

Essay-Wettbewerb 2019/20

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Richard van Camp's Ehtsèe/ Grandpa story

Many old tribes are near to being forgotten or dying out. The Tlicho are one of them. They live in the Northwest Territories in Canada. Very few people know about them, but a Tlicho author, named Richard van Camp, published several books and short story collections, which may introduce the Tlicho to some people. In my essay, I will write about a short story by Richard van Camp, which can be found in the short story collection "Moccasin Square Gardens", published in 2019. First of all, I will introduce you to Richard van Camp. Then I will summarize the short story I will write about and after that, I will focus on the spiritual happenings in the story.

Richard van Camp was born on September 8, 1971. He is a Dogrib Tlicho writer from the Dene Nation from Fort Smith in northern Canada. He is best known for his novel "The Lesser Blessed", which was also filmed. He attended the En'owkin International School of writing and the University of Victoria and obtained his master's degree at the University of British Columbia. Currently, he is teaching creative writing at the British University of Columbia in Vancouver. Van Camp also wrote another novel, named "Whistle" and he published five short story collections. The latest of them is "Moccasin Square Gardens", in which the story I will be focusing on is included.

Now that you have got an idea of who I am talking about, the short story I will be focusing on is "Ehtsèe/ Grandpa". The story is about a Tlicho boy whose family left the Tlicho tribe's community government, Behchoko, because of the violence, and then comes back, not able to communicate with his grandparents, not having learned the language of the Tlicho, although it is his dream to be fluent. In the course of the story, he tries to reconnect with his grandparents and works to help save the Tlicho from being forgotten by the world. There is also much talk in his family about who will be the successor of the boy's grandfather, the medicine man. In the end, the grandfather chooses to give his medicine to the boy over the alcoholic uncles, because he was always friendly to both of the grandparents and, of course, was no alcoholic.

The spiritual aspects of the story especially caught my attention, so I will be writing about them. Now some of you readers might not believe in supernatural phenomena but let us assume they are real. The first reference on something miraculous is when the boy mentions the grandfather's past and says that he "took a hunter's appendix out with his knife. He cured a stutterer. He tied a man's mouth shut over a distance, a man who was spreading lies about us as a family." (Van Camp, 2019, 132). It is very common for a medicine

man to perform such miracles, but many people get misled, thinking the man did this with his power. That is not true, a medicine man has a connection to the “Great Spirit”, as they call it, and the “Great Spirit” acts through the medicine man. Time and again, the boy mentions the grandfather chewing on his pipe but never lighting it. The pipe is handed from one generation to the next. Passing on the pipe means passing on experience, knowledge and the culture of the tribe. When the grandfather gave his pipe to the boy, it was a symbolic gesture, that it was now down to the boy to carry on the legacy of the Tlicho. As the boy’s grandfather was dying, the young man also met his soulmate, and he also had a dream about his grandfather, where the grandfather told him about his daughter. The next day, when the boy woke up, he was in his old lodge. This is very interesting. Either someone could have brought him there, or he got there himself. That someone brought him would be weird, since he was not even living there anymore. So, he must have gotten there himself, which is not that absurd with his heritage.

All the indigenous tribes have always been very connected to nature and have performed many miracles. Richard van Camp wrote many stories that tell us many things and give great insight into the life of the Tlicho nowadays. I admire the Tlicho because they hold on to their traditions and fight against dying out. The boy in the story does that too, with making portraits of the Elders and listening to their stories. Maybe because he is so devoted to his tribe, the grandfather of the boy knew, that giving him the pipe would be the right thing to do. Another example of holding on to their traditions in the story is when the grandfather forbids the boy to go into the sweat lodge because that is not the Tlicho way. In my opinion the Tlicho Nation does not deserve to die out and I hope they will continue to exist. At least the Tlicho will not be forgotten that fast because Richard van Camp wrote these wonderful stories about them.

Bibliography:

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