

Taylor Reads challenges students to explore Indigenous authors



By Bill Kilpatrick

Taylor Reads, a contest that closely mimics the CBC reading contest called Canada Reads, is an Indigenous novel contest that was the brain child of North Hastings High School educator Heather Taylor, and is designed, says Taylor, to assist in the Truth and Reconciliation process by providing reconciliation through education. Taylor Reads challenges students to read a fictional novel by an Indigenous author in two weeks, and then present their novel to a panel of judges in an attempt to convince them that their novel should be chosen as the best for 2023. According to the information package provided by Taylor, the contest provides students with the opportunity to interact with "an extraordinary number of diverse stories from all across Turtle Island," but it also challenges students to confront many of the issues surrounding truth and reconciliation and Canada's dark colonial history which has given rise to the many current issues facing Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples such as addiction, suicide, land treaties, residential schools, cultural appropriation, sexual and physical abuse, clean water, and Indigenous rights regarding land, artifacts, and even their ancestor's remains. The contest not only tasked students to navigate some difficult topics, but it challenged students in other ways as well. For example, students were required to complete a poster, work in partnerships, groups, or individually, and this, according to Taylor, builds their resilience as they learn to collaborate and problem solve, work together, and overcome obstacles such as snow days, illnesses, absences, different learning styles, all while grappling with some complicated material. On top of this, students had to then work together to present that material in a public forum in front of a panel of judges, their peers, the press, and parents as well, and Taylor sees this not as obstacle, but as an opportunity for students to "work through their anxiety" that public speaking inevitably brings. One thing that Taylor has found that helps with the anxiety is prizes. Each student competes for a first, second, and third prize and each consists of a trophy or medals along with gift certificates. Prizes are also handed out for best overall

performance and to students who best exemplify the seven grandfather teachings of honesty, humility, respect, courage, wisdom, love, and truth. This semester's contest was called the 'ultimate book battle' because it involved two classes consisting of 17 groups and a total of 42 students. The competition was fierce and nerves were strained as the students worked to convince the judges that their book was the best. Each group had a mere six minutes to outline the plot of their book including the main characters along with demonstrating numerous curriculum expectations which, according to the information package, included tasks such as identifying themes of 'identity, relationship, self-determination, sovereignty, or self-governance,' along with deconstructing and then reconstructing the different text forms by analyzing historical context, cultural and social conditions, including gender and the role of women. The students were expected to show an understanding of how representations of Indigenous people were impacted by the aforementioned themes and the changing perspectives that were influenced by social, cultural and historical contexts, and furthermore, understand how those text forms have impacted Canadian Society as colonial structures are being challenged along with inaccurate and incomplete representations of Indigenous people. The students worked diligently to argue for their book and in the end there was a mere 0.5 points difference between first and second place, but ultimately the judges felt that Ethan Sellers' passionate and convincing argument for the book *Warrior Girl Unearthed* (2023) by Angeline Boulley was the must-read book of 2023. Ethan's book discussed many of the aforementioned themes and his presentation articulated those themes in a way that put the audience into the place of the main characters without spoiling the book. Ethan began his presentation by having those present engage in a thought experiment meant to, not only, put them in the place of the characters in his book, but the place of millions of Indigenous people throughout the world, stating, 'Imagine, that you're living your life one day, a totally normal day and then you get a call, your grand parents have passed away. You go through the necessary funeral preparations and get ready to bury them. You go to the funeral, you do [bury them] and next week you return to lay flowers upon their grave and they're gone. The grave is dug up, the casket is ripped open. They were buried wearing their wedding clothes, but those are gone too, their wedding rings gone, the earrings passed through your mother's family gone. It's all gone. How would that make you feel finding your ancestors, your family ripped away from you [and] disappeared without a trace, nothing left but disturbed ground and a casket ripped to shreds? Then years later you're going through a town and you stop at a store and you see wedding rings [for sale] you look on the inside and there's an inscription. You look at the inscription and it's your grandparent's names and the year that they were married. You keep looking around and you see your grandmother's earrings, and the suit and dress that your grandparents were wearing when they were put in the ground and it's depicting an outdated stereotype of your people. You demand to see the owner, because you have found your dead grandparent's stuff and they tell you that you can't prove it, you can't do anything. You go to the police and they tell you that they can't do anything. Because it is a 'private collection' they cannot do anything unless the owner has a change of heart; unless the owner changes his mind from grave robbing to charity you cannot do anything to get your grandparents [and their belongings] back. That is the messed up reality that many Indigenous people today have to go through because of the [so-called] 'research' done over the years and that is exactly what happens in Canada and the United States and that is exactly what this book is about.' After the presentation Ethan explained that current legislation in the United States around the return of Indigenous people's and their artifacts called, The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, provides for the return of Indigenous people's artifacts back to their rightful owners, but that the legislation only covers museums and not private collections. No such legislation currently exists in Canada. Ethan went on to explain how Indigenous belongings such as ceremonial pipes, weapons, clothing and other belongings were taken by scientists and agents of the Canadian and U.S. governments to be studied at official institutions and/or placed into museums, along with Indigenous skeletons too. Many Indigenous people want their ancestors and their belongings returned to them, but as Ethan pointed out, 'Official institutes such as museums and colleges have five years to catalogue and return those items. They can request an extension if they can show that they have been working towards that [returning them] but there are many loopholes that they use to get around that and it's a very messed up situation. It's even worse when comes to private collectors because if they owned it prior to the legislation coming into effect then they have total immunity [and do not have to return anything].' For Ethan it is the out right theft of Indigenous artifacts and people along with their protection by the law that bothered him to his core, 'It's something that everyone can relate to, having something stolen from you,' said Ethan, and the thought of having not only belongings, but people taken, disturbed him greatly. The second-place prize went to Keiraly, Mikayla, and Jocelen who argued for the Giller Prize winning book *Five Little Indians* (2022) by Michelle Good. The third-place prize went to Bella and Lakota who tried to persuade the judges that their book, the first part to *Warrior Girl Unearthed*, called *Fire Keeper's Daughter* (2021) by Angeline Boulley, was the best. The special prizes for those students who best exemplified the seven grandfather teachings were Trista and Dawson and the person with the best overall presentation went to Keiraly. Taylor thanked all the participants for doing their presentations and for bravely overcoming their fears and anxiety, 'It's pretty awesome,' said Taylor, 'for me and our guests to sit there and watch you guys present your learning and understanding. When somebody says, 'This book

changed my life,' my English teacher heart just goes everywhere. I'm super proud of you all.?