

# ADUIDE

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INDIGENOUS LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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BLOG ABOUT READING

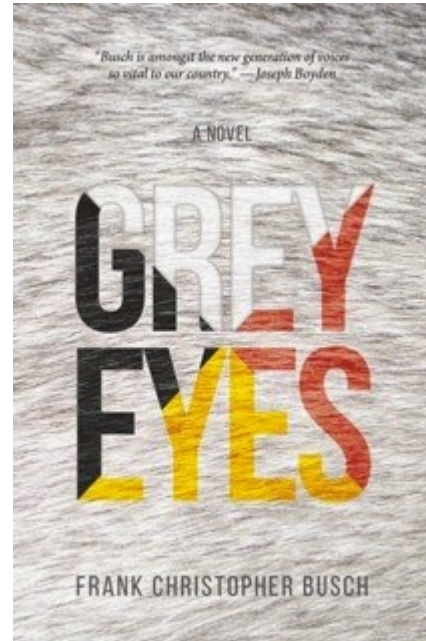
## Education is the New Buffalo: A Conversation With Frank C. Busch



This is the first interview on ADUIDE and I'm glad it's with Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation Author Frank C. Bush. Frank has been an early friend to the blog and this month we are reading through his debut novel, *Grey Eyes*. You can buy the book from many different websites ([Frank's site](#), [Amazon.com](#), [Bkwrks.com](#), [Fernwood Publishing](#)).

**Frank's Bio from his publishers site:** *Frank Christopher Busch is a member of the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation and grew up in northern Manitoba. He has spent his professional life working with First Nations businesses, non-profits and governments at the band, regional tribal council, provincial, national and international levels. He lives in Westbank First Nation, British Columbia.*

**Book Synopsis:** *In a world without time and steeped in ceremony and magic, walks a chosen few who hold an ancient power: the Grey Eyes. True stewards of the land, the Grey Eyes use their magic to maintain harmony and keep evil at bay. With only one elderly Grey-Eye left in the village of the Nehiyawak, the birth of a new Grey-Eyed boy promises a renewed line of defence against their only foe: the menacing Red-Eyes, whose name is rarely spoken but whose presence is ever felt. While the birth of the Grey-Eyed boy offers the clan much-needed protection, it also initiates a struggle for power that threatens to rip the clan apart, leaving them defenceless against their sworn enemy. The responsibility of restoring balance and harmony, the only way to keep the Nehiyawak safe, is thrust upon a boy's slender shoulders. What powers will he have, and can he protect the clan from the evil of the Red Eyes?*



**ADUIDE: Hi Frank. Thanks for agreeing to the interview.**

Frank: Sure, I'm glad to do it.

**I'm reading your book now and it's been great so far.**

Oh yeah, how far into it are you?

**I am about 15 chapters in.**

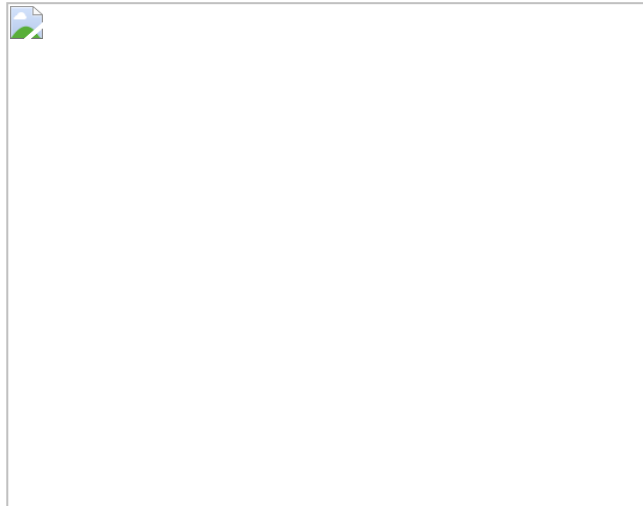
Oh, your just getting into it. Things start ramping up around chapter 18.

**Oh, so it get's even better?**

Oh yeah [laughs].

**Let's start off with you telling us a little bit about yourself.**

Sure. I'm from Manitoba, Canada, just north of Minnesota. It's a fairly isolated community. There's one small city or town in the area and we're north of that. The Cree tribe is possibly the largest tribe in North America, honestly. Our territory is just slightly smaller than the continental United States, stretching across most of Canada and as far south into the United States as Montana. So here in Canada we have 1.2 million Indians, here we call them First Nations, and about 1-in-3 is Cree, is from my tribe.



Facts for Kids: Cree Indians  
[http://www.bigorrin.org/cree\\_kids.htm](http://www.bigorrin.org/cree_kids.htm)

The story takes place in my traditional territory and the village name is the same because we've been calling it Nisichawayasihk for generations, since time memorial. Nisichawayasihk means the place where three rivers meet and it's about the three rivers that we live by and the two lakes between them.

**"I'm a pretty good writer for an accountant."**

I told my editor when I first met her and I've been telling others that I'm a pretty good writer for an accountant [laughs].

I work mostly in accounting and the finance offices for First Nations and tribal councils and for native organizations. I currently work as the marketing director for a national native non-profit organization that's called the First Nations Finance Authority where we help put together financing for major projects on Indian reservations here in Canada.

So yeah, it's kind of an interesting job. I get to travel a lot. I've been to about 200 reservations here in Canada out of about 600 that we have here. Our reservations are way smaller than the ones in the United States. Our experience here in Canada was that the government wanted to divide us up, to separate us instead of jamming us all up into one reservation which I know was the case in some of the states.

Where I live now there are 200 small reservations scattered across the province. It's a different experience, but the rest of the stuff is the same with assimilation.

## Canadian Residential Schools



That's kind of what caused me to write the book. I was working for a time at a law firm with First Nations people who went through residential schools.

Starting here in Canada very early on

St. Paul's Indian Industrial School, Middlechurch, Manitoba

Photo via Wikimedia Commons

in about the 1840's—

with the real peak of

it during the 1950's, 60's and 70's—it was mandatory for all native children to attend these private boarding schools that were run by the government and the church.

At these schools they would cut your hair and take away all your native clothing and put you in industrial uniforms and all that. You were forbidden to speak your language. You had to speak English or you would be physically punished and you lived at these schools. You were separated from family and you weren't even allowed to talk to your own siblings. They made sure families were separated. Often you weren't allowed to see your parents even over Christmas and Spring break.

So I talked to individuals who were actually taken away at the age of three or four and didn't get to go home till they were 21.

I remember hearing one story from an individual that what kept him alive through this experience was a fantasy he had in his head about going home to his mother and walking in the front door and having her hug him and say, "I miss you and I love you." But when this actually happened at age 21 he walks through the front door and his mother started screaming and grabbing her gun [laughs]. There was a strange man in her home. It's a very heartbreaking story. This was told by an elder back in the 60's.

**Wow, I can't imagine that.**

Yeah, so in my job there was a large class action lawsuit here in Canada that became the largest class action settlement in Canadian legal history. It was for 4.6 Billion dollars to be paid out through various very complicated processes to the remaining 90,000 residential school survivors.

**“I just want my culture back.”**

I was part of a law firm at the time and part of my job was to interview the survivors to find out exactly what happened to them. From there they would go to a hearing and tell their story to be compensated accordingly. We're talking about very high level sexual abuse cases. Anything and everything you could imagine under the sun occurred at these boarding schools including sexual slavery and prostitution. So it was a very difficult and tumultuous period of our history and the effect of the residential school system permeates all social levels of our First Nations communities here. A lot of the rampant sexual abuse and substance abuse that we have in our reservations here are mainly derived from that residential school experience.

There's actually a weird statistic out there that says 70% of sexual abuse survivors become dependent on some type of substance, you know anti-depressants such as alcohol and drugs. Some of our communities, especially the northern isolated communities, still have cases where the reservation is 80% alcoholic. So something we're trying to do is help undo some of the damage.

The message I kept hearing from these survivors over and over again—and I kept asking the survivors what would heal or help to reconcile what happened to them—was that they would say, “I just want my culture back.”

That was probably the worst part. They were separated from their language, their lifestyle, their culture, and they were basically forced into assimilation. They were forced to be perfect little white people. One of our first indian agents—the equivalent to the Bureau of Indian Affairs—is actually quoted as saying, “the job is to kill the indian in the child,” and it was very effective. It

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really worked.

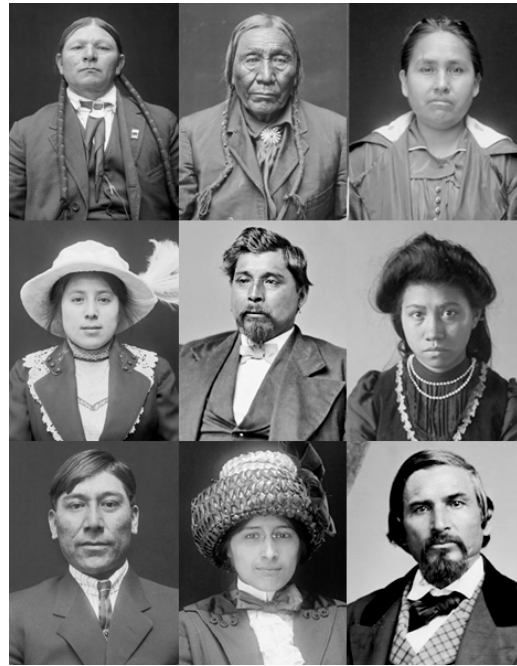
We had a lot of people with identity issues who would say, “Okay, I have brown skin but what does that mean?” And they have no other idea about their heritage or their identity. It’s hard to see where you’re going if you don’t know where you’ve been, right?

So I wrote therapeutically because I started picking up a lot of trauma. I started having a lot of nightmares about being in a residential school as a child and a lot of my personal family history started coming back to me. Things that I thought I worked out and whatnot came back. So I started writing therapeutically.

I guess what I got in my mind was that if I could show a residential school survivor what it looked like to grow up in a traditional native village without the influence of European culture or assimilation policy, then I would be showing them what they missed out on and showing them how to relive it a bit.

I tried to keep some of the descriptions vivid [in *Grey Eyes*] so you feel like you’re there in the village watching what’s happening. I tried to keep it in the perspective that you’re like a villager and your living there and living it.

I had to do a lot of research. I studied Native Studies in university so I had a lot of background knowledge, but I had to learn about the traditional governance systems of the circle of clan mothers in our territory and the warrior societies that were used back then. I wanted to show how those governance systems operated and that we weren’t just a gaggle of brown skin people in the bush randomly following herds of animals. Instead, there



By Antonio(n) Zeno Shindler, De Lancey W. Gill, and Albert E. Sweeney [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

were very complex social structures in place and those helped to mitigate any kind of social ills that would come up. So that's kind of why I wrote *Grey Eyes*. I wanted to help give back a little bit.

## **A Seven Novel Series, With a Prequel**

Originally, I was writing it as a children's story to try and help introduce aspects of my culture and spirituality to people like the residential school survivors who would then be able to pass down what they never had. It just ballooned into this first novel and now eventually a series of seven novels.

**Oh wow. So you have plenty more coming.**

Yeah, I mapped out the original story. I did an outline and brainstorming session where I wrote down all the stuff that I wanted to see happen and the messages I wanted to get across. When I actually started writing the story, it became pretty apparent to me that this was going to be more than one novel.

Based on the outline I had and how I was working at the time, I figured I had to break this up a little bit. When I did the first manuscript, I was around 100,000 words—or 300 pages—and it was only just a fraction of the story I wanted to tell.

There's definitely a lot more coming even though it seems pretty good as a stand-alone story. I'm working on the second manuscript now and I fully intend to write seven books, one for each of the seven sacred teachings.

I also have plans for the prequel based on feedback from my readers. There's a particular character—Painted Turtle Man—that I'm sure you're acquainted with already who people just seem to obsess over. People really want to know all about this medicine man and who taught him and where he learned all this stuff. So after these seven are done I'm actually going to be writing another book called *The Legend of Painted Turtle Man* which

will be his backstory and childhood and everything. So lot's going on there.

### **So where did the idea for the story of *Grey Eyes* come from?**

They were legends I remember hearing as a small child about people with grey eyes who had special abilities. I was very young at the time—maybe four to six—and I remember hearing these stories told to entertain us at camp. We would go really deep into the bush with no T.V. or radio, so my grandma and other elders would tell stories in the evenings to settle the kids down. The stories were just part of my life.

I had my first child four years ago, my son Evan, and he was born with grey eyes. As soon as I saw his grey eyes, I started calling my cousins and asking, “Remember those stories grandma used to tell us about grey eyed people and all that?” And just like me all of them remembered only fragments of those stories.

### **Attention to Ceremonial Detail**

So I had to piece it all together and add things and take artistic license to just fill in the gaps. But the whole concept of *Grey Eyes* and the magic for me was to be able to communicate the power of faith, belief, and real leadership. Because—especially with our ceremonies—you can describe a ceremony to somebody and it doesn't sound that impressive.

You know, describe what happens in a pipe ceremony to somebody and they'll say, “Oh, okay so you sit around and some old man smokes a pipe, I don't get it. Why is that exciting?” But if you could communicate to them the feeling that we have when we hear the drum or when the medicines are lit or when the pipe goes around, then you're kind if imbued with that blast of spirit that's almost entirely impossible to communicate with somebody.

So I brought in this magic to convey the feeling of the power of prayer, the power of belief, and the power of ceremony. I really thought it came

together well where people can see it and it gave the story that supernatural effect that we feel when we're in those ceremonies.

**The attention to detail in the ceremonies is one thing I really appreciate about the book so far. They are done so in a way that —like you said—isn't stale and isn't a textbook, because you have the characters and you have the story building. However, at the same time you're not forsaking the actual ceremonies and the whole process that goes into it.**

Yeah. That was a real fine tightrope I had to walk there, because I knew I would offend some people which I was okay with, but I didn't want to be offensive.

I wanted to describe the ceremonies in quite a bit of detail, but I also didn't want to give too much detail where there would be certain individuals who might decide to replicate the ceremonies. So I left just enough out so that it would be very difficult for people to pose as an elder or something like that.

That's a major concern we have here too where people watch a few too many spaghetti westerns and declare themselves a medicine man and they could get in a lot of trouble and take advantage of people with this title of medicine man.

So I wanted to do it in such a way that people could see the ceremonies and appreciate it, but it would be more to spark a curiosity for those of our people who were raised outside of the culture and spirituality like myself. I didn't learn about most of this stuff until my adult life, so I wanted to write about it because we've been told for a couple hundred years by churches and governments that all native spirituality is devil worship [laughs].

So I wanted to show them no, no, it's not. It's prayer in its purest form and its equal to and as great and as flawed as all other religions; be it Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, or anything else. It's just people coming

together to give thanks for what we've been blessed with. So I wanted to give respectfully, but also accurately as well.

## **“Education is the new buffalo.”**

**So is this heart you have to portray native spirituality in correct ways—and I guess to portray the whole of native life in a correct way by attacking misconceptions—is this what led you to recently start an Indiegogo campaign to get books into reservations?**

That was a big part of it. The main part, though, was the underfunding of First Nations' schools. So

here in Canada—and I've been told by American Indians that it's a very similar situation there—the federal government funds the schools on reservations and the state or provincial governments fund the public schools off reservations. What we've been consistently seeing, though, is that the federal government spends about 40% less money per student.

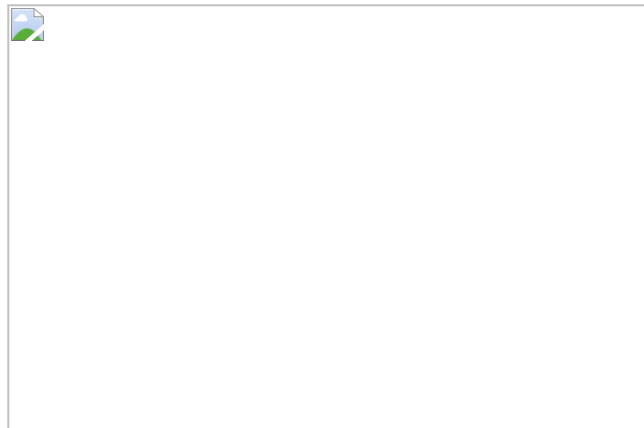


Image from Frank's Indiegogo Campaign

So our children who are going to school on the rez suffer as a result. They can only pay the teachers the minimal amount and they can't buy the latest textbooks or equipment. Instead, they have to get everything second-hand or they use things for years and years. Some of the native teachers I've talked to about donating books said that they haven't had new books in 12 or 14 years. They said their entire annual budget is to just replace the most tattered copies of books they've been teaching from for 20 to 30 years.

I thought that was pretty terrible, so I thought people would want to help out if more people knew about this. So I launched the Indiegogo campaign to

allow people to actually put brand new books into the hands of First Nations learners. I was quite overwhelmed by the response we got. We actually raised enough money to put 500 copies into First Nations schools and we also had another 500 copies donated between my book printer and book publisher as well. So I'm in the process of connecting with native teachers who want to teach *Grey Eyes* in their English courses or Literature courses. Hopefully by the end of it we'll be able to put 25 books into 40 native schools each.

The Indigogo campaign was quite successful and I'm hoping to do it again with other native authors. I've been talking with some of the other native authors out there because I've been told by teachers the maturity level of my book will be for an audience of grade 9+. Ideally, it's a grade level 12 book because there's some advanced concepts in the novel for more mature students. But some of the native authors who have been writing more young adult fiction, they could be writing for the 7th, 8th, and 9th grade range and younger with other children books. So I want to replicate the campaign and hopefully expose some other native authors in the process as well. I'm working with them to get that happening and taking advantage of social media in order to find willing donors to get more of our literature into our classrooms.

### **It's a good goal. How do you see literacy affecting native youth today?**

Well, I forget which elder said it but I have to quote her here, she said, "Education is the new buffalo."

That's pretty interesting, you know, especially in our plains culture. A boy became a man when he went on his first buffalo hunt. So killing your first buffalo, taking responsibility for the hunt, all the preparations, all the prayer, and everything that went into it was part of the process. Learning that process of being able to care for yourself, sustain yourself, and take care of others was the right of passage for a man. Today, I believe you

become a man or woman the day you walk across the stage and pick up a diploma.

So to me literacy is very important now since the buffalo is near extinction. The only way we can really save our culture is for more of our people to get educated and to get into various professions where they start seizing opportunities in the modern world in order to maintain our culture. First Nations or Indian reservations where they have high levels of unemployment and welfare dependency still seem to be the places where culture dies.

However, some of the more successful First Nations have gone into economic development and they're able to make their own money and put it into more cultural programming. You start seeing more of our art reflected in architecture of new buildings that go up in some successful First Nations and they're able to take control of the education system. A native funded education system is able to incorporate the language and culture into the curriculum where as a publicly funded one has to stick to public curriculums which often don't recognize the value of maintaining our traditional languages and culture.

## **Frank's Oral Storytelling Approach to Writing His Debut Novel**

**That's important stuff. For you, what was the process that you went through in writing your first novel *Grey Eyes*? What was your approach to writing?**

Well, I recognize something very fundamental about us as a people. We are oral story tellers. We like to stand in front of other people and talk and tell the story. So I actually ended up writing most of the novel in my car. I have to travel out to reservations and sometimes I'd be on a 6 or 7 hour drive. When you spend a lot of your life on the road you get sick of listening to the radio pretty quickly [laughs]. So what I started doing was bringing along a

voice recorder and I'd actually tell the story to myself in the car as I drove. When I got to where I was going—if I had some time in the hotel or wherever I was staying—I would transcribe the recordings.

There was a bit of an editing process that you had to have there, because you can convey emotions with your voice that you can't convey on paper. It's a very different process but at least I had a rough draft from the verbiage and I was able to go into more detail in places where it didn't come across the same way on paper.

It was funny because one of my editor's first criticisms of my manuscript was that I used exclamation marks all over the place. She said, "You can't do that in writing because people don't know what's being exclaimed until the end of the sentence." You have to use it in the dialogue and in the descriptions to show there's emotions taking place.

"Show don't tell." That's what she kept saying. You have to show what's happening. You can't explain what's happening. So it was quite a revision process I went through. I had to master a new skill. I didn't consider myself a writer by any stretch of the imagination. I had to pick up a couple books on writing style and how to write and things like that just to get the story out. It was strange that an accountant was gifted this story. What an odd person to give a story to.

**So was this the first time that you really attempted writing or had you written when you were younger?**

I hadn't really written much before. I always had the gift of the gab you might say. I've done a bit of public speaking and things like that, but I hadn't really written much other than reports and proposals and things like that.

When I worked with the survivors at the law firm, I had to write out their stories. I talked with them and then had to retell their story on paper in

their own words. So that became my first foray into creative writing and that was a lot of pressure because these people are going into these hearings and these stories were all the information the lawyers had. I had to walk a balance between conveying the feelings and the facts. The survivors wanted people to know how it felt to go to these institutions and suffer what they suffered. The lawyers and adjudicators were only interested in the facts. So I had to blend the facts and the feelings in order to accommodate everybody and I did it for about three years. So that was basically my trial by fire of writing.

Kind of a weird on the job training [laughs].

**Yeah, you just had to do it.**

Yeah.

**So with the rest of the books in the series, are you going to continue the voice recorder approach and edit it later? Has that worked out well for you or are you going to try something else?**

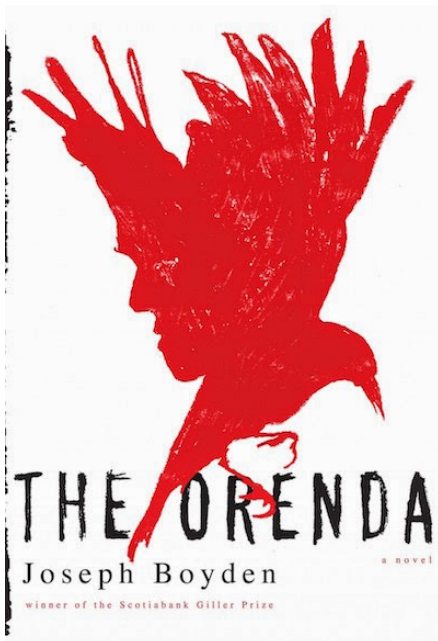
I'm not too sure. It took about a year and a half to edit the book and I learned so much there that I'll probably do a lot more of it as pen to paper or just typing out most of it. For me though, I understand writer's block. I think there's nothing scarier for a writer or any kind of artist than to look at a blank canvas and be like, "Okay, what am I going to do here?" I think it activates a different part of the brain when you have to talk. Things will come out of your mouth that might not come out of your finger tips. Oh, if you could listen to the voice recordings that I had, I mean, I would sometimes turn on the recorder and say, "Okay, so I want to do a chapter before I get where I'm going, uh, this is what happened last time and..." I would just start talking in order to get it out and the story would come naturally. That doesn't work on paper. You just can't start typing, "Okay, what am I going to type here, I don't know, let's see," because you end up using the backspace button a lot. I think it was easier for me to get through

verbally rather than mentally. I will probably do a bit of a blend, but I think it would be a matter of sitting down and doing it bit by bit since I have the story outlined in such detail.

We'll see. I'll definitely keep that there as a trick of the trade I guess and we'll just see how it goes. I think I could sit down and type it all out now, but I'll have to do it that way if I do get caught up a bit [with writer's block] or just depending on where I am traveling.

## Frank's Native Book Recommendation

**One last question before we end the interview: What other native authors are you reading or what native books have you read recently that you think should be widely read.**



Oh, yeah. You know I've been reading almost nothing but native authors for the last two to three years now. Since I've started doing this I've wanted to become very knowledgeable of the genre and I have been reading quite a bit. I think one particular book that every native person should read is *The Orenda* by Joseph Boyden ([Amazon](#), [Bkwrks](#)). [Joseph Boyden](#) is a big hero of mine and he wrote this story that is told from three perspectives: A young mohawk girl who is captured by the Huron people that they were at war with for many years, the Huron warrior who captured her, and a Jesuit priest. The story takes place in the 1700's when Europeans were first coming into Canada and America and Boyden leaves nothing out.

A lot of our native authors will glorify our people and make the Europeans very much the bad guys. Likewise, European authors will villainize the Indians [laughs] and make these heroic Christopher Columbus hero guys.

Joseph Boyden spares no one. He must have the sharpest quill around.

He gives the good and the bad of both sides. He shows the intentions of the Jesuit missionaries who honestly believed that the Indians needed the missionaries to spare them from going to hell. If you honestly really believed that was the case, then you would be doing a good thing right?

Unfortunately, they were mistaken and misguided in their thinking that all Indians are going to hell. But when you see it from the perspective of the person—walking a mile in their moccasins—you understand why they are doing the things they are doing.

You wish you could get in there and say, “Hey, you’re wrong. Stop it. Do some better stuff.” Then on the native side there’s the fact that we were still conflicting with each other when the Europeans got here and we saw the Europeans as a tool to defeat our age old adversaries and there’s times you want to jump into the page there and say, “Don’t you know how many more of them are coming? You guys need to work together [laughs].”

I wish I could have done that. Especially between the Iroquois and the Hurons who basically end up destroying one another and making it that much easier for Europeans to usurp the land. So *The Orenda* is a very good read that way. It’s a little traumatic.

There’s a bit in there about torture because the Hurons and Mohawks used to torture each other when they captured each other. It was just kind of this weird cultural thing that happened when the enemies were torturing you that you would act as if it didn’t hurt you at all. That’s an idea that permeated Indian culture; this idea of pretending that something doesn’t hurt. What it was meant to do was put fear into your enemies’ hearts. You knew that you were captured and doomed. You knew you were going to die. What you wanted to do was protect your family back home. So acting as though you couldn’t be harmed would give the enemy second thoughts about invading your village. “Man, these guys are really tough. We’ve been

burning him and stabbing him and he's happy and thanking me for it."

"With his novel *Grey Eyes*, Frank Busch taps into the traditional in a way I've not seen before. At once historical and fantastical, *Grey Eyes* reclaims some of our most powerful stories with authenticity and with heart and with that bit of magic that brings all of it to such beautiful life. Busch is amongst the new generation of voices so vital to our country." — Joseph Boyden, author of *The Orenda*, Winner of CBC Canada Reads 2014

It's a part of the native culture that I think doesn't fit with mainstream Canadian or American culture. One of the native advocates here in Canada made the statement that "reconciliation between natives and non-natives isn't a new opportunity for assimilation." If they're going to recognize and appreciate native culture, they have to appreciate all of native culture and not just the ones that look a little bit like something similar to what you do.

You have to have an appreciation or at least acceptance of what's foreign to you, because having to adapt to very foreign things was something that our ancestors had to suffer. I know there were stages in the colonization process where native people were being punished for bathing regularly. Back in Europe it was considered bad to bathe. You were washing your soul away. Whereas Indians used to bathe daily in the river. There's actually journal entries from some of the missionaries that complain that the Indians have the disgusting habit of bathing daily [laughs].

I'm glad that's something they adopted from us. The shower; we should be credited with inventing the shower.

Stuff like that. We should appreciate others and know that nobody's right and nobody's wrong. We just have to appreciate that people who live in a given area over generations have adapted and evolved to the point where

they know the best ways to survive. If I was suddenly transplanted down in the desert there in New Mexico, I wouldn't say, "Okay this is how we do things back in the frozen tundra of northern Canada and this is how I'm going to survive." I'm not going to find any seals or walrus around, right? I would say, "Okay any of you local Indians want to help me out. How do you eat a cactus? I have no clue." [laughs]

I'd be wanting to learn from the locals how to survive there. I'd be asking, "How do you find water? How do you stay out of the heat? What do you do?" It's that "When in Rome" thing, right? The people who are there know best and you learn from them.

## **Indigenous Canadian Authors Want to Give Back**

**Is there anything else you wanted talk about or mention that we haven't touched on yet?**

No, not really. I definitely want to thank you for taking the time and for doing you blog. The promoting of Native literature out there as a genre is something very near and dear to my heart. Native authors here in Canada are pretty anxious to get their work introduced to the American market. There a lot more American Indians than there are Canadian Indians, so the market here is very limited for people who are reading or interested in our work. We would like to be able to expose our writings to America. We've been reading [American Indian literature by Sherman Alexie](#) and others for many, many years now and we love it, but we'd kind of like to give back and share as well.

**Frank, thank you so much for taking the time—for taking your lunch break—to talk with me.**

Thank you, Steve.

*Be sure to buy a copy of Frank's debut novel Grey Eyes from any of these*

sellers: [Frank's site](#), [Amazon.com](#), [Bkwrks.com](#), [Fernwood Publishing](#).  
Also, keep up with the discussion on his book [here on the blog](#) or on [Facebook](#).

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### **About the Author**



*Hi, my name is Steve Dragswolf. I am Hidatsa born in North Dakota and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico. My heart is for the indigenous of the Americas. I am passionate about literacy and native culture. Connect [@dragswolf](#).*

