

(How) are Indigenous authors in Canada decolonising the Fantasy genre?

Alaric Hall

Title of the proposed research project:

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If you select a period of award of **less than 16 weeks**, you will **not** be eligible for certain awards. Please see the Award Details for more information.

Period of Award Sought:

16 weeks

Project Description: Provide a short abstract or overview of the proposed research project, including the background and context, purpose, objectives, and methodological approach of the project. Please use plain language (no jargon, easy to understand) for a broad audience.

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My project will expand the University of Calgary's Books To Build On (BTBO) project, cataloguing books which educators can use to bring Indigenous perspectives into the classroom. I will improve BTBO's coverage of two under-represented areas: young-adult novels and Fantasy (and potentially adjacent speculative-fiction genres). While developing this resource, I will investigate how Indigenous children's authors in Canada are co-opting/subverting the Fantasy genre.

The inspirations for published Fantasy literature have traditionally been Eurocentric, and seminal works by, for example, C. S. Lewis embedded racist and colonialist ideologies deeply in the genre's conventions. Despite its colonialist heritage, however, Fantasy's proclivity for drawing on myths and traditional stories has in recent years made it a vehicle for bringing Indigenous traditions to a wide range of readerships.

I will survey Indigenous children's fiction from Canada that can be thought of as Fantasy, beginning with the most prototypical examples and moving outwards towards related genres, adding a new "Indigenous Futurisms" theme to the BTBO catalogue that includes ten to twenty records. This will constitute a fairly comprehensive survey of this nascent field and will include learning ideas to help educators use the texts in teaching. Through University newsletters or other appropriate media, I will also share how, as a new settler, I am coming to understand Canada through Indigenous writers' work, helping to promote BTBO's decolonising project.

I will also develop critical depth in my understanding by writing one journal article investigating how, and how successfully, chosen texts decolonise the traditionally Eurocentric Fantasy genre.

This project will support Calls to Action 62–65 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, for example by helping teachers "integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching

methods into classrooms” (62.ii) and showing how Fantasy provides one accessible way into teaching about “aboriginal spiritual beliefs and practices” (64).

Originality, Creativity and Significance: Highlight the originality, creative aspects, and significance of your research project. Be sure to describe how the research contributes to the broader scholarly field and aims to advance understanding. Please use plain language (no jargon, easy to understand) for a broad audience.

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Fantasy constitutes an important section of the children’s fiction market. Partly because of its colonialist ideologies, however, Fantasy proved an unattractive genre both to non-Anglophone authors and to racialised and minoritised authors within the Anglosphere through the twentieth century. The last two decades, however, have seen a dramatic diversification in the authors of Fantasy, including the first major commercial appearances by Indigenous authors (in North America and beyond). This expansion is potentially reconfiguring the genre, but it has enjoyed little academic investigation.

The most novel part of my research will be a journal article examining one or more case-studies in Indigenous Fantasy from Canada. One possibility is the Misewa Saga series of children’s novels by Winnipeg Cree author David A. Robertson. A critical and commercial success, the series’ first novel is ostentatiously inspired by C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, putting it in a rich tradition of decolonising rewritings of colonial classics. By close comparative analysis drawing on decolonial critical theory, the project will put Robertson into dialogue not only with Lewis’s canonical Fantasy fiction, but also the substantial secondary literature on it, assessing how Robertson responds to Lewis’s colonialism and Christianity, how he adapts Fantasy to Indigenous traditions, and how far he succeeds in mediating Indigenous traditions on the commercial book market. This research will yield a peer-reviewed article suitable for submission to, for example, *Canadian Literature*.

Indigenous Canadian writing is still working to achieve the same prominence in both domestic and international markets as work by White writers. Systematically including Indigenous Fantasy and related writing in BTBO, along with associated educational resources and public-engagement activities, will help raise the profile of a new movement in children’s fiction in Canada.

Potential Benefit: Briefly explain the potential benefit this project will provide to you.

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I am undertaking a BEd degree as a mature international student to facilitate a career-change and migration to Canada for family reasons. Ordinarily, the admission requirements of the BEd degree include university-level Canadian Studies. In my case as an international applicant, this requirement was waived, but researching Canadian culture will enable me to develop equivalent expertise.

Studying Indigenous cultures in Canada specifically will help me, after graduation, to participate with greater knowledge and theoretical sophistication in decolonising Canadian education and to fulfil the requirement of the Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard to develop and apply “foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students” (§5).

My project deliberately includes two axes, one developing breadth of acquaintance with recent Indigenous writing, and the other developing depth of understanding, including of academic research on Indigeneity (particularly in North America). The BTBO project will also provide opportunities for me to meet Indigenous participants in Canada’s literary community, supporting future collaboration with Indigenous people in my career as an educator.

The publications resulting from the project will provide evidence to prospective employers of my ability to deliver Canadian curricula and to decolonise my practice, not only by evidencing my new academic expertise but also my ability to design and disseminate high-quality teaching resources.

Relevant Experience: Tell us about any relevant professional, volunteer or academic experience that has prepared you for succeeding with the proposed project.

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The methodologies of this project draw on a well established skill set, enabling me swiftly to develop expertise in a hitherto unfamiliar field.

Following a BA in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (1997–2000), I undertook an MPhil and PhD in Medieval Studies (2000–2005), followed by postdoctoral research at the University of Helsinki (2005–7) and a lectureship in medieval English literature at the University of Leeds (2007–25). During this career, I have published two academic monographs and thirty-five peer-reviewed articles.

The proposed research will develop my previous trajectory of decolonising work. From around 1997–2007 my work focused on medieval England, reflecting the Anglocentric paradigm of twentieth-century English Studies. From around 2007–2017, I learned Icelandic to promote non-Anglophone language and literature in the English curriculum, writing one of the principal studies of contemporary Icelandic literature (*Útrásarvíkingar! The Literature of the Icelandic Financial Crisis (2008–2014)*, 2020). From around 2017, I studied Arabic in order to put the medieval European canon into dialogue with wider Eurasian literature. My first publications in that field have emerged, but my move to Canada now encourages me to turn my attention to Indigenous and Education Studies. The previous diversifications of my research demonstrate my ability to come to grips with a new field during a four-month summer research project.

My ability to contribute to BTBO is emphasised by twenty years' voluntary work as a Wikipedia editor, during which I have written over six hundred articles, many on literature and authors overlooked by Anglocentric canons (hitherto primarily Icelandic, South Asian, and Arabic). One of my most read articles, on the Syrian storyteller Ḥannā Diyāb, receives over five thousand visits per month. I will apply these writing and research skills to BTBO (and will work to improve Wikipedia's coverage of Indigenous writing as I go).

Is there anything else we should know about your application? For example, any situations that might have impacted your academic record. *(Optional)*

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