

# BREAKING BARRIERS, BUILDING BRIDGES

By **Donald Lynch**

## *Promoting First Nations' Access to Culturally Relevant Literature, One Book at a Time*

**“WELCOME TO THE LIBRARY.** You can read any book you like.”  
“But, Miss, there isn’t anything here I want to read.”

When you don’t have access to material you want to read, the freedom to read is just an empty promise.

People in First Nation communities in Canada are underserved or not served at all when they search for the books, information and services that libraries provide in the rest of the country. Only 46 of Ontario’s 133 First Nation communities have public libraries, and many of those are one- or two-person operations with limited hours. Schools have libraries, but they benefit students, not entire communities.

First Nation societies throughout North America have relied on the oral transmission of stories, histories, lessons and other knowledge to preserve traditions, cultures and identities; however, the oral tradition has been disappearing for years. Today, much of that information is available in books and digital content. Available does not mean accessible, however, and too many Indigenous people, especially in remote areas, are unlikely to have access to material that they

would like to read. The result is that cultures, traditions and identities are slowly eroding.

First Nation communities have many needs and limited resources. Without dedicated funding, libraries exist only at the sufferance of local councils. When councils face so many other pressing needs, the provision of books and information is a low priority. There is also a growing desire for culturally relevant material by Indigenous writers and illustrators. What’s the solution?

Sustainable funding for libraries in underserved areas is the obvious answer, but that isn’t likely in the foreseeable future. Moreover, sustainable funding doesn’t answer the need for material created by and for Indigenous people. As the oral tradition declines, literacy assumes an even more important role. One solution that provides the desired material and also promotes literacy is a program that began more than a decade ago.

First Nation Communities Read (FNCR), which is funded by the Canadian government and was launched in 2003 by the First Nations public library community in Ontario with support from the Southern Ontario Library Service, promotes a community-based approach to reading. FNCR encourages family literacy, intergenerational storytelling and information sharing. By increasing awareness of the relevance and importance of First Nation, Métis and Inuit writing, illustration and publishing, the program promotes understanding of the cultures, traditions, voices and experiences of those communities.

Each year, FNCR invites publishers to submit works to a volunteer jury of First Nation librarians, who read and evaluate the nominations. The shortlist is released in May, and the selected title is announced in June, National Aboriginal History Month.

FNCR buys copies of the five shortlisted titles for First Nation public libraries in Ontario. It also provides a poster featuring the nominated books. There are public readings, school visits, book signings and

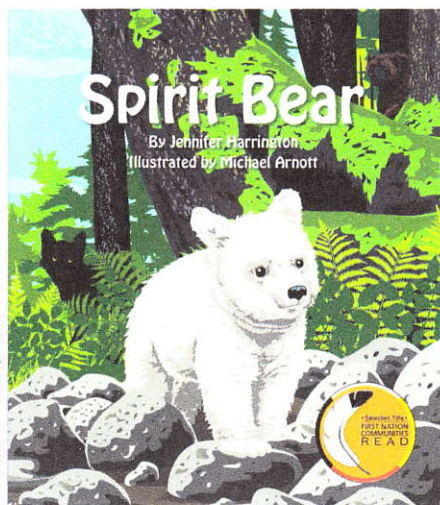
giveaways, and visits to Ontario’s First Nation communities. Danielle Big Canoe Snake, a Rama First Nation librarian, commented on the 2016 tour: “Yes, it was a fantastic day! We had about 40 in attendance. So much *fun*, and educational!”

Although FNCR is based in Ontario, submissions of children’s and adult/young-adult literature in alternate years come from all parts of the country. The 2016–17 winning title is *Spirit Bear*, published by Eco Books 4 Kids in 2014. The lovely colour illustrations introduce children to 22 animals, many of them endangered, from the Great Bear Rainforest in British Columbia. In June 2016, the illustrator Michael Arnott, a member of the Batchewana First Nation, received the Aboriginal Literature Award with a \$5,000 prize. The Periodical Marketers of Canada, inspired by FNCR’s goals, sponsors the award.

FNCR doesn’t solve all the problems of providing Indigenous people with material that they want to read, but it does succeed in three ways. It encourages the production of culturally relevant literature and makes more material available to First Nation communities. Indigenous writers and illustrators are motivated to create culturally relevant material, which is promoted throughout the country. Finally, all of Canada can benefit from learning about stories and traditions of the country’s Indigenous people and can bridge the gap that divides too many of us. It’s definitely a case of win-win-win.

To learn more about FNCR, visit

[sols.org](http://sols.org)



ECO BOOKS 4 KIDS, 2014

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