

Dorion, Leah Marie (B.Ed., BA, MA) (1970-)

Leah Marie Dorion, of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, is a Métis artist, author, curriculum developer, lecturer, researcher, and community activist. She is an award-winning children's book author and a highly acclaimed children's book illustrator. For twenty-five years, she has been an educator, and has dedicated her professional and personal life to promoting her Métis heritage. For eight of those years, she was employed in the Gabriel Dumont Institute (GDI)'s Publishing Department as a Curriculum Developer and as a Publishing Coordinator. There, she developed, edited, or was the project leader for several books and cultural resources. She was also a professor at GDI's post-secondary college, the Saskatchewan Urban Native Teacher Education Program in Prince Albert, where she has instilled a strong appreciation of Métis history and culture in her students. She has also taught at First Nations University of Canada, the University of Saskatchewan, St. Michael's College (Duck Lake), and St. Peter's College (Muenster). She has coordinated the development of Métis-specific educational resource projects for K-12 schools and post-secondary programs across Canada.



Leah Dorion was born in Nipawin, Saskatchewan and grew up in Prince Albert. She is the daughter of Louis and Roberta Dorion. From her family, both external and extended, Leah inherited a strong admiration for her Métis culture, which is traditionally rooted in the boreal forest community of Cumberland House, Saskatchewan. A direct descendent of one of the interpreters of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, Pierre Dorion and his Yankton wife, Marie Toway¹, she has a strong appreciation of her heritage, and has strived to produce books and other cultural resources that promote Métis history and culture.

Leah Dorion has authored and illustrated several award-winning children's books, which fuse vibrant illustrations and good storytelling. These include the following books published by the GDI Press: *Métis Christmas Mittens*, *My First Métis Lobstick*, *The Diamond Willow Walking Stick: A Traditional Métis Story About Generosity*, *Relatives With Roots: A Story about Métis Women's Connection to the Land*, and *The Giving Tree: A Retelling of a Traditional Métis Story*. These culturally relevant books focus on Métis children learning valuable cultural lessons from parents and grandparents and they highlight nearly forgotten aspects of Métis culture. These little known aspects of Métis history vividly come to life through Leah Dorion's crisp prose and stunning gallery-quality artwork.

Leah Dorion is also the author of several levelled reader books, recently published by Strong Nations, and she is also the illustrator of Wilfred Burton's book, *Roogaroo Mickey*, published by GDI Press. She is the author of *The Snow Tunnel Sisters*, which was illustrated by her mother, Roberta Dorion. In addition, Leah Dorion has written several academic and cultural resources for adults. She also recently completed her first colouring book.

Leah Dorion works closely with schoolchildren to promote Métis culture through readings, and cultural and artistic workshops. By doing this work, Leah hopes to not only inform children about Métis culture, but encourage them to realize their creative potential as artists and authors.²

Leah Dorion is also a talented visual artist. Her artwork hangs in galleries and private collections across Canada. As with her children's books, Leah's artistic practice focuses on the vibrancy and timelessness of Métis culture, and in particular, focuses on the strength of Métis women as the keepers of Métis culture. Her art is featured on three healthy parenting posters for the Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health in Ottawa and on many book covers. Through the assistance of the Saskatchewan Arts Board, Indigenous Pathways Initiative, Leah Dorion developed an art show to

¹ Marie Toway (L'Ayvoise) (1786-1853) was married according to the "custom of the country" to Pierre Dorion Jr. Of mixed Iowa-French ancestry from the St. Louis, Missouri Territory, she played a key role in securing trade and diplomatic relations between the French-Métis traders and the Iowa Nation. Marie and Pierre had three children: Jean-Baptiste, Margaret, and Paul—all of whom were born and raised in the context of the fur trade. In 1814, while accompanying Pierre on an inland expedition, her husband and his trading party were murdered leaving her to survive the winter by crossing the Blue Hills to find safety for herself and her children. In the spring, Marie and her small children arrived safely at Fort Walla Walla due to her creativity, determination, and courage. In American history, she is acknowledged for her heroism and contributions to fur trade history. Marie later remarried another French-Canadian voyageur and lived a long life. She is the foremother of the Dorions from Cumberland House, Saskatchewan.

² Leah Dorion, "Advice from an Artist: Make and respect a creative space," *Eagle Feather News*, April 21, 2016. <http://www.eaglefeathernews.com/arts/index.php?detail=2065>.

honour Grandmother Turtle. As part of this art show, she built a giant turtle rock effigy on her land.

Leah Dorion is a Métis community activist who is working to revive the age-old Métis lobster tradition. For instance, in a local forest near Prince Albert, Leah, with the help of others in the local Métis community, fashioned a lobster pole from a local pine. The site is now a Métis gathering place and is used for ceremonies. She has also worked with other Métis community members to revive other Métis cultural traditions.

Leah Dorion has also won numerous awards. She was the 2013 recipient of the University of Saskatchewan Alumni Award of Excellence in Culture, Heritage, and Spirituality. In 2012, she was honoured with the Wiichihwayshiwān Arts Award and the First Nations University of Canada Aboriginal Peoples' Publishing Award (Saskatchewan Book Awards) for her book, *The Diamond Willow Walking Stick*. This book has also been awarded a Gold Medal in the 2012 Gelett Burgess Children's Book Awards for outstanding contributions to children's literature. In 2016, her children's book, *My First Métis Lobster* won a Saskatchewan Book Award in the Children's Literature category.

Leah Dorion was also a competitive swimmer and volleyball player who has played on numerous championship teams.