

The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative (Thomas King, 2008).

Sarah Francis

Every good storyteller knows how to capture their audience, keep them interested and leave them wanting more. Although many stories are told for fun or entertainment purposes, according to King, for Indigenous peoples, our stories are who we are; “that’s all we are” (p. 2). “The types of stories can vary from the sacred to the historical, from the cultural traditions to personal life experiences and testimonials” (Archibald, 2008. p. 83). Through five stories, King discusses the importance of the stories you “let loose in the world” (p. 10). “So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. For once a story is told, it cannot be called back” (p. 10). King’s central theme throughout this book is about how the fabricated stories of “Indians” have shaped how the world perceives them. These stories are out there, and they continue to do damage to Indigenous peoples.

King incorporates personal, historical and cultural stories throughout each section of his book. He starts each section with the same story and ends each section with the same story. This is to ensure that not only have we heard the story, but we have heard it more than once. It seems that King has heard the excuse ‘I had no idea’ more than once in his lifetime. He ends each chapter by saying “But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (p. 29). The truth will not always come to us. Sometimes, we need to do our part and find the truth; the real stories.

“You’ll never believe what happened” is always a great way to start

The titles of each section in King's book are very intriguing. The first section is called, "You'll never believe what happened' is always a great way to start." This is a great way to grab the attention of your audience. In this beginning section, King speaks about his childhood and his family. He tells the story about his hard-working mother and his absent father. King acknowledges that there are "worse" stories in the world and that his stories are of no interest to anyone but him. King is simply making the point that our stories are who we are and that they "can control our lives" (p. 9). When our time is finished in this world, the people we leave behind will only have our stories to share and hang on to.

King then shares one of his favourite native creation stories. He then shares a Christian creation story. Each story is different and unique while maintaining the same outcome: the creation of the world. King brings forth an interesting point about each story. King discusses the way "Genesis creates a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies" and the native creation story "celebrates equality and balance" (p. 23). A sacred symbol in Indigenous culture is the circle. The circle represents many different teachings to Indigenous peoples; "however, a common goal has been to attain a mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature, and the Spirit World" (Archibald, 2008. p. 11). The circle represents equality among all of us. We are taught to take care of our Mother the Earth. It is the responsibility of everyone who lives here to protect the land, water, animals, plants, etc. The idea that any one being is above any other is not a way to live in harmony.

You’re Not the Indian I Had in Mind

What does an Indian look like? What did you picture in your mind when you read that question? King's second section of his book is titled "You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind." We live in a society where Indigenous peoples have to ultimately prove that they are Indigenous. If you are not in regalia, if you do not have feathers in your hair, if your hair is not dark and long or if you "were not born on a reserve or speak your language fluently" (p. 55) then you are not Indigenous. King discusses how "Indians" are "meant" to look according to society. Maybe even according to Indigenous people. We all, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, "are forced to play a racial-reality game" (p. 55). Where are you from? What percent are you? Do you practice any of your culture and/or traditions? How absurd are these questions? Do we ask any other race these questions?

King's shared stories and experiences about the way "Indians" are "supposed to look and act" certainly hit home. Especially his description of the "middle-class Indians," which he classifies himself to be. He explains that middle-class Indians have a lesser chance than non-Indians of being incarcerated or being thrown into the trunk of a police car and left in the middle of nowhere. An Indigenous person who is educated, living off-reserve and working in a respected field will survive. They will survive because society does not view them as "Indians." Indians are uneducated, poor, unemployed and destined to live on-reserve forever. These are the stories that have been shared. These are the stories that society has come to accept and believe.

Let Me Entertain You

Throughout this section of King's book, many historical events are represented. King speaks of the Indian found behind a

slaughterhouse in Oroville, NC in 1911, the massacre of the Wiyots in 1860 by a group of white men, the Boston Tea Party, the arrival of Columbus in 1492, the kidnapping of nearly 50 Indians by Gaspar Corte Real in 1505 and many more. While intertwining historical events with his own personal stories, King is able to “call attention to the cultural distance that separated Europeans and Indians” (p. 78). “Indians could offer little inspiration or example to civilized humans, and colonists saw little need to examine either the Indian or Indian culture” (p. 77). More and more truths are arising about the atrocious and inhumane ways that Indigenous peoples were treated and continue to be treated today. Indigenous peoples were considered to be “savages” and of no use to society. “After three centuries of trying to eradicate Indians, Europeans suddenly became interested in Indians” (p. 78). This, of course, speaks to the title of this section, “Let Me Entertain You.”

King shares a story about a time when he was invited to speak on a panel. After sharing his stories, he and the other presenters left the stage. While two of the gentleman received envelopes with money in them, King and the “Mohawk guy” did not. The woman handing out the envelopes explained that the other men received money because “they’re the experts” (p. 66). It is an interesting perspective that continues to ring true today that just because you are Indigenous, it does not make you an expert on your own culture, traditions, and language. The non-Indigenous person with an education is considered to be more of an expert on Indigenous peoples. King states, “As long as I dressed like an Indian and complained like an Indian, I was entertainment. But if I dressed like a non-Indian and reasoned like a non-Indian, then not only was I not entertainment, I wasn’t Indian” (p. 68). Society tends to dictate who “real Indians” are and society also tends to determine who the

experts on Indigenous peoples are. It couldn't possibly be Indigenous peoples themselves, right?

A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark

This section starts off with quotes from Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Silko. Her quotes are about stories and how important they are. "You don't have anything/If you don't have the stories" (p. 92). Indigenous culture is primarily based on oral storytelling; generation after generation of stories passed down. Indigenous stories were not written down and therefore "lack an inherent sophistication." (p. 100). King describes oral tradition "like an old skin" (p. 100). In other words, it is assumed by non-Indigenous peoples that oral stories lack purpose and are left behind. King quotes passages from Kiowa writer N. Scott Momaday and his novel *House Made of Dawn*. Momaday describes the words from his Kiowa grandmother as "medicine." "They were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning. They were beyond price; they could neither be bought nor sold. And she never threw her words away" (p. 100). The magic and emotion that these words emit speaks volumes about the importance and the need for oral literature. We must continue to honour oral literature through storytelling. Words are powerful. They can change lives. Just because a story is not written down does not mean it is untrue or not valuable.

An interesting point made by King is how "contemporary Native writers have shown little interest in using the past as a setting, preferring instead to place their fictions in the present" (p.105). He has a suspicion that this is because the "North American version of the past was too well populated, too well defended" (p. 105). This is a valid suspicion as there are many people who still believe the

inaccurate stories about the "Indians." For King, this raises the question, who are Native writers writing for? Are Indigenous writers writing for Indigenous peoples or for Non-Indigenous peoples? Or both? There are many Indigenous peoples who are only now learning about the histories of their ancestors. Indigenous writers need to include the past to make sense of the present. It is due to colonialism, intergenerational trauma and Indian residential schooling that many Indigenous peoples and communities are suffering.

The title of this section, "A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark," comes from a novel called, *Porcupines and China Dolls*, written by Robert Alexie. Alexie does not spend much time explaining the history of Indian residential schools. Instead, he advises the audience that it is "important to know the people, where they came from and what they went through" (p. 116). Sometimes the audience needs to do a bit of their own research before continuing on with a story. "When speaking with people from another culture it often takes longer to explain the context, background or meaning of a story than it does to actually tell the story" (Wilson, 2008. p. 7). It would not be ideal for a writer or storyteller to spend time explaining every single event that is mentioned. Alexie gives a brief overview of Indian residential schooling then moves on to tell the story about James Nathan's and Jake Noland's return from Aberdeen Residential School. This was a place where:

"[T]he girls had been scrubbed and powdered to look like china dolls and the boys had been scrubbed and sheared to look like porcupines...when the children cried at night, the sound was like a million porcupines crying in the dark" (p. 116).

King states that “Native writers are particularly keen on the return of the Native” (p. 116). These types of stories give hope to Indigenous peoples. Alexie’s novel is not about residential schooling. It is about two Indigenous men’s return and what happens to them after. These stories are needed. These stories are important to Indigenous peoples’ survival. These are stories “that help keep me alive” (p. 119).

What Is It About Us That You Don’t Like?

In the final section, King tells us a story about the Coyote and the Ducks. This is a story about how we take and take and take and are never truly satisfied. It is a story that you need to read. This is an attempt to encourage you to read this book. The point of this particular story is to speak about the way we like to tell ourselves that “injustices and atrocities have all happened in the past” and “we won’t make that mistake again” (p. 127). Injustices and atrocities are still happening today. It seems we have not learned from our mistakes and we are not more compassionate. King speaks to the treaties made with the Indians and the Whites. He explains that even though the Whites continue to steal more and more land, they are never happy. Just like the Coyote in the story kept coming back for more and more feathers, Whites will continue to steal more land, “For he has an insatiable appetite” (p. 129).

King discussed the many legislations that have come and gone concerning Indigenous peoples. He describes legislation as having two basic goals. “One, to relieve us of our land, and two, to legalize us out of existence” (p. 130). Interesting statement. Even though some legislation had “good” intentions, how is that the

government gave themselves so much control over Indigenous peoples? While discussing Bill C-31 and the U.S. Indian Arts and Crafts Act, King points out that the government is taking it upon themselves to decide “whom will we allow to be an Indian” (p. 139). What is their definition of an “Indian”? The government is doing a great job of slowly getting rid of "status-Indians." Through their rules about a culture that is not their own, Indigenous peoples are losing their rights and “legal status” (p. 144).

“What is it about us that you don’t like?” King poses this question many times throughout this final section of his book. What is it about Indigenous peoples that has the government so concerned about their existence? “There’s not an Italian Act that defines who is and who is not an Italian. Or a Russian Act. Or a Greek Act”. (p. 148). In no other culture does it matter whom you marry, you will not lose your “cultural identity” (p.149). King (2012) discusses similar thoughts by suggesting:

“Instead of trying to kill the Indian to save the child, North America might have gone into partnership with the various nations, and, together, they could have come up with an education plan that would have complemented Native cultures and, perhaps, even enriched White culture at the same time” (p. 119).

It makes you wonder how different the world would be had the two cultures worked together. Our Mother the Earth would most likely be in a better condition. Our Indigenous peoples would likely not be secluded to designated areas or suffering from trauma, disease, and forms of abuse. Unfortunately, this is something we will never know. But it does make you wonder.

Conclusion

King does an excellent job speaking to the truth that stories carry. This book is part of the Massey Lectures Series that was broadcast in November 2003 as part of CBC Radio's Ideas series. The oral lectures are beautiful and should be listened to. Indigenous history is one that needs to be shared and heard by all. King's playful and funny dialogue about his personal stories along with his serious take on Indigenous peoples and what they've gone through and continue to go through, makes this book one that will stay with you. It is a book that you will want to read over and over, each time gaining new teachings and learning new stories. Indigenous people are not bad people. They are protectors of our Mother the Earth and all of her children. "After some five hundred years of vigorous encouragement to assimilate and disappear, we're still here" (p. 128). If we were to ever "get rid of the Indian problem" then "who would sing for us? Who will dance for us? Who will remind us of our relationship to the earth? Who will tell our stories?" (p. 151) Indigenous peoples have a truth that needs to be told and heard. "All Canadian children and youth deserve to know Canada's honest history, including what happened in the residential schools, and to appreciate the rich history and knowledge of Indigenous nations who continue to make such a strong contribution to Canada" (Fontaine, 2016, p. 162). King offers many opportunities through his writing to learn about historical events. This is a well written and engaging book. I am truly grateful for King's literature both written and oral.

References

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Sarah Francis is Wolastoqiyik from Neqotkuk. She recently graduated with a Masters degree in Education from UNB. Sarah has worked with Margaret Kress on developing a Land Based Pedagogy for New Brunswick, and is currently working with the Mi'kmaq Wolastoqey Centre on developing experientially-based learning. She is dedicated to sharing her language, culture and traditions with all people.

Correspondence information not provided