

## CHASING FREEDOM

It has been said that whatever does not kill a person makes one stronger. This old cliché rings with new truth when read as the central theme in the autobiographical Halfbreed by Saskatchewan Metis writer Maria Campbell. This is her own story, and illustrates a life lived by the author in circumstances that demand a conscious choice between survival and defeat. Likewise, the novel Wild Geese by Martha Ostenso features a central character beset with extreme hardship and faced with the death of her dreams – as real a loss for any heart as the passing of a loved one. Prairie women have exhibited great personal strength throughout the development of our province; many of us need only look as far as our own family trees for examples of this. The key female characters in Maria Campbell's Halfbreed and Martha Ostenso's Wild Geese managed to maintain a sense of dignity, pride and self-worth despite the unrelenting efforts of either their families or their community to undermine these characteristics. Campbell's story is autobiographical and while Ostenso's book is classified as fiction, the character of Judith exemplifies a personal arc that many women can relate to. Both books were written during times of great turmoil. In Campbell's book the struggle of the Metis people to maintain a sense of culture while undergoing assimilation sets the tone for Maria's own battle. In Wild Geese, women's rights, while not addressed outright, are an important theme. Although raised under very different conditions,

Judith and Maria share many of the same struggles. They both long for a different life, one where they are free to live their own dreams and pursue their own goals. The prairies have a way of humbling a person, as though the vast distances of land and sky could strip a person down to the bare bones of their existence and force them to uncover their own truths at the most basic level. For both Maria and Judith this fundamental essence that drove them forward was the dogged pursuit of personal freedom and independence and the ability to live a life different than what they had always known.

Maria Campbell starts her writing career with her autobiography Halfbreed published in 1973. This powerful work of non-fiction garnered international attention; ironic, considering that Campbell had no intention of writing this book for publication. In an interview with Hartmut Lutz, Campbell stated she hadn't written anything prior to Halfbreed and that she was only writing a letter to herself. This letter reflected the history and social milieu of First Nation's peoples. Although Campbell's intention was not to have her book go public, she was able to provide insight into the complex life of First Nation's peoples, which included her personal history descriptions of Metis social custom, the traditional role assignments of men and women, and the differences between the Indians and the Metis. Her writing of Halfbreed was a written account and reflection of her healing at that time. Her writing is indeed a reflection of her spirit, one she earned through many trials and tribulations. In the book Halfbreed, Maria is faced with the challenge of adapting to a new way of life while trying to maintain some sense

of culture and community. This was time of great confusion for the Metis people. They could no longer survive as nomads and sought to integrate themselves into a society that viewed them as second-class citizens. The Metis people felt under attack; their religion, education system, moral code and way of life were constantly being challenged. Soon enough, due to the constant assault on their community, the Metis people began to show signs of breaking. Alcohol and starvation began to cause division among the Metis:

“It wasn't enough that our Nations were being decimated from within, then came the strategy of divide in order to conquer. Spiritual practices were outlawed, children were kept separated, then finally the attack began on the heart of our culture-the women. In the case of Metis women, this process was accomplished during colonization and ostracizing Metis women-who up until the "White" women arrived were a necessity for trade, sustenance and in many cases survival.”

(Canada's First People)

As a young woman Maria did not want to identify with a community in such a state of despair but could also recall a time in when things were different. The role of women in the Metis community was quickly losing the prestige it had held up to this time. Maria's mentor and Grandmother, Cheechum continued to teach her the 'old ways' and encouraged her embrace them, however the community was teaching her that the old ways were obsolete and that the new held little dignity. A war was taking place not only between the Metis and the white's but also within the Metis culture. Maria and many other young Metis women

were torn between loyalty to their community and a strong desire to be more than the new stereotype of a Metis woman allowed. This new stereotype taught that Metis women had little to no worth or value to a primarily white community. They certainly could and would not be acknowledged as peers nor would they be given opportunity for improvement. Maria had to run the gambit of emotion before she could come to terms with the ignorance of society. She first fought then conformed to, then completely disregarded this stereotype and in finally doing so, found freedom and purpose.

Campbell explains that her book Halfbreed accomplished what it needed to for the time. She wanted to write Halfbreed to communicate a message to herself and document a reality that she had lived. In Halfbreed, Campbell states, "I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: this is what it was like; this is what it is still like" ( 9). She was speaking out to herself and at the same time to the happiness of others.

The character of Judith in Wild Geese is similar to Maria in that both women demanded more from themselves and their lives than society would have otherwise allowed them. Despite the constant abuse of her father and the neglect of her mother, she maintains a strong spirit. She knows too well she is destined for better things and will not allow herself to except less. The book refers often to the seasonal migration of the wild geese. The serve as both a reminder and an example of what Judith does not posess – freedom of spirit and of body. Like the Metis people, her self-confidence and self worth are constantly under attack. The

totalitarian regime of her father allows no room for uniqueness or individuality. Her well-being comes after that of the farm and of her mother's conscience. Her role in life is to profit her father in any way he sees fit. Any goal or pursuit must benefit him or it will not be permitted. Although Judith appreciates the land and the livestock, she loathes helping her father to profit from their abuse. Settler women were often taught to put their dreams last and to concentrate on the goals of their husbands or fathers. To this effect, Judith's real battle is with herself. She must overcome the beliefs that have been instilled in her since she was a child and allow herself the right to be happy. This doesn't come easily to her until the happiness and well being of her unborn child come into question. Judith draws strength from the decision that her child will not be brought up as she was. That Judith manages to turn out as independent as she does is a testament to her strength and will because she had no positive female role model to learn from until the arrival of the teacher. The teacher provided Judith with a depiction of a woman that she had never known. She brought humor and empathy to a home that had never seen them and bestowed them upon Judith with real generosity. In sharp contrast, her own mother was almost incapable of seeing past her own failures and took no part in preventing the emotional abuse of her children. This kind of abuse continues to occur today, with frightening frequency. Emotional abuse involves an attack on a child's sense of self. It may take place in the form of humiliating, rejecting and/or insulting the child, isolating the child and forcing unfair demands upon the child. It may also take the form of witnessing the abuse of a parent or

parental figure. An estimated 61,201 reported incidences of child mistreatment were investigated and substantiated in 1998 by the Canadian Incidence Reporting Agency. Of these, nineteen percent were claims of emotional abuse. Judith's story illustrates that while statistics like this are not uncommon, the fight for self-worth and the freedom to determine one's own future is truly individual and at the same time, universal. Her story continues to occur nation wide.

Judith and Maria face many of the same difficulties under very different circumstances and yet their emotional journeys share many similarities. They grew up in a time when the role of women was defined by the will of the men around them. Independence and individuality were not nurtured nor encouraged. Both women rebelled against conforming to the type of woman their community or family produced. The women chased after their own definition of freedom and had to work hard to create it for themselves. Halfbreed and Wild Geese, though written decades apart, show the reader the vein of strength running through these prairie women and how they learned to honor it within themselves. Both Judith and Maria had to face the possibility of sacrificing not only their freedom but their sanity to their community or family. One major difference in their journey is that happiness for Maria meant embracing her heritage and its culture and working to eliminate its downfalls, while happiness for Judith meant rejecting her family's definition of heritage and duty.

With its wide-open spaces and endless sky, the concept of the prairies brings the word freedom to mind readily. Unfortunately, this is not always the consensus among prairie people. Many feel bound to their lifestyle, whether it be agriculture based as in Judith's case, or bound to the community, as in Maria's case. Appreciation does not come easily under such circumstances and neither does value. Judith and Maria finally found appreciation for life after allowing themselves the freedom to choose how to live this life. Freedom of mind, body and soul is often taken for granted but for many people it is a hard earned reward at the end of a challenging journey. Many have done without this fundamental right for far too long. The battle continues to wage both within the community and the individual to create assurance that one day everyone will be able to take freedom for granted.

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