

NEIL BISSOONDATH

The Age of Confession

The Antonine Maillet – Northrop Frye Lecture

GOOSE LANE EDITIONS
UNIVERSITÉ DE MONCTON

Copyright © 2007 by Neil Bissoondath

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence from the Canadian Copyright Licensing Agency (Access Copyright). To contact Access Copyright, visit www.accesscopyright.ca or call 1-800-893-5777.

Cover and interior page design by Julie Scriver.

Author photo courtesy of Neil Bissoondath.

Translation by Jo-Anne Elder.

Printed in Canada.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Bissoondath, Neil, 1955-

The age of confession / Neil Bissoondath.

(Conférence Antonine Maillet-Northrop Frye = Antonine Maillet-Northrop Frye lecture)

Text in English and French.

Title on added t.p., inverted: L'âge de la confession.

Co-published by: Université de Moncton.

ISBN 978-0-86492-482-7

1. Narration (Rhetoric) 2. Identity (Psychology) in literature. 3. Storytelling.
4. Politics and literature. 5. Multiculturalism. I. Université de Moncton II. Title.
III. Title: Âge de la confession. IV. Series: Conférence Antonine Maillet-Northrop Frye.

PN3383.N35B57 2007 809.3'923 C2007-900161-0E

Goose Lane Editions acknowledges the financial support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Canada through the Book Publishing Industry Development Program (BPIDP), and the New Brunswick Department of Wellness, Culture and Sport for its publishing activities.

Goose Lane Editions
Suite 330, 500 Beaverbrook Court
Fredericton, New Brunswick
CANADA E3B 5X4
www.gooselane.com

if

The Age of Confession

If you are lucky enough to have children or to know some, if you have made an active effort to get involved with their lives, you will know that, once they have passed the stage of mine-mine-mine and why-why-why, they enter the stage of “Mom, Dad, tell me a story.” Often, they wish to hear stories of your own childhood and then to plumb the depths of your imagination. It is the child’s way of engaging with both the intimate and the larger worlds around him or her, a curiosity as basic as any other human drive. As Margaret Atwood said in an interview, “I believe that people have always loved to be told stories, and they always will. Look at children: they learn so much better if you tell them a story. . . . Children remember these little storylets, which are very simple but still describe an action. I think that’s deeply rooted in human beings.”

The word is consciousness attempting to express itself. Stories give shape to the child’s world and, simultaneously, cause new worlds to take shape in the child’s mind. For this is what stories do: they compete to shape the world — to impose narrative order on disparate or uncertain events — all the while prompting fresh narrative possibilities in the imagination.

We are a society that believes in the power of action. We are always saying to young people: go out, engage with the world, get involved. Find some worthy cause and give of yourselves.

This is vital and necessary advice for those who so often seem to be concerned solely with satisfying their own intimate desires (although it must be said that there are many, those who don't make the news or the gossip mills, who find their own navels less fascinating than the world around them). But how often do we say to young people (and we don't do this because they already seem quite sufficiently self-centred): go *inside*, engage with *yourself*?

I am not talking here about the hypnotic navel or a masturbatory self-involvement. I'm talking about an active introspection concerned, not with how to acquire the new Nintendo, but with the question of who they are, as individuals, as familial beings, as social beings. How often, in other words, do we tell them to go in search, not just of the narrative tissue of the world they inhabit, but of the narrative tissue of the world within them?

So many young people are assailed by a sense of isolation. At a conference workshop some years ago, I asked a group of highly talented and motivated young people to relate the narrative of their lives, beginning with their grandparents or even further back if they could. I was asking for story, not analysis, and for them it was a new experience. A

kind of wonder came to them. Suddenly they were seeing their lives in terms of narrative, which took them beyond their youthful isolation, beyond an individuality that was as hard and cold and self-contained as an iceberg, to seeing themselves as one in a line of many people: great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, each having lived a kind of adventure which, in small and large ways, had led to them — to their lives, their personalities, their characters, their interests and ideas, pleasures and passions. Proceeding from this personal narrative constructed from elements of the past, a path forward began to define itself, not in concrete terms, but in ways that suggested that everything would be all right, a simple truth often lost on those to whom the world appears too large to grasp, too unformed to contain. Narrative is a powerful and incandescent tool, yet we rarely recognize our need for it. It is this very nature that makes narrative both a promise and a threat.



First, I'll talk about the promise of narrative, a promise that is familiar to everyone who is passionate about reading.

As someone who has taught creative writing for a number of years, I've had the chance to get to know many students, most of them majoring in literature. In my conversations with them, I have come to realize that most of their professors — of course, there are exceptions, but they are few and far between — do not ask their students to consider what seems to me to be an essential

question. Consumed by the demands of whatever literary theory they want to use to perform their autopsy of the novel they've selected, they rarely ask their students if they *liked* the book. For some professors, in fact, whether or not readers experience pleasure while reading a novel or a short story is of no importance. This idea reflects an attitude that I find, quite simply, scandalous. After all, giving pleasure, amusement, entertainment — though not necessarily taking things lightly — should be the first objective of any novel. An uninteresting novel, a boring novel or short story useful only as a sleeping pill would not find many readers (except for a few professors). By reinventing language, by presenting us with words imprinted with the sensibility of the writer, with characters we care about and universes that engage us, a novel shakes us and moves us: we smile, shudder, feel destabilized. A novel should offer us the pure pleasure of entertainment. To entertain readers with a well-told, well-constructed story is, to me, a very noble objective indeed.

Diverting our attention from our own reality can be an extremely important task. I cannot easily imagine, nor do I want to — it frightens me, actually, to think about this possibility — what my childhood in Trinidad, in the West Indies, would have been like if I hadn't been absorbed in reading every day. Because of my family, I certainly wasn't miserable, but as a young boy I was already unsatisfied with the smallness of what I saw around me on this minuscule island in the Caribbean. I was aware of other possible lives, more promising worlds, even though

I had never seen them. I imagined what these other worlds might look like. Of course, the picture was rather romanticized, but it became more and more concrete, tangible, accessible because of books — stories, tales, novels. The narrative threads I discovered in books allowed me to be a virtual traveller, led me to worlds that I would discover in reality only much later, at the age of eighteen, when I left Trinidad for good. If my experience of immigration was painless and untroubled, a source of great pleasure and adventure, I'm convinced it was, at least in part, because my reading had prepared me for it. A new world is always a little strange — strangeness is one of the delights of travelling — but if we have some sense of familiarity, we are less intimidated, and the experience is richer.

Far more so than poetry — much of which struck me as cramped and tortured, like the roots of a tree strangulating themselves and each other — and much more so than the cloak-and-dagger and Western movies that were our staple back then, the narrative I found in books opened doors on worlds that were both real and magical, and no less magical for being real. This narrative offered glimpses of horizons far more enticing than the ones I saw from Trinidad's beaches, which seemed to me — even as they hosted spectacular Caribbean sunsets — to be hard-etched lines fencing me in. Narrative helped me see the possibilities beyond these lines. I learned early on, then, that narrative can rescue. It can take us away from places where we do not wish to be, even if only for a few hours a day. Illegal substances also do that, but narrative has the