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Me Artsy compiled and edited by **DREW HAYDEN TAYLOR**

Douglas & McIntyre, 2015 \$22.95

Reviewed by **NATHALIE N. HAGER**

“Art is universal. You cannot be a people or a culture without art” (1), writes Drew Hayden Taylor. And with that declaration, Taylor leads us on an exploration of the indigenous creative spirit via a collection of essays by fourteen contemporary Aboriginal artists reflecting on the connection between their chosen art and their ancestral background.

Yet what Taylor has assembled (and also contributed to—he is one of the fourteen artists)—is much more than a collection of essays. *Me Artsy*, Taylor’s latest edited collection and a follow-up to *Me Funny* (2006) and *Me Sexy* (2008), brings together such wide-ranging formats and styles as memoir and biography, commentary, how-to, cultural analysis, illustration, and poetic prose and combines them with tones of celebration and reconciliation to offer a series of first-person accounts of the indigenous entrance and experience in various creative outputs. The result is a very personalized dialogue by a small group of artists that falls within the emerging genre of creative nonfiction, a hybrid of fact and literary craft that produces an intimate narrative of wide appeal. Since creative nonfiction is new to me, I did some research: in Aboriginal literature I found Rasunah Marsden’s ground-breaking *Crisp Blue Edges* (2000), an edited collection of twenty-three established Aboriginal writers in Canada. But unlike Marsden’s anthology, with the exception of Taylor and Richard Van Camp, *Me Artsy* contributors are not professional writers. They are artists who are also

storytellers. And they are good at telling their stories. For its contribution to Aboriginal creative nonfiction and to the tradition of oral storytelling, *Me Artsy* is well worth the read. It is a book that will appeal to those interested in Canadian arts and culture generally and Aboriginal arts, culture, and heritage specifically.

The *Me Artsy* stories read easily, with many sharing similar themes: the power of origin—of family and tradition and ancestors—in shaping lives and in the call to express oneself artistically; the tenaciousness of spirit and persistence of drive in locating and asserting individual identity; and an unrelenting, spiritual connection to the land. There is much self-reflexivity in the storytelling and a genuine desire to understand oneself and to be understood. Who stands out? They all do.

There is Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, director of the award-winning *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner*, the first feature film ever to be written, directed, and acted entirely in Inuktitut. Kunuk recounts how he and his cousin sold their soapstone carvings in order to see John Wayne movies and how Kunuk kept carving to make rent and eventually buy his first video camera. There is also First Nations bluesman Murray Porter, a JUNO Award winner who mixes country, blues, and humour to tell the Aboriginal side of history. As a child in his bed at night he listened to B.B. King, taught himself piano, and grew up to entertain thousands in some of the largest venues in North America (including fulfilling a lifelong dream to open for King). And there is visual artist Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas, of Haida Gwaii, whose large sculptural works are held in institutional collections internationally and in Canada by the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, and the public

art collection of the University of British Columbia. While Yahgulanaas trained under a number of master carvers, it was only when he was exposed to Chinese brush techniques that he merged Haida and Asian artistic influences to innovate his own, unique art form called “Haida Manga”; (his manga illustrations close the book).

I could go on. The range of achievements in indigenous artistic practice is remarkable, borne out by Taylor’s choice of contributors, half of whom are women: actor and playwright Monique Mojica, installation artist Marianne Nicolson, visual artist Maxine Noel, fashion designer Kim Picard, cultural theorist Karyn Recollet, choreographer/dancer/producer Santee Smith, and actor/singer/artistic director Rose C. Stella. Each of these women describe with poignancy the winding roads that led to their art and the shapes of discrimination they faced along the way. But what was most eye-opening was that the stereotyping they faced was not as women, but as indigenous artists navigating non-indigenous worlds. Mojica writes: “What has *not* changed are the power dynamics and our ability to have control over our image, our cultures and our history when we are performing within a mainstream institution” (23). In response, all these indigenous women—all these indigenous artists—have forged ahead within new, self-created indigenous structures to, again quoting Mojica, “unapologetically hold power over our voices, our stories and our images” (23). This is the principle strength of Taylor’s approach and the overall collection: it gives individual Aboriginal artists a voice.

Taylor carves a wide berth for what might be considered art, and this is another of the book’s strengths. How many of us would consider the mingling of flavours or

the arrangement of food and its garnishing as art? Chef David Wolfman does. He finds creativity in melding his traditional background with learned skills in French cooking to make the kitchen a place where he can express himself. When challenged on the authenticity of his “Aboriginal Fusion” cuisine, Wolfman defends his style as the new way of Aboriginal cooking and as an art. His essay is an important inclusion, for it also makes a timely point and one that is necessary: Aboriginal culture is not static, but grows and changes over time. In much the same way that Wolfman re-envision his artistic practice in hybrid ways (as do Porter and Yahgulanaas, and many other artists in this collection), fashion designer Kim Picard, while designing in an “Aboriginal way,” experiments with new materials and is inspired by many Western designers. These essays make me think: what does it mean to be an indigenous artist today?

At the heart of *Me Artsy* are two claims: that there is such a thing as “an indigenous artist,” and its corollary, that there is an indigenous way of being “artsy.” It is not an insignificant undertaking to propose that being “indigenous” is equally (if not more) meaningful as an organizing principle than “artist” or even the practice of art itself, be it as filmmaker, visual artist, playwright, or other. Taylor accomplishes his task of arguing for an indigenous spirit not by abandoning the individual, but by emphasizing it. In using many unique voices, Taylor brings together such a range of expressions that as reader, one cannot help but understand a world where being indigenous indeed begins to speak for itself.

So is there such a thing as “an indigenous artist”? Perhaps the answer lies in Rose Stella’s consideration of indigenous theatre: “It is about telling stories—past present and future—from our point of view

in our own unique way. Stories that will attempt to deconstruct identities that have marginalized us. Stories that reflect who we were, who we are and who we hope to be” (138). In effect, this is what *Me Artsy* is about: deeply personal storytelling as part of a journey of self-discovery and self-expression. In their own voices. As themselves. Is there an indigenous way of being “artsy”? I don’t know. I’ve determined that it is not my place to decide.

Me Artsy explores indigenous creativity from across Canada and the

United States through the words of the artists themselves. It is a wonderful addition to an extant body of Aboriginal literature.

NATHALIE N. HAGER is a PhD Candidate in the Interdisciplinary Graduate Program at the University of British Columbia’s Okanagan campus. In her dissertation, she explores the discipline of art history’s transcultural turn towards World Art History and how artistic expression is never contained by culture, geography, or time.