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Picture Books

Nokum is My Teacher
David Bouchard
Allen Sapp, illustrator
Northern Cree, contributor
Red Deer Press
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At some point every child seeks reassurance that the academic challenges faced in school are meaningful. These questions become much more poignant when posed by an aboriginal child whose western—style schooling is so different from the native ways in which he was trained by his elders. A young boy of Cree heritage seeks this guidance from his grandmother—his Nokum—in this picture book and audio set, the first in a forthcoming series of bilingual picture books highlighting some of the First Nations people in North America.

Bouchard, a Canadian author whose previous books have been recognized with the Governor General's Literary Award and the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award, presents the dialogue between the boy and his Nokum in a gentle, rhythmic verse. The youth, taught at home through stories and songs, wonders, "I don't need books to learn, do I?" and rails against a teacher who "never walked a snowy path … never met a hungry wolf…" For each barrage of questions the frustrated student fires off, Nokum replies with a simple pointed query such as "Can the reason they don't understand / Not somehow lie in your small hands?" This Socratic style of questioning leads the young student to an appreciation for all types of learning, "I will read… I'll use it as we use our songs / And hope it serves us just as long."

The dialogue is complemented by the paintings of Sapp, an award-winning Cree artist. The illustrations are not tied to the text, but instead depict scenes of native life, past and present, in muted detail. The accompanying CD is an expressive recording of the story in English, then in Cree, enhanced by original drumming and chanting from the Grammy-nominated group, Northern Cree.

The universal themes of validating education and receiving guidance from elder family members will resonate with elementary school—age children. The authentic Cree voice,

artwork, and music, provide a taste of the native culture in a context that unites the concerns of children across time and place. This book will be well-received for the value of its story as well its celebration of the identity of one of North America's First Nations.

Carolyn Bailey