The Canadian Aboriginal Writing and Arts Challenge winners

As the challenge’s popularity expands, so too does the quality of the submissions, says author Joseph Boyden.

Joseph Boyden was supposed to be busy staying under the radar and finishing his third novel, which was widely expected to be the capstone to a trilogy begun by *Three Day Road* (2005) and *Through Black Spruce* (which won the Giller Prize in 2008). Neither expectation, strictly speaking, has come to pass. “The book’s actually a deep prequel,” Boyden says in an interview with *Maclean’s*, an exploration of events from well before the 20th century, “developments that lead up to what happens in the other novels.” Nor is the author tending entirely to his own garden. For the fourth year running, Boyden—who personally (he’s part Metis) and as a writer has always been acutely attuned to “the big part played in my life by the small part of my ancestry that’s Native”—was deeply involved, as judge and master of ceremonies, with the *Canadian Aboriginal Writing and Arts Challenge*.

Created and organized in 2005 by the *Historica-Dominion Institute* as a national writing competition for Aboriginal youth, the challenge this year added a visual arts component. Aboriginal youth, in two age groups, 14 to 18 and 19 to 29, were invited to submit a piece of creative writing (short stories, plays, screenplays, collections of poetry), or a piece of two-dimensional artwork, capturing a defining moment in Native history. The challenge has taken on an impressive momentum: there are cash prizes for the top 10 entries in each category ($2,000 for first prize); all-expenses-paid trips for the first-place finishers to the city hosting the awards presentation on June 21, National Aboriginal Day, (Winnipeg this year); and intense, ongoing support from high-profile Aboriginal authors. Boyden’s fellow judges include the likes of Tomson Highway, Drew Hayden Taylor and Lee Maracle. It’s simply too important and too positive an event for him not to be involved, Boyden says. “Canadians mostly hear the negatives of Aboriginal life, but here we’re showing them some of the really powerful, really beautiful works of Aboriginal people.”

And he and the other judges didn’t have an easy time determining the winners. “Usually there is one head and shoulders above the others,” says Boyden. This year though, partly because of the challenge’s expanding popularity—of the 1,000 pieces of writing submitted over the eight years of the challenge, 300 came in this year—“we had to choose between three or four outstanding entries in both writing categories.” The winner in the older age group, which Boyden says “reads like a really good CSI episode, was “Jonas” by Stephanie Wesley from the Lac Seul First Nation. “We were impressed how she accomplished so naturally things I work hard to teach graduate students.”

*Read Wesley’s winning short story below, and have a look at the five art winners’ works in the 19-29 age category.*
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The Bourke's (1st place)

Watercolour, mixed media by Melanie Jewell, 24, of Forth Smith, NT.

In Memory of My Grandfather (3rd place)

Tags

Jonas, by Stephanie Wesley, Lac Seul First Nation. For the students of Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School, past and present, here and gone.

"Where's Jonas?" Mrs. Bell asked from her desk in her 11th grade English class at Dennis Franklin Cromarty High School (DFC).

DFC was funded by the Northern Nishawbe Education Council (NNEC), and it was a private school in Thunder Bay, Ontario that only Anishinabek students from Northern First Nations of the province could attend. DFC first opened its
Anishinabek families from the most remote and isolated parts of Ontario rejoiced with visions of their children graduating from the first Native high school of its kind and going on to live successful lives. Most of the students would succeed, except for a certain few.

Sadly, over the course of DFC’s history seven of its students would die mysterious, alcohol-related deaths. No one understood why seven young bodies had been pulled from the rivers of Thunder Bay, they couldn’t find any answers. Some believed it was by accident that the students fell into rivers. Others thought there was a darker reasoning behind the deaths. It was hard to rule deaths as homicides when there weren’t any suspects, but motive was not hard to find. Some residents of Thunder Bay could be very cruel and racist with their beliefs, attitudes, and actions towards DFC’s students. Culture shock, homesickness and prejudice often lead to underage drinking, but not all the time.

Some students chose not play with firewater and they did well during their time at DFC. The students could come out of their shells while at the school – save for those who were shell-less to begin with.

“Jonas hasn’t been at school since Thursday,” Laura Machimity said in a nonchalant tone. She was very shell-less.

Laura Machimity was a seventeen-year-old honour-roll student who earned straight A’s. She was a member of North Spirit Lake, First Nation. She was raised in Winnipeg Manitoba, and attended public schools up until eleventh grade. Laura’s grandparents (who lived in North Spirit Lake) took custody over her so that she could attend DFC. As smart and beautiful as she was (great teeth, long brown hair and high cheekbones), she could be just as cruel.

Everyone in the school knew that Laura wasn’t friendly, even her best-friend Emma Loon. Emma’s good looks (long black hair, tanned complexion, almost perfect teeth) helped Laura with a decision; if Laura had to make friends it may as well be with the pretty girl. Emma lost thirteen pounds off her already-thin figure within a couple of months of being Laura’s friend. She and Laura had to wear the same sized clothing, so Emma didn’t eat.

Emma, seated on Laura’s right side, ignored her hunger pangs. She was dying for a piece of her Kookum’s bannock. Emma caught eyes with Mrs. Bell and smiled.

“My boyfriend said Jonas texted him all weekend and that he was being weird,” Emma chimed. Laura looked at her.

“I got a dumb text from him, too. Pervert.” Laura said, unimpressed.

“Is everything okay with him, Laura?” Mrs. Bell asked. Laura frowned as she shrugged.

“I don’t talk to him anymore,” Laura replied.

Mrs. Bell nodded; she remembered that Laura had broken up with Jonas. Now Jonas was missing but still texting. “I see,” is all Mrs. Bell could say.

Jonas Southwind (Sandy Lake, First Nation) was a sixteen-year-old from a broken home. He was often teased growing up because he looked like he was Japanese; he was fair-skinned and had the “fatso-eyes” (as his friend called it). His hair was black and straight and always in his face. He often laughed about the time an attractive Japanese college student tried speaking to him in her native tongue.

During his free time, Jonas read a lot of books. He could often be found in the music room playing an acoustic guitar, but the music room was silent as of late. Jonas was reported missing Saturday by his boarding home. It was now Monday and his grandmother, Aniska Southwind, had been calling the school all day.

Aniska was the only family Jonas had left. His mother died while in a hotel room with a very disturbed individual named Gordon Paul Jordan. Gordon (a balding, overweight non-Native) liked to feed Native women alcohol until they died from alcohol poisoning. Several women had died before Gordon was finally put in prison for a short time. He was eventually released and while Jonas’ mother was visiting friends in Alberta, she met Gordon at a mall. Jonas was placed in the care of a babysitter so his mother could go off with the strange man and his whiskey.

Jonas was only three-months old when his mother died. He carried a black and white picture of her in his pocket at all times. The photo was in terrible shape but he cherished it anyway. His mother was a beautiful Ojicree woman. He never met his father.

“It’s not him on the phone,” a voice said.

Mrs. Bell looked up to see who just spoke. Grace Kakegamic smiled at her. Laura rolled her eyes – she didn’t like Grace.
Grace was only fifteen yet she was in the senior’s English class. She was a perfect student, smart and well-read. Grace also grew up with Jonas in Sandy Lake, and they had been best friends up until a few months ago when Laura started dating Jonas. Grace may have not been the most beautiful girl (acne problems, frizzy black hair, always chubby) but she was nice and people liked her.

“What do you mean, Grace?” Mrs. Bell asked.

“It isn’t him. I spoke to some guy who was making fun of me, said I had an ‘injun’ accent,” Grace explained.

“Well you do have an ‘injun’ accent,” Laura laughed.

“That’s because I am an Indian,” Grace replied. “And what are you, Laura? An in-denial?”

There were a few laughs from the classroom. Laura wouldn’t have that.

“I am an Anishinaabe Ikwe. If you want to refer to yourself the way Columbus did our ancestors, feel free. I won’t stop you from sounding like a moron.” Laura sneered. Laura was happy that the laughs were now at Grace’s expense.

Mrs. Bell told the class to settle down so she could get on with the day’s lesson, finding it hard not to wonder about Jonas. She couldn’t help but think of the students who had died over the years. Before she dismissed the class, she let her students know that they would all become a catalyst for change in their communities, hoping to inspire them to succeed and not drink.

Mrs. Bell knew that each one of the students was special; each one of them deserved to live in peace while going to school. It made her sad to think of what the students went through each day. She also now knew that something was wrong because a stranger had Jonas’s phone. After speaking with the principal and the police about it after class, the phone was eventually tracked to another high school in the city through its GPS. A non-Native teen named Jeremy had Jonas’s iPhone – and he was in tears as he sat in his principal’s office.

“We didn’t mean to hurt him,” Jeremy sobbed, “we only wanted to scare him. He ran towards the river and we couldn’t find him!”

It was March and the ice on the Kaministiqua River would be breaking up soon, so that was the last thing anyone wanted to hear. A search party was set up that very afternoon. By Wednesday morning, thirty volunteers lined the banks of the river in search of Jonas Southwind. His grandmother was flown in from Sandy Lake.

“I can feel him. I know he is still alive,” Aniska Southwind said to a member of the search party as they walked along the river. Aniska always felt a strong bond with her grandson; she knew he would grow to become a great man. She had seen someone like Jonas in a dream.

Meanwhile, Laura had seen the nurse. She hadn’t been feeling so great lately.

She sat down in the cafeteria and tried not to think of Jonas. His last real-text was on her mind. He wanted to know why Laura broke up with him but she already told him; they were both from the Bear clan.

When Laura’s grandmother found out who Laura was dating, she ordered Laura to stop.

“You are both Bears! That is not right!”

“Kookum, Jonas and I are not related!” Laura had cried.

“Find someone from a different clan!”

So Laura ended it with Jonas, even though they had no blood-relation. All tribes and clans had different beliefs, and it was wrong for her to see one of her own people. According to Laura’s grandmother, Jonas’s dad was from the Bear clan.

Emma Loon sat down with her boyfriend Jamie Sutherland at Laura’s table. Laura didn’t know why Emma liked Jamie; he drank too much and was always picking fights. Even now, Jamie’s knuckles were bruised and split.

“Did they fish any body out of the river yet?” Laura asked Emma. Emma held back a giggle.

“That’s messed up,” Jamie said before he stuffed some chips in his mouth.
“Jonas is just doing this for attention, anyway,” Laura said dryly. “Probably just hurting from his time as a foster kid.”

“Why are you so mean?” Grace asked from behind Laura. Laura turned to look up at Grace.

“Excuse you, don’t listen to my conversations!” Laura ordered.

“You speak so loudly, you want everyone to hear! Stop being such a witch, Laura!” Grace replied.

“I am not being a-”

“Yes you are! You always are! You make fun of everybody, and you act like everyone is below you! You’re such a bad person!”

“Settle down!” Laura tried to say as she rose to her feet to face Grace. The whole cafeteria was watching.

“No. You make this such a terrible place to be just by being here. You treated Jonas like crap and now he’s missing and you laugh about it! What is wrong with you? I know you were molested but why’d you let it sour you?”

Laura’s jaw dropped in horror. She tried to recover as a memory from her childhood came flooding back, the reason why she and her mother moved to Winnipeg. A man named Casey had crept into Laura’s bedroom after her mom passed out during a party. He took innocence from Laura and she would never get it back.

“You liar!” Laura tried to say, her voice choked.

“We all know it’s true. I had too much class to say it until now.” Grace said. She felt guilty for uttering those words in front of everyone.

Laura felt a wave of nausea wash over her. She looked down at Emma, who only looked away. Laura couldn’t fight back her nausea any longer so she pushed Grace aside and ran out of the cafeteria.

* * *

In the library, Noel Beardy (Wunnumin, First Nation) was trying to figure out what Mrs. Bell meant in class. He was going to be a “cattle list” for his community? What did that mean anyway? He opened up Google on the library’s computer and tried searching for cattle lists. Nothing came up, except: Did you mean catalyst?

Noel clicked catalyst. After reading the definition for the word, he found the fourth entry suited what his teacher said the most.

Catalyst: a person whose words, enthusiasm, or energy causes others to be more friendly and energetic as well as enthusiastic.

Noel smiled as he folded his arms over his chest. Could he really inspire his people?

He then caught a whiff of something awful.

Noel made a face. Why did it smell in here? It reminded him of when he found a dead puppy in his Shoomis’s’ shed back home. Noel’s eyes fell on the door in the library that went to the basement. This door was usually locked but now it was slightly open. Noel got up from his chair to find out where the smell was coming from.

* * *

The entire school was sent to their boarding homes after Noel made his discovery in the basement. Aniska Southwind sat in DFC’S library. She stared blankly at the door to the basement as policemen and emergency response people shuffled in and out of the room. She couldn’t believe what everyone was telling her.

“He is still here; I know he is still here. I can feel a part of him,” Aniska said. Tears streamed down her face as she remembered holding a crying eight-year old Jonas to her chest and singing “You Are My Sunshine” after some local kids had made fun of his mother.

She placed her right hand over her chest above her heart as it started to ache. Aniska lowered her head as she tried to remember the feel of his arms around her.
"You make me happy...when skies are...grey" she sang softly.

Aniska closed her eyes and wept.

* * *

Jonas Southwind was confronted by a group of non-Native teenagers in a car while waiting for the bus Friday night after visiting some friends in Fort William First Nation. They accused him of beating up one of their friends. Jonas resembled the person responsible for the assault (Jamie Sutherland) because he was native and was wearing a grey sweater. After they assaulted Jonas, he fled towards the Kaministiqua River, dropping the iPhone that Jeremy would later make obscene texts with.

Jonas didn't fall in the river, though. He waited on the river's edge – the same one Aniska had walked along. The group hung around the bridge over the river for a while before leaving. Jonas didn't want to go home with a black eye and a busted lip. He walked back to his school and let himself in through an unlocked window. Jonas then broke into the janitor's storage room and found an old can of lacquer. He'd never tried huffing before, but he was too scared to drink and he just wanted to feel better.

When he was found a few days later, Jonas was holding a piece of his ripped, lacquer-soaked sweater in his right hand and a photo of his mother in his left. Jonas had died from cardiac arrest in the basement of his school; he was only sixteen.

* * *

Laura, her eyes red from crying, sat in her bedroom. She clenched her hands together so tight her knuckles had almost turned white. The nurse came over to her boarding home to give her the results of a test she had taken the day before; there was too much commotion with the discovery of Jonas in the basement for the nurse to tell her sooner.

Laura was mad at Jonas. She was mad at those stupid kids who beat him up. She was mad at Grace, at the teachers, at the nurse, at Thunder Bay. She was mad at herself.

But she couldn't be mad at who was now growing inside of her, the part of Jonas that Aniska had felt.

Laura looked over at the nurse.

“What's going to happen now?” Laura asked.

The nurse smiled a little.

“You start a new path,” the nurse said. “You keep going forward, Laura, you and your classmates. Don't let anything hold you back.”
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