. You can always spot the librarian at a new venue. She is invariably the most organized person in the room. Our host librarian at Swift Current Place is Andrea McCrimmon. She explains to us that (as in Prince Albert) a large bunch of young adults at the college have studied *The Education of Augie Merasty*. These students are in a number of programs for which a course in English is part of their curriculum: nursing, policing, social work, wildlife conservation and other disciplines. Few of them are indigenous, but they are just as keen on Augie's story as the indigenous students up north.

Once more, Jean McKendry is here for the presentation, and after a lively Q and A, she has a special announcement: *David has agreed to play his banjo for you*. Because my reading is over, and because these are discriminating listeners, most of them shuffle out of the room. I ask the remaining thirty or so, whose taste in music might be questionable, to come up to the front, and I play a few oldtime blues and mountain tunes. All self-deprecating ironies aside, it was a poignant ending to the evening. We drove to our motel and had a night-cap with Jean.

Tuesday, March 21, Moose Jaw

Downtown Moose Jaw is a very good neighbourhood in which to celebrate the coming of spring. Through good times and lean times, this city has managed, against all odds, to preserve a goodly

number of historic buildings downtown, and the old trees and hedges that line the street near the Moose Jaw Public Library. In my city of Saskatoon, they tend to knock down the old venerable buildings and replace them with lesser structures, monuments to the quonset era of construction. Honor and I get to stay in the Grant Hall Hotel, one of the coziest remaining hotels in the province. The interior is designed and decorated in elaborate brass fixings, lovely gold and marble pillars and scrollwork that calls to mind an era of Edwardian opulence.

We haul our supply of books up to the Moose Jaw Library and then take a walk through the public park which the library is part of. I always walk through this park whenever I'm able to come down to the Moose Jaw Festival of Words in summertime. It's an old park with its own past, a public space you amble through slowly enough to gather in its gentle glories.

Kever and I grab an early bite and then go to find our latest host- librarian, in this case, Jessie Marchinko. It's a busy place today, with several librarians bustling around among the patrons. Jessie introduces herself and brings along two younger hosts, Claire Kruger and Laurie Deets. We are joined by co-presenters Sarah Longman and Bill Waiser. Sarah is an indigenous scholar and educator originally from Gordon First Nation. She is charming, tenacious, well-schooled in indigenous history, and she is great as a consciousness raiser. Bill Waiser recently won the Governor General's literary award with his latest take on prairie history, *A World We Have Lost*. I've been one of his fans for a long time, so it will be a thrill to present and field questions with him and with Sarah. The only thing I object to about Waiser is that he never seems to grow any older than forty-five. If the rumours are true, he is just about retirement age, but I don't quite believe it.

Jessie and her young hosts are prepared to the teeth. In their introductions of Sarah, Bill and me, they both talk about Saskatchewan history, one from a Euro-Canadian perspective and the other from an indigenous perspective, in this way setting the tone for the discussion. I always appreciate it when the introductions to these events are informed. I love it when the host has actually read the book in advance. And I really love it when the intros have some imagination behind them. And I especially love it when I spot the omni-present Jean McKendry, travelling library director, sitting in the front row. Her dedication and passion for the programs amounts to a mission in life.

I always hate to leave Moose Jaw. It's the kingdom of the late Gary Hyland and the poet Bob Currie, and the birthplace of so many fine writers that you come to suspect there is something magical in the water. And it's crawling with bright, energetic, committed librarians.

Friday, March 24, Colonsay

We are greeted by Sandy (librarian) and Erna (host), and we discover that the library is too small to present to several dozen people. We gather instead at the town hall in the centre of the village. This is our smallest settlement yet, but by no means our smallest crowd. Erna is married to a friend of mine, Eric Sander, who is a keen numismatist. As a token of our visit to Colonsay, he gives me a beautiful dime encased in a 2 x 2 inch holder. (A 2016 dime. I can't bear to spend it.) We all gather at a table near the front of the hall and gab at one another as though we have lived here all our lives.

You keep on hearing about how friendly small towns are in Saskatchewan, because of course it's true. Last year, before the Augie book won the One Book, One Province Award, I did an Augie reading in Eastend, and like tonight in Colonsay, the atmosphere was charged with energy, and the questions came fast and furious. And these small towns were also alike in their extreme friendliness. Tonight some of them have come from other centres like Watrous, Young, and Nokomis.

After the sale and signing of books, they bring out a local band. They range from mid-teens to sixty-something. They begin with classic rock 'n roll and end with Celtic music complete with tin flutes and bag-pipes. Kever and I have to sneak out before we are too exhausted to drive home. Kever drives through the starlit night. Her eyes are much younger than mine.

"That's it," I say to Kever. "No more tour."

Instead of uttering this with relief, I said it with a sadness that lingered and deepened well into the following week. Today my mind is swirling with light and dark impulses, and libraries are at the centre of this confusion. I've just found out that our library system has become a casualty of Brad Wall's austerity budget. Our municipal system has lost 1.3 million dollars from its operational budget, and the regional system has lost 3.5 million. This means that they have to cut back on their programs and cancel their province-wide borrowing system as well. Education Minister Don Morgan has announced that this co-operative library system should just continue as though nothing has happened. What world does he live in?

For weeks I've been privy to a discussion about reconciliation across our province. I'm celebrating my own act of reconciliation, which is my work and my friendship with Augie. We were an amazing team in a country that, some day, could be as welcoming to indigenous people as to whites. This is a sad but ultimately victorious story. And not just because of my efforts or Augie's efforts or any kind of enlightenment from our provincial government. This vital dialogue in many communities came together because an army of committed librarians thought it would be a good idea. This heightened, ongoing sense of social cohesion is held together and re-enacted by librarians every month in our province. Libraries, the physical entities, are much more than bricks and mortar. They are active receptacles of wisdom, a quality apparently lacking in the budget farce to which we have all been subjected.

Like I say, the tour is over.

David Carpenter, Saskatoon

April 8, 2017