Multitude of voices brings historical accuracy into question

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The diverse voices manifested in primary and secondary sources, popular and academic works often diverge in Myrna Kostash’s award-winning non-fiction work the Frog Lake Reader to present contrary views of the little known Frog Lake massacre.

Kostash’s chronological accounting of the events and various viewpoints prompt the reader to question who was to blame in the clash that ended with the hanging of eight Cree, buried together at Fort Battleford. The “massacre” occurred April 2, 1885, on the Frog Lake First Nation, located north of Edmonton. At the time of the occurrence, Frog Lake was part of the Northwest Territories.

In the Frog Lake Reader, Kostash pinpoints a defining moment in Western Canadian history, the clash between the white settlers and the plains Cree described as a “massacre” on the official historical plaque.

Kostash was astonished that she was unfamiliar with the events leading up to the killing of nine settlers, the hostage-taking of several others and their movement back and forth from Fort Pitt to Frog Lake, ultimately leading to Wandering Spirit’s surrender.

Exploring further, Kostash discovered an “embarrassment of riches” including first-hand accounts published immediately after or during the events by those who witnessed or were involved, commentaries and journalistic accounts and standard historical texts. The voices of Aboriginals were finally included when Kostash interviewed for her documentary on Frog Lake, broadcast on CBC’s Ideas. When she travelled to the historic sites, Kostash discovered gift shops that provided additional material such as pamphlets and literary works, drama, poems and memoirs.

The book suggests the complex, multi-faceted and elusive nature of truth as it shifts over time. Kostash describes this technique as “polyphonic narrative,” consisting of many voices that resonate throughout the work.

“History had come to certain conclusions that were hostile and very condescending to the Cree people,” said Kostash. “The colonial voices (are) very wounding to an Aboriginal audience.”

Kostash hopes to open a dialogue with Aboriginal people and has initiated a Facebook page for further discussion. In light of recent views that Louis Riel should be pardoned for treason, the question has arisen about the exoneration of the eight men hanged and buried in a mass grave at Frog Lake. In 1973,
Big Bear’s grandson, Four Souls, asked, “If we are going to exonerate Riel, what about Wandering Spirit and the men hanged alongside him?”

Wandering Spirit reappears as the central character in Kostash’ play The Gallows is also a Tree. History which implicates Aboriginal people retold from multiple viewpoints continues to capture Kotash’s imagination. In her new work about the Battle of Seven Oaks, she explores the rising of Métis consciousness. “I’m not done yet,” said Kostash.

The Frog Lake Reader was recognized by the Canadian Author’s Association Exporting Alberta Award in 2009. In 2010, Kostash received the Writers’ Trust of Canada, Matt Cohen Award: In Celebration of a Writing Life, one of the largest awards for Lifetime Achievement. Most recently she has received the City of Edmonton book award for “The Prodigal Daughter.”