

## *Charlie Muskrat*, Harold Johnson

### Winnipeg Free Press

#### Amusing, moving look at life as an aboriginal

Saskatchewan lawyer and writer Harold Johnson's new novel is an appetizing and humorous read, coupled with a profoundly reflective and moving commentary on the duality of indigenous experience in Canada.

Indeed, Johnson reflects on both the traditional and contemporary narratives and the sometimes contradictory space indigenous people occupy.

Johnson's hero, Charlie Muskrat, begins a labyrinthine journey east from Montreal Lake, Sask., to Toronto in his modern-day horse — his truck named Thunder.

Along the road, he finds himself coming across, and picking up, people and spirits who are, many times, one and the same.

Throughout his journey, Charlie reflects on poignant moments in his life, and on his relationship with his wife, Mary (amusingly, the reader learns her name only toward the end, because he can't remember it throughout). His are memories lost, but later regained.

Concurrently, the Cree trickster named Wesakicak — a mythological ancestor who gives teachings — begins his own tangled journey towards understanding just who Charlie Muskrat is. Johnson himself is a Harvard-educated lawyer, based in Lacombe, Sask., who has written three previous books, including two novels. His 2007 non-fiction effort, *Two Families: Treaties and Government*, won a Saskatchewan Book Award for First Peoples publishing.

In *Charlie Muskrat*, Wesakicak seeks to understand where Charlie will go after death, having been born to both the white and indigenous worlds. Wesakicak begins his quest by visiting a somewhat out-of-shape Adonis, who Charlie — through his own lens — believes is Chinese. Wesakicak goes on to meet Socrates and Plato, along with some Muses.

The conversation that takes place between them is comical and is a microcosm of both the indigenous and white cultures' worldviews and the lack of understanding, communication and respect between the two.

Johnson's novel beautifully presents an intimate picture of aboriginal culture, politics, social context, thought and love.

At one point Charlie finds himself thrown in the back of a Saskatoon police car and dropped off near the power plant. One imagines the same power plant where Neil Stonechild was dropped off and left for dead by two Saskatoon police officers in November 1990.

Charlie's sister, Paulette, visits him in spirit and sorrowfully describes how one day she just disappeared; she doesn't remember how but she knows that "there's lots and lots of us... all over the place."

This is clearly a reference to the more than 500 aboriginal women in Canada who've gone missing and/or been murdered, with many of the cases unsolved.

When Charlie is given money because he looks Indian and attempts to buy food, he finds himself approached by Ron Smith from the Department of Indian Affairs.

Smith notes that Charlie is "required by section twelve thousand nine hundred and eighty-four, subsection eighteen 'G' of the regulations pursuant to that Act to fill out forms 'K', 'P' and 'V'."

This is only a slight comic exaggeration of a reality most aboriginal leaders know all too well.

Johnson offers the reader an amusing and genuine glimpse into aboriginal culture, traditions, socio-economic and political context in Canada and the struggle to find balance and recognition between the modern and traditional. — Nahanni Fontaine

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### Saskatoon StarPhoenix

#### **Moose hunting, diamond selling: the new North**

La Ronge writer Harold Johnson is back with his third novel, *Charlie Muskrat* in which we meet the title character traveling down the road east of Montreal Lake looking to shoot a moose and bring home the meat.

Poor Charlie's head is in a bit of a whirl. His wife's sister, Thelma, is here for a visit and she "scares the sh--" out of Charlie. On top of that, we notice that he calls his wife Lois, then Lori then Lilla and Lisa. Charlie, it's obvious, is having some problems with his memory and his wife teases him about it. She asks him about the first time they met, the first time they kissed, and he has to fudge the answers.

But his truck, Thunder, is running fine, he has half a tank of gas, a thermos of coffee, and a bag of Cheezies. Life looks good. He stops for a hitchhiker who takes a minute to think about his name, as well: "My name is, uh, Wesley, yeah. Wesley Jack. Wesley Jack that's my name."

Charlie's not fooled for a minute: "Wesley Jack. Are you related to Whiskey Jack, Black Jack or Wesakicak?" Readers of First Nations stories will recognize these names as belonging to one version of the Trickster figure, the sly, shape-shifting fellow who's there to have all sorts of adventures and teach the people about the nature of life. He puzzles Charlie by getting off in what looks like the middle of nowhere. But we'll see him again.

Charlie, though out for moose, finds himself all the way south in Prince Albert, and after that Saskatoon. On the advice of a friend he parks at the Queen Elizabeth power station and, much to his surprise, gets a ride back there from the police later in the evening.

Charlie works his way to Toronto via Winnipeg, a trip to the U.S. border, the Collins Bay Penitentiary, and Trenton, Ont. All the while he struggles with remembering his wife's name — occasionally he hits it — Mary — and tries to hold on to it — and wonders why, exactly, he's wound up all the way down east.

He runs into a friendly man in a cafe named Bert Russel, sells diamonds — which he thought were just good luck stones — to a fellow named Herman Hesse, has bizarre dealings with a number of Indian Affairs functionaries, and eventually finds that the only time he really feels good down there in Toronto is when he gives his money away to street people.

Meanwhile, Wesakicak the Trickster goes up Mount Olympus and visits various Greek gods, has a chat with Socrates and Plato on the way back down, cuts across a golf course and ends up

in one heaven where he meets Jesus, then winds up in a form of Cree heaven where he meets Charlie's grandparents.

Clearly Johnson has packed his slender novel full of literary, philosophical, and mythological figures, various kinds of reality, some literary tropes, a few jokes, some satire, a few political barbs, a couple of history lessons, and even a bit of post-modernism, which we hadn't seen since the '80s. Harold Johnson, author of the novel, turns up as a character in the book and, indeed, Charlie goes and gets a copy of the novel to find out how it ends.

Johnson, a practicing lawyer and a trapper, in a hunting story that owes something to Don Quixote and Jack Kerouac, takes a look at both white and First Nations ways of knowing. Through his characters' antics he inquires as to what gets privileged as Myth and what is relegated to folk tale, what is the nature of history and who writes it, and, ultimately, what is memory for and whose is right, or better.

A lot of people are going to a lot of work right now to look for "good luck stones" in Northern Saskatchewan, but Charlie gladly trades his away to be able to remember his own life. Without some idea of who he is and where he came from, he could end up anywhere, being talked into, or out of anything.

Johnson's *Charlie Muskrat* is clever, literate, and packed with allusion. Open it anywhere and you'll catch a funny sparkle among the stones. — Bill Robertson