



The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America

By Thomas King

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In *The Inconvenient Indian*, Thomas King offers a deeply knowing, darkly funny, unabashedly opinionated, and utterly unconventional account of Indian–White relations in North America since initial contact. Ranging freely across the centuries and the Canada–U.S. border, King debunks fabricated stories of Indian savagery and White heroism, takes an oblique look at Indians (and cowboys) in film and popular culture, wrestles with the history of Native American resistance and his own experiences as a Native rights activist, and articulates a profound, revolutionary understanding of the cumulative effects of ever-shifting laws and treaties on Native peoples and lands.

Suffused with wit, anger, perception, and wisdom, *The Inconvenient Indian* is at once an engaging chronicle and a devastating subversion of history, insightfully distilling what it means to be “Indian” in North America. It is a critical and personal meditation that sees Native American history not as a straight line but rather as a circle in which the same absurd, tragic dynamics are played out over and over again. At the heart of the dysfunctional relationship between Indians and Whites, King writes, is land: “The issue has always been land.” With that insight, the history inflicted on the indigenous peoples of North America—broken treaties, forced removals, genocidal violence, and racist stereotypes—sharpens into focus. Both timeless and timely, *The Inconvenient Indian* ultimately rejects the pessimism and cynicism with which Natives and Whites regard one another to chart a new and just way forward for Indians and non-Indians alike.

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The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America By Thomas King **Bibliography**

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Editorial Review

Review

No writer is better positioned than Thomas King to tell a richly Native history that reveals the common threads weaving North American patterns across the boundary line between Canada and the United States. *The Inconvenient Indian* sweeps up popular culture, law and policy, and the complexities of resistance and reinvention, framing all the tough issues through King's powerful storytelling and penetrating eye.

—Philip J. Deloria, University of Michigan

"*The Inconvenient Indian* may well be unsettling for many non-natives in this country to read. This is exactly why we all should read it. Especially now." —*Vancouver Sun*

"King uses stories to turn history upside down. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that he presents history with a candour and honesty rarely found in usual accounts of the interaction of aboriginals and non-aboriginals." —*Winnipeg Free Press*

"*The Inconvenient Indian* is couched in a plainspoken forthrightness that shocks as often as it demystifies. It is essential reading for everyone who cares about Canada and who seeks to understand native people, their issues and their dreams. Thomas King is beyond being a great writer and storyteller, a lauded academic and educator. He is a towering intellectual. For native people in Canada, he is our Twain; wise, hilarious, incorrigible, with a keen eye for the inconsistencies that make us and our society flawed, enigmatic, but ultimately powerful symbols of freedom. *The Inconvenient Indian* is less an indictment than a reassurance that we can create equality and harmony. A powerful, important book." —*Globe and Mail*

"The author's wit and storytelling talent make the book easy to read; more importantly, his humor may keep readers from wanting to scream at the injustices. " —*Kirkus Reviews*

"King delivers an intelligent and eye-opening overview of Native peoples in post-Columbus North America in this new volume, a book that has been a work-in-progress for most of the author's adult life. The effort shows." —*Publishers Weekly*

"Dr. King's book should be required reading for anyone seeking insider insight into how Indians have been treated in Canada versus the United States." —*New York Journal of Books*

"From the first page to the last, *The Inconvenient Indian* shoulders the American Indian burden of helping the White Man understand what it means to be a natural person, a human being. It is a powerful reminder of the big picture and a close look at the details - of Indian history and of contemporary Indian life." —*Indian Country Today*

About the Author

Thomas King is an award-winning novelist, short story writer, scriptwriter, and photographer. His many books include the novels *Medicine River*; *Green Grass, Running Water*; *Truth and Bright Water*; two short story collections, *One Good Story, That One* (Minnesota, 2013) and *A Short History of Indians in Canada* (Minnesota, 2013); nonfiction, *The Truth About Stories* (Minnesota, 2005); and the children's books *A Coyote Columbus Story*, *Coyote Sings to the Moon*, *Coyote's New Suit*, and *A Coyote Solstice Tale*. King edited the literary anthology *All My Relations* and wrote and starred in the popular CBC radio series, *The Dead Dog Café*. He is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Western American Literary Association (2004) and an Aboriginal Achievement Award (2003), and was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2004. He has taught Native literature and history and creative writing at the University of Lethbridge, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Guelph and is now retired and lives in Guelph, Ontario.

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About fifteen years back, a bunch of us got together to form a drum group. John Samosi, one of our lead singers, suggested we call ourselves "The Pesky Redskins." Since we couldn't sing all that well, John argued, we needed a name that would make people smile and encourage them to overlook our musical deficiencies.

We eventually settled on the Waa-Chi-Waasa Singers, which was a more stately name. Sandy Benson came up with it, and as I remember, waa-chi-waasa is Ojibway for "far away." Appropriate enough, since most of the boys who sit around the drum here in Guelph, Ontario, come from somewhere other than here. John's from Saskatoon. Sandy calls Rama home. Harold Rice was raised on the coast of British Columbia. Mike Duke's home community is near London, Ontario. James Gordon is originally from Toronto. I hail from California's central valley, while my son Benjamin was born in Lethbridge, Alberta, and was dragged around North America with his older brother and younger sister. I don't know where he considers home to be.

Anishinaabe, Métis, Coastal Salish, Cree, Cherokee. We have nothing much in common. We're all Aboriginal and we have the drum. That's about it.

I had forgotten about "Pesky Redskins" but it must have been kicking around in my brain because, when I went looking for a title for this book, something with a bit of irony to it, there it was.

Pesky Redskins: A Curious History of Indians in North America.

Problem was, no one else liked the title. Several people I trust told me that Pesky Redskins sounded too flip and, in the end, I had to agree. Native people haven't been so much pesky as we've been . . . inconvenient.

So I changed the title to *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious History of Native People in North America*, at which point my partner, Helen Hoy, who teaches English at the University of Guelph, weighed in, cautioning that "history" might be too grand a word for what I was attempting. Benjamin, who is finishing a Ph.D. in History at Stanford, agreed with his mother and pointed out that if I was going to call the book a history, I would be obliged to pay attention to the demands of scholarship and work within an organized and clearly delineated chronology.

Now, it's not that I think such things as chronologies are a bad idea, but I'm somewhat attached to the Ezra Pound School of History. While not subscribing to his political beliefs, I do agree with Pound that "We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence. It may be convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table

with dates pasted on here and there, but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time.”

There’s nothing like a good quotation to help a body escape an onerous task. So I tweaked the title one more time, swapped the word “history” for “account,” and settled on *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Mind you, there

is a great deal in *The Inconvenient Indian* that *is* history. I’m just not the historian you had in mind. While it might not show immediately, I have a great deal of respect for the discipline of history. I studied history as part of my doctoral work in English and American Studies at the University of Utah. I even worked at the American West Center on that campus when Floyd O’Neil and S. Lyman Tyler ran the show, and, over the years, I’ve met and talked with other historians such as Brian Dippie, Richard White, Patricia Limerick, Jean O’Brien, Vine Deloria, Jr., Francis Paul Prucha, David Edmunds, Olive Dickason, Jace Weaver, Donald Smith, Alvin Josephy, Ken Coates, and Arrel Morgan Gibson, and we’ve had some very stimulating conversations about . . . history. And in consideration of those conversations and the respect that I have for history, I’ve salted my narrative with those things we call facts, even though we should know by now that facts will not save us.

Truth be known, I prefer fiction. I dislike the way facts try to thrust themselves upon me. I’d rather make up my own world. Fictions are less unruly than histories. The beginnings are more engaging, the characters more co-operative, the endings more in line with expectations of morality and justice. This is not to imply that fiction is exciting and that history is boring. Historical narratives can be as enchanting as a Stephen Leacock satire or as terrifying as a Stephen King thriller.

Still, for me at least, writing a novel is buttering warm toast, while writing a history is herding porcupines with your elbows.

As a result, although *The Inconvenient Indian* is fraught with history, the underlying narrative is a series of conversations and arguments that I’ve been having with myself and others for most of my adult life, and if there is any methodology in my approach to the subject, it draws more on storytelling techniques than historiography. A good historian would have tried to keep biases under control. A good historian would have tried to keep personal anecdotes in check. A good historian would have provided footnotes.

I have not.

And, while I’m making excuses, I suppose I should also apologize if my views cause anyone undue distress. But I hope we can agree that any discussion of Indians in North America is likely to conjure up a certain amount of rage. And sorrow. Along with moments of irony and humour.

When I was a kid, Indians were Indians. Sometimes Indians were Mohawks or Cherokees or Crees or Blackfoot or Tlingits or Seminoles. But mostly they were Indians. Columbus gets blamed for the term, but he wasn’t being malicious. He was looking for India and thought he had found it. He was mistaken, of course, and as time went on, various folks and institutions tried to make the matter right. Indians became Amerindians and Aborigines and Indigenous People and American Indians. Lately, Indians have become First Nations in Canada and Native Americans in the United States, but the fact of the matter is that there has never been a good collective noun because there never was a collective to begin with.

I'm not going to try to argue for a single word. I don't see that one term is much better or worse than another. "First Nations" is the current term of choice in Canada, while "Native Americans" is the fashionable preference in the United States. I'm fond of both of these terms, but, for all its faults and problems—especially in Canada—"Indian," as a general designation, remains for me, at least, the North American default.

Since I'm on the subject of terminology and names, I should mention the Métis. The Métis are one of Canada's three official Aboriginal groups, Indians (First Nations) and the Inuit being the other two. The Métis are mixed-bloods, Indian and English, Indian and French, for the most part. They don't have Status under the Indian Act, but they do have designated settlements and homelands in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Many of these communities maintain a separate culture from their White and First Nations neighbours, as well as a separate language—Michif—which features components of French and Aboriginal languages.

Terminology is always a rascal. I've tried to use "reservations" for Native communities in the United States and "reserves" for Native communities in Canada, and "tribes" for Native groups in the United States and "bands" for Native groups in Canada. But in a number of instances, when I'm talking about both sides of the border, I might use "reservation" or "reserve" and "band" or "tribe" or "Nation," depending on rhythm and syntax. I actually prefer "Nation" or a specific band or tribal name, and I try to use this whenever possible.

And Whites. Well, I struggled with this one. A Japanese friend of mine likes to call Anglos "crazy Caucasoids," while another friend told me that if I was going to use the term "Indians" I should call everyone else "cowboys." Both of these possibilities are fun, but there are limits to satire. Besides, "Whites" is a perfectly serviceable term. Native people have been using it for years, sometimes as a description and sometimes as something else. Let's agree that within the confines of this book the term is neutral and refers to a general group of people as diverse and indefinable as "Indians."

There is an error in the text of the book that I have not corrected. "The Bureau of Indian Affairs" is the correct designation for the U.S. agency that is charged with looking after matters pertaining to Indians in that country, but for Canada, I have continued to use the "Department of Indian Affairs" even though the ministry is now called "Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada." I simply like the older name and find it less disingenuous.

In the end, I'm not so much concerned with designing a strict vocabulary as I am with crafting a coherent and readable narrative.

One of the difficulties with trying to contain any account of Indians in North America in a volume as modest as this is that it can't be done. Perhaps I should have called the book *The Inconvenient Indian: An Incomplete Account of Indians in North America*. For whatever I've included in this book, I've left a great deal more out. I don't talk about European explorers and their early relationships with Native people. I haven't written much about the Métis in Canada and, with the exception of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, I don't deal with the Inuit at all. I touch on early settlement and conflicts, but only in passing. I spend a great deal of time on Native people and film, because film, in all its forms, has been the only place where most North Americans have seen Indians. I talk about some of the resistance organizations and the moments that marked them, but I don't spend any time on Anna Mae Aquash's murder or on the travesty of Leonard Peltier's trial and imprisonment.

Nor do I talk about Native women such as Brenda Wolfe, Georgina Papin, and Mona Wilson, women whom

Robert “Willie” Pickton murdered at his pig farm in British Columbia, or the Native women who have gone missing in Vancouver and along the highway between Prince Rupert and Prince George. Nor do I bring up the murder of Ditidaht First Nation carver

John T. Williams, who, in 2010, was gunned down in Seattle by a trigger-happy cop.

While I spend time in the distant and the immediate past, I’ve also pushed the narrative into the present in order to consider contemporary people and events. This probably isn’t the best idea. The present tends to be too fresh and fluid to hold with any surety. Still, as I argue in the book, when we look at Native–non-Native relations, there is no great difference between the past and the present. While we have dispensed with guns and bugles, and while North America’s sense of its own superiority is better hidden, its disdain muted, twenty-first-century attitudes towards Native people are remarkably similar to those of the previous centuries. Finally, no doubt, someone will wonder why I decided to take on both Canada and the United States at the same time, when choosing one or the other would have made for a less involved and more focused conversation. The answer to this is somewhat complicated by perspective. While the line that divides the two countries is a political reality, and while the border affects bands and tribes in a variety of ways, I would have found it impossible to talk about the one without talking about the other.

For most Aboriginal people, that line doesn’t exist. It’s a figment of someone else’s imagination. Historical figures such as Chief Joseph and Sitting Bull and Louis Riel moved back and forth between the two countries, and while they understood the importance of that border to Whites, there is nothing to indicate that they believed in its legitimacy.

I get stopped every time I try to cross that border, but stories go wherever they please.

Users Review

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