

ANCESTRAL, HISTORICAL & LIVING ART by INDIGENOUS PEOPLES of the AMERICAS

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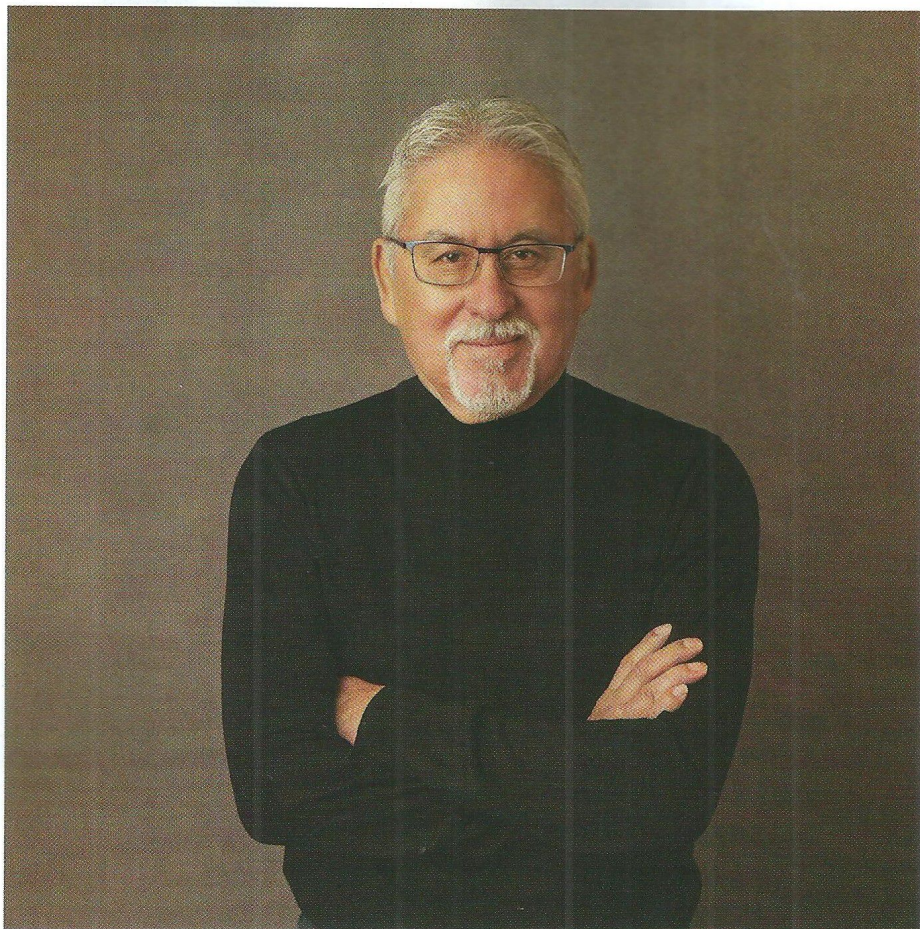
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Sylx Novelist

BRIAN THOMAS ISAAC

By Matthew Ryan Smith, PhD



In 1950 Brian Thomas Isaac was born on the Okanagan Indian Reserve in British Columbia. As a teenager, Isaac left school after eighth grade and eventually began working in the oil fields of Northern Alberta. He retired as a bricklayer. In the early 2000s he began to write fiction. When his wife, Marlene, submitted his work to a writing competition in Penticton, British Columbia, he won the first prize in the fiction category. The award inspired him to take his writing seriously.

TouchWood Editions published Isaac's debut novel, *All the Quiet Places*, in 2021. In the book, protagonist Eddie confronts the aftermaths of colonialism by attending school outside the reserve, leaving his culture, and experiencing

family trauma. The book quickly became a commercial and critical success. The novel was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, long-listed for the 2022 Scotiabank Giller Prize, and long-listed for CBC Canada Reads. It won the Indigenous Voices award for fiction, was a finalist for the Amazon Canada First Novel Award, and was named an Indigo Best Book of 2021.

Isaac and Marlene live in West Kelowna where he is finishing his second book, *Bones of a Giant*, and enjoying time with his three grandchildren. I connected with Isaac through a series of email conversations in September 2023.

Let's begin outside of writing. Can you tell me about your early life on the Okanagan reserve?

My early life was similar to Eddie's in *All the Quiet Places*. I lived with my mother, six brothers, and a sister in a three-room cabin on an isolated area of the Okanagan Indian Reserve. I think living close to the Salmon River in many ways saved me. Being outdoors away from the dark and depressing house was the best place for my brothers and me. We didn't have electricity or running water, so we played outside from morning until night. One day when I was ten, my mother handed me the .22 rifle and said we had nothing to eat. When I came home with a grouse, I was so proud. But I didn't understand how poor we were until I began school. On that very first day when I crossed the bridge, the reserve boundary, I was not prepared for the world I was entering. Attending a school in a nearby town where I was one of the few Indigenous kids resulted in many fights. After making it known that I could stand up for myself, I was able to adjust to school life a little. Although I enjoyed reading and writing poetry, it was not encouraged by my mother. Riding the bus to high school 30 miles away was like riding in a pressure cooker, and I quit school before completing grade 9.

How did you get introduced to riding bulls?

Riding in rodeos is a rite of passage to many Indigenous boys—similar to boys in Spain who dream of being a matador. When I was about 14, my white friend lived on the neighboring farm, and we would practice on an old barrel tied to the hay barn rafters that we pulled by a rope and also by riding steers when his dad wasn't home. My friend was a big, strong farm kid, and he rode by sheer strength while I weighed about 120 pounds. I didn't always have the money for the entry fee. I would enter my name for the bull riding and then try to come up with money. I had to stop bull riding because

money became such a big issue for me while my friend went on for years. I still have a facial scar from a bull horn that I proudly show my grandchildren.

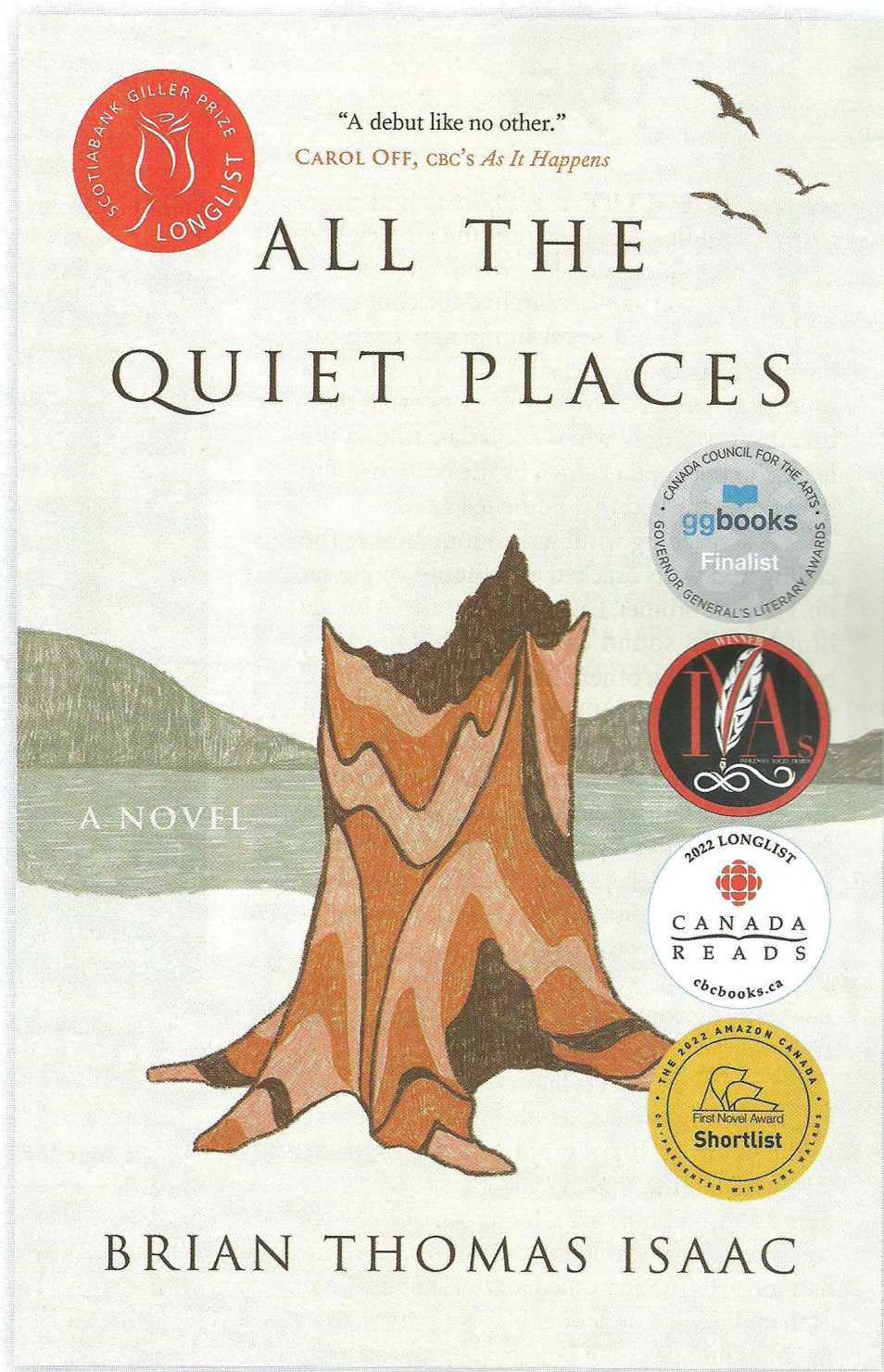
You worked as a logger in the Albertan oil fields and as a bricklayer. How did those experiences shape your writing?

I eventually went to Adult Basic Ed and earned my grade 10, but my lack of education relegated me to jobs as a laborer. I had always loved to write poetry and to read novels, so when I retired from bricklaying due to an injury, I found I had time to read again. When I began to write, I discovered the great freedom that writing gave me to create my own worlds and allowed my mind to wander freely. The many characters I had met in my working life with their different stories, reactions, and lifestyles were like a gold mine when it came time to write.

Is it important for writers to gain life experience outside academia, outside the publishing industry, outside the “art world”?

There are some fine writers who have studied and worked in academia all their lives, and I wish I had had that opportunity. The stories I write principally come from snippets of real-life occurrences that I have either seen, heard, or read about. If I had studied writing formally, I doubt I would have even attempted to write a novel. Because I knew so little about that world, I had the audacity to think I could write and publish a novel. Although I have learned much about writing from reading the literary giants, I write from instinct, not from a set of rules or principles. I would like to think that might give me an edge because my writing is different from others. I am not handicapped by those rules.

There is something to be said for not being handicapped by rules. Some also actively unlearn the rules they absorbed in academia. *All the Quiet Places* wouldn't read or feel as it does if you had pursued formal training. It's also your debut novel, which was released when you were 70. Was this novel possible when you were 30 years old, 40, or 50?



When I was asked about how I felt writing my first book at 70, I said that stepping out of my coffin in the mornings to start work was wonderful. But seriously, it wasn't practical or even possible until I was 50 to write, as I had to work to help support my family. And I was pretty messed up when I was younger. But when I began to write seriously in 2000, it was my metamorphosis. Writing was my therapy, and I was able to let go of many long-buried, painful feelings.

ABOVE *All the Quiet Places: A Novel* (TouchWood Editions, 2021).

OPPOSITE Brian Thomas Isaac. Photo: Fiona Blaquier. Both images courtesy of the artist.

1956

THE SULTRY WEATHER had been building for days until the air weighed on Eddie's bed like a damp blanket. His feet constantly searched for cool spots on the mattress but never found any. Even the burping frogs down at Heart Lake, a quarter of a mile away, stopped now and then to catch their breath. It was only when cooler air rattled the leaves on the poplars down by the outhouse and swept over the bed that Eddie fell asleep.

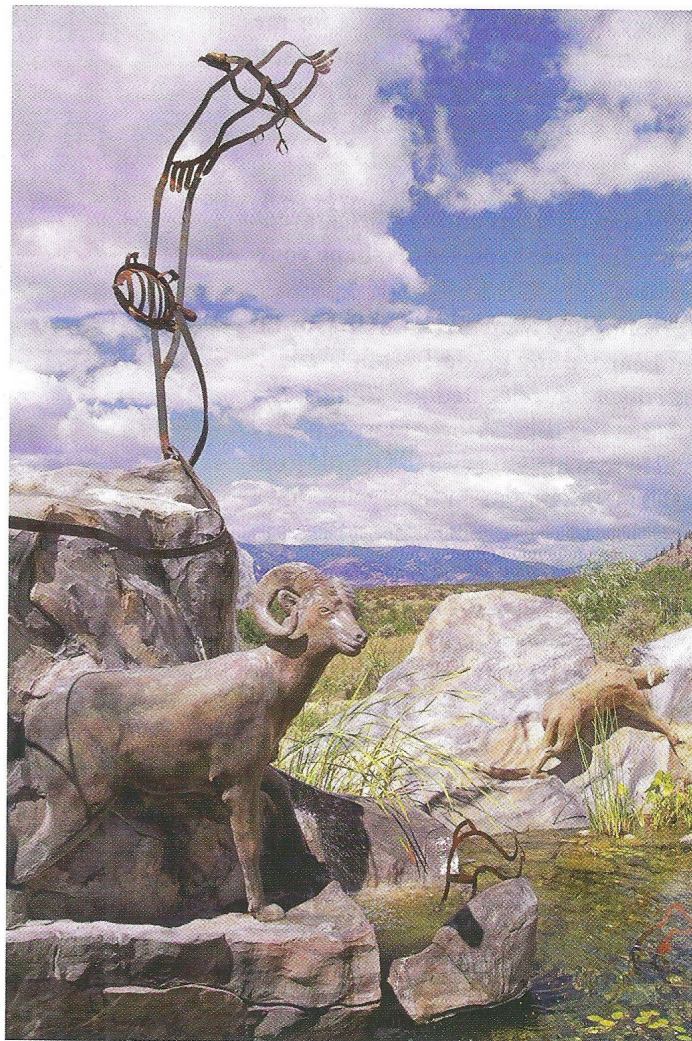
A screeching wind jerked him awake. The ceiling and walls cracked and thumped. He sat up. His little brother, Lewis, was fast asleep beside him, and no sound came from his mother's bedroom on the other side of the paper-board wall. The slop bucket slid across the porch, hit the ground, and rolled banging across the yard. Eddie stood on the bed and looked out the window but saw only pitch darkness. Then lightning flashed across the sky, showing trees that leaned at impossible angles to the ground. With a loud crack a bolt of lightning struck the top of a cottonwood down by the river, and pieces of wood scattered into the wind like dandelion fluff. Eddie saw spots in front of his eyes as if he had looked at the sun.

Lewis woke up crying and stumbled to join his mother, but five-year-old Eddie was drawn to the lightning like a moth to a coal oil lamp. His hand felt the shaking glass with each thunderclap. A nail holding a loose board in a wall squeaked like it was being pulled out by a claw hammer. His mother called to him, and the three of them huddled under her blankets, listening to fir cones and pieces of boughs that hit the roof.

The next morning Eddie let out a long yawn as he stretched and arched his back. He heard water dripping on the hot stove. *Psst, psst, psst.* He jumped to his feet, and with his nose touching the window, scanned the ground around the house.

—*Brian Thomas Isaac (Syilx)*

Excerpted from All the Quiet Places by Brian Thomas Isaac, copyright © 2021 by Brian Thomas Isaac. Reprinted with permission of TouchWood Editions. <https://www.touchwoodeditions.com>



ABOVE Sculptures by Smoker Marchand (Colville, 1951–2023) at the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre in Osoyoos in the South Okanagan Valley, British Columbia. Photo: Gunter Marx / Alamy Stock Photo.

What is your advice for writers who take up writing later in life, either as a hobby or as a professional pursuit?

Be brave. And let go of the feeling that you're not good enough. A good friend or mentor is a must, so you can bounce ideas off of them. But you must read, read, and read again. For two years, I read every word of award-winning literary authors' books with the greatest care and reflection so I could understand what made their writing so good.

All the Quiet Places is set in the Okanagan reserve community and Falkland, British Columbia, places you have lived. How did your knowledge of these places create a richer picture for the reader?

I have never written about an imagined setting, but I would love to try. One of the joys of writing is to create your own world, and I expect that as a first-time writer, writing about the familiar made it easier. For *All the Quiet Places*, I was lucky to find a professional editor who advised me to use real place names so readers can identify more closely with the book. For me, writing a science-fiction novel would be difficult—or maybe not, I haven't tried. I have traveled quite a bit, and the Salmon

River Valley is one of the most beautiful locations in the world. But the sad part of that is that recently a well-known biologist predicted that in ten years, if nothing is done about river conservation, the Salmon River will cease to exist.

It's been two years since *All the Quiet Places* was released and read by tens of thousands of people. What are your thoughts on the book now that you've had some historical distance from it?

All the Quiet Places was written from the heart. When it was finished, I didn't care if it was published or not. But with my wife's persistence, we found the right publisher. The book went out, and I am so proud that it did. I have learned so much about the business of books! I was lucky. The money and attention paid to good writing is so meager. The several major awards and prizes do help sell some books, but I know that there are many Canadian writers who write beautiful and important novels who have rarely been recognized.

One well-known writer told me that the writing awards are "a crapshoot." Another wrote, "Imagine any other profession where hundreds of people work with no pay for two to ten years, and then a lottery is held, and a handful of people get a payout." It's the reality of writing. But we need more Indigenous writers to tell their stories, because through writing and reading, people will learn about our reality so we can enact change.

What do you struggle with in your writing practice and how do you alleviate it?

I love writing. I can hardly wait to start in the morning because I am so comfortable sitting in my chair in my office, lit only by the light from my monitor. It is my fortress of solitude. What I struggle with is the public speaking and expectations of the interviewers. I am not an academic. I do not have a literary vocabulary, unlike

writers who were lucky enough to study literature or creative writing. I can only respond to questions in general terms or in stories about my own writing experience. And unless the interviewer is able to help me relax, I am not at my best while public speaking. It's like a mental block. I much prefer having time to reflect on my answers. The two facets of a writer's life are not compatible for me. Lock me in a dark room with a computer and I am at my best. Put me in front of an audience and I am at a loss.

Thank you for sharing this. You're certainly not alone. I think many people would rather be in front of a laptop than an audience. What is the next project you're working on?

Bones of a Giant, a companion (yet standalone) book to *All the Quiet Places*, has been sent to my agent who will be presenting it to publishers soon.

BRIANTHOMASISAAC.COM



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