

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

### 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.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What seems to be the predominant tone of voice throughout this book?
2. Which of the characters in this book interest you the most? Why?
3. Character pairings are important characterization devices. Which of the character pairings in the book are especially good examples of that?
4. How effective is the book title, and how revealing are the titles of the individual stories?
5. What are some of the truths of male-female relationships dramatized in these stories?
6. What are some of the truths of youth-age relationships dramatized in these stories?
7. Which images recur throughout the book? Why?
8. How effective is the author in her use of dialogue?
9. What might Christians learn from the Christianity depicted in this collection? To what extent is that understanding of Christianity still operative in today’s world?
10. What does this text reveal about attitudes toward military service among tribal peoples? Given their histories, what might motivate tribal people to enlist in the military as frequently as they do?
11. Why are horses so central to some of the narratives in this collection? How might tribal attitudes toward horses differ from the attitudes of mainstream society?
12. Which other creatures are important to the action in this collection? What are their roles?
13. What does this collection suggest are some of the consequences of loss of earth relationship?
14. Which story in the collection is your favorite? Why?
15. Which is your least favorite? Why?
16. Which story has the most potential for development into a novel? Why?
17. How do you feel about how these stories are sequenced? Is it effective? If so, why? If not, what would be a better sequence?
18. What does humor contribute to the total effect of this collection? Where it is employed, how appropriate is it?
19. What does the collection suggest are the biggest philosophical differences between tribal people and non-Indians? Can these differences be resolved? If so, what might be some strategies for resolving them?
20. Would you recommend this text to other readers? Why or why not?

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn is an enrolled member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe. She was born in Fort Thompson, and raised on the reservation. She did her undergraduate work at South Dakota State University, graduating with a B.A. in English and Journalism, and she later studied at New Mexico State University and Black Hills State University and obtained her Masters of Education from the University of South Dakota in Education, Psychology, and Counseling. She did doctoral work at the University of Nebraska and was a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellow at Stanford University. She taught in high schools in South Dakota and New Mexico and then had a long career as Professor of English and Native American Studies at Eastern Washington University, retiring in 1990 as Professor Emerita. She is a founding editor of an academic journal, Wicazo Sa Review, and in retirement she has been a visiting professor at universities around the country, including the University of California at Davis and Arizona State University. She has authored novels and books of poetry and essays, and her collection of essays entitled Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner: A Tribal Voice was awarded the Myers Center Award for the Study of Human Rights in North America in 1997. She has also received the 2007 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas, the Literary Contribution Award from the Mountain Plains Library Association, the South Dakota Living Indian Treasure Award, and the Distinguished Native American Alumnus Award from the Native American Club at South Dakota State University. Since 1993, she has served as mentor for the Oak Lake Tribal Writers' Society, a statewide organization of writers committed to culture-based writing. She now lives in retirement in Rapid City, South Dakota.

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