

The Fencepost Chronicles Short Guide

The Fencepost Chronicles by W. P. Kinsella

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Characters

The characters of Silas Ermineskin and Frank Fencepost unify the various stories in *The Fencepost Chronicles*. As in Kinsella's other North American Indian stories, Silas serves as narrator; here, he recounts Frank Fencepost's deadpan trickery and entrepreneurial shenanigans. As Silas says, teaching Frank to read was a mistake because "it opened up to him about a hundred more ways to get into trouble." In "Beef," for example, after learning that the government's Treaty 11 grants the reserve forty bulls and four thousand cattle, Frank forges Father Alphonse's name to a letter requesting the cattle. A government clerk makes a mistake and instead of shipping four hundred cattle a month, four thousand cattle and forty bulls arrive at the same time. The reserve at Hobbema, the closest town, is inundated with cattle. While most of the Indians either sell the cattle at a profit or butcher them, Frank decides that he and Silas can use the cattle for advertising purposes by tying sheets over them with a company's name on the sheets and then let the cows graze along the highway. After being thrown out of six businesses, Frank says that his idea is "fifty years ahead" of its time and sells his cattle to buy a VCR.

In "Indian Joe," Frank runs amok in the Intercontinental Loan Company's computer center, which is operated by Silas's white brother-in-law, Robert M. McVey (who fell victim to Silas and Frank in "Illianna Comes Home" in *The Moccasin Telegraph*). In "The Practical Education of Constable B. B. Bobowski," Frank retrains Sergeant Cujo, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police dog trained to sniff out illegal whiskey on the reserve, and Sergeant Cujo embarrasses Bobowski in front of her superiors.

In *The Fencepost Chronicles*, Frank sometimes succeeds and at other times fails in his clashes with the white world. While his victories underscore the native American determination to survive, his failures are less than tragic because of Frank's stoical sense of humor.

Social Concerns/Themes

As in *Dance Me Outside* (1977), *Scars* (1978), *Born Indian* (1981), and *The Moccasin Telegraph* (1983), *The Fencpost Chronicles* deals with the plight of native Americans. Kinsella focuses especially on the Crees living in Canada, who are often in conflict with the white world, represented by bigoted Canadian police, pompous bureaucrats, unscrupulous businessmen, and selfrighteous religious sects. Not all conflicts are with whites; Chief Tom Croweye and his girlfriend Samantha Yellowknees wish to impose white values and customs on the Cree. These stories are variations on the continuing war between red and white cultures. In *The Fencpost Chronicles*, cultural conflicts emphasize the native American determination to survive through deadpan trickery and sense of humor, especially when Frank Fencpost is involved. Kinsella has said that any oppressed group survives by making fun of the oppressor.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

While the framework of *The Fencpost Chronicles* suggests Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Kinsella's narrator, Silas Ermineskin, recalls Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* and J. D. Salinger's *Holden Caulfield*. All are concerned with telling the truth and trying to understand the world around them. Not as cultured or sophisticated as Holden, Silas is closer to Huck's primitive nature; neither is corrupted by people or their experiences.

The Fencpost Chronicles is Kinsella's fifth collection of native American stories. All are narrated by Silas Ermineskin and set on the Hobbema Reserve.

These unifying devices, along with the reappearance of characters in the later stories, creates a novelistic "world," reminiscent of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, or William Kennedy's Albany, New York.

On a more universal level, *The Fencpost Chronicles* belongs to the novelistic tradition in the American novel of the classic confrontation between European and native American cultures. Instead of fighting with rifles and tomahawks, Frank Fencpost uses government loopholes and a sense of humor to defeat the whites. However, as with Kinsella's other native American tales, both sides win a share of the battles.



Related Titles

The Fencepost Chronicles is narrated by Silas Ermineskin, an eighteen-year-old Cree living on the Hobbema Reserve in northern Canada. Similarly, the narratives reintroduce Silas's friends who appear in the other stories: Frank Fencepost, Silas's closest friend; Connie Big Charles, Frank's girlfriend; Said One-wound, Silas's girlfriend; Mad Etta, the reserve's four-hundred pound Medicine Lady who has an affinity for Lethbridge Pale Ale; the militant Bedelia Coyote who belongs to organizations that range from "Save the Whales" and "Free the Prisoners" to "Stop Acid Rain" and "Stop the Missiles"; Louis Coyote and his ancient but reliable pickup truck; and Silas's sisters Delores and Illianna. As in Kinsella's other story collections, The Fencepost Chronicles trace the clash between Indian and white cultures and reveal internal tribal conflicts by examining the attitudes of native Americans like Chief Tom Crow-eye, Samantha Yellowknees, and Yogarth Running Eagle, who prefer the white world.

This collection focuses primarily on Frank Fencepost, the reserve's practical joker and entrepreneur, and who, says Silas in *The Moccasin Telegraph*, the class at Wetaskiwin Tech School voted the "student most likely to get murdered."

Although Frank Fencepost was the central focus in an earlier story, "Where the Wild Things Are," (*The Moccasin Telegraph*) here he is the central focus of the entire collection, which makes it more humorous and less poignant than Kinsella's earlier collections.



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