

“Critical Literacy: Challenge, Inspire, Empower”
Manitoba Reading Council’s 4th Adolescent Literacy Summit
April 12 & 13--Winnipeg, MB

“Books are sometimes windows, offering views of world that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors, 1990).

The Manitoba Reading Association’s 4th Adolescent Literacy Summit was a time for reflection and personal and professional growth for over 450 Manitoba educators, librarians and literacy leaders at the Victoria Inn in Winnipeg, MB from April 12 to 13. As described by one attendee, “It was not necessarily an in-service for the head, but one for the heart.” Many of those presenting commented on the theme of “windows, mirrors and sliding doors”. Linda Christensen began the summit with the keynote and encouraged the audience to look at what texts they are sharing with their classes to ensure diversity is incorporated into each class. Breakout sessions led by Shelley Warkentine and Michelle Honeyford discussed practices in the ELA classroom in terms of curriculum and writing practices. Eric Walters shared his experiences as a YA writer, discussing his books and the inspirations that led him to write his book. Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair shared many incredible resources as a means of bringing many of the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Actions into all our classes.

The day continued to be just as incredible in the afternoon with a keynote by John Schumacher (aka @MrSchuReads), Scholastic Library Ambassador, and seeing what was books were in his infamous carry-on bag. Many new books were discussed, and many Amazon orders were placed. His enthusiasm and charisma re-ignited many teachers’ love of books and the idea of getting those books into the hands of the students was clearly emphasized. Finally, the day ended with a very emotional author’s panel, consisting of Eric Walters (*The Rule of Three*), Marsha Forchuk-Skrypuch (*Making Bombs for Hitler*) and Manitoba author David A. Robertson (*When We Were Alone*); it was moderated by John Schumacher. The authors discussed, among other topics, what motivated them to write and where their ideas came from, along with how writing has affected them personally. Again, emphasis was put on the idea of using books as windows and mirrors. There was not a dry eye in the room when Marsha discussed her mother’s struggle with Alzheimers or when David told of his six-year-old daughter asking her grandfather to teach her Cree. Also discussed was how reading about difficult subjects makes one’s brain think like those who have gone through that experience; as a result, it grows empathy and hope within the reader.

The day ended with local educators sharing their expertise through IGNITE sessions in various fields such as teaching with theme, popular and current book trends, how to bring gaming and technology into the classroom and Reading is Thinking, among others. Kudos to those teachers who shared their talents in this unique presenting style.

The next day was just as uplifting and powerful as the first. The day began with Pernille Ripp again encouraging us, as educators, to do our best to create passionate learners through choice and using feedback directly from the students. This includes ensuring that the books and other texts we use serve as both windows and mirror for the children we teach. We need to ensure that the students not only see themselves, but also are able to explore others' lives as well from books, not only from a knowledge lens, but also one of empathy and understanding. She also encouraged us to always put the child first and think of the situation from the child's point of view, always striving to do whatever is in the child's best interest. Stories from her own experiences again brought the audience to tears. Pernille's break-out session was also an encouragement in the use of picture books in all classrooms, not just in EY rooms. Again, books were being saved in Amazon carts across the room. Other break-out sessions included Shelley Warkentine presenting on Reading Apprenticeship, and Richard Van Camp spoke about how to incorporate the use of graphic novels and comics into the classroom when teaching about healing and reconciliation. Pearson Publishing kindly brought in a speaker who spoke about various comprehension strategies and how to engage students using strategies such as making inferences and monitoring comprehension.

Did you know that you can call The Northern Lights by doing one of the following: clicking your fingernails, whistling or running your jacket zipper up and down? Northwest Territories author Richard Van Camp continued the day's storytelling with stories that were humorous, inspiring and heart-wrenching all at once. The fact that he handed out many copies of his various books was also quite popular. The most powerful session of the summit, however, was the student panel, led by Richard. Students represented rural and urban areas, along with the North. Both male and female students took part, and were anywhere from Grade 8 to 12. All spoke their hearts, giving credit to either their teachers or mothers for making them the readers they are today. "When I read, I can be anything I want to be" was only one of the many profound statements made in the hour. The overwhelming consensus of the panel was to let students choose their own books. The only standing ovation of the summit was for the students of the panel—and so well-deserved!

While it wasn't your typical in-service where one came away with tons of ready-to-go lessons and strategies for the classroom the following week, it was a time that was set aside for each attending to really think about what practices are we doing well and how we could improve. It made us think about each and every student in our class and what we can do to challenge, empower, and inspire each and every child in our care.