

# Native writer's dreams a reality

by Portia Priegert

On a typical day Maria Campbell, this year's writer-in-residence at the U of A, can be found in her office reading and discussing manuscripts of aspiring writers.

Today she has been encouraging a woman who hopes to publish a children's book.

As the woman picks up the animal illustrations she has brought along, Campbell pauses before relating a story.

"Children have such an imagination," Campbell says.

"My five-year old grandson told me about a dream he had. He said he climbed a mountain and found an old man sitting on a log with his eyes set out beside him . . . he ran up and grabbed the old man's eyes and popped them in his head . . . then he described what he saw with those eyes."

"I wrote a story using his dream."

"He's in kindergarten now," she sighs, "I can already see the change in him. They don't encourage him to think that way, to fantasize there," she says.

Maria Campbell, author of the autobiographical novel *Halfbreed*, brings the old and new together in a seemingly effortless fashion.

Nearly 40, she is a startlingly attractive woman, her appearance denying her years of hard living.

Motherless from an early age and responsible for bringing up seven siblings, she lived in poverty in a Metis community in northern Saskatchewan.

She married at age 15, had her first of four children and was deserted by her husband. After moving in and out of a number of menial jobs, she became a prostitute and a heroin addict twice before she managed to break the circle of despair that traps so many of her people.

"I began to write in 1969," she says, "because I was really angry with what I had been through and what was happening to me."

"I never thought of publishing, I just wrote down what I thought. Somehow writing it all down made me feel better." Campbell eventually ended up with a 400-page life story which was brought to a publisher's attention by a friend and was published as *Halfbreed* in 1973.

"I was very lucky," she says. "So many authors don't get the chance I had."

But as writer-in-residence, a position which involves no formal teaching duties, Campbell is getting the opportunity to provide the advice and encouragement she never received herself.

"Most people are really romantic and starry-eyed about writing," she says. "I have to tell them writing is hard, hard work and that they have to be prepared to be poor and spend lots of time alone."

"I've just been swamped with people wanting to talk to me about their work and bringing in things for me to read. I was almost afraid I wouldn't get any writing done myself."

But things are calming down now and Campbell says she'll soon start working seriously.

She hopes to have a children's story about the Indian legend of Tiger Lily completed by summer and to write the first draft of a historical novel tracing six



photo Allen Young

generations of native women in Canada. She is also working on a screenplay for *Halfbreed* which is to be produced by Fil Fraser.

Although she says she doesn't want to write solely about native people and native problems, Campbell says she feels a responsibility to her people to tell their story.

"When I was a girl I never found a book written by a native person," she says. "Everything written about

us was so undignified I would rather have read something else."

But *Halfbreed*, which has been published in the United States and is used in university curricula in Mexico and Japan, allows her an influence she might not otherwise have had.

"I can't tell you my history if I talk in political terms," Campbell says. "I have to reach you at a gut level. Seventy-five per cent of people don't give a damn about native people. But if I can make them say 'yes, I've felt like that' they'll read my story and maybe care a little more."

She stares out her office window and her eyes get a faraway look.

"My first day in this office I just sat down and thought; I'm a native, I'm a woman, I've got a Grade Seven education and now I work at a university."

"I remembered how I sat on a beaverhouse when I was a little girl, imagining that someday I would do something great." Her eyes light up as she says, "I'm a far cry from that kid on the beaverhouse now."

Campbell owes much of her optimism to her great-grandmother Cheechum, a niece of Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel's war tactician. "She told me nothing was ever impossible if you wanted it badly enough," she says. "I can almost see her sitting there on the floor on the other side of my desk saying 'see, I told you so.'"

She continues: "I'm a determined person. I came through what I did because I had to. If someone says something can't be done, I have to show them it can be . . . I've always been that way."

Her expression grows melancholy and more distant.

Is thinking about her past painful? "No," she responds. "I've become objective about that person 20 years ago. She wasn't me. I'm a different person now."

But she believes her life experiences were valuable because she may never have developed her emotional strengths otherwise.

Nevertheless, she stresses that it's a misconception for people to think that a writer has to live a hard or unhappy life in order to write.

"Everyone has experience in different kinds of things," she says. "If you're hurting, I can't say your hurt isn't as big as mine. It's all the same thing . . . we all get what we can handle."

"Some people are lazy, though . . . they never allow anything to touch them. In writing, you can't be closed up. You have to feel."

## Hatchet Job

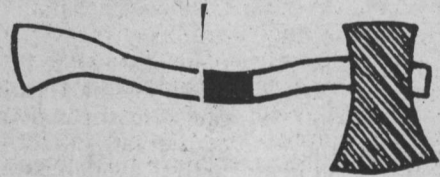
Concert review by Hunter Carlos

Molly Hatchet, the name suggests, is a group of female axe murderers. However they are actually southern musicians able to appeal to Edmonton's most progressive element: the white male, high-school dropout between 17-19 years old. Needless to say my high-top Converse All-Stars and Ramones leather shell aroused suspicion. I made my seat under police protection, Saturday night at the Coliseum.

I do not remember the name of the warm-up band. Neither did the grim young man who I asked. Anyway, they played a frantic Colonel Saunders processed chicken rock.

The mysterious chicken band stopped playing and the NAIT men started. All sorts of neat things happened. Males frolicked playing imaginary guitars. Hordes of young women in full Edmonton Center parade garb, bounced around my seat. I needed something so I did a line of Peruvian rock crystal.

Molly Hatchet was introduced at 9p.m. and started off with asking everyone if they felt alright. In fact they asked several times that night, probably in response to the crowd's cadaver-like enthusiasm. Fortunately Molly played until 10:30. Better yet they had one good song.



Molly is from a part of America where music has not changed for a long time. Other Southern bands have played imaginative arrangements and reached wide audiences. A band like Molly that relies on a four man guitar army reaches audiences that think like an army. Moreover, an army band of utility grade, reaches an army of utility grade tastes. Hence the popularity with the audience.

One song, "Dreams I'll Never See," was good and titled with ironic precision. Molly Hatchet has the manual skill, but not the innovative ability necessary to be interesting. Instead they are Southern tradesmen.

The concert ended at 10:30 so that the guys could light up the 69 Camaro, squeeze the deodorant dice, and wish they had a real chick. Besides, Boston Pizza was open late and there was cruising to be had.

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