Augie and Me:
AN INTRODUCTION

IN THE SPRING OF 2001, I RECEIVED A PHONE CALL from the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan, where I had been a professor before becoming a full-time writer. One of the women in the office had received a letter, addressed to the “dean of the University of Saskatchewan,” from an old fellow up north requesting some help with his memoir. The man was a retired Cree trapper in his early seventies who lived in the bush. He wanted a co-writer to come up to his cabin, tape his stories, and write them down for publication. Particularly, he asked the dean to recommend someone who had “a good command of the English language,” someone who might also have an outdoorish streak. Were this scribe to agree to help him write his book, he would “enjoy
the finest fishing in all of Saskatchewan.” The man was building his cabin “right at the junction of two beautiful rivers that join together.”

Luckily, the letter found its way to the English department. “Dear Sir,” it began, “I really don’t know where to begin or how to ask someone of your high position this rather odd request, and coming from a retired fisherman and trapper and Jack of all trades I might add.” The man had already finished writing down his stories of the horrors that he and his schoolmates had been subjected to “at that terrible place” known as St. Therese Residential School in the community of Sturgeon Landing. I had never heard of the school, which he described as “about forty miles south of Flin Flon” and about “the same distance north of The Pas.” These two coordinates are at the western edge of northern Manitoba, near the Saskatchewan border, but the school and the community of Sturgeon Landing are on the other side of the border, in Saskatchewan. Back in the early 1970s, a year or two before I got my job as an English professor, I completed a weekend workshop in The Pas, and memories of time spent in that community still trouble me. When I was there, The Pas was a town divided hatefully between white and Native peoples.

The old trapper correspondent described his “superiors” at the residential school, the priests, brothers and
nuns, as primarily “white” and “French Canadian.” The stories he had written down and sent off were for “the law group representing us across Canada.” He was referring to the Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation and of the Exploratory Dialogues (1998–1999), which constituted the first stage of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The working group sought written testimonies from former victims of the residential school system, which came into being in Canada around 1870 and lasted for more than a century in many parts of the country. Joseph Auguste (Augie) Merasty attended St. Therese Residential School from 1935 to 1944 at a time when there was “no law” up there to prevent the many atrocities committed by the children’s “superiors.”

Merasty had already written his story down for the purposes of the inquiry. So, at the time, I wondered why he needed someone to drive way up north to tape them. I suspected then, as I do now, that the legal firm representing Merasty had some hesitation about releasing his account while it was still before the inquiry and on its way to the courts.

“Sorry,” Merasty continued in his letter, “I am getting carried away here, I will state my reasons for asking the request to you, Mr. Professor, and Dean of University. I want to very humbly ask you sir to ask someone in your class, someone who has a good command of the English
language, to help me write a book I fully intend to write beginning about the first week in August 2001.” First, Merasty suggested that he had to finish work on his cabin and tie up a few loose ends. The cabin was to be finished by the end of June 2001. He wanted his co-writer to stay for two weeks in the cabin while recording his stories. They could discuss the payment later. They would talk and they would fish for “northern pike up to twenty-five pounds, [for] whites and pickerel, and many more.”

He concluded, “We be having a great time for sure.”

Merasty made the point in this first of many letters that he would not only tell his story but also those of many others. He would tell of things that happened from 1927, “eight years before [he] entered.” His “older sisters, aunts, uncles and others told [him] things that happened in their time.” He came to believe their stories because “the same things happened in the time [he] was there.” By telling the stories of others and connecting them to his own experiences, Merasty broadened his range of inquiry, and in other, subtler ways, he broadened the implications of his sometimes horrific story, a story in which our entire nation is darkly and obscurely complicit.

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Writers, like other professionals, can get very busy. If they are to make their deadlines and finish their books
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School Days, School Days

Around the 26th of August, 1935, my father decided it was time for us kids to be taken to Sturgeon Landing by canoe, which was propelled by a four horsepower motor. It took several days to get there on the river. We had to reckon with a dozen rough rapids and eight portages. Two or three of those were about three quarters of a mile long, with thousands of black flies and mosquitoes to fight all the way.

In those days, the whole country was teeming with northern wildlife, including fish of many kinds, which my dad scooped out of the waterfalls with a scoop net made especially for that purpose. We lost about twenty-four hours of travelling time in all. My dad shot and killed a bull moose, and we had to stay in one spot on the
South Sturgeon weir to smoke the fish and cut and dry the moose meat. Yet we got to our destination a whole day ahead of schedule.

I was born in 1930 at Sturgeon Landing and baptized there by Father Aquinas Merton, omi, who was also the head administrator and principal at St. Therese Residential School from 1927, when the school was opened. Two of my sisters and my brother Peter were the first three to walk inside the school. Annie and Jeanette were the names of my two sisters. There were also six uncles and the same number of aunts who attended the school in its first year.

All those sisters and cousins, uncles, and many other unrelated people from other villages told me what had happened. Good and bad, positive or negative, were told to me and others when we got to school eight years later, and they all told basically the same stories. So one has to assume they were speaking the truth and nothing but.

A lot of their stories I already wrote and submitted to our lawyers, who number about thirty-six across Canada, representing the survivors of residential schools. The six that are working with me and others here in Saskatchewan have offices downtown in Saskatoon.

The former principal, Father Aquinas Merton, was the hardest working man that I have ever known. Well,
he was not like the next one. It was just the opposite with this kind and friendly principal, Father Bernard Pommier. He never touched a plow or any farm implement, and I honestly could say I never even saw him enter the barn. He was always super clean and wouldn’t go into a smelly barn, let alone drive a team of horses or milk a cow, or shovel and scrape dung. No, sir, he always had to be immaculately dressed and really preferred to have all the privacy he could get. All of the boys who knew him can say the same, that we never saw him lifting a block of wood or anything from the warehouses.

Sometimes Sister St. Mercy, whom I will write a lot about, would send some young student upstairs to the principal, assuming the Father would take care of him one way or another. But instead, Father Pommier would ask the boy why she sent him to see the principal.

“Oh, well, I was laughing a little too loud in the washroom during lineup time."

Then he would start laughing himself and say, “Is that all you came to tell me? Just a waste of my time and yours. Next time just laugh kîmōc [in English, “quietly”]. That is all I have to say. Now go back down to your classroom.” More laughter from Father Pommier, “I’ll talk to Sister Mercy later.”

No one can ever say anything bad about this principal, Father Bernard Pommier. He was a far cry from the
principal who took over two years after I left the school, Rev. Father L. Lazzardo. I will write about him later.

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But back to my story. Yes, in the fall of 1935, when I was only five years plus eight months, my father made arrangements with the principal, Father Aquinas Merton, to allow me to start schooling even though I was not of school age. I would be six in January 1936. Due to the distance from the residential school and the need to travel in winter by dog team in extremely cold weather, it would be very hard on a six-year-old child just to take him to St. Therese School. And that winter my father and family had decided to go way up north to trap. So they took me to school at the end of the summer when I was still five years old.

It was that fall that I first laid eyes on the one human I would dislike for the rest of my school term, if not for the rest of my life: Brer Lepeigne (pronounced “Le Pain”), who was there from before I arrived and stayed at St. Therese until 1939 or 1940. But I will not talk about him now. I want to keep talking about the nice ones.

I want to talk about my first class teacher for grade one. Her name was Sister St. Alphonse. Well, she was one of the kindest and most loving persons in that institution. She was also our boys’ keeper in our playroom and joined us in playing Hide and Seek the Marble and other
games we enjoyed. Once in a while, when some boy was extremely disobedient and wouldn’t do what he was told to do, she would use the small ruler we kept at our desks and tap him on the palm of his hand very lightly, and we could see that both of her eyes were shedding tears, which she wiped with her white kerchief. It didn’t happen too often. Since she taught in grades one and two, I was in her classroom for two school years. She never changed in her loving and kindly ways, and I’m sure she still is that way. I met her ten years ago in Nipawin, Saskatchewan, and she kissed me hard, bless her.

Well, I’ll continue with this memory of all the sisters who showed kindness and genuine care for us kids, good or bad, and as I said aforehand, you did not have to do anything gross to be punished for bad behaviour at St. Therese Residential School.

Sister St. Famille was our baker at the school and also one very kind and loving individual, and every day or every other day, three or four boys were taken from the classrooms and told to help Sister St. Famille, who required a lot of manual labour when baking for about 120 people. She knew only a few words of the English language, so we had some difficulty communicating with her. Some words she always used when some kid got smart or noisy. With a half-smile she would raise her arm and wave her forefinger to and fro, and say, “Look boys no smarrrt, no bread.”
The boy would not get her specialty that she called “La Galette,” small round bannocks, which were really special to us, as we never were served bannock in our meals. It was always the same, bone-dry bread that raised heck with our gums and teeth. The Fathers, Sisters, and Brothers enjoyed beautiful white bread served by Sister St. Virginia Rose, who was their special cook. I swear, those people of this school administration would not even look at our bread or our food. To them it was puke.

Now, Sister St. Bonhomme ran the sewing room with help from six or seven girls. They did all the mending and made slippers and linings for our shoes in winter, and for our mitts, which, by the way, were made from old canvas and old, grey, horse blankets. Sister St. Bonhomme was also our keeper in the playrooms and the refectory (dining room). She was not too mean, except when we got too noisy and didn’t heed her clapping. Whenever our keepers wanted to get our attention, they had what we called a clapper, a wooden two-piece item joined by hinges on one end and banged together with both hands, making a noise like a large woodpecker. Once in a while, though, Sister St. Bonhomme used a strap when she deemed it necessary. I still say she was one of the kinder nuns.

Then I’ll talk about Sister St. Ange de Cachot, who was our nurse. There were two Sisters St. Ange de
Cachot, but this first one looked after the sick children and whoever got hurt at school. I can only say she was exceptionally kind and sympathetic. She really wanted to do whatever she could to ease the pain of whatever the problem laid. She once looked after us when the regular keepers were away.

There was Sister St. d’Amitié, who was mostly the girls’ keeper but many times our keeper. She played with us and really enjoyed her time at our playroom. She loved doing us favours, like carrying love letters back and forth from our playroom to the girls’ playroom. She knew full well she would get some kind of a reprimand if she ever got caught with what she was doing, but she never got caught. (Only one other nun did those letter deliveries, and that was Sister St. Doucette, my junior high school teacher, originally from the United States.) Sister St. d’Amitié was a cook’s helper and girls’ keeper, and was never known to strike anyone in the school. The girls really enjoyed having her as keeper, especially when they got her to carry their love notes back to us guys.

I cannot remember the name of one of my second-grade teachers, who also taught the grade-four kids. I can only remember that we called her Old Bodo, because she looked so much like a guy who lived across the river here in Sturgeon Landing. She looked mean enough and she was very tall, and we had little chance of doing
anything wrong, as she used the strap occasionally. It really made a kid cry, because she had a strong arm. But it did not happen very often once we got the story and saw what she could do with a strap. Otherwise, most of the time I can recall, she was a nice and kind old soul. Most of the time she was our refectory-room keeper. One can imagine the sound of 110 children all talking and laughing together. She didn’t like to be called Old Bodo, but she was okay.

Sister St. de Mer was our Sister Superior from the time I entered St. Therese, and was there before I even arrived, until she was replaced by the other Sister St. Ange de Cachot. All I can say about both of those Sisters is that they were kind and loving in every way, and they never did anything to hurt anyone, never used the strap. That’s all I can remember about these two Sisters. When they left sometime in the summer of 1942, and when we came back from the holidays, we sure missed them.

Here are some of the brothers who were good to us. Big Brother Beauville (we called him Big Beauville) is one of them. Brother Beauville was a good and jolly person. His work was mostly driving a team of horses and working inside the barn, which housed cattle and horses. He always smelled like cow and horse manure. He was a big overweight man, a kindly person who never said a mean word to any of the boys. He was always in a playful mood,
but he never stopped working at a job he was ordered to do until it was done. On or about the winter of 1942, he was kicked in the face by one of the big horses that wore metal shoes on all four hooves, and one can only imagine what that could do to anyone. But Big Beauville was a big and tough individual. The blow could have killed a small person or crippled one for life. Brother Beauville, however, went to St. Anthony’s Hospital in The Pas to have his battered face fixed and had to go back later to have it redone. He was absent for a total of two months. We missed him a lot, and we all prayed for him.

Now, there was also Brother Leopold, a tall, lanky, middle-aged, and very friendly man. He always carried a pouch of chewing tobacco. He drove a team of horses and, most of the time, a load of kids. He only stayed at the school for two school years, so I don’t have much to say about him, except that he was a really kind person.

Then there was Brother Henri Jean, the engineer, who looked after the boiler room, making sure all the machines and the heating systems were in working order. He was one of the hardest working men at the school and a good engineer. About twenty of us boys worked with him every morning, filling the wood bins for the boilers. We also worked at taking the wood in for the kitchen and for the baking. Brother Henri Jean was at most times a kind and jolly old fellow. But occasionally, whenever us
boys got disobedient or disrespectful, he would blow his baldheaded top and roar like a lion, throwing blocks of wood against the walls to make a lot of noise.

Brother Henri Jean was a stammerer. When he couldn’t stand the horsing around, he would roar, “All right, you bastards. G-g-g-g-get out, all of you!” Otherwise, he was a very loving and kindly old soul when nothing bothered him. In all those years from 1927 to the time I got out in 1944, I have never heard of him breaking any rules or having a serious problem with the machinery he was supposed to maintain. I can only end up by saying, he was a great guy.