

## Essay-Wettbewerb 2019/20

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### Representation of the Tłıchq Nation in the works of Richard Van Camp

In this essay I will discuss the Tłıchq Nation and how it is represented in Canadian author Richard Van Camp's short stories. While the first paragraph will give you a brief description of the author, the second will summarize two of his short stories. Following that, the last paragraph will deal with answering my specific research question.

Richard Van Camp is an internationally renowned storyteller and best-selling author. The Canadian is a proud member of the Tłıchq Nation, also known as Dogrib. He is the author of four collections of short stories dealing with the characteristics of the Tłıchq Nations. The Tłıchq people are a Dene First Nations people based primarily in the Northwest Territories, Canada. He is a graduate of the University of Victoria's Creative Writing BFA Program, the En'owkin International School of Writing, and got a Master's Degree in Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia. (*Richard van Camp*, n.d.) Since he started writing, he has published 20 books in over 20 years, covering a far spectrum that ranges from children's picture books to short fiction and graphic novels. Two of his books were made into a film. (*Burt Award*, n.d.) He began his career as an intern on the writing staff of the television series *North of 60*, produced by the CBC (*Albertanative News*, 24. Nov 2016). He is the eldest of four brothers (*Strong Nations*, n.d.). The awards he won range from the Jugendliteraturpreis, an award given by the German government, to the Writer of the Year Award for Children's Literature (*Richard van Camp*, n.d.).

Richard van Camp's latest collection of short stories "Moccasin Square Gardens" includes two short stories called "Grandpa" and "Man babies". They both tell stories that revolve around the ups and downs of members of the Tłıchq Nation. In the first story "Ehtsèe/Grandpa", the narrator, whose name is never mentioned, is having his grandfather over at his house. It is important to mention that the grandfather is a tribesman of the Tłıchq, so it was very likely that he could not speak English at all. In the story, family history and relationships are being outlined, giving the reader a brief overview of the marital status and the family's past. The story continues by giving insights into problematic situations that the Tłıchq people are often confronted with. Serving as an example is the previously mentioned first confrontation of grandfather and grandson. The author writes about their inability to properly communicate with each other, which represents a typical problem for not only the Tłıchq people, but every tribe that does not have a widely used language as its primarily spoken tongue. Throughout the story, the narrator and his grandparents experience a lot of encounters with modern habits. "Man Babies" on the other hand, is a story in which the main character is a grown-up man who relies on others completely. Throughout the entire story, he is referred to as nothing more than a "baby". Van Camp tries

to highlight a situation that quite a few people encounter when experiencing parenthood, namely that their scions do not quit being reliant on them and do not establish a life of their own, in which they could stand on their own feet. The fact that the mother shows unconditional love, no matter how badly her child behaves, is also typical for this type of family situation. As one can expect, the mother's new boyfriend does not get on well with Baby at all.

By reading everyday situations of Dogrib people, one can understand the characteristics of the Tłıchq̓ government very well. In the short stories, the Tłıchq̓ Nation as a whole is represented as a tribe that does not fit into modern society. The Dene appear to be proud people, trying their best to pass down Tłıchq̓ traditions to their descendants. In the story "Ehtsèè" the narrator is being ostentatious, talking about his grandfather tying a man's mouth shut over a distance and curing a stutterer. Concerning their language and their level of technological development, they are described as being very isolated. In both of the stories it often occurs that from time to time tribespeople wander into a more civilized municipality to undergo a medical examination. Coming along is the fact that apart from annual check-up's, they prove to be rather sceptical when dealing with "southern" products or medicine, since they want to prevent losing their traditions at any cost. It also appears that they are very tough people. Nurturing the family seems to be the top priority one has to fulfill, regardless of other interests. Worth mentioning is the extraordinary tradition of presenting the female as the superior gender in this culture. For instance, the grandmother is the one who often makes the final decisions. As with many tribes that encounter modern civilization, alcohol and violence is an issue. In one of the short stories, the majority of the family's men are having severe addictions to alcohol, leading to the disruption of their families. "Booze was eating my family alive", as the narrator described it. By contrast, in "Man Babies" it was laziness that poisoned the family's cohabitation.

All in all, I think that the Tłıchq̓ Nation is a very interesting tribe to read about. I like the fact that the natives maintain a very traditional way of living, neglecting the technological improvements made and in use in today's society. Both stories are very well written, making the experience of learning the Dene's culture even more pleasant.

### **Bibliography (author's biography)**

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