**Response Journal #4 – Boyden on Aboriginal Storytelling**

**Boyden on Strombo Tonight**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggMsWNUj96w**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ggMsWNUj96w)

**Joseph Boyden on narrative structure in *Three Day Road*:**

*Can you discuss the relationship between fact and imagination in the writing of a historical novel? How difficult is it to blend the real and the imagined into a single narrative?*

I found it very helpful to know from historical research when and where Elijah and Xavier would actually be during the war. I placed them with the real-life Canadian Second Division because it went overseas at right about the time I wanted my two characters to head overseas. As well as this, the Second Division participated in some of the war's worst battles.

Once I had placed my characters geographically, it was up to my imagination to try to envision what these places must have been like. Accounts of the Great War refer to mud, lice, trenches and dead bodies, and so I had a lot of macabre details to work with while at the same time trying to avoid what have become the clichéd images of this war. My two characters becoming snipers gave me the freedom to let them wander away from the trenches and into more varied geographical landscapes outside of the trenches. I also learned while writing and researching this novel that whatever horrors my mind could make up were rarely a match for the real thing.

As for Niska, the blending of the historical and the imagined into a single narrative happened very organically. I knew quite a bit about what the Cree of northern Ontario went through in the period spanning Niska's life. The biggest challenge was to realistically create a proud, strong woman who did not give in during a time of cultural upheaval.

*Much of the novel is about the act of storytelling. Why is this so important for the book and for you as a writer?*

I got a kick out of being able to create a novel that is like one of those Russian Matryoshka dolls, the ones where you open up the doll to find other, smaller dolls inside. But instead of the “dolls” in my novel getting smaller, they get bigger. I didn't even realize or plan on doing this until I was well into the first draft. Niska tells Xavier stories of her life, Elijah is obsessively compelled to tell Xavier war stories and poor Xavier is too damaged to speak of his own stories and so relives them in his morphine-addled head.

On a craft-based level, I was uncomfortable having these characters talking directly to the reader. I wanted to avoid what I felt was too self-conscious a style, and so I had each protagonist in the book be telling a story directly to another. Niska and Elijah tell their stories to Xavier, and Xavier tells his own stories to himself. In the end, of course, the reader is the recipient, and hopefully the reader feels like a participant in a type of confession, a sharing and cleansing.

Of course, the Cree and Ojibwa tradition of storytelling is as deeply rooted as any other part of the culture. Storytelling is the lifeblood of the anishnabe. It is how lessons are taught, family histories are kept alive and good times are had.

**Questions to consider:**

1. Consider the structure and content of the novel, as well as Boyden’s cultural background. Why do you think Boyden chose a circular and interwoven plot structure? Do you like that the story is told from the perspectives of two main narrators? What does the structure of Three Day Road tell you about Cree culture? Explain your answers and provide 2 quotes to support your perspective.