
Richard Van Camp. *Moccasin Square Gardens*. Douglas & McIntyre, 2019. 160 pp. ISBN: 9781771622165.

www.douglas-mcintyre.com/book/moccasin-square-gardens

The stories of Tlicho writer Richard Van Camp tend to alternate between the sentimental and the sinister. Frequently they also are funny and/or sexy. He established this pattern with his first collection in 2002, *Angel Wing Splash Pattern*, and it continues with his latest, award-winning short-story collection, *Moccasin Square Gardens*, which won the 2020 Alberta Literary Awards' Georges Bugnet Award for Fiction.

The sinister element is the most compelling in *Moccasin Square Gardens*. Two stories will create interest in Van Camp's next graphic novel project. "The Wheetago Wars I: Lying in Bed Together" and "The Wheetago Wars II: Summoners" tell of a near-future when monstrous forces have been awakened by the environmental degradation created by resource exploitation. After spending the night with the narrator of "Lying in Bed Together," a beautiful female messenger from the future tells him, "These Wheetago are older than Christ, and they have been counting on our greed as humans to warm the Earth so they can return" (50). The Wheetago are called "Body Eaters," and the narrator, with the help of the messenger, has visions of their arrival; the consequences of that event are described in "Summoners" in fractured, violent imagery of humans struggling for survival.

These stories are part of a project intended as a series of graphic novels that, according to Van Camp, will be "far more terrifying and far more hilarious" than *The Walking Dead* (Black). Other stories in the cycle are included in *Godless but Loyal to Heaven* (2012) and *Night Moves* (2015).

Another short story from *Moccasin Square Gardens* that belongs in the sinister category is "I Am Filled with a Trembling Light." This story participates in a common theme for Van Camp: justice (or revenge) against those who victimize members of their own community. Another common theme found in this story is the struggle within a Native community between the use and misuse of traditional or spiritual medicine. In it, a young man who is dying from cancer seeks reprieve from a debt owed to a notorious criminal, and, in the process, he turns the medicine back on the criminal and onto a police officer who has hurt young people in his community. The story has interesting twists and continues Van Camp's exploration of how members of an oppressed community oppress others.

"The Promise" and "Man Babies" are stories from the sentimental category. They continue the Van Camp pattern of telling stories of male competition or friendship; his male-female relationships are almost always romantic. I deem the two stories sentimental because, by the end of such stories, the differences between characters are resolved, frequently with hugs and declarations of affection. "The Promise" tells of the resolution of a years-long conflict between best friends, and "Man Babies" tells of a conflict between a man and his spoiled, adult stepson.

The term "sentimental" in criticism often is used as a pejorative, but I do not mean it that way. Imagining resolutions to real-world problems and acknowledging emotions are important in the social work of literature. Even though the sentimental stories of *Moccasin Square Gardens* are not as effective as those from earlier collections—for instance, "Show Me Yours" and "Dogrib Midnight Runners" from *The Moon of Letting Go* (2009)—Van Camp's stories remain committed to imagining paths through hardship and ways to heal broken relationships. He imagines better lives for people in the communities of the Northwest Territories that he has spent his career writing about.

Finally, "Aliens" is perhaps more interesting for what it does not do rather than what it does. It sets up an intriguing context for the story but does not elaborate, despite the world-changing impact of that context. "Star People" have arrived and hover over the world in dark "obelisks" (11) (perhaps in an allusion to Ted Chiang's novella "Story of Your Life" on which the film *Arrival* was based). The visitors are cleansing the oceans, it seems, but the humans are not sure what else they are doing: "Most people just watch TV or Facebook now, waiting for something to happen" (11). The rest of the story is about a romantic encounter between two characters, Shandra and Jimmy. Jimmy has lived in Fort Smith his whole life but has remained a "mystery... cruising around by himself" (13). After their date, Shandra tells her friends that Jimmy is "beautiful," but different: "There are no words for what he is..." (21). The second thing the story does not do is tell the reader the exact nature of Jimmy's difference. Van Camp has set up this narrative gap not only by making Shandra unable to fully articulate her experience with Jimmy but also by moving us one step away from her experience. She tells the narrator and the narrator tells us, so we have no immediate experience of Shandra and Jimmy together. The narrator imagines that Jimmy is "Aayahkwew, neither man or woman but both," but we do not know that for a fact (22). Not knowing is part of the point; the true nature of Jimmy's difference is not as important his beauty.

As readers, we suspect the story's two mysteries are connected: the Star People and Jimmy. That is not to say that Jimmy is an alien; his apparent gender diversity would

make that a potentially troubling connection. Jimmy has always been in Fort Smith and, as the narrator states, Jimmy's gender or sexuality is not something new to this community—they have ancient words for it. Perhaps the connection is between the cleansing of the world the Star People are initiating and, in the reader's world, the broader, although gradual, cleansing of prejudices against people like Jimmy. "Aliens" first appeared in *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time: An Indigenous LGBT Sci-Fi Anthology* in 2016. Part of the collection's goal is the survivance of Native communities and LGBT Native people in particular. In an introduction to *Love Beyond Body, Space & Time*, Niigaan Sinclair writes, "let love guide us as we understand, work, and change" (19). Van Camp's stories throughout his career indicate he would agree with that sentiment.

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