

*The Education of Augie Merasty: A Residential School Memoir* by Joseph Auguste Merasty with David Carpenter. Regina, Saskatchewan: University of Regina Press 2015. 120pp. ISBN: 978-0-88977-368-4

University of Regina Press has published a small, slim volume, titled *The Education of Augie Merasty*. The book isn't an academic read, but it's an education for anyone. By the end, it's a revelation and an illumination, both painful and beautiful. It's an extraordinary accomplishment.

The author, Joseph Auguste Merasty, with David Carpenter, embarks on a journey through the years when Merasty was a student at St. Therese residential school. David Carpenter, writer of non-fiction and fiction, including *A Hunter's Confession* and the award winning *Niceman Cometh*, is contacted by Merasty in 2001. Merasty "wanted a co-writer to come up to his cabin, tape his stories, and write them for publication." Many writers would have turned the project down, citing 'busy'ness or perhaps being wary of a man who says he has a story to tell but of which there is no evidence. Carpenter, however, is intrigued. From the moment the book was mooted to the signing of the contracts, Carpenter follows through with dogged persistence. In the final book, Carpenter writes the introduction and conclusion. He describes in these how the two men communicate over the years and how Merasty talks about the manuscript he's written himself, which Carpenter finally reads and edits to create the core text. Carpenter is a writer deeply rooted in place. On his website, he notes he was *conceived* in Saskatoon. Saskatchewan intrigues and motivates his writing. In *The Education of Augie Merasty* he brings to light the hidden history of the place where we live.

Once the introduction clarifies how the project came into being, it is time for Merasty's own writing. Merasty has particular ability with scene; with this ability he brings images and moments horrifyingly alive so that it feels like St. Therese residential school is right here, sixty years and more in the past, yet brutally present. In Merasty's able voice, people long dead are made vivid so that their hideous legacy isn't buried with them. The writing is lucid and it vivifies the images of day-to-day life in the school and of specific moments of horror, which have burned into Merasty's mind to be replayed over the many years that have followed, destroying and driving his life.

The book is divided into nine chapters, each focusing on an element of life in the residential school. The book is character driven, with chapters like *Brotherly Love and the Fatherland*, or *Sisters of the Night*, bringing into sharp detail the people who made Augie's childhood a living hell. Yet Merasty is a thoughtful writer who investigates the complexities of these characters. They exist as real, flawed humans. The things they do are terrible, yet he has great compassion. Merasty is able to take the vilest of characters and give them nuance and layers. He tries to understand so that even the

cruelest perpetrator is made real; broken and despicable, yes, but also lonely and lost. Merasty seems to be a man with great heart and knowledge, a man who has overcome his traumatic early years in his writing, if not in his day-to-day life.

The misery memoir is a well-known genre, particularly in the UK where the moniker was coined, but the term takes away the catharsis of the writing process. Even as the misery of the school is revealed, Merasty also shares humour and intimacies that add texture. Like here, “We used to enjoy going out miles away from the school, going on picnics...It felt so nice to get out of the enclosed playground.” His casual yet strong language has the intimacy of a postcard from the past, yet the postcard is from a place of horror. In the chapter *Lepeigne*, Merasty writes, “If Brother Lepeigne caught anyone whispering to another person or even smiling during silence time, or lineup time for church, classrooms, or bedtime, it was too bad for him.” The deceptively simple words ‘too bad’ belie the terror lived by a child. With relaxed prose, Merasty with no self-pity, deepens our understanding of his history.

Merasty’s story is only one story, although he acknowledges the stories of others in his own words often: “Louise cried all that time in his room;”; “I know for a fact that two of those young boys... learned all about pohtitiyĪhikĪ.” (“which is Cree for corn-holing or sodomy”).

With the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s work the importance of Merasty’s memoir is magnified. The book, although small in size, is an essential moment of history making. Thousands and thousands of children were taken into residential schools in Canada, with approximately 80,000 survivors (according to [wherearethekids.ca](http://wherearethekids.ca)) still alive today. Their voices have been mainly silenced by the years, through neglect, and worse. David Carpenter was brave to take on the challenges of making this memoir into a book, understandably driven by his need to understand this land and this country. Merasty was far braver to write, hold and hone his manuscript through the years, bringing his exquisite, poetic narrative of fear, loneliness, and innocence lost to those who absolutely need to read it.

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