

A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO THE TRUTH ABOUT STORIES

Written by Thomas King

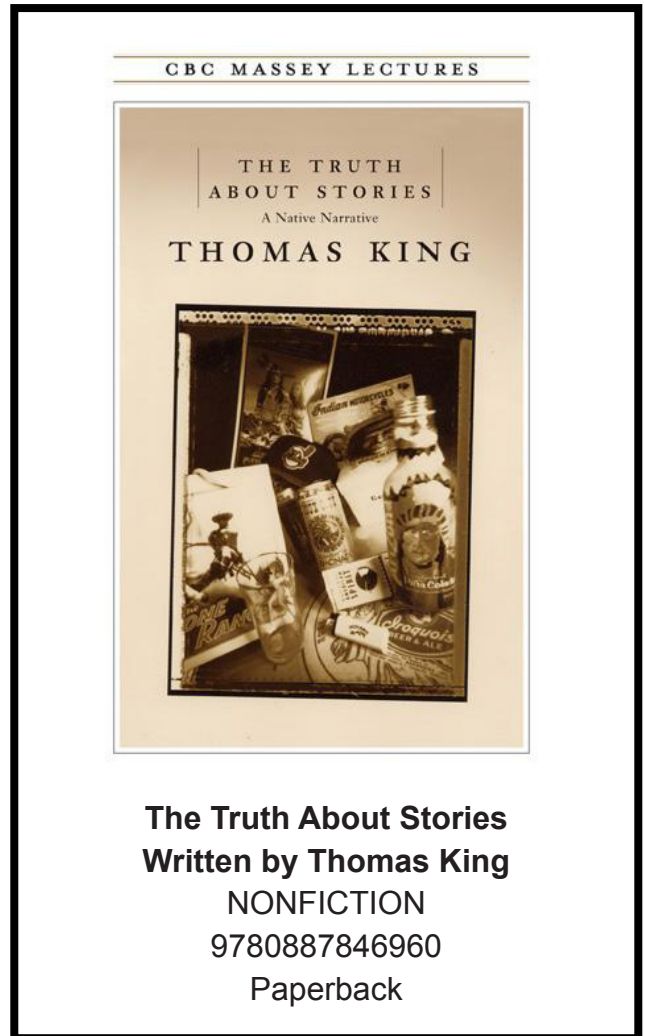
ABOUT THE BOOK

“Stories are wondrous things,” award-winning author and scholar Thomas King declares in his 2003 CBC Massey Lectures. “And they are dangerous.” Beginning with a traditional oral story, King weaves his way through literature and history, religion and politics, popular culture and social protest, gracefully elucidating North America’s relationship with Indigenous peoples.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas King has written several highly acclaimed children’s books. *A Coyote Solstice Tale*, illustrated by Gary Clement, won the American Indian Library Association Youth Literature Award for Best Picture Book and *A Coyote Columbus Story*, illustrated by William Kent Monkman, was a Governor General’s Award finalist.

King, who is of Cherokee and Greek descent, was a Professor of English at the University of Guelph for many years, where he taught Native Literature and Creative Writing. He won the Governor General’s Literary Award for his adult novel, *The Back of the Turtle*, and he has been nominated for the Commonwealth Writers Prize.



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ABOUT THE BOOK

This book explores the themes and topics of:

- Storytelling
- Humor and Sarcasm
- Colonialism
- Westward expansion
- Cultural genocide
- Residential schools
- Racism
- The Indian Act
- Traditional Indigenous territories
- Indigenous stories/culture
- Indigenous education
- Reserve system
- Human rights
- Family
- Politics
- Religion
- Social Protest
- Popular Culture

Curriculum Connections

English; Indigenous Studies; Civics and Careers; History; World Views; Humanities and Social Sciences; Anthropology; Health Management; Geography; Visual Arts

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IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Introduce the book, its author, and the themes and topics the book will be exploring. Explain that though the book is non-fiction in a lecture format, the themes and topics can be difficult and can evoke strong emotional and physical reactions in individuals. With this in mind, have the class create group norms around discussion, writing and explore time. These can include listening without interrupting when someone is speaking, respecting all views, not using negative language to comment on one another's ideas and/or opinions, etc.
- Consider introducing the concept of an Indigenous talking circle for discussion about the book. A talking circle is a space where participants can feel free to speak without censure or to remain silent. There is usually an object (i.e., a talking stick) that is passed around the circle. Only the person with the talking stick may speak, and all others must remain silent. The circle can be used for discussion topics or at times when healing or understanding are needed and a safe space for sharing feelings and experiences is welcomed.
- Terminology used by the author, Thomas King, describing himself as "Indian" is prevalent throughout the book. Have students discuss in a group why they think he uses the term "Indian." You may wish to read the 2014 CBC article "What's in a name: Indian, Native, Aboriginal or Indigenous?" by Don Marks. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/what-s-in-a-name-indian-native-aboriginal-or-indigenous-1.2784518>
- Consider this in the context of how people use language/terminology as a form of resistance or to claim as one's own. Engage students in a dialogue on this concept and the purposeful use of language.

Terminology
Additional site for information on terminology:
A Note on Indigenous Terminology
<http://canlitguides.ca/canlit-guides-editorial-team/an-introduction-to-indigenous-literatures-in-canada/a-note-on-indigenous-terminology/>

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TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

- Read the book as a class, incorporating small group or class discussions during and at the end of each lecture. You could use a combination of teacher read-aloud and independent reading. Have students complete a culminating activity after you have finished the book. (Ideas for culminating activities are suggested at the end of this study guide.)
- Videos are also available for listening/viewing on YouTube:
 - The Truth About Stories — Thomas King — Lecture 1
“You’ll Never Believe What Happened’ Is Always a Great Way to Start”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzXQoZ6pE-M>
 - The Truth About Stories — Thomas King — Lecture 2
“You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daw7cGjrORE>
 - The Truth About Stories — Thomas King — Lecture 3
“Let Me Entertain You”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CICKluOS9lc>
 - The Truth About Stories — Thomas King — Lecture 4
“A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mgJEMPf1hSE>
 - The Truth About Stories — Thomas King — Lecture 5
“What Is It About Us That You Don’t Like?”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KW2ETIxnYyo>

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TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

- Have students investigate, in small groups or as individuals, the creation story presented in Lecture 1 of the book (Turtle Island). Students can prepare artistic or visual mapping of the creation story as told by Thomas King or other versions they may know or have read in other texts. You may also consider inviting a Traditional Knowledge Keeper to visit the class to share the creation story teachings that they hold.
- Assign groups of students one story each and have them read it and present it to the rest of the class.
- Have students read the book in groups and then either collaborate on a culminating activity or complete it independently.

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TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Lecture 1: “‘You’ll Never Believe What Happened’ Is Always a Great Way to Start”

- On page 2, Thomas King writes, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” Why do you think he says this? Why do you think this is true? Provide evidence to support your answer.
- On page 4, King describes his mother, “At eighty-one, she still believes that that world is possible, even though she will now admit she never found it, never even caught a glimpse of it.” Discuss the current realities of women’s rights and equity in the workplace, including statistics in Canada and other regions in the world. Do you think that things have improved since King’s mother was in the workforce? Why or why not?
- On page 10, King says, “You have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told.” Why do you think this is the case? What story of your life/ community/country would you share first as you move to a new place?
- King shares two creation stories that have some similarities but also many differences. Discuss these with the class. How does subscribing to one or the other impact your worldview and your actions? You may choose to have the class prepare for a debate on these two stories.

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TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Lecture 2: “You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind”

- King begins this lecture with the same introduction that he used in Lecture 1, with one small change of the location and the child. Discuss the literary impact of this choice of King’s writing style.
- What do you think Edward Sheriff Curtis’s idea of the “North American Indian” was? What do you think about the idea that the “North American Indians” were “poised on the brink of extinction” (page 33)? How did the literature and art of the eras represent society’s ideas about the “North American Indian”? In what ways did they remove the human aspect of Indigenous people?
- On page 44, King indicates, “Race is a construct and an illusion.” How might this impact identity? Discuss this comment as a class.
- On page 53, King asks the question, “Yet how can something that has never existed — the Indian — have form and power while something that is alive and kicking — Indians — are invisible?” He goes on to list several examples of this. He indicates that “we must be seen as ‘real’ for people to ‘imagine’ ... we must be ‘authentic’” (page 54). Discuss this passage as a class. What do you think King means by this statement? Why is this a challenge?

Explore the photos of Edward Sheriff Curtis at:

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/edward-curtis-epic-project-to-photograph-native-americans-162523282/>

“Ware: Will Rogers’ overlooked Cherokee roots”

<https://indiancountrymedianetwork.com/news/ware-will-rogers-overlooked-cherokee-roots/>

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TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Lecture 3: “Let Me Entertain You”

- Explore the story of the man called “Ishi.” Discuss the anthropological approach of 1916 to learning and contrast it to the Indigenous worldview.
- On page 68, King refers to himself and other Indigenous people as “entertainment.” How do you see this statement? Where is his argument going? Do you agree? Disagree?
- As a class, examine the Indian Act and the provisions for the education of Indigenous children within it.
- Have students create a definition for “cultural genocide.” What are its similarities/differences with genocide? Do they amount to the same thing in the end? Give evidence as to why or why not.
- Discuss King’s descriptions of the early European explorers and their descriptions and treatment of Indigenous people in North America. How does this compare to your previous knowledge of explorers who visited North America?
- Examine King’s descriptions of the Europeans’ descriptions of and interactions with Indigenous people in North America, specifically in the United States. How do the changes in description influence the reader? What story do they tell?
- King describes the “mythic Indian” and gives examples of how the settlers impersonated the Indigenous people as ways to exercise resistance to the government’s actions. Explore these examples and discuss.

Ishi (1860–1916)

<http://www.californiamuseum.org/inductee/ishi>

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TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

Lecture 4: “A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark”

- King shares the statement “Stories are medicine.” Discuss this concept and why you think King shares this idea.
- Explore racism. In what ways is racism overtly represented in the book? How is racism covertly represented? What is the difference between individual racism and systemic racism? Give examples of each from the book.
- King discusses the methods of storytelling from the traditional sense — orally — to the western form of writing. Discuss the methods of storytelling and how these were preserved historically through to the present.
- King discusses the intimacy with the land. Why is this connection to the land important for Indigenous people?
- Why does King articulate that the stories people choose to share are the important ones, that they matter?

Lecture 5: “What Is It About Us That You Don’t Like?”

- King uses a repeating opening for each of his lectures. What does he achieve by using this technique?
- Read the story of the Duck and the Coyote on page 127 and write your opinion on the meaning of the story. Why do you think that King chose to tell this story at this time?
- List some of the amendments that the United States government and Canadian government used in their attempts to legislate Indigenous people out of existence. Discuss the various government legislation that dictate who is a “legitimate Indian” in both Canada and the United States. Why do you think that these definitions evolved over time?
- Examine one of the hyperboles that King uses to describe the different incidents of racism. Why do you think he uses the metaphor within the hyperbole, and how do you think this literary device helps or hurts his point?

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IDEAS FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

- As a class, examine the work of Edward Sheriff Curtis. Have students use technology to capture how they would represent themselves and their classmates/school/community to tell the story they wish to leave the world with. They may choose to use a multimedia approach or still shots. Ask students to write a piece to accompany this or include in their multimedia work.
- Have students build a timeline that illustrates the dates of the policies of the United States and Canada to achieve the goals of colonization (e.g., land, eradicate the Indian in the child, etc.). Ask them: How do you think these policies reflected the view of people throughout the generations and still reflect and impact societal views today?
- King references several Indigenous writers and alludes to many others. Have students explore storytellers, filmmakers, poets, or writers who are Indigenous, past or current. Ask them to choose one to write a biography on, including descriptions of the genre(s) they tell their stories in.
- Students can explore the theme of racism in the book through an image collage. They can use mixed media, drawings, photos, videos, etc. They can prepare a presentation on the collage based on the images they chose and the explanations for them.

Curricular Connections: Visual Arts, Social Sciences, Psychology, Civics and Careers, History, English

- Students can explore racism in their own communities. Are there examples of covert and overt racism? Are there similar situations or circumstances within their own communities? How did these issues arise? Are there examples of systemic racism and, if so, what are they? Students can then present their own findings in a similar manner as the author — through stories or accounts in a journalistic manner.

Curricular Connections: English, History, Anthropology, Geography, World Studies, Social Sciences, Psychology

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CONNECTIONS TO OTHER TEXTS BY THOMAS KING

A Coyote Columbus Story — written by Thomas King, illustrated by Kent Monkman
ISBN 978-0-88899-830-9

A Coyote Solstice Tale — written by Thomas King, illustrated by Gary Clement
ISBN 978-0-88899-929-0

Coyote Tales — written by Thomas King, illustrated by Byron Eggenschwiler
ISBN 978-1-55498-833-4