

# Exploring Contemporary Canadian Voices

the spoken word

# Louise Bernice Halfe



# Bio

Louise Bernice Halfe

- Also known as Sky Dancer
- Born in Two Hills, Alberta
- Attended Blue Quills Residential School
- First book of poetry, *Bear Bones and Feathers*, won the Milton Acorn People's Poet award
- *Blue Marrow* was nominated for the Governor General's Award in 1998
- *The Crooked Good* won the Saskatoon Book Award and the First Peoples Publishing Award
- Was Saskatchewan's Poet Laureate.
- Published by [Coteau Books](#)



# Before Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

Before viewing *Returning*:

- Have you experienced discrimination of any kind? Describe your experience, either in writing or through class discussion.
  - ▶ Discrimination includes being picked on or excluded because of: a group you belong to (e.g., nerds, geeks, browners, emos); the way you dress; your age; your sexual orientation, or your religion.



# Background

Louise Bernice Halfe

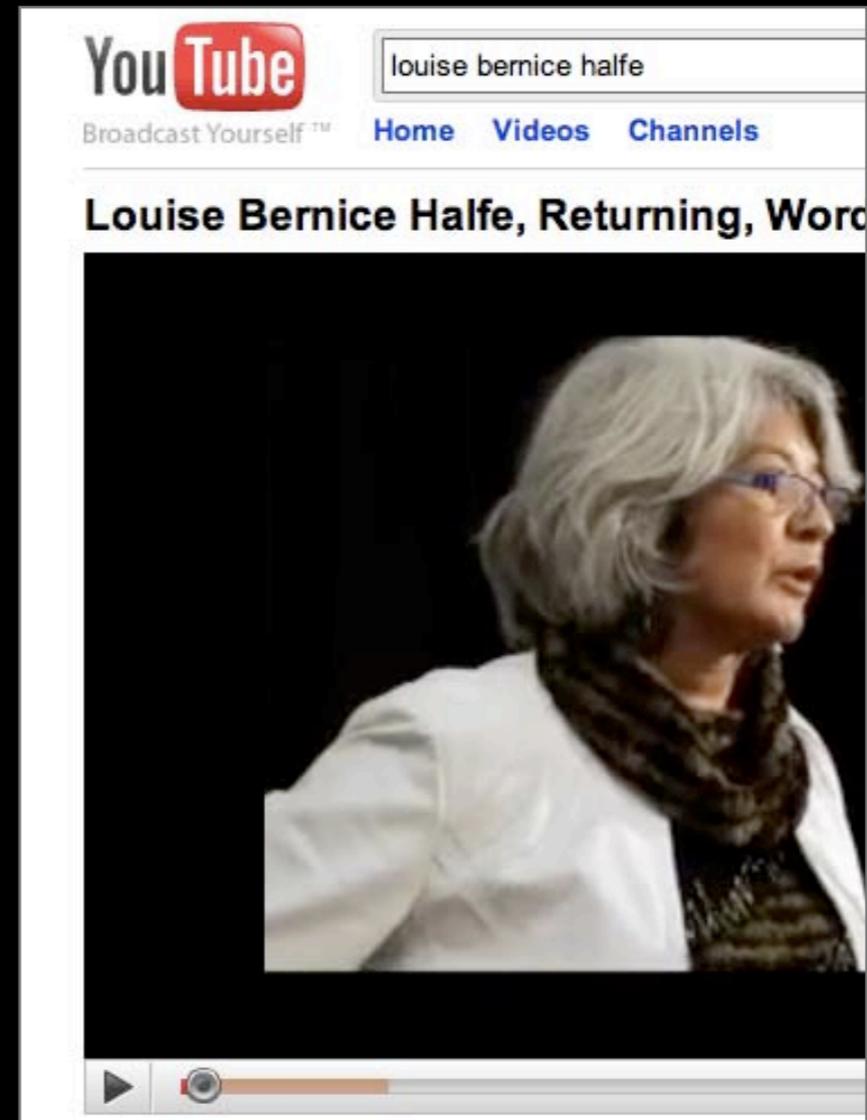
- Excerpt from a poem about Halfe's childhood experience at the Blue Quills Residential School, from *Bare Bones and Feathers*.
- Residential schools:
  - ▶ Church-run, government-funded residential schools for native children were supposed to prepare them for life in white society. But the aims of assimilation meant devastation for those who were subjected to physical, sexual and emotional abuse.
  - ▶ Decades later, aboriginal people began to share their stories and demand acknowledgement of – and compensation for – their stolen childhoods.



# View *Returning*

5 minutes

Mature content



# After Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

After viewing *Returning*:

- From listening to the poem, what values do you think the narrator of the poem was learning at residential school?
- How did residential school affect her family, both in school and at home?



# Activities

Louise Bernice Halfe

- **FREE-WRITE** for five minutes about a childhood experience that was upsetting. Read over what you've written and write for 10 more minutes, expanding the part you feel is most powerful. Share your writing with a partner. Give each other feedback on what parts you felt worked best and why.
- **CREATE A COLLAGE** from selected online or printed magazine and newspaper articles about discrimination. Cut them out or print them and make a one page collage with a minimum of four items: images, words, articles, etc. Present it to the class or write an explanation of why you chose these items.



# Before Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

Before viewing *Dear Pope*:

- This poem is a letter addressed to the Pope, after he apologized to aboriginal peoples.



# Background

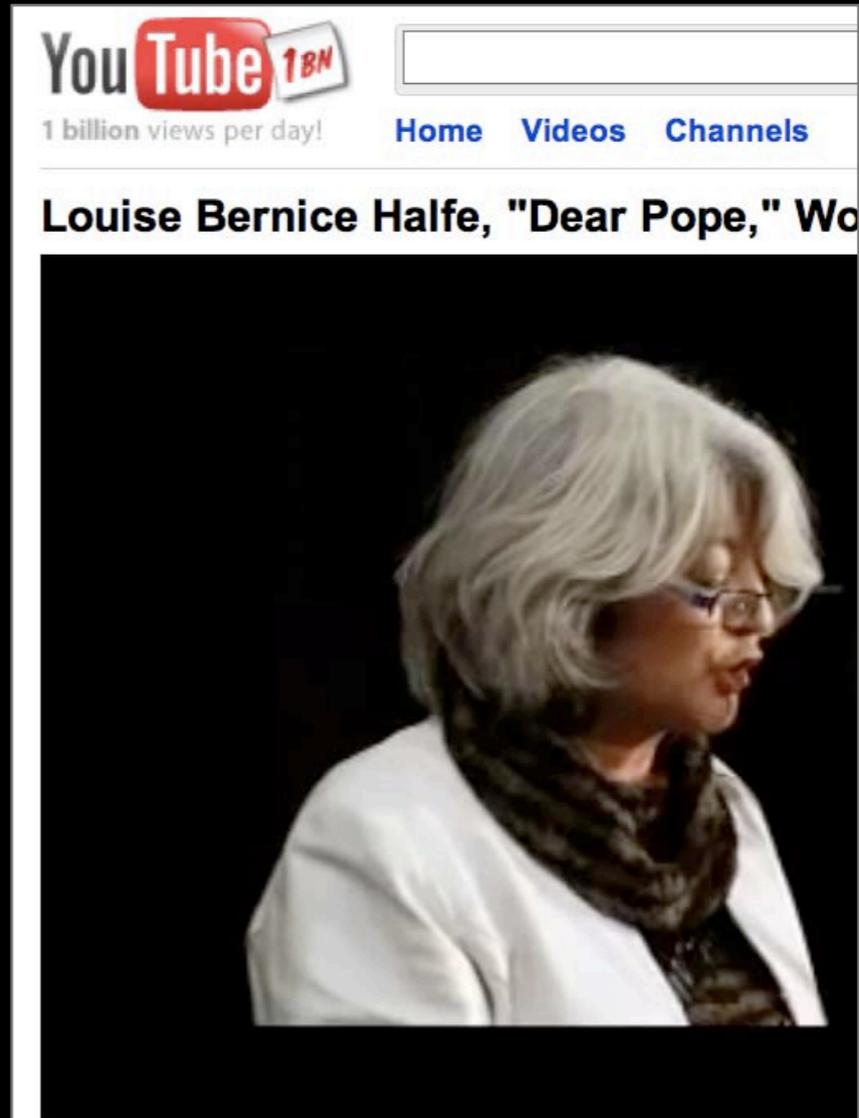
Louise Bernice Halfe

- In 2002 the Pope issued a generic apology for “violating the rights of ethnic groups and peoples, and showing contempt for their cultures and religious traditions . . . .” Read the [full article](#).
- In 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper [issued an apology](#) to Former Students of Indian Residential Schools. Here’s an excerpt:
  - ▶ “We now recognize that it was wrong to separate children from rich and vibrant cultures and traditions that it created a void in many lives and communities, and we apologize for having done this.”
  - ▶ Harper also apologized for “separating children from their families, undermining the ability of many to adequately parent their own children, and for failing to protect children who were abused or neglected in the residential schools.”



# View *Dear Pope*

2 minutes, 2 seconds



# After Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

After viewing *Dear Pope*

- Who is the speaker of this poem?
  - ▶ Note: there is a difference both in tone and in actual language between the poet and the speaker of the poem – the switch to dialect, as in “me wants...”.
- What point does Halfe make to the Pope?
- What images does she use to make her point?
- Perhaps the strongest and funniest part of this poem is that it takes place in an outhouse. What does this suggest?



# Activities

Louise Bernice Halfe

- GIVE two examples of how the speaker writes to the Pope in a very conversational, almost blasphemous, tone, as if they were equals.
- RESPOND to this poem in writing (3 – 5 minutes).



# Before Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

Before viewing *The End and the Beginning*:

- This is an excerpt from an epic poem, based on a Cree creation myth, from *The Crooked Good*
- Do you know a creation myth you could share with the class?



## Creation myths:

- Canada's First Nations peoples value a legacy of oral tradition that provides an account of each group's origins, history, spirituality, lessons of morality and life skills.
- Stories bind a community with its past and future, and oral traditions reach across generations, from elder to child. Read the [full article](#).



View *The End  
and the  
Beginning*

3 minutes, 40 seconds



# After Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

After viewing *The End and the Beginning*:

- How do you think the contents of this poem relates to Halfe's life and her experiences as a child in residential school?
- What is a lesson to be learned from this story?



- **WRITE** your own creation myth story. Think about how something came to be. For example, your family, your neighborhood, dogs, trees.
- **FIND** a creation story you like and present it to your class in a creative manner (e.g., dramatic monologue, poem, skit). This may be done alone or in a group.
- **WRITE** a question or make a statement about what you've just experienced, or write a response to the poem.



# Before Viewing

Louise Bernice Halfe

Before watching *Interview with Louise Bernice Halfe*:

- What do you think it would be like to be separated from your family when you were six years old.
- Were you ever lost as a child? Describe your experience.



# Background

Louise Bernice Halfe

- Louise Bernice Halfe was taken away in the middle of the night when she was 6 or 7, to a residential school.
- She talks of the impact on herself and her family, and how she reclaimed her culture and started writing at age 16.
- She also talks of her writing process and the importance of journaling.



View *Interview*  
*with Louise*  
*Bernice Halfe*

9 minutes, 37 seconds



- **WRITE** in your journal about what you have learned about Louise Bernice Halfe and her writing, or create a dialogue with Halfe. Ask her questions and imagine what she might say.
- **INTERVIEW** someone in your school or community – a classmate, friend or relative. Ask them if they've ever experienced any kind of discrimination and to tell you about it. Hold a class discussion about what everyone found.



# Resources

Louise Bernice Halfe

[Poetry Map of Canada](#) Louise Bernice Halfe's page

[Aboriginal Literatures in Canada](#) A Teacher's Resource Guide. See p. 28 for Cree Literature, which includes Louise Bernice Halfe

[Coteau Books](#) Louise Bernice Halfe's publisher:

[Kegedonce Press](#) A Native owned and operated press, based at Neyaashiinigiing, on the traditional territory of the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation, on the Bruce Peninsula. Since it began in 1993, Kegedonce Press has been committed to the development, promotion, and publication of the work of Indigenous writers nationally and internationally.

[Owen Sound Poet of the Month: Kateri Akawenzie-Damm](#) Poet, writer, publisher, activist and Indigenous arts advocate from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation at Neyaashiinigiing on the Saugeen Peninsula near Wiarton, Ontario.

[Healing the Legacy of the Residential Schools: Where are the Children?](#) Silence is more often than not an expression of hurt or pain kept inside. This web site attempts to give voice to the untold stories of so many Aboriginal boys and girls who attended residential schools in Canada from 1831 to the 1990's. Learn what school life was like for students and hear the voices of the Survivors themselves. May this site continue to bring healing to those whose experiences have left them behind, as well as begin to introduce a sense of understanding for all Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples.

[Canadian Indian Residential School System](#)



# Credits

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