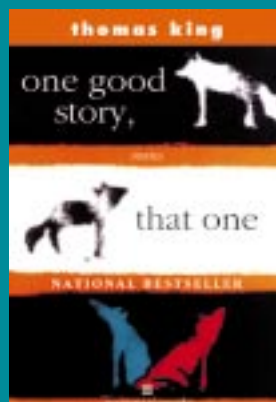
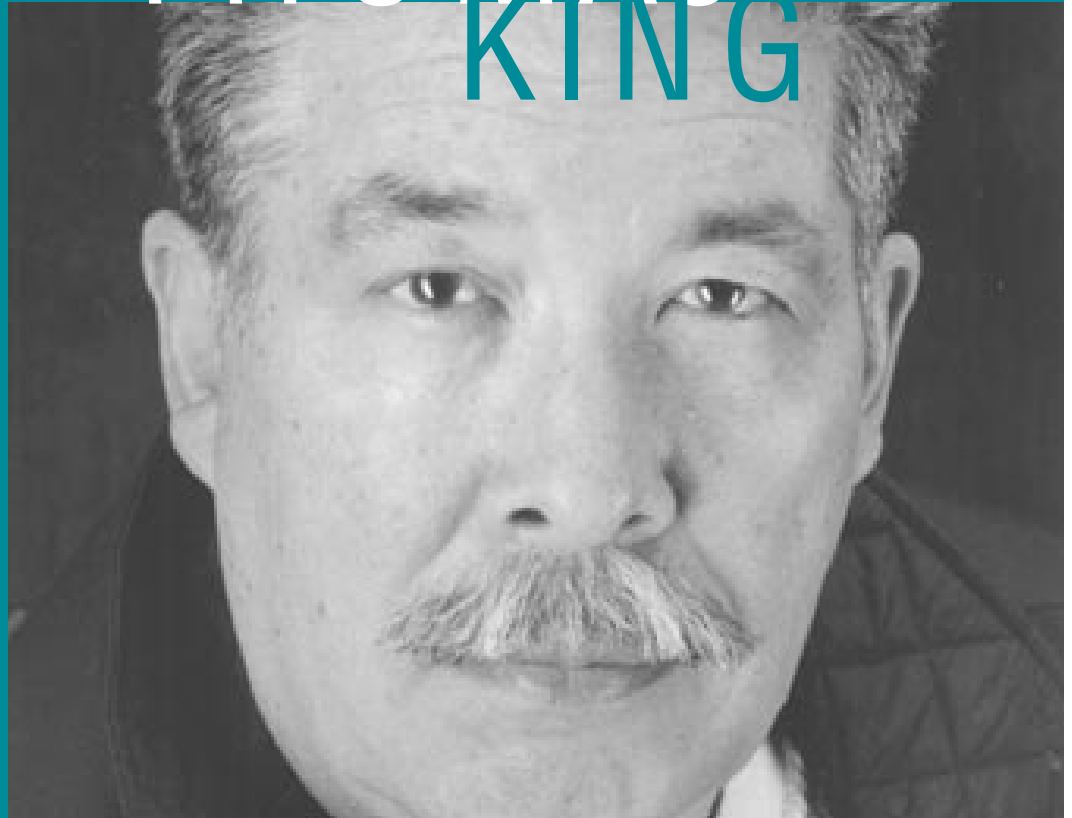


*One Good Story, That One*

# THOMAS KING



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0-00-648513-8; \$18.95 tpb, September 1999  
HarperPerennial paperback edition

### *One Good Story, That One*

0-00-648525-1; \$16.95 tpb, December 1999  
HarperPerennial paperback edition

### *Truth & Bright Water*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*His stories “ambush the reader... They get the knife in not by whacking you over the head with their own moral righteousness, but by being funny.”*

—Margaret Atwood

Of Cherokee and Greek descent, Thomas King has become one of Canada's most beloved and critically acclaimed writers. He is an award-winning novelist, short story writer, scriptwriter, and photographer.

After studying at Chico State in California, Thomas King worked as a photojournalist in Australia and New Zealand. King began writing while working overseas. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly* he recounted his first novel attempts as “penny-dreadful things about American astronauts hidden away on college campuses pursued by Russian agents—real pukey stuff,” while his first short stories “were blithering messes, romantic slop.”

Having received a doctorate in literature from the University of Utah, he taught English literature and American Indian literature at the University of Lethbridge for ten years. He was also the chair of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota.

In 1980, after accepting a teaching position at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Thomas King began writing again.

“There isn't much to do in Lethbridge. It's a small town, and I was divorced and up there alone with my first son, and I started writing again.” King took his writing more seriously when he met Helen Hoy. “I had nothing else to impress her with, so I thought maybe I could impress her with my writing.” It worked. Thomas King and Helen Hoy have been together ever since.

In 1989, Thomas King received a one-month writer's residency at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming. During that month he both completed his first novel, *Medicine River*, and wrote a 300-page draft of *Green Grass, Running Water*.

*Medicine River* was published to critical acclaim. *The New York Times* described it as “precise, elegant...a most satisfying novel.” It won the Alberta Writers Guild Best First Novel award in 1990, the PEN/Josephine Miles Award and was shortlisted for the 1991 Commonwealth Writers Prize. *Medicine River* was made into a CBC television movie starring Graham Greene and it was also made into a three-part radio play which aired on CBC Stereo in January 1993. *Green Grass, Running Water*, his second novel, was short-listed for the Governor General's Award in 1993 and won the Canadian Authors Award for Fiction. A national bestseller, it was also named to *Quill & Quire's* Best Canadian Fiction of the Century list. In 1993, *Publishers Weekly* described Thomas King as “one of the first rank of contemporary Native American Writers—a gifted storyteller of universal relevance.” During 1993 and 1994 he worked as a story editor for a CBC TV dramatic series called “The Four Directions” that was made by and about Native people.

King has also written two acclaimed children's books—*A Coyote Columbus Story*, which was nominated for a Governor General's Award in 1992, and *Coyote Sings to the Moon*. In 1990, King edited an anthology of short stories by Canadian Native writers in *All My Relations*. The highly praised short story collection *One Good Story, That One* was published in 1993 and became a Canadian bestseller. *Truth & Bright Water* was published by HarperFlamingoCanada in the fall of 1999.

Thomas King is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Guelph. He is currently working on a photography exhibition, a radio comedy show, “The Dead Dog

Café Comedy Hour,” which airs on CBC Radio, and a screenplay of *Green Grass, Running Water*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS KING

Q. Was becoming a writer a conscious decision, or did it just happen?

A. *I always wrote or told stories in one way or another. Even lies. Lies are forms of stories—good liars are reasonably good storytellers. I also wrote poetry. But since I was a guy, I had to hide it. What would my he-man friends think of me writing poetry? I was also a voracious reader. I spent a lot of time at the library. I was a journalist for a while. All of these things played into it. But it was like plucking at the strings of a guitar. I just played here and there—until 1980 when I started writing seriously. There was nothing organized about it, I was just thinking—how can I make a living?*

Q. Are there any writers who inspired your work?

A. *I can't say that any writers inspired me. As a kid I read dog and horse books and the entire Oz series by Frank L. Baum. I would go down to the library in the summer, especially on hot days. The basement of the library was cool and I would just work my way along the shelves. I'd choose the "F" section and choose a book. You could tell where I was [in the alphabet] by where I was seated. There were reading programs at the library and you could earn stars. I was one of the top kids in reading.*

*When I was older, there were writers who came along and demonstrated that literature is available by other peoples. Although there was damn little, they didn't teach literature by other peoples at school. I was living in California when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn*. I enjoyed his book and was encouraged by his success.*

*But there wasn't one writer or book that inspired me; it's not that cut and dried. It's rockier and more disjointed than that.*

Q. After studying at Chico State in California, you worked in Australia and New Zealand as a photojournalist. What

was that like? And was there any particular reason why you went to the South Pacific?

A. *I was bored. I didn't have a career going at the time, it was 1964 to 1967. I had some university credits and had gotten mediocre results. I had worked odd jobs in San Francisco and at Lake Tahoe, which is a gambling community. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I felt adventurous and so I got on a steamer and went to New Zealand. From there I went to Australia.*

*I went for no better reason than that it was there. I didn't have a family; I wasn't responsible for taking care of anyone except myself. Which at the time I could barely do. Travelling was a way to lose myself.*

Q. Your work draws upon a wealth of traditions—Native, Christian, literary, pop culture. Can you speak a bit about the traditions that you were raised in?

A. *I was raised in all of those traditions. No one tradition was dominant. My mom was Greek-Orthodox and she was part of a community who were Orthodox, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic. I went to Greek-Orthodox services, I went to Methodist Sunday school, and I spent two years at a Catholic boarding school. It was kind of schizophrenic.*

*What it taught me is that there is a certain meanness and arrogance in religion and in society in general that prevails. The questions that we ask are not the kind of questions that we should ask. We ask how will this profit me? How will this increase my prestige? Will this give me more power?*

*Religion is this way because it is run by humans, created by humans, and inhabited by humans. In my early training, what I saw were the underbellies, but I tend to look for those imperfections. I am not a person who is full of faith.*

Q. Your stories are a hybrid of styles and traditions. You weave in pop culture, aspects of Native and Judeo-Christian traditions and imaginary or fantastic landscapes. How did writing in this manner come about? Was it a conscious decision, or do your stories unfold this way?

A. *Satire has always been a tool that comes from distrust. I am happier and stronger as a writer when I'm pointing out imper-*

*fections. I wouldn't write a piece that is laudatory. Calling attention to those things that are problematic, that mark us as human, is what I do.*

Q. You weave together humour with issues such as the plight of contemporary Natives. How would you describe the role of satire in your work?

*A. Satire is sharp. It is supposed to hurt, it is never supposed to make you feel comfortable. I hope that when readers laugh, deep in their hearts they are uncomfortable, uneasy, and looking over their shoulder, watching. That if they read something that they too have done, they feel like someone watched them do it. Maybe me.*

*There is a lot of writing that is complacent and soothing and there are a lot of good writers out there—but that's not of much interest to me.*

Q. How did the CBC show “Dead Dog Café” come about? Did the CBC approach you or did you send in a proposal?

*A. I have no idea. I can't remember how it started. There are probably four or five versions of the story floating around out there. A producer that I've done some other work with called me and asked me about doing it. But why I came up with what I did is lost in the mists of time. Sometimes I have to look at old scripts to remember what I've written and to make sure future episodes make sense.*

Q. A movie was made of *Medicine River* and I read that you are working on the script for *Green Grass, Running Water*. Is it difficult to translate your work from literature into film?

*A. No. It's easier than writing a novel. Film is always easier. It is much shorter, the plot is simpler and you can't spend as much time with the structure. It's not as complex as a novel. Even a good film is not as complex as a good novel. A lot of writers can't do it or don't want to do it. But I don't find it as difficult as other writing. It takes me five years to write a novel. I can write two film scripts in a year. That's ten scripts for every one novel.*

Q. You have also been teaching at universities for about thirty years. When did you decide to teach? How does it influence your writing?

*A. Being around other academics and a body of information provides some of my material. But teaching doesn't improve or hurt my writing. If I wasn't teaching, I'd miss the incisive kinds of discussions about various things and the bizarre things that happen at universities. It's a lot of fun. But I think of writing and teaching as two different activities.*

Q. Reserve life plays a role in your novels, yet you weren't raised on a reserve. You taught at the University of Lethbridge near the Blood Reserve. Is that where you draw your understanding of reserve life?

*A. I have worked on reserves all over the place. I worked with Natives in northern California and at the University of Utah, although Lethbridge was the primary place of inspiration. I have met a fair number of people on reserves and in and around reserves, kind of on the edges of those places. It's true, though, that I wasn't raised on a reserve.*

Q. Even when you're drawing the past into your stories, they are still set in contemporary North America—is there any particular reason for that?

*A. I hate historical novels. History is a dead issue. One version of it is told and is taught and that's the version that everybody knows and the version that everybody is expecting. But it's only one of the stories told of an event. And I hate doing research for novels. I like contemporary stuff and that's what I write.*

Q. In a 1993 interview about *Green Grass, Running Water*, you mentioned that you felt free to ask questions such as, “Who is an Indian? How do we get this idea of Indians?” Are you still exploring these questions?

*A. These are questions that still need exploring. Treaty rights in Canada, Native tax status and who decides how Native communities are organized and run—these are still live questions. I engage them in my novels because it is an ongoing debate. It's a dangerous debate. People out there might not like it. But I try to present sticky issues from all sides.*

*These questions still plague us. They are important issues. The Canadian government has no interest in Native rights. It doesn't matter who is in power. There is a lethargy. No—that's too kind a word—there is a turning of the political back to Native people. It will be interesting to see what Mathew Coon Come, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, does. He is more of a firebrand than other Grand Chiefs have been. It will be interesting to see if he has more success with the lump of dough called Ottawa. Ottawa can turn a blind eye to almost anything.*

*I engage in these kinds of debates, like a nasty little black fly buzzing around. In person I am sweet and shy, but if you put a computer in front of me, I become a bit of a radical.*

Q. Your characters often speak along separate tangents. They end up talking around subjects instead of talking to one another—what is the intended impact of this kind of dialogue?

A. *It's the way people talk to each other. Take a political forum. When a politician is asked a question, they answer with something else:*

*"Mr. Day, do you think your stand on homosexuality is going to affect your chances of being elected?"*

*"When I'm elected... blah blah blah."*

*People don't answer questions. Much of what I hear is people speaking off on different tangents. Literary conversations like "How are you?" "I am fine" are boring.*

Q. What are you currently working on?

A. *A film script for Green Grass, Running Water and a detective novel with a Native detective. This new novel moves away from literary novels. It's a bit of grease, something to stuff in your overnight bag on the way to the cottage in the summertime. It will be straight genre fiction.*

# ONE GOOD STORY, THAT ONE



*Like the coyote—that sly prankster of Native folklore who lurks close to the heart of King’s work—these tales at once trap you in their jaws, tickle with waggish tongue, and howl with ironic wit.*

—Quill and Quire, September 1993

Steeped in the Native oral tradition, filled with compelling and amusing characters, myths and truths, King’s sharp humour and engaging storytelling runs throughout this collection of ten stories.

The title story, “One Good Story, That One,” draws upon Native oral tradition. The storyteller loops around, shifts off onto tangents, and weaves in anachronistic details as he recounts a satirical version of the Garden of Eden story to a group of white cultural anthropologists. Humour and subversive wit are directed at the story’s audience: “those ones like old stories, says my friend, maybe how the world was put together. Good Indian story like that. Napiao say,” leaving us wondering how straight the storyteller is being with us.

A Native woman named Granny finds herself caught between cultures in “Magpies.” She is dying of a bad leg and is both fearful of facing a lonely hospital death and of being buried like “old things that are broke.” She asks Ambrose to dispose of her body in a traditional manner, wrapped and placed among the branches of a cottonwood tree, but he is up against Granny’s daughter Wilma who wants her to be buried according to the rites of the Catholic church.

Coyote, in “A Coyote Columbus Story,” accidentally conjures up Christopher Columbus while singing and dancing the world into existence. Coyote hopes the explorers will want to play ball with her but Columbus and his friends “have work to do...We got to find China. We got to find things we can sell.” When Columbus and his crew don’t find gold, silk cloth, portable colour televisions or home com-

puters, they decide to enslave and sell the Indians. Coyote is unable to fix her conjuring mistake to help her friends.

In the story “Borders,” a woman en route to visit her daughter in Salt Lake City must confront the meaning of identity when she claims her nationality as Blackfoot. Challenged by both the Canadian and American border patrols, her tenacity, pride, and the help of a TV news crew stretches the concept of identity and who and what we are.

Fantastic and realistic landscapes mingle and merge in these ten stories as Native and white characters share the literary landscape with Adam and Eve, Christopher Columbus, the Blue Coyote, space aliens, and a singing totem pole. Drawing upon a wealth of traditions, told with both humour and humility, these stories challenge the idea of universal truths and shed light on the way we treat one another.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) How does the story “Magpies” illustrate the fundamental spiritual differences between Native and Western societies?
- 2) What role does humour play in Thomas King’s stories?
- 3) In “Borders,” the narrator’s mother’s tenacity and the eventual presence of the TV news leads to the border guards backing down on the idea that a Blackfoot person either has to be a Canadian or an American. What does this story tell us about how Native identity and culture is viewed by North American institutions?
- 4) Told in an oral tradition, these stories are ripe with wit and dialogue and bare of detail. Compare this way of telling stories to linear and descriptive character-driven stories.
- 5) Magical, biblical, and legendary characters share these stories with both Native and white people. How does the blurring of the real and imagined landscape challenge the idea of truth and the way we see people from different cultures?

- 6) Coyote in “The One About Coyote Going West” talks about the “whiteman” stories of the “founding” of North America: “Maybe I tell you the one about Eric The Lucky and the Vikings play hockey for the Oldtimers, find us Indians in Newfoundland, she says. Maybe I tell you the one about Christopher Cartier looking for something good to eat. Find us Indians in a restaurant in Montreal. Maybe I tell you the one about Jacques Columbus come along that river. Indians waiting for him. We all wave and say here we are, here we are.” The grandmother replies that these are the stories that everyone already knows. Does storytelling play a role in how history is viewed and how historical stories are told?