

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve. The Trickster and the Troll. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

### SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

South Dakota has a long history of mostly unacknowledged cultural diversity. From at least the time of the so-called “Indian wars,” ethnic and racial polarization has been the norm, especially in regard to tribal and majority society people. In a poem called “Neighbors” by South Dakota Poet Laureate David Allan Evans, there is this line: “They live alone together.” The poem is about a couple living together but estranged from each other, but it applies equally well to the two main groups of people in South Dakota.

We live alone together.

Consequently, most of our high school and even college students graduate with predominantly mono-cultural perspectives. This circumstance is remarkable, given the old and rich cultures that reside here. It is also terribly ironic, given the increasing need for cross-cultural understanding in this era of dramatically increasing globalization. Our students, and indeed our entire citizenry, could benefit greatly from acquiring bi-cultural and multicultural perspectives.

What is needed now more than ever, therefore, is the bridging of cultures, and books are of course a primary means of accomplishing such bridgings. Books at their best help us to understand the minds and hearts of the so-called “other,” and in the process we acquire what may be the most important of human qualities, which is empathy. As the American poet Emily Dickinson wrote, “There is no frigate like a book.”

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve’s The Trickster and the Troll is an exceptionally good frigate, and an exceptionally good bridge book. Written especially for young people, it is a book for people of all ages. Drawing upon both her Lakota culture and her husband’s Norwegian heritage, Sneve dramatizes the two ways of thinking and being in highly entertaining and informative ways. She adds imaginative plotting to well-known stories about the Lakota trickster figure Iktomi and Norwegian trolls and other myth figures to create a very thought-provoking narrative.

The Trickster and the Troll is set in the nineteenth century time of terrible troubles for the Lakota and other indigenous peoples. The great buffalo herds have been decimated, and the people of the buffalo culture are being driven from their homelands by gold miners and immigrants and the federal troops sent to ensure their success. Likewise, the traumas of displacement from Europe to America are dramatized in this narrative—both the pain of departure from the old country and the emotional difficulties attendant to adjusting to a new land. Troll is the vehicle of expressing all of this newcomer angst. He has been prevailed upon by an anxious mother in Norway to accompany her sons and her daughter as they emigrate to America, only to be rejected by the young Norwegians because they fear that the culture and belief system which he represents are irrelevant to them now, and perhaps even impediments to their progress in the new land.

Despite these honest and informative portraits of the difficult times of the era, however, there is an impressive range of emotion in this book, and its predominate tone is comic. The author demonstrates throughout the narrative that humor is survival, through her stories of the continuing adventures and misadventures of Iktomi, and through her

stories of his often hilarious interactions with Troll and their eventual adventures together. The places where the laughter dies are the emotional low points of the book, and when the laughter returns, as it must and always does, the spirits of the book's characters are restored.

The author also shows her mastery of narrative technique in the sequencing of the novel's events. She employs the intercalary technique of alternating chapters in much of the sequence, with some chapters focusing on Iktomi and his people and some chapters focusing on Troll and the Norwegian people. In other chapters, however, the two narrative lines are intertwined, and the integration of the two stories is complete in the final chapters, as the narrative moves toward its culminating scenes.

The author also demonstrates her masterful storytelling throughout this book, both in her re-telling of well-known trickster stories and in her creation of the new stories of the adventures of the book's two protagonists together. Early in the narrative, for example, she re-tells the story of Iktomi and the ducks, perhaps the best known of all of the Iktomi stories, but she tells it in a new way, adding Troll to the plot so artfully that his presence enriches the telling. Then, especially later in the narrative, she creates new adventures for her two protagonists that are both highly entertaining and psychologically consistent with whom they are becoming in relationship with each other.

Events, of course, take and even make place, and the setting in this book is especially important to its crucial theme of cultural persistence. The main movement in The Trickster and the Troll is from east to west, from the farmland of what is now eastern South Dakota to the buffalo plains and then the mountains to the west, and as the narrative unfolds, it becomes a moving evocation of landscape, especially the sacred landscape of the Lakota which is He Sapa, sometimes called Paha Sapa, and, more recently, the Black Hills. The earth itself becomes a very vital character, perhaps the most important character, in this culture-based text.

Finally, the book is a dramatization and even a celebration of cross-cultural possibilities. Its protagonists are in most ways opposites, and at the outset they are foreign and even alien to each other, but expediency dictates that they find ways to get along, and somehow, they do. How they eventually move from tolerance to acceptance and even appreciation of each other's cultures and traditions as well as each other's differences in personality and temperament is both informative and heartening. This is a straightforward and very accessible narrative, but its messages are thought-provoking and meaningful.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is "culture"?
2. How might a tribal definition of "culture" differ from definitions of "American culture"? Why?
3. The trickster is a common figure in many cultures. What are some examples from American culture? From other cultures?
4. The troll also has relatives in other cultures. What are some of those, and how do they compare to and contrast with the troll in this book?
5. What are some of the specific historical events alluded to in this text? How widely known are they?

6. What are “oral traditions”? How are they demonstrated in this text?
  7. Are you significantly influenced by oral traditions? Should you be?
  8. What are the dominant vehicles for storytelling in the contemporary world?
- How does contemporary storytelling compare to storytelling of other times?
9. Is “history” storytelling? Should it be? Why or why not?
  10. Why do most South Dakotans know so little about American Indian histories and cultures?
  11. Is the past “past”? Should it be?
  12. How might the history of this region be made into more of a usable memory?
  13. Which of the issues raised in this text are still issues today? Why?
  14. What are some differences between American Indian and non-Indian philosophies of the earth? How are they dramatized in this text?
  15. How do you define “humor”? How is it defined and how does it function in this text?
  16. In her “Author’s Note,” the author observes, “Today there is an awareness that we live in a multicultural nation.” Do you think that awareness of which she speaks is common among South Dakotans? Why or why not?
  17. Do you know of other “bridge” books? If so, how do they compare and contrast with this one?
  18. South Dakota is predominately bi-cultural, American Indian and Euro-American. What are some other cross-cultural dynamics in our state?
  19. How is the recent influx of immigrants from other countries affecting South Dakota society and culture?
  20. Would you recommend this text to other readers? Why or why not?

### **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve was born and raised on the Rosebud Reservation and is an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. She attended Bureau of Indian Affairs schools and graduated from St. Mary’s Indian School for Girls in Springfield in 1950. She received B.S. and M.S. degrees from South Dakota State University and then taught high school and junior high school English, speech and drama, and music in White and Pierre and at the Flandreau Indian School, and she later served as a counselor at Rapid City Central High School and as an associate instructor of Oglala Lakota college. Her first book was published in 1972, and she has published 25 books and numerous short stories, articles, and poems. She has also received numerous honors and awards, including the National Endowment for the Humanities Medalist Award from President Clinton, the Writer of the Year Award from the Western Heritage Hall of Fame, the South Dakota Governor’s Award in the Arts for distinction in Creative Achievement, the Golden Spur Award from the Western Writers of American for The Trickster and the Troll, the South Dakota Living Indian Treasure Award, and the Native American Prose Award from the University of Nebraska Press. She is married to Vance M. Sneve, and they have three children and five grandchildren and are living in retirement in Rapid City.

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