How epic thinking courts a tragic ending

- Toronto Star
- 23 Jul 2017
- NOAH RICHLER Noah Richler is a Toronto writer. His latest book, The Candidate, was nominated for awards for humour and political writing.

Game of Thrones vindicates our view of the world as a hostile place where reason has no reward and relationships are meaningless, Noah Richler writes.

Some time back, giddy on Canada, I travelled the country for a few years chatting to novelists and storytellers. My purpose was to discover, through story, our sense of ourselves. Stories, my researches taught me, are robust, battling things. They are vessels of ideas competing with each other not only through words — call a town Kitchener or Berlin — or their content (Cornwallis as hero or not), but through form.

The stories we tell reflect the way we see the world but also the level of security a community feels. We use creation myths and cautionary tales to explain things as they are, and how to behave, and novels to celebrate the fact of our common humanity. But there is another kind of story that is prospering now, and that is the epic.

The epic is not, as you were likely taught in school, a story that is long and written down. (Whether a myth, epic story or novel is spoken, written down or visually told is totally irrelevant and only a question of technology). The epic sings the virtues of the host society chauvinistically and against others. It is the story form favoured by societies at their most dangerously insecure. It is the kind of story that, historically, comes about when a society enters into fractious contact with another.

Usually, the strife starts because one or the other society has a surplus to spare, or that it covets. Most often, the surplus is of unemployed men and the society to which it belongs — think colonial Europe, today's Russia or North Korea — has a choice to make. It can dress

men as soldiers and spend them in the sort of carnage we remember from the First World War or, if the human surplus is urban and useful to other tasks, go beyond the territory and forcefully acquire (through invasion or "treaties") the resources it needs — fur, cod, oil, land. Either way, aggression follows and epic thinking makes it happen. The epic's view of the world is defined in terms of absolute good (home) and evil (the enemy), and there is no in between. Epics uphold the hero and decry the monster out of necessity because, in their narrators' minds, the community's very being is thought to be under threat.

Whether epic thinking exists to defend the territory or justify the appropriation of someone else's, it glorifies the self and dehumanizes the other. Through its talk of "heroes" and "monsters" ("terrorists," but also "savages" and "colonists"), epic thinking facilitates our disregard of fellow human — and, in wartime, permits us to kill them. Epic thinking makes no friends. It sees no human equivalence.

In the battle the epic is waging, other kinds of storytelling are undermining and a force to be countered. Creation myths that once served a conciliatory purpose (the wilderness as home and Indigenous peoples its steward) become, in this climate, rallying cries of identity with adversarial intent (national parks as colonial crime scenes). Creation stories are ones no one else can possibly understand. And if the novel is offensive, it is because its doctrine of our common humanity erases the very differences epics must uphold — differences held dear because they define the threatened community.

The morality of novel thinking is derived from the imaginative leap writers and then readers make — one only possible because of the novel's belief that each of us is basically alike. And in the myth world (the first environmentalist movement), morality is derived from the land and the understanding that coexistence — not only with fellow humans, but animals and plants and the rock and the water and all the other elements of a world to be thoughtfully shared — is the only way forward. But in the epic story, morality is derived simply from strength.

And if popular culture is a barometer, then we see everywhere now a preponderance of the sort of epic thinking typically infecting politics, its natural habitat. So many of us feel threatened by monsters at the margins of society and at home — shoot that black man, jail that terrorist — epic thinking has become the norm. Gone are successful Hollywood blockbusters such as Kramer vs. Kramer, Ordinary People or The Deer Hunter that, in the distant bygone world before 9/11, explored the inner self through their novel's mindset. Instead, Game of Thrones vindicates our view of the world as a basically hostile place in which reason gathers no reward and human relationships are meaningless. Wonder Woman hands the sabre to a different gender but is just another resuscitation of comic book heroes proliferating in wartime, that crucible of epic thinking.

Hollywood churns out an endless series of mindless, idiot stories of "good" against "evil" and, when it runs out of worlds and universes it imagines devastating us, then it ups the graphic portrayal of violence to retain our anaesthetized interest and buttress the view of bodies as nothing more than blood and guts. (See, for instance, Hacksaw Ridge — its battlefield intestines and gore topping even Saving Private Ryan — and compare it to the pain and thoughtfulness of The Deer Hunter.)

We savage our enemies and resist anything suggesting our foe is like us. Daesh, Russia, Trump; these are all examples I might point to, but the truth of the matter is that in our anxious age we are also generating epic thinking here in Canada. Peruse the social networks (where no one actually encounters anyone else and needs to consider their common humanity) and you will find hatred surmounting any pretence of even the most negligible common experience of, say, "settler" Canadians and First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. Many of the latter groups' most formidably articulate artists, musicians, writers and thinkers — such as Robert Jago, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Hayden King — see the very

survival of their communities as threatened and therefore, that requisite of epic thinking, sing their histories as ones of unbridgeable difference. Thus the battle over the right to a culture seen, in the epic's view, to be as necessary to survival as the land — and as rapaciously appropriated.

Even "reconciliation" is a threat — as I learned at the Nelson Mandela Dialogues concerning historical trauma recently hosted at the Enoch Cree reserve outside Edmonton.

In Canada, there are specific reasons for this. Reconciliation demands expiation — as occurred, elsewhere, in the fall of the Nazis before Nuremberg, or the Cambodian Pol Pot and South African apartheid regimes before those countries' trials and truth and reconciliation commissions.

But, here, there has been no fall and this 42nd Canadian Parliament pushing reconciliation is seen by Indigenous detractors as merely the latest iteration of the same, offend- ing, colonizing party. Reconciliation, or even an Indigenous governorgeneral — read Jago's relief this did not come to pass — is seen as a sop or, worse, a Trojan horse.

Without a fall, the road to repair and away from epic is not impossible, but it is more difficult.

So I don't feel so giddy even about our country these days. And yet I feel it impossible as a Canadian not to be positive. In what other country of the world, for instance, would the real achievement of a 150th birthday party been so magnificently antinationalist and contrary — and, because of this unrelenting and often painful discussion, our very being be strengthened? In what other country would "decolonizing" be the written intent of its Department of Justice? And who, in Canada, is not better off for the extraordinary contributions to the argument made by Jago, Simpson, King and innumerable others previously sidelined?

Let's hoe this path. We'll get back to novel thinking, though only when all communities sharing the territory feel confident and secure. It'll take all of us to make this happen.