

THE EDUCATION
OF AUGIE MERASTY

NEW EDITION

THE EDUCATION
OF AUGIE MERASTY

a residential school memoir



JOSEPH AUGUSTE MERASTY

with David Carpenter



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A Note on the Text

THIS IS A BOOK OF NONFICTION, AN ATTEMPT BY a man and his editor to expose an injustice that happened more than seven decades ago. I have changed some of the names of people and places in Augie's account to protect the identities of individuals and their families. I have not changed the name of Joseph Auguste Merasty. The names of our country's heroes and martyrs should be proclaimed. —D.C.

Augie and Me:

AN INTRODUCTION

IN THE SPRING OF 2001, I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL from the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan, where I had been a professor before becoming a full-time writer. One of the women in the office had received a letter, addressed to the “dean of the University of Saskatchewan,” from an old fellow up north requesting some help with his memoir. The man was a retired Cree trapper in his early seventies who lived in the bush. He wanted a co-writer to come up to his cabin, tape his stories, and write them down for publication. Particularly, he asked the dean to recommend someone who had “a good command of the English language,” someone who might also have an outdoorish streak. Were this scribe to agree to help him write his book, he would “enjoy

the finest fishing in all of Saskatchewan.” The man was building his cabin “right at the junction of two beautiful rivers that join together.”

Luckily, the letter found its way to the English department. “Dear Sir,” it began, “I really don’t know where to begin or how to ask someone of your high position this rather odd request, and coming from a retired fisherman and trapper and Jack of all trades I might add.” The man had already finished writing down his stories of the horrors that he and his schoolmates had been subjected to “at that terrible place” known as St. Therese Residential School in the community of Sturgeon Landing. I had never heard of the school, which he described as “about forty miles south of Flin Flon” and about “the same distance north of The Pas.” These two coordinates are at the western edge of northern Manitoba, near the Saskatchewan border, but the school and the community of Sturgeon Landing are on the other side of the border, in Saskatchewan. Back in the early 1970s, a year or two before I got my job as an English professor, I completed a weekend workshop in The Pas, and memories of time spent in that community still trouble me. When I was there, The Pas was a town divided hatefully between white and Native peoples.

The old trapper correspondent described his “superiors” at the residential school, the priests, brothers and

nuns, as primarily “white” and “French Canadian.” The stories he had written down and sent off were for “the law group representing us across Canada.” He was referring to the Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation and of the Exploratory Dialogues (1998–1999), which constituted the first stage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The working group sought written testimonies from former victims of the residential school system, which came into being in Canada around 1870 and lasted for more than a century in many parts of the country. Joseph Auguste (Augie) Merasty attended St. Therese Residential School from 1935 to 1944 at a time when there was “no law” up there to prevent the many atrocities committed by the children’s “superiors.”

Merasty had already written his story down for the purposes of the inquiry. So, at the time, I wondered why he needed someone to drive way up north to tape them. I suspected then, as I do now, that the legal firm representing Merasty had some hesitation about releasing his account while it was still before the inquiry and on its way to the courts.

“Sorry,” Merasty continued in his letter, “I am getting carried away here, I will state my reasons for asking the request to you, Mr. Professor, and Dean of University. I want to very humbly ask you sir to ask someone in your class, someone who has a good command of the English

language, to help me write a book I fully intend to write beginning about the first week in August 2001.” First, Merasty suggested that he had to finish work on his cabin and tie up a few loose ends. The cabin was to be finished by the end of June 2001. He wanted his co-writer to stay for two weeks in the cabin while recording his stories. They could discuss the payment later. They would talk and they would fish for “northern pike up to twenty-five pounds, [for] whites and pickerel, and many more.”

He concluded, “We be having a great time for sure.”

Merasty made the point in this first of many letters that he would not only tell his story but also those of many others. He would tell of things that happened from 1927, “eight years before [he] entered.” His “older sisters, aunts, uncles and others told [him] things that happened in their time.” He came to believe their stories because “the same things happened in the time [he] was there.” By telling the stories of others and connecting them to his own experiences, Merasty broadened his range of inquiry, and in other, subtler ways, he broadened the implications of his sometimes horrific story, a story in which our entire nation is darkly and obscurely complicit.



WRITERS, LIKE OTHER professionals, can get very busy. If they are to make their deadlines and finish their books

so that they can get paid for their work, they learn to say no to a lot of people. They become willing slaves to their own prioritized, underpaid, preoccupied, inward-dwelling lives. It was in that writerly state that I, at first, said no to Augie—as I soon came to know him—and his scheme to bring me, my spinning rod, and my tape recorder to the North. On the phone, I asked him to send me a copy of the story he had written for the commission, and he said he could not get copies of his submission.

Suddenly, I began to realize something of the challenge that faced Augie, living in a cabin in the bush without electricity and sometimes without a car, far from any town, on a new reserve with only three other houses. My question to Augie, “Why didn’t you get photocopies of your submission?” seemed somehow beside the point.

Until this moment on the phone, Augie was irrepres-
sible, all enthusiasm, the voice of endless possibilities.

“Augie,” I said, “I need you to write this story down. All of it. Before I can come and help you.”

Silence.

“If I’m going to help you write your memoir, I need something more than a bunch of tapes to transcribe.”

Silence.

“What if I phoned your lawyers and asked for copies of your story? Do you think that would help?”

Silence, and then a weary voice muttering from some

outpost five hundred kilometres north of Saskatoon, “Ohhh, David, I dunno. I think maybe I gotta try a few things, ah?”

Soon after our conversation, Augie sent me a copy of a note he had recently written to the lawyers who represented him in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission inquiries:

I am in the process of making the whole story from the time I entered St. Therese from 1935 to 1944 when I left. It is a book I hope to finish within the next couple of months, with some help from English Professor David Carpenter, who had written eight books and also had them published. Him and I communicate at times by phone or letter, and he wants me to do what I can to complete the book. I’ve done about one hundred and fifty pages already and have about two hundred pages to go, and I’ve sent him some manuscripts and I will send him everything whenever I am finished, sometime before Easter.

Joseph A. Merasty

I frequently heard about the 150 pages done and the two hundred pages to go, but for reasons that I will try to

outline, in the eight years of our correspondence following this letter, I never saw all the pages that Augie referred to and promised to send me.

I heard little from Augie throughout the spring, summer, and fall of 2001, but in late November he wrote me a letter in a downcast mood. Instead of working on his memoir or finishing his cabin, Augie had been travelling and drinking a lot.

I fell off the wagon after my lady friend of ten years decided that [I] should not see her. . . . We have lived together in ten different apartments and houses and I was happy and always assumed I was going to ride into the sunset with her. I have never loved or cared for anyone . . . like her in the last forty-five years. . . . It's a long story so I won't delve on it. I got her the job at the Casino by filling out her resume, I also showed her how to drive a car. All of these she's never found time or inclination to obtain in the past. She was too busy drinking and running around. She has . . . shacked up with nine different men and had nine bastards from each one of them. I now wonder why I was so crazy about her all these years, no matter what she did to me, stealing money when I

passed out, bringing other guys [to] her place whenever she wanted to.

The story continued in great detail with old cars traded in for new ones at Augie's expense, and old Augie being traded in for a younger model, as well. He was thirty years older than this girlfriend, and in the end, she found someone her own age. Readers will no doubt recognize the universality of Augie's romantic woes. This is not simply the story of a Cree man being ditched by a Cree woman in Prince Albert. It's a story as old and as sad as the blues.

We exchanged one or two letters during the winter, and Augie's missives turned into long lists of loss from long bouts of boozing, and his tone remained glum. Then in late February of 2002, almost three months after his first gloomy letter, Augie struck a different note. "At the end of your last letter I found it rather amusing [that you] find the time to mention Aubergine [the con woman who jilted Augie], and you are absolutely right." I had told Augie that he was probably lucky to have escaped her clutches.

"I almost went 'BATS,'" Augie continued, "but I now realize what a fool I really was." He cited a number of similar cases of heartbreakers and con women from the tabloids he read, and he heartily identified with their

victims. In the same letter, Augie went on to recall the first terrible heartbreak of his life. “I once contemplated ending it all twenty-three years ago when my wife of thirty years left me. It took approximately five years to get back down to earth. I feel lucky I came out alive from the cesspool of booze. This time it only took months and I been dry for some time now.”

What resilience, I remember musing. I thought we had lost Augie to despair and worse, and here he was at age seventy-two, ready to start again. From his earliest days at St. Therese he demonstrated this resilience in the face of terrifying and degrading attacks. When I began to connect the resilient, oppressed child with the alcoholic, love-spurned old man, my feelings for Augie began to climb up the moral ladder from abhorrence to pity to sympathy to empathy. I just had to meet this guy face to face.

By the end of the winter of 2002, I was receiving regular mailings of his residential school story. One letter contained the photocopy of some twenty-seven pages (slightly more than eight thousand words) of Augie’s sprawling but immaculate handwriting. Another letter contained thirteen pages of foolscap (about five thousand words). The other enclosures were shorter, most of them originals but some photocopied. I could not tell if his lawyers had released these disorganized swatches of

handwriting or if Augie had written them for my benefit and done the photocopying himself. Sometimes I would end up with several retellings of a gruelling episode I had transcribed earlier, so I would incorporate the best of each version into one version to get the clearest picture of the incident. I discovered that there was a wide gulf between the Augie at the end of his rope, singing the blues, and Augie the truth-seeking memoirist who recounted his experiences with painful clarity. In one version, one of his assailants was a “perverted so and so.” In another, more clearly rendered version of the same story, he was “an emeritus of immorality.”

The stories assembled in this volume make for a compelling but rambling account for readers, people like you and me—willing witnesses to the ongoing tragedy of Native peoples who suffered from their collision with Euro-white justice, domination, and broken promises. Augie talks at length about the dreaded Brother Lepeigne and then moves on to some other atrocity, some other adventure, then returns to Brother Lepeigne with yet another brutal encounter, as though his former keeper still haunts his every day. Augie’s letters were even more pronounced examples of this cyclical tendency, especially if he had been drinking or felt gloomy.

Augie’s reports of being sexually assaulted twice by his nemesis, “Brer” Lepeigne, were very detailed but at

times confused. I did my best to assemble only one attack and describe it in Augie's terms, as graphically as he did. Augie seemed to think that Lepeigne's attacks on several other boys "gave" them homosexuality in adult life. Like many people of his generation, Augie seems confused between the terms "homosexual" and "pedophile." Lepeigne comes across as the latter, but the possibility of his homosexuality is not really explored in Augie's account.

In my conversations with Augie and in my editing of his accounts, I tried not to correct him. I tried, instead, to nudge him and his stories into clarity. "It is fifty-seven years since I left that school," he told me, "and I find it hard to remember all that has happened to me and others." The final product in this account, then, is a collaboration between a man haunted by memories and an editor bombarding him with questions and goading him toward the milestones and the foundations of his own memory.

Late in 2003 I received a long letter from Augie that recapped the sorrows of his life: his habit of driving all over the North and the western provinces to fight off despair, the long drinking bouts he had resumed, and the many deaths in his extended family that saddened him so.

In the midst of his grieving, Augie had arrived at a point where he could begin to cherish what was left of his people. "I am coming along real well with my own family and all their kids, I am really enjoying myself in

all things I do for the first time in a long time. I really feel I'm walking in the light. I feel as though I can take whatever this old world can dish out. Oh! I know I've tried [to quit drinking] dozens of times, but now at my age, I know, I have limited time, and that's no Bull."

Augie confessed that, over the past three years (2000 to 2003), he had lost "hundreds of pages" of his memoir to theft, to periods of extended drinking, to sheer carelessness. "I don't want to sound like a bigot," he told me, "but ninety-five per cent of my people are drunks and thieves and they take anything they can find. I have been a victim of such individuals all my life. I never seem to learn, always too dumb or too trusting."

Note how Augie lapsed in tone from the euphoria and resolve of a man on the mend to the self-pity of a man who has fallen. Augie issued these laments when the booze had taken him into a dark place; at other times, he was no doubt aware that the 95 per cent he referred to were merely the drunkest of his brethren and hardly representative of all northern First Nations people. He ended that letter with a promise: "As of now I am one hundred per cent sure that I am going to finish what I have started. And for many reasons of my own, and for others who are beholden to me, I swear I will." Those words were penned eleven years ago, but I received very little of his memoir after that.

I don't know how much I need to despair over the scattered and lost pages of his life. Perhaps they will show up in scraps here and there, or, more likely, they are gone for good. I suppose that I am simply grateful for the stories he did send me. His memoir rests on these 75 handwritten pages, as well as on the letters he sent me.

In one of his letters from that up-and-down time of his life, dated September 18, 2003, Augie reported that he was at last finishing his cabin, doing some adjustments on the door and windows. His cabin is on the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation Reserve at Birch Portage, just off the Hanson Lake Road, west of Creighton. He was about to go moose-hunting to stock up on jerky and pemmican for the winter: "It costs me about fifty dollars a month for food up here." He mentioned that he had no water, no power, no cable, but he did have a radio that worked on batteries, "unpolluted water, lots of game, wild chickens [probably spruce grouse], rabbits, all the fish I want any time . . . and NO TAXES. . . . I am really getting out of this city life and will reside here at Birch Portage."

Around this time, Augie phoned me to announce that he was coming to Saskatoon to stay with some friends. At last we would meet face to face and shake hands. He would phone me when he got settled, and we could go out for a bite to eat. A lot had happened to him during the spring and summer. There had been some break-ins at his cabin,

and one of the culprits was a bear that laid waste to the cabin's interior, ate his food and part of his manuscript.

"A bear ate your manuscript?"

"Oh, yeah, Davey. A big black bear."

About to leave for Prince Albert for yet another funeral and wake, Augie had not been able to lock his cabin. Instead, he hammered an 8 × 4.5-inch strip of plywood across his door. The bear had smelled food inside and ripped the plywood off the door.

"Yeah, he really went to work. He tore up the inside of the cabin, ate up the food. Hey, that bear, he even ate up the canned food. Scattered the flour and the sugar all over the floor and scattered all my clothes and blankets on the floor, like with all that flour. And the roof wasn't finished, eh, so the rain fell over everything for the six weeks I was gone, and the bear and the rain, they destroyed about one hundred pages of my story. One whole month's work, eh. Then some guys come in and stole my stuff."

"The roof wasn't finished? I thought your cabin was nearly done."

"Oh, well, I had a bit of work to do, ah? But there was this funeral."

But there was this funeral.

I began to fill in the blanks. A six-week funeral meant a lot of drinking. In this case, it also meant two weeks

in hospital (I didn't ask). And after our phone call, I began to wonder who would show up in Saskatoon, the reformed drinker bursting with new resolve to finish his story, or the despairing man who had fallen once again into a bottle.

Augie phoned me in Saskatoon, the following spring.

"I thought we were going to meet last fall."

"Oh, Davey, I guess I couldn't make it. But here I am."

It was a warm spring day in 2004, and I had heard about some of his medical problems, including type two diabetes.

"How are you feeling, Augie?"

"Oh, Davey, I'm ridin' high today. Just won a fortune at the casino."

Oh, Jesus, Augie was drunk again.

"You gotta come down here, Davey. Have a drink with me."

With great reluctance, I agreed. I simply had to meet this guy in the flesh. I drove to a sports bar south of town on Lorne Avenue, where people could eat, drink, gamble, and watch boxing and hockey on the big screens. I found Augie sitting at a table with several other guys. He rose, we shook hands, and he embraced me like a brother.

"Oh, Davey, you're such a good guy," he said.

We found a table on our own so that I could throw some questions his way.

“Augie, could we talk about Brer Lepeigne? Are you okay with that?”

“Ahhh, that guy was a sonofabitch.”

“Remember when you and your friend caught sight of him in The Pas?”

“Davey, that guy was a real sonofabitch, eh?”

“But what did you do when—”

“Ohhhh, Davey, you’re such a great writer. I’m lucky to have you as a friend. You’re such a great guy.”

“But Augie, what about my question?”

“Davey, you ask me any question you want. Lemme buy you a drink.”

It was a short night. We didn’t talk again until the fall of 2004, and this time it was by phone. He was in Prince Albert, and he sounded subdued.

“I think maybe I got to quit drinkin’, Davey. Can’t go on this way.”

“I think you’re right, Augie.”

He paused for a few seconds. “You think so?”

“Yes,” I said, “because when you’re drinking you don’t seem to hear my questions. You don’t seem to listen to me, Augie.”

This time there was a longer pause, a grave moment drifting between us, because I think Augie was hoping for another answer from me. I’ll never forget that phone silence, and I can’t help wondering if this moment gave

Augie, for the first time, an inkling that I might be judging him.

His letters that followed, however, betrayed none of that gravity or uncertainty about the status of our friendship. He wanted me to think of him as a “best friend.” His first letter in 2004 contained copies of some forms he had to fill out for his lawyers. One line reads, “I AM NINETEEN YEARS OR OLDER.” Augie complained about this line to me. “I see that they got my birth date wrong.” He has crossed out the word “nineteen” and printed in “74 SEVENTY FOUR.” One of the forms asks Augie about his work experience. It began officially in June of 1947 when he started working for the Churchill River Power Company at age seventeen. “It’s a long story, Davey . . . [but] I was still driving taxi when I retired at age sixty-seven.”

Joseph Auguste Merasty, power company employee, taxi driver, fisherman, hunter, trapper, labourer, visual artist, memoirist. Like many a memoirist before him, Augie seemed eager to rescue some of his key experiences from the ravages of time. By the late summer of 2005, when Augie had finished building his cabin and was about to resume work on his memoir, he wrote, “I feel like a man on death row. I’ll be seventy-six in January but I still work hard and walk a lot, and I don’t drive and I eat right. I’m on special diets, hoping to add a few

more years to my stay here on this planet. . . . Someone once stated that the only way to achieve some semblance of . . . immortality [is to] do some painting or write a book and you will be remembered for all time after you kick the bucket. Well, in a way that is one way of looking at . . . the afterlife, EH WHAT.”

He told me that his spouse had recently passed away. He frequently referred to the dozens of funerals he'd had to attend between 2002 and 2005, but I was not aware that he had found someone since his romantic disaster of 2002, let alone lost his partner. These insistent whispers of mortality must have infused him with a greater resolve to get healthy, do his art work, and write his book.

I suspect that much of what he wrote reached his lawyers, but not very much found its way to my mailbox. The exception to this lengthy lapse, of course, was his letters to me, which had taken on an urgency and a hint of hope for his final years. He had almost quit the boozing entirely (but not quite), he had become an outspoken critic of cigarette smoking, he was still hunting moose and making pemmican, still fishing through the ice, and, as I reported above, he had at last finished his cabin.

In the late summer of 2005, he began his letter to me in high spirits: “Well! Hello David O’boy, I suppose you may have thought I must have passed on . . . well, I haven’t been all that healthy . . . in the past year and

maybe [I've been] a little overworked at times. I have been building on my property at Birch Portage for the last six summers, and I did it all alone. I wanted to do it that way." In previous letters, Augie had lamented the many times people had broken into his cabin and stolen his tools and other personal possessions. But when he had returned to the cabin in that spring of 2005, "lo and behold, I only lost a rod and reel and one hammer this time."

Augie was feeling the weight of his years, but his fatigue was now that of the hardworking man looking back on his life from his childhood in Pelican Narrows to his adult life as a paid-in-full member of the working poor. By this time, Augie had conditioned himself "to accept the inevitability of the end of [my] life here on this planet, that no one gets out of this world alive." And once again, when I read these words, I thought, *What resiliency!*

Late in the winter of 2006, Augie wrote me about the challenges of staying sober and healthy at age seventy-six. For some time he had been without a vehicle, so for several summers he hitchhiked from his cabin at Birch Portage to Prince Albert, a distance of 270 miles, "starting about two hours before sunrise, and I usually walk ten to fifteen miles before getting rides (ten to thirty miles per vehicle). I counted the mileage. Last summer I

walked thirty-four miles [between rides] before getting to Prince Albert, a total of seventeen to eighteen hours, but I made it. Would a smoker do that?”

Augie wrote this with obvious pride, but his hard life had taken its toll. “I take pills daily and nightly for high blood pressure, diabetes, bladder and prostate gland, stomach and sleeping pills, even Tylenol #3 for two fractured ribs when I slipped on the ice two months ago.” And on the possibility of publishing his memoir, he had become aware that he would be “despised by many” who would read what he had written, but he assured me, “I can live with whatever anyone thinks or does to me. It is as simple to die as it is to be born.”

Things had come to a head for Augie. 2006 was the year that the first of his payments would come to him from the residential school claim. This was the year that Augie became vocal about all kinds of issues. This was the year that his written testimony would be read. As I mentioned earlier, Augie wrote this testimony on behalf of many others who had spoken at the commission hearings but who had written nothing down.

After that 2006 letter, it was a long time before I heard from Augie again. By this time, I had received only a part of the testimony that he had sent to the Merchant Group of lawyers who represented him, but by my reckoning, the stories he sent me had brought me to the very heart

of his experience as a student at St. Therese Residential School, and his eight long letters to me went a good way toward telling his story of moving on into adulthood and old age. In other words, I had a record of his life in school and a record of the sometimes chaotic, sometimes heroic aftermath of his life. But I had hoped to receive more.

I wrote letters to Augie, but not one was answered. As the years passed, I wondered what I should do. Edit what I had with me and make it into a book, or wait for more material? I decided to wait. In the meantime, I finished a book of novellas entitled *Welcome to Canada*, and continued to work on my own memoir, *A Hunter's Confession*.

Finally, in March of 2009, after three years of unexplained silence, Augie wrote to me, his ninth letter, and, as it turned out, his last. He was seventy-nine now, and had been using the money from his Truth and Reconciliation Commission payments to help some of his family along. Augie sounded once again as though he were full of good things.

I will be very busy until about October, moose hunting in September to get ready for winter (dried meat, pemmican, etc.), and I have decided to remain dry until Christmas at least and will probably stay at the cabin most of the

time, writing, painting, and living and eating off the fat of the land, as they say. I know that being sober is the only way I can go back to my original way of life. I feel I have wasted at least twenty-five years or more of my life, and God-given talents, and I don't really have that much time left unless I smarten up.

In this letter, Augie enclosed a few pages of material from his residential school stories, some of it rewritten from earlier times. The writing was as succinct and lucid as it had ever been in the eight years he had been corresponding with me. He promised me about sixty-five more pages. So, once again, I waited. Life took over. I began a new novel. My wife and I did some camping, my son and I did some hiking in the mountains, my buddies and I went fishing. I resumed work on Augie's memoir. I finished a draft of my novel. Again, my letters to Augie went unanswered.

And then in November 2013, my wife and I went down to the Stegner House for retreating artists in Eastend, Saskatchewan, she to work on her paintings for a month, me to finish the job on Augie's work that he and I had agreed on more than a decade ago. Somehow I was sure that Augie was gone and that he would never see the work I had done on his memoir. But I hate to give up on

anything, and I had promised him that I would finish this work, even if the remaining stories did not show up.

I tried once again to find out what had happened to Augie. I phoned numbers he had given me in the past, and I sent out some letters to addresses in my Augie File. A helpful woman at the Indian-Métis Friendship Centre in Prince Albert promised to ask around for me. Sometime approaching mid-November she phoned me back.

“You were looking for an old fellow named Augie Merasty?”

“Yes.”

“He’s alive,” she said. “He comes here every so often and sits across the room from my desk.”

“He’s alive?”

“He says he’s over eighty years old.”

“Do you have an address for him?”

“No,” she said. “No one knows where he lives.”



HERE IS THE STORY IN AUGIE’S WORDS. I’VE TIGHT-ened up his style from time to time. I have eliminated some excess verbiage: for example, the instances where he simply repeats himself. Some of these changes came about from phone calls between Augie and me over the years. If some passages confused me, I revisited them

with Augie and reworded the confusing parts according to the context of his remarks and his explanations to me.

I corrected Augie's grammatical lapses if they created any confusion or if they called undue attention to themselves. I had no intention of highlighting these lapses. For example, his "interment" became "internment," "cumberland house" became "Cumberland House," "there" became "their" and vice versa, and many commas turned into periods. My occasional additions of information appear within square brackets in the text.

As I have suggested earlier, rather than giving me a finished manuscript, Augie mailed me many enclosures. Sometimes, therefore, the same incident would be recounted more than once with some variations. I had to work out with him, and sometimes without him, which details to retain and which to discard.

The result is a coherent manuscript but with some questions still unanswered. Why, for example, did Brother Lepeigne hang around The Pas when he turned his back on his vows and left the school? Why did he not flee to a French community that might have welcomed him? Did he not anticipate that his life might be in danger? What happened to Lepeigne after Augie and his friend ran into him in The Pas?

As Augie's memories start to fade, as time moves on for all of us and plays its little tricks on our memories, as

the planet follows the pull of its galaxy and the constant drift of our universe, we might well ask, *Where are we, really?* Sometimes I ask this question. The answers fade and certainty becomes relativity's ping-pong ball. Trying to pin down Augie with my questions yields intimations of this same cosmic uncertainty.

One of the things I keep noticing in Augie's written accounts is his fascination with the people who were his keepers. His curiosity about people took him well beyond simply praising or indicting them. Augie could have given me a point-by-point account of the atrocities at St. Therese Residential School and organized everything around the sordid facts of the case. But at times he moves beyond the bounds of accusation and judgement into the region of a true memoir. Sister St. Felicity's passion for young boys is mingled with affection. Brother Verwelkend's perversions can be seen in the larger context of his politics. Brothers Languir and Cameron's yearnings for teenage girls seem to be driven, in part, by loneliness and social isolation. Like Augie, I almost feel sorry for them.

These familiars of Augie are often presented to us in and for themselves—as though Augie is interested in his torturers and kindly keepers alike, beyond their assigned roles. He seems curious about the reality of their lives. This richness of detail that moves beyond the

mechanics of mere condemnation is the most engaging part of Augie's work. He gives ample space to the nuns, priests, and brothers who were kind and considerate or just plain fun to be around. He has not only acquired a strong sense of moral outrage, but through his many ordeals he has also preserved a sense of fairness and demonstrated a perceptive intelligence. His memoir manages, from time to time, to rise above the sordid details and resentments of his incarceration to document the chaotic life around him.

I have read enough accounts of the atrocities of the Holocaust by such writers as Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi to realize the futility of comparing Hitler's atrocities to those of other violent and oppressive regimes. Augie might differ with me on this, but I won't fall into the trap of calling the moral travesties at St. Therese and the tragic consequences of Canada's experiment in residential schools for Aboriginal children our national Holocaust.

But sometimes, when I think about the complicity and the silence that came from respected clerics and churchmen in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, that same silence and that same complicity resonate with Augie's long ordeal during virtually the same years in a church-run residential school. I am referring to the callous regime—the corporate structure, if you will—that

hired and protected people like Sister St. Mercy at St. Therese School in Sturgeon Landing, the lessons she learned from Brother Lepeigne, the lessons she apparently taught to Sister Joy. And still in this disheartening vein, I am thinking of one of St. Therese's school principals, Father Lazzardo. In his livelier moments, he was an equal-opportunity thug, spreading his chaotic violence among boys and girls alike. And I think of jolly old Brother Johannes Verwelkend, selling swag for Hitler's war effort and spreading the gospel of *pohtitiyihiki* among the little boys who gathered around his sewing machine and his dangling testicles. Like Augie, then, I have been pondering the institutionalized strategies of silence that protected these ghouls and allowed them to pursue their violent recreations for so many years, swinging their corrugated hoses and their straps, rattling their clappers, and flourishing their candles to teach the children about the fires of Hell.

I'm not much interested in writing a tirade against the Roman Catholic Church in Canada. If you detect evidence of a tirade (and I hope you do), it is focussed on the predators and sadists who worked at St. Therese, their superiors who allowed them to carry on unchecked, their conspiracy of silence, and on a government that shares complicity with that system of residential schools in our country. As far as I have been able to discover,

similar patterns of abuse have been uncovered relative to Canadian residential schools run by other churches.

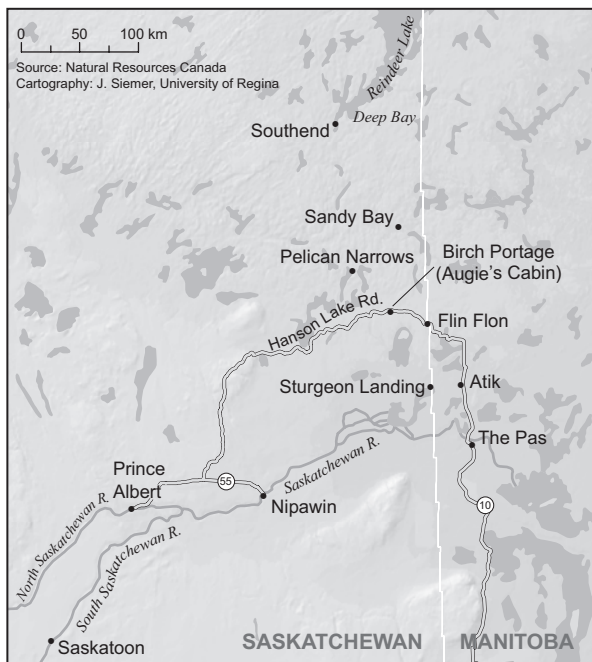
Every winter I attend a writers' colony to work on my manuscripts. This colony gathers at St. Peter's Abbey in Muenster, Saskatchewan. I've come to know the priests and the monks who live and worship there, and I think of some of them as my friends. One of the abbey's monks was recently discovered to have been a child predator at a residential school some decades ago. He was expelled from the abbey, charged, sentenced, and imprisoned for these crimes.

Clearly something has changed for the good. And that change came about in part because people like Augie Merasty spoke out against their oppressors, and because various people started to listen. I cannot escape the conviction, therefore, that I am writing about a hero.

Recently, in our writing community, I have noticed a healthy increase in First Nations writers, and I am beginning to see a trickle of these writers come to our colonies at St. Peter's Abbey. Perhaps a day will come when these residencies at the abbey will have the same appeal for our Aboriginal writers as they do for non-Aboriginal writers. At the moment, most of the First Nations writers I know tend to feel more comfortable retreating in non-religious venues, like the Saville retreat centre in the Cypress Hills near Ravenscrag, Saskatchewan.

I hope that someday more of these First Nations and Métis writers will also feel inclined to retreat with writers of all stripes at St. Peter's Abbey, that they will no longer find any targets for their anger and nothing to fear, that the echoes of past oppression will grow fainter. If, as I suspect, the church pendulums have begun to swing in a salutary, inclusive, and compassionate direction, this progressive thinking may have come at the cost of Augie's innocence, not to mention that of thousands of boys and girls in this country. And perhaps this sacrifice has not been entirely in vain.

Well done, I say to Augie. Good work.



Sturgeon Landing and other places discussed in this book.

ONE

School Days, School Days

AROUND THE 26TH OF AUGUST, 1935, MY FATHER decided it was time for us kids to be taken to Sturgeon Landing by canoe, which was propelled by a four horse-power motor. It took several days to get there on the river. We had to reckon with a dozen rough rapids and eight portages. Two or three of those were about three quarters of a mile long, with thousands of black flies and mosquitoes to fight all the way.

In those days, the whole country was teeming with northern wildlife, including fish of many kinds, which my dad scooped out of the waterfalls with a scoop net made especially for that purpose. We lost about twenty-four hours of travelling time in all. My dad shot and killed a bull moose, and we had to stay in one spot on the

South Sturgeon weir to smoke the fish and cut and dry the moose meat. Yet we got to our destination a whole day ahead of schedule.

I was born in 1930 at Sturgeon Landing and baptized there by Father Aquinas Merton, OMI, who was also the head administrator and principal at St. Therese Residential School from 1927, when the school was opened. Two of my sisters and my brother Peter were the first three to walk inside the school. Annie and Jeanette were the names of my two sisters. There were also six uncles and the same number of aunts who attended the school in its first year.

All those sisters and cousins, uncles, and many other unrelated people from other villages told me what had happened. Good and bad, positive or negative, were told to me and others when we got to school eight years later, and they all told basically the same stories. So one has to assume they were speaking the truth and nothing but.

A lot of their stories I already wrote and submitted to our lawyers, who number about thirty-six across Canada, representing the survivors of residential schools. The six that are working with me and others here in Saskatchewan have offices downtown in Saskatoon.



THE FORMER PRINCIPAL, Father Aquinas Merton, was the hardest working man that I have ever known. Well,

he was not like the next one. It was just the opposite with this kind and friendly principal, Father Bernard Pommier. He never touched a plow or any farm implement, and I honestly could say I never even saw him enter the barn. He was always super clean and wouldn't go into a smelly barn, let alone drive a team of horses or milk a cow, or shovel and scrape dung. No, sir, he always had to be immaculately dressed and really preferred to have all the privacy he could get. All of the boys who knew him can say the same, that we never saw him lifting a block of wood or anything from the warehouses.

Sometimes Sister St. Mercy, whom I will write a lot about, would send some young student upstairs to the principal, assuming the Father would take care of him one way or another. But instead, Father Pommier would ask the boy why she sent him to see the principal.

“Oh, well, I was laughing a little too loud in the wash-room during lineup time.”

Then he would start laughing himself and say, “Is that all you came to tell me? Just a waste of my time and yours. Next time just laugh *kīmōc* [in English, “quietly”]. That is all I have to say. Now go back down to your classroom.” More laughter from Father Pommier, “I'll talk to Sister Mercy later.”

No one can ever say anything bad about this principal, Father Bernard Pommier. He was a far cry from the

principal who took over two years after I left the school, Rev. Father L. Lazzardo. I will write about him later.



BUT BACK TO my story. Yes, in the fall of 1935, when I was only five years plus eight months, my father made arrangements with the principal, Father Aquinas Merton, to allow me to start schooling even though I was not of school age. I would be six in January 1936. Due to the distance from the residential school and the need to travel in winter by dog team in extremely cold weather, it would be very hard on a six-year-old child just to take him to St. Therese School. And that winter my father and family had decided to go way up north to trap. So they took me to school at the end of the summer when I was still five years old.

It was that fall that I first laid eyes on the one human I would dislike for the rest of my school term, if not for the rest of my life: Brer Lepeigne (pronounced “Le Pain”), who was there from before I arrived and stayed at St. Therese until 1939 or 1940. But I will not talk about him now. I want to keep talking about the nice ones.

I want to talk about my first class teacher for grade one. Her name was Sister St. Alphonse. Well, she was one of the kindest and most loving persons in that institution. She was also our boys’ keeper in our playroom and joined us in playing Hide and Seek the Marble and other

games we enjoyed. Once in a while, when some boy was extremely disobedient and wouldn't do what he was told to do, she would use the small ruler we kept at our desks and tap him on the palm of his hand very lightly, and we could see that both of her eyes were shedding tears, which she wiped with her white kerchief. It didn't happen too often. Since she taught in grades one and two, I was in her classroom for two school years. She never changed in her loving and kindly ways, and I'm sure she still is that way. I met her ten years ago in Nipawin, Saskatchewan, and she kissed me hard, bless her.

Well, I'll continue with this memory of all the sisters who showed kindness and genuine care for us kids, good or bad, and as I said aforehand, you did not have to do anything gross to be punished for bad behaviour at St. Therese Residential School.

Sister St. Famille was our baker at the school and also one very kind and loving individual, and every day or every other day, three or four boys were taken from the classrooms and told to help Sister St. Famille, who required a lot of manual labour when baking for about 120 people. She knew only a few words of the English language, so we had some difficulty communicating with her. Some words she always used when some kid got smart or noisy. With a half-smile she would raise her arm and wave her forefinger to and fro, and say, "Look boys no smarrt, no bread."

The boy would not get her specialty that she called “La Galette,” small round bannocks, which were really special to us, as we never were served bannock in our meals. It was always the same, bone-dry bread that raised heck with our gums and teeth. The Fathers, Sisters, and Brothers enjoyed beautiful white bread served by Sister St. Virginia Rose, who was their special cook. I swear, those people of this school administration would not even look at our bread or our food. To them it was puke.

Now, Sister St. Bonhomme ran the sewing room with help from six or seven girls. They did all the mending and made slippers and linings for our shoes in winter, and for our mitts, which, by the way, were made from old canvas and old, grey, horse blankets. Sister St. Bonhomme was also our keeper in the playrooms and the refectory (dining room). She was not too mean, except when we got too noisy and didn’t heed her clapping. Whenever our keepers wanted to get our attention, they had what we called a clapper, a wooden two-piece item joined by hinges on one end and banged together with both hands, making a noise like a large woodpecker. Once in a while, though, Sister St. Bonhomme used a strap when she deemed it necessary. I still say she was one of the kinder nuns.

Then I’ll talk about Sister St. Ange de Cachot, who was our nurse. There were two Sisters St. Ange de

Cachot, but this first one looked after the sick children and whoever got hurt at school. I can only say she was exceptionally kind and sympathetic. She really wanted to do whatever she could to ease the pain of whatever the problem laid. She once looked after us when the regular keepers were away.

There was Sister St. d'Amitié, who was mostly the girls' keeper but many times our keeper. She played with us and really enjoyed her time at our playroom. She loved doing us favours, like carrying love letters back and forth from our playroom to the girls' playroom. She knew full well she would get some kind of a reprimand if she ever got caught with what she was doing, but she never got caught. (Only one other nun did those letter deliveries, and that was Sister St. Doucette, my junior high school teacher, originally from the United States.) Sister St. d'Amitié was a cook's helper and girls' keeper, and was never known to strike anyone in the school. The girls really enjoyed having her as keeper, especially when they got her to carry their love notes back to us guys.

I cannot remember the name of one of my second-grade teachers, who also taught the grade-four kids. I can only remember that we called her Old Bodo, because she looked so much like a guy who lived across the river here in Sturgeon Landing. She looked mean enough and she was very tall, and we had little chance of doing

anything wrong, as she used the strap occasionally. It really made a kid cry, because she had a strong arm. But it did not happen very often once we got the story and saw what she could do with a strap. Otherwise, most of the time I can recall, she was a nice and kind old soul. Most of the time she was our refectory-room keeper. One can imagine the sound of 110 children all talking and laughing together. She didn't like to be called Old Bodo, but she was okay.

Sister St. de Mer was our Sister Superior from the time I entered St. Therese, and was there before I even arrived, until she was replaced by the other Sister St. Ange de Cachot. All I can say about both of those Sisters is that they were kind and loving in every way, and they never did anything to hurt anyone, never used the strap. That's all I can remember about these two Sisters. When they left sometime in the summer of 1942, and when we came back from the holidays, we sure missed them.

Here are some of the brothers who were good to us. Big Brother Beauville (we called him Big Beauville) is one of them. Brother Beauville was a good and jolly person. His work was mostly driving a team of horses and working inside the barn, which housed cattle and horses. He always smelled like cow and horse manure. He was a big overweight man, a kindly person who never said a mean word to any of the boys. He was always in a playful mood,

but he never stopped working at a job he was ordered to do until it was done. On or about the winter of 1942, he was kicked in the face by one of the big horses that wore metal shoes on all four hooves, and one can only imagine what that could do to anyone. But Big Beauville was a big and tough individual. The blow could have killed a small person or crippled one for life. Brother Beauville, however, went to St. Anthony's Hospital in The Pas to have his battered face fixed and had to go back later to have it redone. He was absent for a total of two months. We missed him a lot, and we all prayed for him.

Now, there was also Brother Leopold, a tall, lanky, middle-aged, and very friendly man. He always carried a pouch of chewing tobacco. He drove a team of horses and, most of the time, a load of kids. He only stayed at the school for two school years, so I don't have much to say about him, except that he was a really kind person.

Then there was Brother Henri Jean, the engineer, who looked after the boiler room, making sure all the machines and the heating systems were in working order. He was one of the hardest working men at the school and a good engineer. About twenty of us boys worked with him every morning, filling the wood bins for the boilers. We also worked at taking the wood in for the kitchen and for the baking. Brother Henri Jean was at most times a kind and jolly old fellow. But occasionally, whenever us

boys got disobedient or disrespectful, he would blow his baldheaded top and roar like a lion, throwing blocks of wood against the walls to make a lot of noise.

Brother Henri Jean was a stammerer. When he couldn't stand the horsing around, he would roar, "All right, you bastards. G-g-g-g-g-get out, all of you!" Otherwise, he was a very loving and kindly old soul when nothing bothered him. In all those years from 1927 to the time I got out in 1944, I have never heard of him breaking any rules or having a serious problem with the machinery he was supposed to maintain. I can only end up by saying, he was a great guy.