

*The Moccasin Telegraph and Other Stories* by W.P. Kinsella. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1983.

"Well, a wise old medicine man name of Buffalo-who-walks-like-a-man, long time ago mix up some herbs and roots in a porcupine bladder, and use it to tan prairie chicken hides. When them hides is stretched over a special drum why the sound travel for maybe a hundred miles. And it don't make a bump-bump-bump sound like a regular drum, but a quiet hum like the telegraph wires do way out in the country on a quiet night." (Pp. 25-26)

This is the way in which "Chief" Frank of the Ermineskin Reserve, explains his people's communications system to a group of CBC reporters who have gathered in the town of Wetaskiwin for the funeral of an Indian outlaw gunned down by the police. "All these press peoples look at Frank like they was three years old," the storyteller observes, "and he was this Big Bird off the television." (P. 26) Comic elements abound in this fourth book of Hobbena tales, *The Moccasin Telegraph and Other Stories*, which call to mind the tradition of farfetched frontier humour. As in the other Hobbena books (*Dance Me Outside*, 1977; *Scars*, 1978 and *Born Indian*, 1981), the narrator is the young writer, Silas Ermineskin, who doesn't always follow the white man's spelling or syntax, although he was schooled in English and "had some books printed up." (P. 24) The rough edges of his prose add to the authenticity of the tales and Silas's growing Indian "savvy" combine with his wit and candor to make him a fine straight man for his brothers as they con the officious or self-seeking white men who once conned them out of their native lands and rights.

Nor is it just the white man who is looked at with humour and detachment. Silas notes that the cars which have brought so many unfamiliar Indians to the Alberta town have licence plates from Montana, Wyoming, and other distant places. The strangers are here, they tell Silas and his friends, to bury "our murdered brother." "I think you got it wrong," corrects Bedelia Coyote, one of the tough heroines of this volume, "It was Burt who done a murder." Kinsella's Indians have street smarts as well as trail smarts and they know that these interlopers ("AIM usually stand for American Indian Movement but most people around here call them Assholes in Moccasins," 22) want to make an international case of it. The actual Indian chief, Tom Crow-eye—more Uncle Tom than real chief—is a grandstander who wants to use the occasion of the massive funeral for a speech about the "Alberta Government oil pricing policies." The Wetaskiwin people ignore the politicians and quietly "drag the travois," bearing the coffin, to the funeral home for cremation.

A death ritual is also the subject of a story, "Parts of the Eagle," which deals with the response of a father to the loss of his daughter, a promising university student. The accidental death of young June Brown is publicly met with a ceremony which is an unconscious parody of the popular conception of Indian stoicism: "The coffin covered with a yellow rug of some kind, while the Browns sit in the front row dressed like dummies you see in department store windows in Edmonton." (P. 47) Silas has

prepared us for his description of Lester Brown's family as characterless mannikins by noting, earlier in the story, a few of the Indians' jibes at Lester's white ways: e.g., "First you change your name," says Frank Fencepost, "next thing we know you'll be getting white-walls for your truck." (P. 46) This apple of an Indian (red outside, white inside) already *has* white-walls. However, when he speaks to Silas in private after the funeral, Lester Two-brown-bears momentarily "lapses into Cree" and he explains that June was going to pass on whatever old Indian knowledge she and her father shared. Silas then joins Lester as he goes off to bury June's "medicine bundle" with an old eagle feather, emblematic of the spirit's return to the sky. The fact that June was a university student is not just incidental but rather an ironic comment on the modern Indian's fate because June had found her native lore in library books. Lester had learned of the eagle from Mad Etta, a comically obese "Medicine Lady," one of the Reserve's last solid links with the animistic religion of the past.

Death is not always treated by Kinsella with the quiet dignity that it has in "Parts of the Eagle." There is the story of a good samaritan, born Donato Fernando Tragaluz, who lives illegally but effectively as a Hobbena physician, "Dr. Donald Morninglight," until he is unmasked by the RCMP. After his consequent suicide, his patients gather at the funeral to sing the Hank Williams' song, "I've Seen the Light." The story ends with Silas Ermineskin's observation:

There was sundogs out this morning when we were putting the coffin in the grave, shimmering like peaches there in the cold pink sky. I imagined for a second that I could see Dr. Don's face in one of them, but only for a second. (P. 103)

This ending presumably springs from an unsophisticated but lively imagination. To pile such sentiments on top of a heartfelt ballad is too much for even a sturdy native travois to carry. Even the slightly parenthetical "only for a second" cannot prevent a tilt into the maudlin. The reader of Kinsella's story might prefer to have it end on the note struck by Mad Etta, who replied as follows when asked to explain what Dr. Don meant to the Reserve:

She gave a long speech in Cree that the white people think is her answer, but she really be saying things to make me and the other Indians laugh. (P. 102)

Mad Etta is right, of course, for it's not the white man's business although he tries to make it his business. Recalling the story called "Canadian Culture" in *Scars*, the reader wonders why there are always so many news reporters on the reserve. He might also wonder why they bothered to consult Mad Etta after they heard the testimony of Samantha Yellowknees: "No real doctor in his right mind would start a practice out here." (P. 101) Even this unofficial verdict of insanity does not put off the probing of the newspaper "creeps"! The view of the church in this case is the unsentimental one that Dr. Don was beyond the pale and therefore not entitled to its burial services.

Matters of the church in *The Moccasin Telegraph* usually pertain to Roman Catholicism, as one would expect to be the historical case, and the Hobbema priest's name, Father Alphonse, is related to the voyageur past. The Church is merely an accepted presence; services are not so important as picnics. What comes as a surprise to readers of Kinsella is the "Brotherhood of Burning Bush Bible College," located near the Reserve at Hobbema, which is the subject of the story entitled "The College." Kinsella paints the College-Reserve relations in broad strokes. When a group from the Reserve, costumed to look like "regular Indians," is stonewalled by the College's unobliging receptionist, who "buzzes" (the intercom) as the trapped "wasp" she is, they burst into the president's office banging a drum. Dr. Manson apologizes for the lack of Crees attending the BBBBC: "If you didn't live in Canada, it would be all right.... We could give you a scholarship if you were from the Third World, China or even Mexico, but as a Canadian you'd have to pay full tuition." (P. 115) But Dr. Manson is no mere straw figure for, although he cannot change the policy of his board of directors, he supports the Indians' demand for more educational opportunities. Here as elsewhere in *The Moccasin Telegraph* the more substantial enemies are the government and the Uncle Toms of the tribe.

The continued troubles with the government centre on the ownership of the land. In the story "The College" the issue is the cheap, long-term lease granted to the BBBBC. In "The Ballad of the Public Trustee" an old Indian dies intestate and the government converts his land into a computer farm. When the Indians tell the receptionist (they always encounter red tape) that they want to see the public trustee in charge of their case, they meet an unexpected obstacle and display an unpleasant touch of racism:

The man she send out smell like cherry candy, and he be an Indian, only one of those that come from the Pakistani tribe on the other side of the earth. I always wonder why the Government offices be full of those kind of Indians and never any of our kind. (P. 71)

From then on the troubles accumulate. The Indians get nowhere with the trustee; they are about to be outmanoeuvred by the lawyers of the avaricious Catholic Church; they are distressed by their own public-defender-type, a white lawyer, who believes that the parentage of Indian children is too problematic to hold up in court. In a final desperate act, Silas and a friend level the computer farm with heavy equipment to leave the land, "except that the buffalo be gone, as wild, and open, and lifeless, as it was when Old Joe first seen it nearly a hundred years ago." (P. 78) In the story "The Mother's Dance," which Kinsella begins and ends with stage directions for a ritual dance celebrating a hopeful future for newborn Indian children ("the dancers hold them babies way up high, as if they was pushing them toward the sun," 166), the subject is again a boundary rights dispute with Indian Affairs. Into the midst of the befuddlement on the Reserve there descends a rich city Indian (like a "Daze Exmacinaw," Silas explains, trying to recall his readings in drama at the tech School in

Wetaskiwin), whose name is fortuitously "Grace" and whose money and legal savvy win the day for the Ermineskin people. In a fine touch, the author has the grateful Indians create the dance, which frames the story, for Grace McGee (née Many Hands High). Less necessary to the story is Silas's observation that the government, "no matter how simple the question," will always "find a way to either charge us money, or take away something that already belongs to us." (P. 156) Such a comment might be made by any disgruntled person, regardless of race or colour. (In a similar vein is the crack in "The Mother's Dance" about the Minister of Indian Affairs "who think in French so his English always come out backside-foremost," 161.) The more important fact is that the so-called Treaty Indians didn't understand that they were giving up their native lands for a piece of *scrip*. This land deal was intended by the white man to be permanent; it's ironic that language rights agreements are no longer thought to be held in perpetuity but constitute a contemporary problem.

As noted earlier, the tone of Kinsella's stories is often lowered when he has a character descend to racist slurs. This is most obvious in "Fugitives" where two of the Ermineskin people dress up as East Indians ("They never bother the kind of Indians who come from India") in order to escape capture by the RCMP, who seem to have nothing to do in *The Moccasin Telegraph* except harass the Ermineskins. The fugitives adopt the names "Ravinder Singh" and "Sanjit Singh," the latter being sometimes mispronounced "Ratchet," which comes close to being ratshit. "We are Canadians now," the Singhs reassure their white landlord (who happens to be Silas's brother-in-law, "Brother Bob"), "We have learned to cook with bacon grease and cabbage like everyone else" (193)—one of the funniest remarks in *The Moccasin Telegraph*. When the ever vigilant cop arrives on the scene, he mispronounces "Mr. Ki-o-Tee's" name, fails to notice the aroma of curry which he's been warned against, and then reprimands Brother Bob and his native wife, Illianna: "I'm surprised you're all so prejudiced.... East Indian people are our most law abiding citizens." (P. 196) "The Fugitives" is a jokester's story, even if it starts off with two cases of manslaughter, and the final word is Silas's flip chuckle as he hoodwinks the bullies of the law, "You can always trust me to do the right thing." (P. 196)

Silas is also the straight man in a farcical story, "Where the Wild Things Are," which pits two Hobbema hosers, "Frank" and "Standing-Upright-in-a-Wet-River," against a pair of rich dudes from the States. The Indians get giddy in their playacting, lose track of their roots and refer to their "slave names," and even forget if they're "Onagatchies" or "Onadatchies." The latter of the tribe pseudo-names—designating folk who "have the blood of ravens in their veins"—is perhaps Kinsella's wink at a fellow author, Michael Ondaatje, who can tell a fine frontier tale and whose ancestors were dusky Sinhalese (See Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, 1982). Playing a variation on the *Daze Exmacinaw* theme of another story, Kinsella here drops the dudes' "safari truck" onto an elk,

thus bagging their game, and the story bumps to a close with the lapse of the reader's attention span.

Two other stories in the volume also draw the reader's attention: one does so because of its haunting conclusion. "Pius Blindman Is Coming Home" is filled with the clichés of condescension with which the white society denigrates the red. But we never lose sight of the cancer-ravaged Indian woman who is waiting for her prodigal son, "the old lady's favourite," to come home. What keeps the old woman alive? While Silas maintains his vigil over Minnie Blindman, she responds, "'Pius, is that you?'" to his movement in her darkened room. "In the orange glow of the coal oil lamp," he notices, "Minnie's one eye glows red, tiny and full of hate as a wolverine in a trap." (P. 175) Although Pius is long dead and buried, still he survives. As at the end of "Weasels and Ermines" in *Born Indian* and "Between" in *Dance Me Outside*, Kinsella is able to zero in on the arresting detail. So, too, in the gothic story "Nests," an old white man, Mr. Moon, lives nearly paralyzed in the decaying farm house which is haunted by his dead wife and the presence of his demented daughter. The girl has transformed the house into an empty wasp's nest, using glue and scraps of unread newspaper—the family has no more need for human reality—in a ritual re-enactment of her mother's identification with the insects which inhabit the twisted orchard trees outside. Danielle remembers how her father would scream, "'Predacious bastards,'" at the wasps. The etiology of the family sickness is obscure, though it may have been postpartum depression which drove the wife to spend her last days among the wasps, as Mr. Moon recalls,

"'swayin', them yellow things crawling across her skin. She took off her clothes.... Sometimes when I think I see Jessie down there in the orchard, I expect it's Danielle I'm seein', though I don't want it to be.'" (P. 130)

"'First snow,'" says the old man who perhaps initiated the strange chain of metamorphoses with his maniacal possessiveness, "'I'm a dead man.'" Mr. Moon has been taken over, too, and his insect life will end with the coming of winter. Overall, it seems that *The Moccasin Telegraph* adds more to the story of Kinsella's humour than it does to the list of his serious or powerfully dramatic stories (such as the memorable tale of retribution, "Caraway," in *Dance Me Outside*). He can handle romantic love ("Vows") and sexual jealousy ("Green Candles"), but he never gets near ecstasy. Some aspects of the Indian sensibility which he portrays are clearly, if very simply, shown at the beginning of the volume in the description of a young girl's room: "She keep a picture of Jay Silverheels the movie actor, and Allen Sapp the artist, pinned to the wall." (P. 2) If the decor is superficially native (it's a photo, not an original Sapp, which she couldn't afford), the sentiments are fundamentally human. Yet Kinsella succeeds in *The Moccasin Telegraph* in reproducing a considerable range of human experience within the limits of his own view, which is both amused and concerned: jocoserious, in a word.

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*Prairie Wildflowers: An Illustrated Manual of Species Suitable for Cultivation and Grassland Restoration* by R. Currah, A. Smreciu and M. Van Dyk, ill. by J. Maywood. Edmonton: University of Alberta Devonian Botanic Garden, 1983. Pp. 280.

*Prairie Wildflowers* is unique as it is neither flora or a field guide nor is it a collection of colour photographs of common and showy native species. This should be fully understood, as should the author's intentions, if one is to appreciate the true value of this publication. *Prairie Wildflowers* is intended for a specific purpose. That is, to supply information that has regrettably few other sources. The information provided is primarily for the use of ecological consultants, site planners, and development engineers who are planning or recommending site revegetation with native species. Secondly, it is a guide for commercial gardeners, nursery tradesmen and landscaping agencies who require information concerning not only what the recommended species look like but also how to collect, propagate and grow the materials. Finally, it will be of interest to gardeners both amateur and professional, who are interested, either as a fascinating hobby or an absorbing vocation, in the establishment or re-establishment of communities of native plant species.

The background data for the publication were partially derived from numerous reference sources. In addition, it contains the findings of study and observation of plant species, community composition, phenology, edaphic and vegetative factors and propagation and establishment. One hundred and forty-two species were selected for inclusion in *Prairie Wildflowers* and were reported on after observation and data gathering at ten sites in southern Alberta, from the Cypress Hills to Magrath. On these sites, there were three-year research programmes which were designed to augment the background studies of the University of Alberta Devonian Botanic Gardens and the research and practical knowledge extent in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

The data for the one hundred and forty-two individual species are listed alphabetically (by specific name). For each species, common names (489 in total) are given, followed by a description. Each description includes: growth habit, height, form, spread, leaf characteristics, stems, inflorescence, flowers, fruit, seed, underground parts and phenology details. While the descriptions themselves are acceptable, the lack of any taxonomic or other grouping or ranking requires that the user of the book have a considerable prior knowledge of the species. Also included for each species are habitat and distribution and propagation information. In some cases, some additional information, such as fungus diseases is given. Finally, references/ illustrations are provided.