

The Moccasin Telegraph Short Guide

The Moccasin Telegraph by W. P. Kinsella

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Characters

The narrator and unifying element in the stories is eighteen-year-old Silas Ermineskin, who studies tractor repair at the Wetaskiwin Tech School but who is also apprenticed to Mad Etta, the reservation's four-hundred-pound medicine lady. In this sense, Silas has ties to both worlds, the white technological world and the Indians' old way of life. Silas's loyalty is, however, to his red world, and when the two worlds collide, Silas makes his stand.

In "The Ballad of the Public Trustee," old Buffalo Joe dies and leaves his farm to Silas, but because there is no will, Silas loses the land to a computerfarming conglomerate through legal and bureaucratic shenanigans. Realizing that he cannot fight an impersonal bureaucracy and win, Silas steals a bulldozer and razes Joe Buffalo's cabin, corral, barn and granaries. In "Where the Wild Things Are," Silas, urged and aided by trickster Frank Fencepost, poses as certified Indian hunting guides to hornswoggle some Alabama white men, and the results are hilarious. In "Fugitives," Silas devises the plan for hiding Grover Manybears, the founder of Canadian Indians for Freedom, who has been unjustly accused of shooting two Royal Canadian Mounted Policemen. At the same time, Silas can be awed by his Indian heritage as he is in "The Moccasin Telegraph," and at other times he is chagrined as he is in "The Bottle Queen" when his alcoholic father steals money from Delores.

Silas's sister.

Social Concerns

Although the narrator, Silas Ermineskin, is a Cree Indian living on the Hobbema Reserve in Canada, these stories deal with the plight of all North American Indians who are still and often unjustly treated by whites ranging from sternly bigoted Royal Canadian Mounted Police constables to pompous bureaucrats who, in "The Queen's Hat," are referred to as a "carload of suits." Intermixed in the stories are the conflicts between the reservation Indians and representatives of the American Indian Movement (AIM) whom the reservation Indians call "Assholes in Moccasins." There are also oblique references to the grim reality of reservation life and alcoholism, unemployment, suicides, and violent deaths. At the same time, as the Indian and white worlds collide, there is a sense of loss, especially in terms of the Indians' heritage and way of life.



Techniques

Within *The Moccasin Telegraph*, each story has its beginning, middle, and end, but because Silas is the unifying element, the various plots and characters dovetail into each other while at the same time revealing interesting insights into both the Indian and white world. Moreover, each world contains its share of good and evil, saints and sinners. These techniques not only underscore the humor and the tragedy that are part of life, but they also make for interesting reading.

Themes

In one sense, these Indian stories are variations of the continuing war, metaphorical, of course, between the white and the red man and evident in some of the stories like "The Ballad of the Public Trustee," "Where the Wild Things Are," "The Mother's Dance," and "The Queen's Hat." Through Kinsella's combination of the tragic with the comic, however, a more contemporary theme emerges: the sheer determination of the Indians to survive through humor, mutual help and love, deadpan trickery, and an appreciation for the old ways of life.

Literary Precedents

The framework for the stories suggests Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and Anderson's narrator, George Willard. Unlike Winesburg, Ohio, with its more somber tone and its "grotesques," Kinsella's stories, because of their humor, are lighter and more entertaining to read. Yet, both Winesburg, Ohio and Kinsella's Cree Indian stories are basically about the encroachment of civilization and what happens when worlds collide. In addition, eighteen-year-old Silas Ermineskin recalls his two famous narrator-predecessors: Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield. Interestingly enough, although older than Huck, Silas, because he is an Indian and despite his attending school, is closer to Huck's primitive state; although older than Holden, Silas, again because he is an Indian, is not as worldly wise or sophisticated as Holden. Huck, Holden, and Silas are basically concerned, however, with understanding the world and determining their place within it, and all three experience both good and evil. Similar to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), *The Moccasin Telegraph* relies on the interesting technique of reporting life through the eyes of a youth.

In a larger sense, *The Moccasin Telegraph* is cast in the western novel tradition with the classic confrontation being between the white and the red man. Although no pitched battles with rifles and tomahawks are fought, there are battles with the whites using their laws and bureaucracies and the Indians tearing out culverts to keep white sightseers away or using deadpan trickery to carry the day. In Kinsella's world, sometimes the whites win; sometimes the Indians win.

Related Titles

Preceding *The Moccasin Telegraph* were *Dance Me Outside* (1977), *Scars* (1978), and *Born Indian* (1981), all short story collections with Silas Ermineskin as narrator. Also figuring prominently in these stories are Silas's friends — Frank Fencepost, Bedelia Coyote, Sadie One-wound, Mad Etta, and other residents of Hobbema Reserve in Alberta, Canada. The conflicts between the white and red world continue, and the results are either comic or tragic. As with *The Moccasin Telegraph* these earlier stories are entertaining and reveal rather than preach about the world's injustices and absurdities.



Copyright Information

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