

Teachin' Books Episode 1.12 - Interview with Taylor Brown / Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jess 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode I'm chatting with Taylor Brown. Taylor is finishing off her undergrad at the University of Guelph, where she studies English and Creative Writing and in the summer, she works as a tour guide. And that is what we are going to talk about today actually. On today's episode, Taylor is going to, or already did with me, share her experiences and her knowledge as a tour guide in Ontario, which is where she would lead kids or youths, or Grade 8ers, around the city to see the city sights and the buildings and the monuments, and as she talks about in our chat she sort of had to negotiate the official and the unofficial histories of the places around her in her role as a tour guide. Of course I'm talking about a time that was pre-COVID, and I should actually say that we recorded this chat quite a few months ago. So Taylor has been very patient with my process editing and getting this episode ready to release.

Jess 1:32

At the same time, Taylor and I talk about Thomas King's 2012 nonfiction book *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*, which also like Taylor's tours, weaves sort of the telling of personal and public histories or unofficial and official accounts with entertainment and humor and basically just an attempt to keep the reader reading, or in Taylor's case, the kids listening. As Taylor mentions, she read the book at the same time that she was guiding tours one summer. And so there sort of became this back-and-forth dialogue between the book's histories and the history she was teaching about as a guide, and she'll speak to that more in the episode. What I like about this conversation is that Taylor's experience reading alongside working, being a tour guide, really, to me, provides a good example of the ways that literature impacts and inflects our lives in unexpected ways sometimes, in ways that we might not always map out ahead of time as a teacher or as a student. So, her story kind of provides for me an example of the broader "work," quote unquote, that many of us do with or alongside literature, even if we're not, you know, literature teachers, strictly speaking. Okay, let's see what Taylor has to say about *The Inconvenient Indian* and tour guiding in Ontario.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 3:15

So you just asked me about my teaching of this text: so I taught it quite a while ago, I think 2014. So that's the last time I would have really taught it and interacted with it in a teaching capacity. And so we actually looked at this text for its formal, its formal aspects a lot, so it has a lot of lists in it, it uses humor. It has a kind of back-and-forth dialogue between Thomas King and his wife, Helen Hoy, like he's

constantly sort of calling back to her and saying, "Helen said this about the draft but I think this," right? So it's sort of dialogue as a formal aspect. So because it was a literature class in an English first-year English class, we focused a lot on the formal aspects of the texts, like how King constructs his argument with evidence and commentary, humor, irony, pop culture references lists, did I already... I can't remember if I said that. And then also dialogue. So we were like really looking at it formally and less so for its content, which I imagine that, given what we might talk about today, might be a little bit different than, than how you looked at it. Although did you first study this in a class or...?

Taylor 4:24

My kind of experience with it is I read it for heavy quotations on fun, for "fun," initially, and then I ended up learning it, or being taught in the class about a year later, but I definitely think my professor focused a lot more on the content and a little bit on some of the formal elements, obviously like you know as an English Lit class that's going to make its way into the conversation, but I think it's interesting because I felt like when he was teaching he taught the book very much as a history, which I think we kind of learned throughout the book that I'm not 100% sure it's a history -- it might be a counter-history, or maybe our idea of history is not going to stand up anymore, you know so I think it was really interesting the way he taught it as just, if it was a history class I think that was an interesting take on it.

Jess 5:08

Yeah, that's a really interesting approach, given that like pretty early on in the book Thomas King says something like I was going to call this *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious History of Native People in North America*, but he chooses not to. He calls it *A Curious Account* because history sounds too grand or too, too, comprehensive for the kind of thing that he's doing. So yeah it is an interesting like scholarly or teacherly take to say, "Nope, I'm going to approach it as a history," and there's I think probably advantages to doing that, especially since he, Thomas King, is mythbusting throughout.

So we've already started talking about the text so why don't, to backtrack a little bit that's great, why don't we, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Taylor 5:50

Yeah, totally. Um, hi, my name is Taylor Brown. I am pursuing my undergrad at the University of Guelph. Currently, I am doing an English major with a minor in Creative Writing. I that's about it. I'm not very interesting, aside from that.

Jess 6:06

No that sounds great.

Jess 6:08

I've worked like a lot of jobs in and around teaching. I've been a tutor, I've been a freelance editor, I've read tarot cards, I am a poetry editor for Carousel Magazine, I'm a research assistant, and just as of recently last summer, summer 2019, I was a tour guide. So I've kind of worn a whole bunch of different hats in relation to education and done everything but actually teaching, in all honesty.

Jess 6:33

Well and all of those sound, or a lot of those sound like teacherly roles. So I mean actually part of this podcast will be questioning, kind of, who we give the label of teacher or of educator and also opening up that a little bit so I'm hoping, hoping that that will be part of the like purpose of the podcast is to showcase that educators come in all sorts of forms and all roles, outside of the traditional educational contexts in the West.

Jess 7:01

So you did mention the job that initially kind of got us talking about you coming on here, which is your tour guiding experience. So just for folks who won't be familiar with that kind of thing or because it's probably very different depending on where your tour guiding and that sort of thing, can you describe your previous work as a tour guide or, like, what kind of tours they were, where they were, that kind of thing?

Taylor 7:20

Totally. So I don't know if this is speaking from a very like GTA-centric context but like grade eight grad trips to like Ottawa, Montreal, Quebec City like that's kind of like the capstone of your elementary school experience. I guess the trips are more focused on tourism base so this is sort of just kind of wandering around Ottawa, Quebec City, Montreal and for me my job was primarily to balance the curriculum that the teachers wanted to see, and also entertain the students, kind of like camp counselor meets like a "cool" teacher, like heavy quotes on cool. I've often described my job as like the intersection between fun and education. And also sort of contextualizing the spaces that students and I are exploring and kind of understanding the very loaded history that is on the ground around us. And I guess also as a more general thing the very loaded history that is Canadian history. And then I guess on top of that also just like had very like mundane duties of organizing the group, directing them in busy traffic situations, dealing with activities restaurants, hotels, then all the kind of emotional labor tied into that. So yeah, that's kind of how I probably describe my job, no minus 40 weather, as of yet.

Jess 8:39

Good. Well, it's interesting to me that you say part of your job is being entertainer but also, you know, I guess... history conveyor or conveyor of the histories of the geographies around because that's, formally

again, I think what this book does a lot of is combine like entertainment and humor and, you know, fun things with the more serious pursuit of history, I guess. So yeah actually do you want to just say a little bit about, you mentioned that you were reading this book at the same time that you were giving tours, do you want to just kind of give a general idea of how that came about?

Taylor 9:19

Yeah, totally. Um, as I sort of mentioned a little bit earlier, I started reading this book more out of pleasure. I really loved Thomas King as an author and I wanted to explore what he was saying and *The Inconvenient Indian* is always, you know CBC makes like "Top books you should read before anything," and this is always on the list, so I've kind of been always interested in it. So I started just kind of taking it with me on tour, and I read like slow super slowly because I work like super long days as a tour guide so I pretty much get back to my hotel room, and just kind of close the door, shut the door, and read. And it was a very weird experience for me to be, on one hand, balancing like this curriculum I had been given by my company, which is very like.... very like sterile rendering of Canadian history right. Like it's heavy quotes "age appropriate," it's friendly, it's like very passive. And then also I'm kind of at the other hand balancing this really interesting text that is formally challenging and also content-wise challenging with specific reference to Canadian history, and also this talks a lot about American history but I guess my more reference point would be Canadian history. And I guess what kind of happened there was I started to realize that these narratives that I was telling during the day were incomplete, and were not... I'm trying to think of the best way to say it. So they were incomplete and they felt very one sided, obviously, and to an extent I realize actually how damaging they were. But that's something I unfortunately only started to understand once I went back to my hotel room and started reading about what all these men who I just talked about had just actually done in their historical context.

I also, as someone who has is a settler on this land, I'm kind of I've also grown up with that education, so I see it a lot of just being not really focusing on the other perspective of it or just being sort of... realizing who's actually left out of the narrative. And I think when we talk about -- by we I mean us "tour guides," quote unquote -- when we talk about Canadian history, we'll talk about you know the big names. We'll talk about Sir John A, we'll talk about Wilfrid Laurier, and you know well... everyone has their critiques of them personally, but we don't know if we can always translate that quote unquote for "professional reasons" across to the students and it's almost like by withholding that kind of information, by withholding those kind of critiques, it's kind of enforcing a narrative that is very dangerous. And as King kind of explains in the book. It's untrue right? Like we know now, we understand now that Sir John A Macdonald was objectively, not a good person.

Jess 11:53

Bad.

Taylor 11:53

Bad man. Bad man. So to sort of have during my day job I was like, showing or pointing out to monuments and statues, to all these people who had committed genocide, and then to have not mentioned that... That's a very one-sided and colonial approach to history.

Jess 12:14

Mmhmm. Yeah, I have so many things like sort of coming into my head now about what you're saying. The first question I had was, how much leeway -- and I realize you're working from a student perspective, somebody who's sort of pursuing side jobs probably to keep afloat, as you're also being a student that sort of thing -- how much leeway did you feel like you had to manipulate the narrative you were supposed to tell, I guess, as you go along? And I'm curious how much leeway you felt you had in telling the tour, telling the story that you were supposed to tell on the tours, like could you manipulate it according to what you were reading?

Taylor 12:46

Mmhmm, in a weird kind of way that actually like the company that I work for I honestly like basically no negative comments about. They did always say "you know what tour guiding is your own, you add your own kind of flair, your flavor to it, do whatever you want with it." So that led to a lot of us finding really creative ways to tell stories and I found the way I told stories changed from group to group, which is something that like Thomas King, as a storyteller really manipulates well in the text, how to tell stories, when to tell, then why to tell them, but I found it was kind of changing the story depending on the group. We actually had an interesting, quote unquote "interesting" conversation, during our training, where the manual that we were basically handed which had like all of the different historical spots that we're going to be talking about, all the different figures we should learn, all the basic all the spiels, all the information we needed to tell. They basically some tour leaders were asking our kind of manager. Do we have to use the word settler? Because that sounds a little bit too... not quite, doesn't quite fully encapsulate the experience there, like I wouldn't describe them as a settler or as a pioneer. Like basically we're asking, can we use the word colonizer?

Jess 13:52

laughs Yes!

Taylor 13:54

Yes. Yes. Can we use the word colonizer yes or no? And our manager I think like tried like is it trying to really try to keep the peace between like the white dad history teachers that are going to be on the trip and then us being like, contemporary university students, a lot of us being non-white. And she, like the best he could do was "you know what like you have to kind of be careful with what you say. But if it's true, it's true." I think was the general kind of sentiment. I think he did at the end of the day, sort of say to steer away from a word like "colonizer." He said, "you know settler's fine." He's like "settler is the

same idea," so after that I only use colonizer, obviously. Yeah, so we were we were awarded a fair amount of leeway. We just kind of had to still be careful with it because like you said, it's like we're still quote unquote "providing a service," we're still doing a job, and we still have to retain a little bit of professionalism, and I guess there's also this weird opinion about Canadian history that's objective. And obviously King's account tells us, absolutely not it's objective, it's never been objective. For it to be objective... Like there's just no way. Like it just isn't and can't be and isn't. So I feel like a lot of teachers... I have always been afraid of teachers being directly critical, because at the end of the day, students won't be. Students will be interested and they're been receptive in the past to these kind of conversations. I'm actually more afraid of like this old white guy history teacher cussing me out in front of the whole, like, bus or whatever, which I realized I was like a settler isn't a huge concern like that doesn't directly upset my safety or like hurt me in any way. It's just more, unfortunately, trying to avoid an inconvenient conversation.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 15:47

I find it interesting too that it sounds like both the tour company gives you leeway, but also sort of encourages you as the tour guide to make particular choices. And I mean that's actually a microcosm for how, like a lot of discourse works because it's like we're all working within constraints that are caused by our physical, material, financial realities right like what I can say in a classroom is, even if I wish it not to be and I just want to be like "yeah fuck it all! burn it all down!," even if I want that to be true, what I say in a classroom is necessarily going to be constrained by the fact that I'm precariously employed or that I don't have a permanent job right? And yet, I will still like like you, it sounds like you did, try to work subversively against the institution in which I am constrained by, you know? So yeah I'm just noticing how in the tour guide context there's such, it's such a.... It sounds to me like a microcosm for what we experience both in university classrooms and elsewhere, where you're both constrained but also working against the sort of structures that constrain you.

Jess 16:57

Oh, and then I was also thinking about how too much leeway could be dangerous because what if you get tour guides who are and I'm sure maybe there's examples of this, I'm not sure if you'd want to speak to them or not, but you could probably get tour guides, I assume, and I've experienced this actually being on the other side of it, where they are saying some pretty shady, super troubling crap about, you know, Canadian history or Indigenous history or just geographies around. So giving people a lot of leeway would be, inevitably, also possibly dangerous, in some cases.

Taylor 17:32

Yeah, it's definitely a weird job that you don't really train for. So I think, just like based on that of like you can get hired without basically any experience. They kind of have to provide some kind of curriculum or some excuse me some kind of guideline, just because we can't leave people with nothing in a way, like they have to give us something we don't we don't really know what to do. Like I definitely wouldn't know what to do for sure.

Jess 17:55

Yeah, and that that is like both kind of cool and also, again, possibly dangerous. I want to use like a less, a less threatening word than "dangerous," but it's cool because it means that anyone can bring their body into the tour guide position and with their own lived experience of the, of the place in question, the geography in question, they can sort of influence the narrative that they tell, which is awesome because it validates our own individual experiences of space and the knowledge that we have from simply experiencing a space. But on the other hand, of course, I like I couldn't even imagine being a tour guide for basically anywhere. I would be so scared of the expertise that in my head, you would need, even though that's not true as you're saying but in my head you would need such expertise to really do justice to the complexities of a space. So, yeah, I see both how that can be very awesome and validating and really validate people's own personal, like the tour guide's own personal lived experience of the space, but also kind of scary.

Taylor 18:57

Very scary.

Jess 19:00

So, I guess I wanted to ask if you had like moments from the tours that stood out to you? Either moments that stood out to you just from the tour's perspective because I find that interesting and I want to know, or in relation to your reading of the inconvenient Indian which you as you said you were reading sort of every night as you came home to your hotel.

Taylor 19:19

Yeah, like I think very specifically, I... I remember this really interesting, "what are the odds" kind of story, where basically after, when I started tour guiding, I already decided as a figure I didn't really want to put Sir John A on any kind of pedestal, and then like that was before I fully read Inconvenient Indian and to be totally honest like that was an opinion I'd been having for a bit. So I decided that the only story I'd ever tell about Sir John A Macdonald is the one where he gets super wasted and vomits on the common House of Commons floor.

Jess 19:53

I love that. Yes! You're like, that is the one that is going to be my tour guide legacy is I will be the tour guide who only talks about his wasted vomit scene.

Taylor 20:03

It's true like I'm like "okay so he's the first like whatever whatever of Canada," but also he like vomited and it was really embarrassing and everyone hated him. I know, he got re-elected that term.

Jess 20:13

I just have to say I love that you just said "he's the first whatever whatever of Canada." That just makes it all better. It doesn't matter what he was we should just know, it doesn't matter, I love it.

Taylor 20:22

He was there, I don't know, that's it that's, like, that's all. So after I told the story this kid approaches me and he's like, "Hey, I really liked your story" and I was like "oh thanks" and he was like "I'm actually a distant relative of Sir John A." And I was like, "What do you mean?"

Jess 20:38

What?

Taylor 20:39

Like, how do you know that?

Jess 20:41

Yeah. Is that so did he have a defensive reaction or he was just like, "Hey, that was cool. And by the way...?"

Taylor 20:46

"...it's a weird thing that my parents know for some godforsaken reason." No, he you know he wasn't critical of the story, he didn't like he didn't have a problem with it, like he wasn't like "you're disrespecting my family's legacy." No, he was fine with he thought was funny. Everyone does, it's a great story. It's a weird because I wouldn't even say his reaction was necessarily like "oh yeah like he was totally like a fuckup and we, as a family have shadowed whatever whatever." No, it's more just like he was just like "oh that's a funny story oh by the way I'm related to him." What I kind of took away from

that, well my first thought was, like, I don't know anything about my ancestry like past great grandparents, and that even is a little sketchy sometimes. And I think it's really interesting like I guess the figures we hang on to and the figures that we want to be, or that this boy in particular was really interested in having this relationship to, because I feel like that's something that's like an ancestry.com kind of discovery that's like a family historian kind of oriented journey I guess, so I was really interested in the fact that he knew that he was related to this person, and that he also, almost like his family did the work to find that out. I think shows how central this person still is to like Canadian identity and people's narratives around Canada especially.

Jess 21:57

Mm hmm. And I mean with the activism that we've seen not just this year but you know for previous years around John A Macdonald's statues, we see how he's central to people's familial legacies and all sorts of contested and complicated ways. Do you know if there's, it just occurs to me, do you know if around the same place that you were giving tours has any of that John A Macdonald statue -- were there John A Macdonald statues in those tours, or was it more just the places he inhabited?

Taylor 22:26

It definitely will actually it all depends on kind of like where the tour is coming from. So mostly like I mostly GTA-focused, so you know a lot of times they would pick me up, based from my house, but the tour bus would pick me up and we'd go eastbound, in that specific case to go to Ottawa, and we passed like Kingston and I feel like when I was learning the job they were like, "oh you know Sir John A, he's from Kingston, you better, you know, make sure you talk about him." Yeah, their whole thing was oh, make sure you talk about him during this section, but I feel like once we got into Ottawa like, there's only a couple statues of him around. Kind of the back of Parliament Hill has like all these statues that are at that point they were being renovated, so the summer that I actually like might have run into some uncomfy, uncomfortable situations with statues and maybe with like activism relating to the statues, which isn't something I'm uncomfortable with obviously is more something, how do I unpack that to the group of 50 kids standing behind me? Yeah, that was happening actually the whole area was under construction. so that was a weird thing of never took the kids there, I almost never even had to have that conversation with myself, or with any parents or teachers involved. So my answer is yes and no. There were some kind of Sir John A's sentiments or tributes around Ottawa in the place I've been to, but for the most part, like I didn't see a lot.

Jess 23:47

Right, yeah, it would definitely be interesting had there not been construction or if you were doing it this summer for example when I know, like you know the statue in Montreal was toppled over and where there's a lot of contemporary statue activism I know there's this year there's been a lot of statue activism happening, including other years but especially this year, so it'd be interesting to think about how you would both teach the protest and teach the activism at the same time as teaching whatever

the, the statue was supposed to represent. That would be a complicated probably history to unpack for students.

Taylor 24:20

Oh, for sure. I also, now that you mention it, just as you were saying teaching a protest. In my manual I received to like do the job, they were like, oh if you're in Ottawa and you happen to see like a sit-in like a, like a protest, you know make that a teachable moment. Say, you know, these people are standing up against the government, they're having a problem, they're being critical, they're doing it peacefully, and we're allowed to do that as Canadians. And I thought that was really interesting because even like though my little manual that I keep referring to is like just like a corporate put together thing, it still was like no like these protests are good and they're happening for a reason. So if you see it on Parliament Hill while you're driving by through tour bus, bring it up, it's a good place to have the conversation.

Jess 24:57

Oh, that's amazing. Yeah that's surprising to me just knowing nothing like you haven't even told me the name of your tour company for the record, folks, but yeah know nothing, knowing nothing about your organization you're working with, that's just surprising and unexpectedly awesome that they would put such a, such a sort of instruction in the, in the manual, because yeah that is part of the geography of the city is the protests that have gone by, the activism that have gone by, the organizing that continues to go by right? So to actually show and teach that to kids or Grade 8ers, I get, of course, kids, I'm like, are you a kid in grade eight? Yes I believe you're a kid in grade eight, although I can't remember how old.... It's so, I just have no concept of what age aligns with what grade, that's my issue. It's like grade eight.... Are you eight? Because the number eight is in that? I have no idea.

Taylor 25:54

They're like 13 or 14. No, 14's too old, they're like 13 ish.

Jess 25:59

Gotcha. Teenager children. One of the things I wanted to ask, but I was wondering if you thought there was any ways that your tours did mimic the book in its form? And maybe this is just because of what I told you earlier, which is that when I taught this book we were very focused on form and, and how the book does what it does formally, so like you know storytelling meets history, he uses humor, personal anecdotes, I'm not sure if you were allowed to or if you just use personal anecdotes throughout your tours. Yeah Is there any ways that you feel like you're touring mimics the book in form?

Taylor 26:37

Definitely. Well, I think, like, the most important thing I think that King establishes all throughout *The Inconvenient Indian*, is that history is a set of narratives, and there's nothing... I think like what I understood from that book was that there's nothing concrete and perfect about Canadian history, like if you open up a textbook, that's just a story, and like, there's nothing objective and untouchable about it, there's nothing like unfaultable about it. Like it's absolutely just someone's story that they wrote in, you know, the writers of history and yada yada yada. So, I think like when I was telling stories like that's kind of how I started to see it. Like I wasn't in a place thinking "okay I'm going to tell this like great objective history about Quebec City," because it doesn't exist. Like there is no great objective history of Canada, of anywhere, of any place, or thing that exists. So I think I just started telling stories. Like that's kind of just what I reverted to, and as a result of that, a lot of them were humorous, like they had to be, like had to be fun yet educational. Certain groups wanted to hear certain things. I like telling ghost stories.

Jess 27:40

Oh nice!

Taylor 27:41

Which is not a proper like historical facts factual thing, but the kids like love it, the parents love it, like it's kind of all about... in touring, like a lot of it is like what stories are going to get the reaction you're looking for, which is engagement, whether that be engagement of the kids being super interested in it or the kids asking more questions or like laughing and such like that. So I think at the end of day, King's book helps me to see that like I shouldn't be stressed out about trying to tell this like grand, objective history because there is like there's nothing to tell like the history is the different stories that I've read and I can retell and understand, but at the end of the day, it's narratives that you can make right?

Jess 28:22

Yeah i mean that's something he comes back to over and over again. And at least from my elementary perspective, my sort of K to 12 education, I absolutely remember being sort of what's the word like being implanted with the idea that you're able to know history in an unmediated way, there is an objective truth, and that sort of thing and this is the history. And of course as you continue on either in education or just in life when you realize that history is mediated and you can never transparently access some history that's free from ideology, right? And, and I think that's actually part of why King mentioned that he had uncomfortableness with the title, *A Curious History of Native People in North America*. That's part of what he says in the opening of this book: like he changed the title because he was uncomfortable with that idea of history because he sees history as stories. Yeah, he actually, I'll just read it. There's a quote I have here. "History is the stories we tell about the past. That's all it is. Stories." So exactly what you say, and I know King has the other another popular text that he spoke and wrote which is *The Truth About Stories* where he says "that's all we are," right? And history is part of that. And his problem is he, again this is a quote but, he says, "I simply have difficulty with how we choose which stories become the pulse of history, and which do not." And a lot of what you've said already really for

me reminded me of that quote. This idea that each tour guide will be pulling and picking different aspects of stories or different stories altogether. And that will inflect the way a whole group of students might see history going forward, like, I don't want to put like just like me as an instructor I don't say that "I will influence these, these children or students forever," but I just know from my youth that I do remember individual moments of teachers and teachings that did affect me going forward. So if King's question is how do we choose which stories become the pulse of history, I can see how tour guides are also making that choice all the time in and against the constrictions -- is that a word? -- in and against the bounds that they're up against in their organization or their company, what they're supposed to say versus sort of what they what they want to say.

Taylor 30:41

Definitely is very interesting if I... sometimes they'll do what's called like a tandem tour, like basically means like you partner up with another tour leader, and it's really interesting to see how other people do things because you can teach it and do it 100 different ways and the end of the day like there's nothing wrong -- like, there are wrong ways to do it, don't get me wrong, but there are, like, as long as you're within a reasonable limit like there's no wrong way to do it. You just have to kind of hit your mark, tell your stories, get on the bus and call it a day, you know.

Jess 31:12

Right, like there's different approaches to the same sorts of material and I assume that also means there's different ethical approaches to the same kind of practice right. Not everybody's ethics or values will align and that's kind of a reality of both that industry, it seems to me, but also of all industries, teaching, teaching in a university being the same.

Jess 31:34

Oh, I was gonna ask, so about The Truth about Stories, history being a story, sort of on that note, did you ever have instances where your students that you were touring around sort of brought their own stories and histories to the place or talked about or offered their own perspectives or anecdotes on the place, the places you were touring around?

Taylor 31:54

Oh yeah, like all the time, like I think the way kids understand things is they just understand it of how they know it. So certain towns would be like, like super small towns they'd be like hockey towns kind of thing where like the big trip for the families and for all the kids is to go to Ottawa and like play at the tournament. I'm not a sport person, so that's why I'm like, the heck I'm talking about playing the tournament... them to do a tournament like and that was their big travel, like they would often talk about it and you know it's like I said with that kid who said "oh I'm related to so and so," a lot of times the kids would try and understand the place in their context. And, you know, a lot of times, it wasn't it

wasn't as like insightful or intellectually like highbrow as maybe I'm making it out to be -- like kids would sometimes like just reference like the Netflix shows they're watching like "that looks like this place that this thing happened on Riverdale," like they're kids, like they're fun, they're fun as fuck right? So they're just talking about like, "Oh, this reminds me of like this, Netflix original I'm watching" or whatever like they just kind of.... They're into that kind of thing and they just do like to relate to the place, and how they know what or how they see it also.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 33:11

Okay, so these are K to 12 teachers in any case, and you're a tour guide who's also a undergraduate student, and so you'll both be working with prior knowledge about history, including the Canadian history that you're teaching, but I am wondering if you have like instances where your knowledge and your experience of history that you're telling bumped up against the teachers in particular?

Taylor 33:36

I'm trying to think of the best way to say this. So sometimes I do tours from America where they'll come up from the States, and like... Yes, they come up from the States, meet me in Quebec City, and we'll hang out for a week or whatever, which is a really casual way to talk about it. But it's like, you know, I do the tour or whatever. So I had this one teacher who's super history nerd and he knew a lot about American history as an American, and I don't know anything about American history just because where I live and I don't, I'm not inclined to learn that much. Whatever -- send your hate mail to my Twitter, it's fine, I'll get over it.

Jess 34:12

laughs Oh my god.

Taylor 34:15

And he had some... at one point a dinner he was kind of talking about the Confederacy in ways I didn't agree with nor appreciate. Yeah, so that's like the gist of, kind of what he was saying so with that kind of person in mind I was kind of like, Well, you know, now's probably a bad time to talk about what a shithole or shithead fucking Sit John A Macdonald is like, because, you know what I mean? Like, now's the time to start... like I was like if I start challenging colonial narratives, like straight up is he gonna yell at me? You know I'm gonna get an uncomfortable situation. Like, I can handle the uncomfortable conversation, that's fine, but I don't want to put the kids through that and I don't want to put like

unnecessary stress and plant drama on the whole scene. But yeah, there's that one specific instance where I wasn't really comfortable talking about it but in all honesty, like a lot of teachers are very receptive to it because a lot of teachers are at least aware of the history. Like I definitely don't want to paint Ontario teachers as people who don't want to talk about the history because a lot of them are interested in it. And if they're not interested at the very least they're at least semi-aware that they should be talking about it so sometimes they just need, they just need help people to help facilitate the conversation and I'm not saying it's me it's definitely not me like I'm not a professional under the any kind of any kind of means in that way, but I think a lot of people are interested in facilitating that kind of conversation and maybe they should look to places like King's book right? Like that's such a really great entry point for a lot of people and I've seen it in class as I was kind of like talking about in class, seeing it, a lot of university students who, as University English kids we're all well-read and none of us are like willfully ignorant by any kind of means, but everyone learned a lot from that class, everyone learned a lot, and they said that King's book was the entry point for them.

Jess 36:01

Yeah, and I'm just thinking about how like in your moment of sort of possible conflict with the one with the one instructor from the US... Like, you're also, it sounds like you're also negotiating a strangely intimate kind of relationship or encounter because if you're with a group for like a week, or if you're if you know that you're going to be with folks for a few days even, I could see how that would change the way that you want to approach these... I mean, quote unquote "difficult" issues. That kind of intimacy is almost like it reminds me of the teaching, like a teaching a whole semester-long class where because of that semester because of the time involved, because of the semester long nature of it, you will be negotiating complicated and complicated histories in particular ways because you have like students for a whole semester. So, in that same way, I feel like it would be difficult to... it would be difficult to negotiate the kind of... I don't know if "intimacy is the right word," but the kind of relationship you build being with the group for like a week. That sort of thing.

Taylor 37:02

Yeah, definitely. I mean, at the end of the day, we all sleep at the same hotel, right, like...

Jess 37:05

Okay, yeah, that's... Yeah, see that would be... Yeah, and it would also change your perspective on what possible harm could come to you out of this, right, if you're constantly going to back to the same sort of hotel, and with the same people all the time. There's like a riskiness involved, I guess.

Taylor 37:21

Yeah. And I think the riskiness is definitely more, for myself speaking like again like as a white women, I'm seeing that more as like a professional riskiness. Worst comes to worst, I get fired. Don't want to be!

But if it happens, you know I can live the rest of my day and I can live the rest of my life and I'll "get over it," quote unquote.

But yeah like I'm trying... I think, as I'm thinking more about everything, I guess to put it really broadly, and just kind of revisiting King's book, I'm thinking when I return to tour guiding, I want to take a more actively anti-racist approach to my teaching because at this point, if you don't, it's like there's... what's the point in doing it? That's just kind of how I'm coming from it at this point

Jess 38:02

Yeah, so you're committing to assuming a certain amount of risk in your teaching and other practices, professional practices, because that's what white women, like myself as well, need to do in order to actually make change and not just perpetuate the same... We will always be perpetuating the same troubling ideologies, but to try to work against them, it's like necessary to adopt some professional risk for sure.

Taylor 38:29

Definitely. And I think like you also mentioned like being subversive within the constraints you can be... I guess just being subversive with the history when I can, that's kind of maybe what I would like to do going forward. Post-COVID, I don't really know the whole tour situation is going to be like, so we'll see...

Jess 38:44

That's actually – so, first, I just thought of a tweet, so I'm going to try to bring it up here because it's actually somewhat going maybe against... But the tweet has to do very much with what we were just talking about, which is sort of like shit disturbing, or being a shit disturber within the institution... Okay, yeah, here it is. I just wanted to make sure to give due credit to the person who wrote it.

So, it's Susanna L Harris on Twitter, and she wrote, "Once I graduate. Once I get a postdoc, Once I am faculty, Once I get tenure, Once I'm Emeritus... Look, you aren't ever going to feel like your job is secure enough, or that you have enough time. That change you want to make in academia? Do it now." And I, I wrote, like just in my own post, that yeah "Power dynamics and pressures not to speak up or not to cause conflict are real, but this" -- what Suzanna L Harris says -- "is so true. If you're not being a shit disturber now, even in precarity," especially with the privilege that I have as a white settler here, "then you probably won't be a shit disturber in the future." So I think that professional riskiness that we're just talking about is integral to working against the, the, it's integral to both using privilege that we or that I have, and also trying to do that kind of anti-racist and anti-oppressive work that you're talking about.

Taylor 40:10

I think that gives me that's given me a lot to think about. So thank you, thank you for sharing that.

Jess 40:15

And that actually reminds me, back to the book and also to things that we've said in the past, like I said, the book has this sort of, as you know, this dialogue between, Tom, Tom King -- Thomas King. "Tom King," as if I'm on like a nickname basis. Thomas King, and yeah, Thomas King and Helen Hoy, his partner, are like sort of dialoguing throughout it, or he he says that she makes comments on his draft as he's writing on it, sorry as he's writing it. And that's a sort of dialogic approach to telling this history. But then, in my mind, please correct me if I'm wrong tour guiding doesn't seem as dialogic because it does still seem like there's one person sort of doing most of the monologuing and you might hear back from students. I'm wondering what a tour would be like if the tour guide and the students co-constructed it? Or like constructed it through dialogue rather than just through monologue? It would be really interesting and I bet it would be kind of whimsical and sort of silly in a lot of ways because you might have students that are just like "that is my hockey place," and that becomes part of the tour. But imagine yeah... that just seems like such an interesting and potentially cool way of doing tours where it's like, "let's all talk about our associations with this place" instead of one person narrating some sort of official, if you know subverted, history of Canada.

Taylor 41:36

Mm hmm. I would like love to see that. Oh my god. Um, no, I definitely feel like tour guiding is obviously very one-sided because I'm just kind of sitting there on the mic like monologuing about this grand history of Canada. I had a student tell me like really candidly and really like randomly, she was like, "you know, I feel like you have two personalities," and I was like, "oh, what do you mean?" And she was like, "you know, when you're like talking to everybody, you sound very different from when you talk person to person." And I'm just kind of like, "oh okay." Like I guess I can see that right like we all put on different social chameleon faces or whatever, but I was kind of like, what would it look like if I was just always the person talking like one-on-one, or like one to a group or a couple? I would love to see a tour that was like communally run or like organized like that -- might have to be for like an older age group who has more experience with a place but honestly, even as I'm saying that I would love to see all the kids kind of like give their two cents on this place, what do they think about it? What Netflix original does it remind them of, you know? Like, I'd absolutely love to see.

Jess 42:44

Totally! It'd be so empowering and validating and even if there were kids who came in or adults who came in with like troubling assumptions about places that clearly need to be unpacked, at least through conversation hopefully that could happen or like that kind of tension would be generative or productive, even. And yeah you would just get the funnest... like okay there's a place near my house that I go for a walk every day. And it's just like a block of sidewalk or like a chunk of sidewalk, but early COVID days there was always a band-aid there, and I'm sorry to say I never picked it up. I didn't like de-litter the ground or anything, I just looked at it every day. And now even though it's gone, every day I'm like "that's the band-aid place!" Like I just think about that, and it just it will forever be in my head -- like that

block of square is the band-aid square. So, even if stuff like that came out, it would be really interesting and fun and whimsical to see the kind of like personal histories that people attach onto places and the sort of humor and the kind of silliness that can come with intersections of place, intersections of narratives about place.

Taylor 43:53

Totally I would, oh my god, that'd be so fun. I would love that.

Jess 43:58

Um, so I think we might have already addressed this um yeah... What challenges do you find the text posed for you and your work as a tour guide?

Taylor 44:09

Mm hmm. I think I mean I guess we're, we were talking earlier about like the more formal qualities of the text as ultimately rejecting like a chronological easy to digest, understandable history, I think there's this kind of approach in *Inconvenient Indian* of, "well, once I read this, we're reconciled Like that's it, like we're good to go," like I can figure out how to move forward to the world and be an actively anti-racist person and also be a person who is a good Indigenous or a good ally for Indigenous people. And obviously the book doesn't offer an answer, like King doesn't list at the back like "oh by the way you should do this and this and this." There is you know things he alludes to and things he suggests but I think like, just as he rejects a kind of broad, and all-encompassing history, he also rejects an all-encompassing way of being. And I think that's interesting because I like to kind of unpack it and and kind of mess around with that idea, but then equally like if I wanted to, almost take that text and use it as theory or as ideology to go forward and teach a tour, it still kind of leaves a lot of blanks and it almost, it doesn't tell me how to do it, and I think like that's fine. I can figure it out, I can try and like figure out things and reconcile things and try and make it work, but I guess what challenges it faces is as the text itself, it doesn't tell you how to do it. It really is something you have to figure out by yourself. King kind of gives you the tools and just lets you figure it out because if you can't. He's yeah he's not going to kind of like make this easy for you. And he shouldn't -- he doesn't have to. He's not like obligated to. In the same way like Canadian history isn't going to be easy, it's not going to be easily digestible.

Jess 45:54

Yeah, this idea that there's one thing we can do to be a good ally to Indigenous folks or something like that, as, as white settlers, it's just already a problematic idea right? So I think actually his book accurately represents the complexity of, of not giving a solution is a good way of reinforcing that there is no single way to be a perfect ally with like kind of the gold star badge and the hero cookie and whatever else that goes along with that because it's just not simple like that nor should it be.

One thing I wanted to make sure to ask about was aspects of Indigenous history that you were asked to highlight on the tours, or their absence?

Taylor 46:39

Yeah, so I think like the sort of like manual I keep mentioning that I was handed, like, it's very like geographically centered. So, even though, you know, big figures of like Canadian Indigenous kind of like historical canon. Probably the biggest name is Louis Riel, and like, Gabriel Dumont, they never got mentioned just because geography geographically, it didn't make sense. However, there were, like... I don't know if you have this experience kind of where you are at, but during at one point in the tours in Quebec City, if you drive like an hour ish north, you're in a place called Wendake -- Wendake, Wendake? -- sorry, Wendake, which is a Huron-Wendat reserve. So basically what they have on the reserve is a reconstructed, they call it a traditional site. And it's sort of got like the longhouses, it has different fixtures of Huron-Wendat culture, and a lot of times they have tour guides there, who would be very interesting to interview, tour guides there who are Indigenous people living on the land who, not the site is their home but the surrounding area's their home, and their job is to kind of teach these kids about Huron-Wendat traditions. And it's a really interesting... It's a really interesting thing because like you said, it's for a lot of reasons it's not perfect and not on the organizers' part at all, like I think everything that they do is like absolutely incredible. But it's almost like the kids kind of react to it in a very interesting way. Like there was this one student who asked me like, "oh, like, do they live here?" And it was like, "oh in this like reconstructed long house. Like, no" Like.... So then it kind of, you know, Thomas King in, I believe it is in *Inconvenient Indian*, please correct me I haven't read it in about a year, But he talks about this concept of "Dead Indians" and "Live Indians."

Jess 48:30

Totally. Yes, I had that in my notes here to bring up if it applied, "Dead Indians," "Live Indians," and "Legal Indians." Yeah he makes -- just for folks who don't know -- he makes, King makes this sort of categorization between different figures that he thinks white North Americans have slotted indigenous folks into. So...

Taylor 48:52

Yeah, so I felt like King describes "Dead Indians" as like this kind of like antiquated "cowboys and Indians" kind of look that a lot of people kind of approach and approach Indigeneity -- it's like, that's the kind of mentality they bring with it. It's like totally like poor representation in the media, racist characters and stereotypes that kind of contribute to this image, but it was really like a weird and like I don't even know how to fully describe this experience to be totally honest of like this kid being looking at these real life Indigenous people, King calls them "Live Indians," real life Indigenous people, sort of, you know, dressing in their tradition and in their culture, of course, but he this kid is sort of seeing them as like these "Dead Indians" that he's probably seen on like, you know, just like "cowboys and Indians" cartoons -- not that kids in 2020 watch that. But like they still have that very antiquated idea of like what

Indigeneity is. And like, I'm not really like bringing this up to be critical the student because obviously like, I don't really think that that means he is like an ignorant person or that he just doesn't get it or whatever. I just think it's really just an indication that the education needs to be better. And that's just not just in the school board part but it's also maybe even on my part too as a tour guide, because I think I did say to him like "no like this is a reconstructed heritage site," it's like.. I think I compared it to a Pioneer Village, which loaded -- regret that, not how I would describe it now. I was like, "No, like, you know, they go off and it just people live their life after their nine to five shift at the traditional site, you know." So I think it's a lot of like, trying to deconstruct these ideas of Indigeneity that the kids almost don't even know they have, they don't even fully get it. I don't know, like, also, at one point we went to that same traditional site and this kid was wearing like a Chicago Blackhawks hoodie. Oh my god.

Jess 50:45

Yeah, and that's actually something King calls out explicitly in the book. He says, the reason why so called quote unquote "Dead Indians" continue to sort of have this cultural currency is because of things like sports teams and he, he might not name the Blackhawks but I know he names a couple in there, and he says because of businesses and brands and other sort of commercial endeavors and an organizational endeavor endeavors that serve to profit off of the image of the quote unquote "Dead Indian," and that's why that continues in culture and has cultural currency here. So yeah, interesting that that sweater would both come into conflict with but also maybe inflect some of the things that are happening on the tour, or by inflect I moreso mean like reinforce maybe, if you're saying that, not the tour, the folks who are doing the tour itself but if you're saying that part of the problem that seems to be happening is that students are understanding that part of the tour in terms of the quote unquote "Dead Indian," figure, then that sweater really kind of almost it reinforces why or.... Yeah.

Taylor 51:52

Yeah, it was a moment where I was just like, this is like an irony that they like could have written into a TV show and it would have like ended up on the editing room floor because it's too obvious or something you know, like it was just like

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Taylor 52:10

....any, a lot of mentions of Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity as a whole in the history that I'm, quote unquote "taught" to teach, it's a lot of time it's, it is funneled through like a colonial lens where it's very much like "Indigenous people welcomed the new settlers, and they..."

Jess 52:25

Oh wow.

Taylor 52:26

It can be like like that it's very damaging but also at the same time, there isn't anybody from the company like, kind of, staring over my shoulder, so most of like the tour guides, like I said, they're university students. So most of us are like, "well we know that's not true. So let's not tell like that."

Jess 52:43

Yeah.

Taylor 52:44

Any... so a lot of like the attempts to make to kind of like let those narratives be heard, and that they're not overwhelmed by this kind of weird colonial almost like tone deaf or like missing or incomplete narrative, a lot of like tour guides did more take it upon themselves to change that.

Jess 53:04

And I think that's like one of the best parts of this chat, this chat for me has been thinking about more and learning about the sort of subversive ways that you can get around some of the more damaging narratives that you're asked to tell or that you're sort of called to tell because of the geography around, with statues that heroize figures that you want to, you know, paint as bullshit, or. I really like that because it's so it speaks to me, not just to the themes of the podcast, but also to my own teaching which is trying to be subversive within an institution that is doing active harm and what are the possibilities of that? But also what are the limits of that? And you've spoken to both of those the possibilities of being subversive but also the limits of it.

Taylor 53:51

I guess on the, on the kind of topic of like institutions that create harm. I was touring Quebec City and there is absolutely beautiful Basilica. It's called St Anne Basilica, yes St Anne de Beaupre Basilica, and it has a really has some really weird paintings in the basement, and a lot of them.... One of them is actually of like Indigenous people being like, taught, like about Catholicism. And basically I kind of like this was like my last tour and this also was the tour that I was a little bit anxious about because it's like that American, kind of like history dad. I kind of was like you know what like if I'm just gonna, like, say something. I was like, "well you know like, this is a very beautiful Basilica, but also like these kind of pictures remind us that it's a very different loaded history," and it was something I couldn't fully get into

in the basement of Basilica, which honestly I should have now that I'm honestly like really looking back on it, but it is something that I wanted to make sure that I let the students know about. And if it's something that makes them curious, they can go home and google it or they can ask their parents about it or that maybe they could like ask their friends about it. And it's maybe as a tour guide my job isn't totally to completely like perfectly like immaculately educate anyone, but maybe just to give people ideas to Google later. Like that's maybe--

Jess 55:08

Totally. Yeah and I mean putting the pressure, especially with the time constraints that you had and the constraints on each space and everything like that, putting the pressure on yourself to teach some sort of comprehensive history, even if it's the good history that you're hoping to teach like, "here's the story that you might not hear," that is so much pressure both individually but also threatens to reiterate the same problems that King sees with history, which is that there is no comprehensiveness available to us, that we are always only understanding it in fragments and in stories and in perspectives and not in some whole kind of whole picture or portrait or tapestry. So, and I think the fact that you are self-aware about it and saying, "hey in the future I might do it this way," is like again so reflective of me and the process of teaching, which is just that the first time something happens, you're like "okay, I'll do it a little bit differently next time," then you do it a little bit differently next time, but then you're like, "oh, I'll do it even more differently next time," and it's just like a process of a dynamic process that changes all the time and is never going to be some perfect educational transfer like the banking model of education that Freire talks about, where it's just like you put ideas into a student's head and off they go nicely that's a very neat idea but it's troubling and problematic and it's also just not how teaching and learning works, so.

Taylor 56:25

It's also never happened like that, like not ever.

Jess 56:29

Yeah, exactly. So is there anything else you wanted to mention or talk about that we haven't gotten to about either your experiences as a guide or about this text?

Taylor 56:38

Yeah, I think I kind of want to make a quick comment on like I guess tourism as like an industry. My involvement is a summer long kind of love affair and I'm not totally like, I don't have a comprehensive knowledge of every single little aspect in the industry, maybe that's something for later in life, maybe that's something I'll explore when life gets normal, but I think what's really important to remember is in my experience like tourism as an industry tends to be really exploitative. I think the ability, the privilege like to be able to travel is like incredible and especially now as we consider traveling feels like such a far-

off fantasy. Well even back then, like these trips can be expensive for certain schools and for certain students right? Like it's it is really is a privilege to travel and I think a part of that should be kind of understanding the land we're standing on in reference to traveling and just kind of understanding, you know like, this wasn't always like a place for people like me to come and like enjoy a cup of gelato by like the river. That's what it's doing now and that's its function in my reference, but there's people who live here right now and before that, there's people who lived there, and this is somebody's home, and this is somebody's homeland, and this is important to somebody. So I guess I want to kind of carry that with like my touring strategy as I guess going forward like more of an awareness of the land and what it means. Because as King notes in the book, like his second last chapter, it's all about land, like that's what he called I think he says, non-native and native relations have always been about land and I think that's something I've been upon like re-looking at the text and re-examining and that's something I definitely wanted to carry forward and what I'm doing and what I'm teaching.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 58:31

This episode was recorded on Treaty Six Territory and the homeland of the Métis. It's a new month, February, and I want to share with you one sort of ongoing event or series put on by the Library Services for Saskatchewan Aboriginal Peoples, and the Saskatchewan Writers' Guild, which is called the Saskatchewan Aboriginal Storytelling Month in February 2021. There are four talks planned throughout the month, all are happening over Zoom, of course, and I'm going to link to the site where you can find more information about each one. I'll put that in the show notes. The one that is nearest to right now to when this episode will come out is Randy Morin speaking on the topic of healing, which is February 3 at 12 o'clock noon central time. So take a look at the site. Check out the link that I throw in the show notes, and register for Randy's talk, and then also check out the other events planned over the course of the month. As I said, it's Saskatchewan Aboriginal Storytelling Month.

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas.

Thank you to Jade McDougall at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. You can follow me, or the podcast rather, on Twitter and Instagram @TeachinBooksPod or get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. It is very helpful if you rate and review the podcast on Apple Podcasts or any podcatcher that allows you to do so. Okay, goodbye for now.

Please join me again next week, Teachin' Books. I really have nothing to say I didn't prepare any sort of sign-off, so still looking for that perfect sign-off, not sure if I'll ever find it, forever indecisive. See you next time. Nope, never mind. You'll hear me next time. Anyway, okay. Join me next week.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>