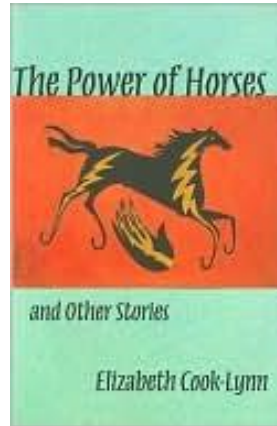


About the Book



Elizabeth Cook-Lynn. *The Power of Horses and Other Stories*. New York: Arcade Publishing. Little, Brown & Company, 1990.

Synopsis

Cook-Lynn, an enrolled member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, became one of the leading Indian Studies scholars in the world with her teaching and writing. Her storytelling is at its best in this collection of short stories, which together provide a panoramic picture of her Dakota people and their struggles to adapt to changing times and often tragic circumstances. An especially accessible and engaging text, this book constitutes an important part of the history of the plains.

Summary of the Book

One of the leading American Indian Studies scholars in the world, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is also an accomplished poet and a writer of evocative and informative short and long fictions. In all of her writings, she is a consummate storyteller, and her storytelling is at its best in *The Power of Horses and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories which together tell a whole story of her Dakota people and their struggles to adapt to changing times and often tragic circumstances.

Most of the narratives in this collection are quite brief, but they are richly textured with vivid imagery and multi-sensory descriptions, and so they have the experiential effect of longer narratives. Cook-Lynn also has an ear for human conversation, and so the dialogue, which punctuates most of her stories, is both believable and highly informative.

The book begins with a “Prologue,” which is a prose poem naming change and some of its consequences, and a prelude narrative entitled “Mahpiyato,” which describes a grandmother speaking lovingly to her granddaughter about the beauty of the earth, encouraging her to look closely to truly see and teaching her the language to describe what she sees. Her voice is that of the storyteller and story-keeper, and it establishes the tenor for the stories which follow.

One of the most engaging of these stories is “A Visit from Reverend Tileston,” in which a gaggle of Christians invades the home of a tribal family with disastrous consequences. The tone of this story is predominantly comic bordering on hilarious, yet its implications are tragic, demonstrating the emotional range of the author. Its companion story, “The Clearest Blue Day,” dramatizes the missionary presence among tribal people from a different angle of vision, as it portrays a young missionary woman with considerable sympathy and compassion. Both stories are vivid depictions of what logically occurs when one society attempts to impose its philosophies and values upon another society. They are both reminders of the sorry history of this region and suggestive of how important it is for majority society institutions, religious and otherwise, to learn from that history and proceed more appropriately in their interactions with tribal people and communities.

Another main focus in this book is family relationship. “A Family Matter” and “Last Days of a Squaw Man” dramatize the dysfunction which is a consequence of the destruction of tribal systems and ways of being, but it is also apparent throughout these narratives that the traditional tribal ideas of family are still in the hearts and minds of many people and therefore available to be reclaimed. “Bennie,” the concluding story, is an especially good example of the power and beauty of family presence, and it gives the collection symmetry, reminiscent as it is of the family connectedness dramatized by the grandmother-granddaughter dynamic which begins the story sequence.

Finally, while there are many memorable human characters in these stories, horses are arguably of equal importance in them. In the traditional world of the plains tribes, horses were not just providers of essential services, but also inspirational relatives whose well-being was important for spiritual as well as practical reasons, and that dynamic is frequently evident in this collection. Most importantly, the “power of horses” of the book title is the power and promise of the earth, and in the title and in a number of the other narratives, the manifest importance of right relationship with the whole earth is convincingly conveyed.

The Power of Horses and Other Stories is an especially accessible and engaging text, and an important part of the whole story of the plains. It is an excellent source book for all of those who should be interested in understanding foundational things about the tribal people of this region, and it is also a thought-provoking presentation of human behaviors, a presentation which has many contemporary applications, given today’s emphasis on “globalization” and the attendant need for people of diverse cultures to better communicate with and understand each other.

Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).

<http://library.sd.gov/PROG/sdbookbag/index.aspx>