A Jewish saying asks what is truer than the truth? And it answers: The story.
Everyday people invent narratives, repackage old ones, corrupt others, and preserve, by various means, those narratives that matter most to them, because, perhaps, they provide that otherwise unobtainable quality accurate self-definition requires. Stories abound because humanity seems to depend on them. Such fundamental things need study; the University of Manitoba has a scholar dedicated to understanding them – or some of them at least.

Warren Cariou is the university’s newest Canada Research Chair (CRC); his Chair in Narrative, Community and Indigenous Cultures began on April 1, 2008. His role as such will be to foster respect for cultural differences by re-evaluating what “Canadian community” means and he does this by examining the stories and stereotypes people tell and hold onto. By looking at these narratives, Cariou finds effective ways to accommodate different communities within our understanding of a multicultural Canada.

“I’m interested in smaller communities, in particular the ones where storytelling is important,” Cariou said. “So my own focus is on Aboriginal cultures and the ways oral storytelling has really preserved and been, in effect, their culture, because so much of Aboriginal culture is contained in the stories – so much teaching, so much philosophy, so much practical knowledge of how to be on the land is contained in their stories.”

As CRC, Cariou will approach his task from various angles, one of which involves resuscitating books Aboriginal authors penned without much fanfare in the publishing world.

“I would really like to bring them back to the public eye,” Cariou said. Many publishers prior to the 1980s had interests in printing Aboriginal books, but the editors (not used to dealing with authors who were rooted in oral traditions), and the writers (who were better oral than textual communicators), did not find the success they both hoped for. As a result, the stories fell to the wayside.

“There are a lot of stories that get left out or marginalized. But these stories have a lot of powerful, positive ways to tell people who they are and it’s not a negative thing. It’s something they can be proud of."

“I don’t see it as a straightforward ‘here, teach these people these stories and they’ll be well-adjusted and able to shed stereotypes.’ But by reevaluating and giving more attention to Aboriginal peoples, it gives a validation to those stories that they didn’t have in academic culture before.”

Academia, Cariou said, has historically treated Aboriginal stories as something akin to gallery pieces – quaint relics good for admiration, but not necessarily as valuable ways of interpreting the past and present. Since many stories weren’t written down they were viewed as having little value.

“But I think it’s really been discovered in the last generation or so, that there is just so much important knowledge embedded in these stories from all First

WARREN CARIOU

in addition to holding a Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Narrative, Community and Indigenous Cultures, is a professor of English in the Faculty of Arts and is Director of the University of Manitoba’s newly established Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture. He was recently awarded a Fulbright Visiting Chair. The Canada-U.S. Fulbright Visiting Research Chairs are awarded to prominent Canadian and American scholars who wish to conduct research, work with faculty and graduate students, and if they choose, offer guest lectures and teach while at select American and Canadian universities. Cariou will undertake his studies at Arizona State University (ASU) While at ASU with his Fulbright award in creative writing, Cariou will work on his novel-in-progress, “The Hummingbird Cloak”, which is partly set in the American southwest.
Nations and Métis that we all can—every-one—learn from them. And I think from evaluating them and trying to understand them from an academic perspective, and from trying to be as respectful as we can, it gives them a kind of power that they deserve. Our academic community gives them the credence they deserve in the larger community. And I think that can have effects; it will take time but it will have effects for individuals and their lives.”

Many of the stories people tell are about belonging: belonging to just about anything. We define ourselves by our stories, and in so doing, define who we are not. Instantly, we have created “the other”. This opens the door to stereotyping—about ourselves and others—and we may then find ourselves uttering statements like, “I don’t belong in that neighbourhood because…” or “All [fill in the ethnicity] are….” Suddenly barriers in our otherwise free society have been erected. But as Cariou discovered in writing his award-winning book, *Lake of Prairies*, that sense of differentiation is overwhelmingly unsubstantiated yet often inherited without question.

**CARIOU**

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“A couple of texts we are working on right now are George Cluetsi’s *Potlatch* (1969) and Anahero’s *The Devil in Deer-skins* (1972). We are focusing on texts from before 1980, though we are not entirely exclusive about dates.”

“Cluetsi describes the last Tloq-wnah-nah, or Potlatch, the gift-giving feast that was traditional among First Nations but then banned by Canada’s “Indian Act.” He participated in the potlatch he describes and says he writes this account with considerable trepidation, omitting names of those involved, because some of his own family had been arrested for having staged a similar ceremony.”

“By writing a novel or critical study, or doing a documentary film, I think it can get people to think differently about those negative, stereotypical narratives that we have been accepting or just not thinking about.”

“I think my role is to ideally make people think about these things. If I can get people to be critical about those stories they received about who they are, where they belong, and where other people belong, then we’ll be able to move forward as a community.”

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