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*Spruced Up*  
**JOSEPH BOYDEN**



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEE TOWNDRON

WHEN THERE WAS NO PEPSI LEFT FOR MY EYE  
 WHISKEY, NIECES, THERE WAS ALWAYS GINGER  
 ALE. NO GINGER ALE? THEN I HAD  
 RIVER WATER. RIVER WATER'S LIGHT LIKE  
 SOMETHING BETWEEN THOSE TWO. AND  
**At the hunter's meridian**  
 BROWN MOOSE RIVER WATER'S COLD. COLD  
 LIKE LIVING BETWEEN TWO COUNTRIES

Whether roughing it in the bush or writing about the same, Giller Prize-winning author Joseph Boyden seems to be a straight shooter

BY IBI KASLIK

**I**n another life, Joseph Boyden's hands were explosive weapons. "I used to teach school with black eyes," says the author-teacher, who just last month won Canada's most prestigious literary award, the Scotiabank Giller Prize, for his second novel, *Through Black Spruce*. "My students thought I was nuts." He wasn't nuts, he was just a scrappy, long-time practitioner of Jeet Kune Do, the martial arts system developed by Bruce Lee. An individual with an admittedly focussed personality, Boyden explains there was a time when he sparred so often that he couldn't walk into a room without eyeballing every occupant, sussing out potential 'situations' that might arise. "I definitely became obsessive," he reflects, "but I don't think I'm aggressive." Not crazy, either, despite his students' understandable suspicions.

The obsession certainly paid off, as there are a few violent fight scenes in *Through Black Spruce*. But given the Giller Prize's three-punch combo of critical acclaim, \$50,000 purse and instant national bestseller-level success, it's safe to say that the man is now officially a successful writer and not a fighter.

*Three Day Road*, Boyden's first novel, was based on real-life Aboriginal First World War heroes, specifically examining the war experience of two Cree youths. Published in 2005, it won nearly every major Canadian literary award for first attempt, save the Governor General—for which it was nominated—and the Giller. *Through Black Spruce* is a tangential sequel; the tie is limited to character lineage (Boyden's plan is for an overall trilogy). It describes the tragic life of comatose bush pilot Will Bird and his

fashion-model/animal-trapping nieces, Susan and Annie. Set in Moosonee, Toronto, Montreal and New York, the story flits seamlessly from metropolis to reserve and manages to be both traditional and modern in its depiction of Aboriginal culture. As Boyden says, he hopes the book "paints a fuller picture of First Nations life."

That *Through Black Spruce* claimed the Giller Prize within a mere two months of its release certainly makes for juicy press; throw Aboriginal roots and dashing good looks into the mix, and Boyden has become irresistible to the Canadian media. Grabbing a Giller so early in a career would send any Canadian writer on a dizzying ego bender, but Boyden seems entirely level-headed. "It kind of wipes away any concern I might have had that I'm not on the right path," he offers, without irony.

The thing is, Boyden's naturally happy-and-rooted-epic-novelist vibe appears genuinely unrelated to any kind of success. On the afternoon of our interview, four days after his Giller win, there's a heavy storm in Toronto. Boyden is content and affable, and completely over the topic of black-tied literary victories. In actuality, it hasn't even sunk in. For now he's happy just to be out of the fierce rain, sneaking in a smoke and a phone call to his good friend, The Tragically Hip's Gord Downie.

After an exhausting day of being primed and prodded like a pin-up, Boyden has learned something about himself. "The irony of ironies is..." he tells Downie, reflecting on an afternoon of pouting and striking poses, "...I'm a terrible model."

If the novel's accurate-enough modelling content did not spring from hours spent under the ministrations of stylists and flash bulbs, maybe it came from Boyden's own family, specifically his sisters. He was the first boy born after four girls (in a family of 11), so he should be used to the role of man-doll. "Maybe that's what I was working through in the book: being made up by my sisters?" he laughs, flashing another media-friendly attribute—an honest but dazzlingly toothy grin.

# Three Wiser's Men

By Joseph Boyden



Illustrations By Juliana Neufeld

Axe Man drives the RV down to New Orleans from Penetanguishene. It's The Bat's vehicle, but he's not been able to drive it for years due to his affliction. Big Indian keeps the thing running, all of them drinking rye out of Tim Hortons coffee cups. They break down just outside Toronto in the first hours of the ride, The Bat pacing and whining, but thank god Big Indian is a whiz with the wrenches. The Bat loses his pop-bottle thick glasses somewhere in Ohio. Gas station? Discount liquor store?

Who knows. He looks like that Bubbles character from *Trailer Park Boys* with those ridiculous things on, anyways. Truth is he's blind as a bat now. That's for sure. Axe Man will write a song about this, accompanied by his sweet lady, his sweet axe, his Gibson Hummingbird True Vintage acoustic guitar.

When they break down once again in Kentucky and it looks like everything is lost, Big Indian crawling out from beneath the old RV forlorn and looking like a greased-up residential school survivor, Axe Man becomes depressed. Is this what their lives have finally boiled down to? Three middle-aged fat guys in a crapped-out RV? But the Indian works his magic once more, and the glorious afternoon, sticky and hot, arrives when they hobble out of that RV

and onto the streets of the French Quarter, Axe Man's darling sleeping in her case in his hand.

Big Indian and The Bat bail on him a half-hour into their stroll to head into Craw Daddy's and catch the early show. Craw Daddy's promises a live sex extravaganza, but that kind of action doesn't do it much for Axe Man anymore. If there's one thing Axe Man has always wanted to do, it's to play to a crowd on Bourbon Street. He can picture the tourists surrounding him, shouting for more, urging him to play his river blues, right hand thrumming steady, left hand with slide on pinkie finger, working the neck with his lover's touch. They'll be throwing money into the open case, red velvet covered in green, green Yankee bills.

Axe Man searches for the most New Orleans-looking street corner he can find. Not too difficult. The friggling place is like a movie set. He sits and opens the case gently, stares at the polished wood of his Gibson gleaming in the sunlight. My God, he thinks, this city is hot, like standing in the mouth of an overworked dog. He can feel his ponytail, dank with moisture. As he leans to pick up his guitar, he's horrified to see his own sweat plop onto that immaculate wood. Axe Man pulls the bandana from his pocket and wipes her clean. He's had this lover, the same lover, for years. He doesn't need no live sex extravaganzas to get off.

Axe Man hasn't even finished tuning his baby when up walk two cops, asking to see his permit, smiling, but not with their hard eyes. Axe Man has to ask them "Pardon?" twice. His hearing isn't what it used to be,

forces him to play the blues louder than he should.

"Permit, motherfucker, permit!" the thinner of the two cops shouts at him. A crowd begins to gather, but unfortunately not for the music.

"I just drove down from Canada, sir," Axe Man says as sweetly as he knows how. "I didn't know of any legalities pertaining to permits, sir."

Maybe his politeness does it, maybe it's that his hands shake so hard his guitar quivers, but the cops let him go with a warning. "We catch you playing music on these streets without a permit, your long-haired ass is in central lockup for the duration." Axe Man has to read the cop's lips. Duration sounds like a long time.

After hours of wandering, peering into the daiquiri, sex, antique, and T-shirt shops, he finds himself at this same intersection of Bourbon and Royal again. He's going to play, even if it means doing hard time. You can't kill the blues. You can't hold the black man down, or the Axe Man, for that matter. Bon Jovi's "Wanted Dead or Alive" plays over and over in his head. *I'm wanted. Wanted!* He'll have to learn to play that one.

Axe Man peers down each of the four streets as coolly as he can. The night has come, but the heat remains. He's as close to being a wanted man in this town as one can become. All he has to do is open his guitar case and the real heat will be on him. He's on the verge of being an outlaw. Lots of people walking up and down, making it hard to see if there are any cops hiding among them. He's gonna do it. He has to. Axe Man places the case on the sidewalk, hands shaking as he flicks open

the clasps, blood pounding in his ears.

He fumbles with the tuning of his babe. It's hard to focus on chord progressions with the possibility of the hammer falling any moment. Even his fingers sweat. The strings screech and whine. To make it worse, some little black kids with bottle caps on the soles of their shoes have taken up residence thirty feet down the sidewalk and tap dance out a rhythm far too fast and jazzy for the blues. Already an audience gathers around them, clapping and cheering, tossing coins at their feet.

Fuck it. He reaches for the mickey of rye in his ass pocket, unscrews the top, and takes a swallow big enough to make him gag. Pigs can't stop the music. There was a time that doesn't feel so long ago when he wouldn't have even second-guessed himself, a time when he still had his hearing, when his ponytail was more blond than grey and a lot more full, when he would have happily gone to the big house in exchange for the music to flow.

Closing his eyes, he turns to the wall of the Voodoo Magic Shop—the perfect venue for his first New Orleans concert, no?—and focuses his attention on feeling, not hearing, the notes becoming chords, the chords becoming song, the song becoming him. Let your freak fingers fly, he hums to himself, Mississippi River close and to his right, the ghosts of all the slaves of the South beginning to hum along with him. So easy to get lost in the music that he can feel vibrating more than he can hear singing in his guitar.

When the hand slaps heavy on his shoulder, the shock of coming back down is so

