

A love of stories: Solomon Ratt passing on traditional Cree tales to new learners

Having learned the stories stolen from him as a child, Solomon Ratt now passes them on to his students.

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Solomon Ratt, associate professor of Indigenous languages at FNUiv, looks on his computer screen on Thursday, September 16, 2021 in Regina. PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE /Regina Leader-Post

Flipping through a book filled with beautiful illustrations and Cree stories, Solomon Ratt's eyes light up and he laughs as he spots a story that sparks a memory.

It is the story of buffalo wings.

Buffalo once had wings, Ratt says as he tells the story. Skilled Indigenous hunters would knock off just the tasty wings, leaving the buffalo alive. Eventually buffalo evolved to no longer have wings, but when people arrived from across the ocean and heard the stories, they invented their own version of buffalo wings — the kind that can now be ordered off a menu.

Ratt, an associate professor of Cree language studies at the First Nations University of Canada, told that story to one of his classes before it was ever published in a book.

“One of my students says, ‘Is that true?’ The other student says, ‘That’s Solomon telling a story, of course it’s not true,’” Ratt recalls with a laugh.

Now the story lives in a book he wrote called *nīhithaw ācimowina / Woods Cree Stories*, which features nine traditional stories written in English and Cree.

They are just some of the stories stolen from Ratt’s childhood.

Born in 1953 near Stanley Mission, about 320 kilometres north of Prince Albert, Ratt grew up along the shores of the Churchill River, speaking only Cree with his family and hearing the traditional sacred stories every winter.

At the age of six, Ratt was taken to the Prince Albert Indian Residential School and, for the next decade, he spent 10 months of every year at the school.

By speaking Cree with family members and other students, away from the watchful eyes of teachers, Ratt kept his language alive. But residential schools tore from him the opportunity to grow up surrounded by his family and the stories of his people.

“The worst thing that ever happened to me is not hearing the sacred stories in the winter time. Winter time was a time of sacred stories,” says Ratt.

A main character in the stories was *Wīshkêcâhk*, a trickster who served as an example of how not to behave.

“These are the stories we used to educate people,” continues Ratt. “These were our classrooms on how to live in this world that is forever changing, and these are our stories where we also learn how to raise our families, how to get along with everybody around us.

“Those are the lessons that we missed out on when we were at residential schools.”

Now 67, Ratt sits in his home and pages through a book he wrote featuring many of those stories, which have been taught to hundreds of students outside of residential schools over the years.

His black T-shirt features a white Sasquatch and the words “#1 Papa Squatch” — a gift from his daughter. Beside him sits a travel mug that also features a Sasquatch. His

obsession with the mythical creature has brought about the nickname Solsquatch and caused others to joke that his love for hiking in the mountains is also motivated by the beast.

“People in my Facebook page think I go out to the mountains looking for Sasquatch,” Ratt says with a laugh. “I’m just there because I love it.”

While his love for the natural world has been ever-present, it took Ratt time to rediscover his passion for stories.

After graduating from high school, Ratt came to the University of Regina in 1973 for the bachelor of social work program. He knew almost no one in the city and struggled to transition into a world so far from home without the traditional teachings of his people. He quit university and took a job with the provincial government as an information officer.

“This is where I returned to the love of stories,” Ratt says.

A large part of his job was to travel throughout northern Saskatchewan, interviewing elders for a radio broadcast. He would often ask them to share their experiences growing up and to tell him the sacred stories.

That renewed passion for storytelling drove him back to the U of R, where he began taking pre-journalism classes. But in 1984, before he could finish his degree, he was approached by a professor from what was then known as the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College (now the First Nations University of Canada). A Cree instructor was sick and needed someone to teach her class.

Could he do it?

He said yes and, two years later, became a full-time Cree instructor.

“So I ended up teaching classes before I actually had a degree and I’ve been teaching ever since,” Ratt says.

In the 1980s, written materials or teaching resources in Cree were almost non-existent. A decade earlier, Cree had been written in Standard Roman Orthography (SRO), which uses the English alphabet to represent Cree language sounds.

Always up for a challenge, Ratt began developing his own written course materials. Those resources culminated in the publishing of two books — *nīhithaw ācimowina* and *māci-nēhiyawêwin / Beginning Cree* — which are now being used by Cree teachers across Western Canada. A third book, *âhkami-nēhiyawêtân / Keep Speaking Cree*, is coming out in spring 2022.

“It’s handy,” Ratt says of having his own books. “Do I use it? No. I create new files.”

In those early years, Ratt says Indigenous language instructors faced a lot of pressures. Many were furthering their own education as they taught classes and developed resources for those classes while also raising a family.

Ratt had a similar experience, obtaining a bachelor and master's degree while teaching Cree, creating Cree materials and raising his two children.

The hard work and sleepless nights have all been worth it for Ratt, especially as he watches more and more people become interested in Cree and create their own resources in the language.

That growing interest is reflected in his class numbers. Years ago, most students stopped at introductory level classes. Now his intermediate level classes have grown from only four or five students to more than 20.

“Interest is really picking up in the language,” he says. “One of the reasons is because there's more materials available. Part of the reason is because of the renewed interest in the languages due to the publicity of the residential school experience. People have said, ‘I want to learn more about this. I want to learn the language that we lost.’”

It gives Ratt a deep sense of satisfaction to see his books used to teach his mother tongue and to pass along the stories that were taken away as a child.

It also encourages him to continue on.

“I am honoured when people start using my stuff,” he says. “It's an honour I never did expect.”

But after 37 years of teaching, Ratt is looking to retire.

“I'm hoping this is my last year,” he explains. “I've been trying to retire the past five years. I'm still here because my students say, ‘Please, no, I want to finish classes for my degree before you go.’”

Two other instructors — Darian Agecutay and Andrea Custer — are being mentored to take over his Cree classes. Ratt is confident the students will remain in good hands and the stories he holds so dear will continue being passed on to the next generation of Cree learners.

“They did very well in my classes, so they ought to be able to do the stuff I'm doing,” Ratt says of Agecutay and Custer. “... they have a lot of years of service and I feel confident that they'll do a good job.”