https://doi.org/10.48336/IJAXEW4233

Book Review

The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative

Book by: Thomas King

Review by: Shari Fitzgerald

In *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, Thomas King (2003) offers a captivating examination of narrative knowledge as it is formed and shaped within Anglo patriarchal society. Over the course of six chapters, King adds to ongoing discourse pertaining to Native American culture and civilization by making shrewd use of storytelling in the conveyance of omnipresent power at every level of the social body (Clarke, 2008, p. 524). King explores how the telling and retelling of narratives shape the ways in which individuals perceive and make sense of their social realities, and draws upon anecdotal accounts to elucidate pervasive harms and injustices present in contemporary society. Further, King provides insight into the inherent oppressive overtones shrouding the historical writings, political interactions, and Native experiences that underpin overt and covert racialized social structures.

King's dialogue concerning the significance of oral storytelling in Native American culture prompts much reflection around the development of cultural identity and the persistence of social injustice among Aboriginal populations. This book review seeks to critically examine King's personal orientation toward Native identity and the manner by which oppression of Native peoples prevail in hegemonic Western culture. The article also aims to explore the concept of storytelling as a mechanism for social change in social work assessment and practice.

Chapter 1: "You'll Never Believe What Happened" is Always a Great Way to Start

The first chapter of King's lecture series sets the foundation of his work, detailing the significance of oral storytelling in Native American culture. Beginning with personal reflections and recitations of his childhood observations and experiences, King draws upon his familial background to illustrate the overt workings of Aboriginal discrimination and injustice (pp. 3–10). He grounds his personal experiences and witnessed accounts of his mother's oppression in Native American history and illuminates the depth of struggle deeply entrenched in his family heritage. By embedding his own childhood experiences in narrative depictions of Native inequality, King exemplifies the rooted prevalence of social injustice among Native Americans long before he grew to truly understand it and advocate for resistance.

As a reader, I immediately felt connected to King, despite my roots in White, middle-class culture. He skillfully builds upon his own personal experiences and family history in a manner that helps construct a sense of trust and understanding with

his audience. As is true for the processes and procedures of assessment in social work practice, King appears to acknowledge the importance of building rapport with his readers (or, clients), and takes time to nurture this relationship by using casual, sometimes humorous, dialogue to keep his audience engaged (Dziegielewski, 2013, p. 89). By using this approach, King not only enhances readers' interest, but also helps build appreciation for the merits and impact of relational narratives in Native culture.

In enticing his readers to think about the value of stories in the development and persistence of historical discourse, cultural assumptions, and ingrained racial biases, King also makes apt use of traditional stories of creation (pp. 10–25). King contrasts biblical and Native accounts of creation—hierarchical chaos versus cooperative balance—as a means to forecast the guided ideals in Western society (pp. 23–24). Although King sardonically questions his place in criticizing power divisions inherent in Christian creationism asking, "Am I such an ass as to disregard this good advice and suggest that the stories contained within the matrix of Christianity and the complex of nationalism are responsible for the social, political, and economic problems we face?" he arouses much contemplation of the real-world effects of dichotomization (p. 26).

According to King, Western society is built upon dichotomies that ultimately act to undermine cultural complexities (p. 25). These categorizations are in place to service particular powered interests, and thus lead to structured archetypes of acceptance (Fook, 2012, pp. 84–86). This remark is critical for social work practitioners in that it promotes recognition of the flaws of binary distinctions, and highlights the limitations of dichotomous thinking in failing to account for differences as they pertain to cultural identity and individual experience in social work assessment and practice (Fook, 2012, p. 85).

Chapter 2: You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind

In Chapter 2, King further expands on the notions of dichotomization and Western discomfort with cultural complexity by exploring the typical "Indian" stereotype. Using stories of personal experience to highlight ongoing assumptions and biases around what being Indian truly looks like, King discusses the challenges associated with understanding American Natives outside of their traditional stereotypes. Embedded in colonialism and the volatile relationship between White and Aboriginal populations (Blackstock, 2009, p. 29), the racialization of difference often becomes so pervasive that even those people at the center of the tyranny behave in ways that either allow or comply with such totalitarianism (D. Mullings, personal communication, January 26, 2015). To know more is not necessarily to do better, as is the case for members of marginalized groups; the commitment to stay true to one's cultural identity in the light of systemic racism may inadvertently act to box people in and paradoxically substantiate their segregation (King, pp. 46–47).

King also draws upon the works of photographer Edward Sheriff Curtis to explore the ways in which Western society superficially decides who is and who is not "authentically Indian" (pp. 35–36). Using Curtis's "postcard Indians" as illustrative examples, King highlights the stereotypical image of Indians that saturate

modern culture and media and bolster ongoing ideas of discrepancy and culturally driven assumption (p. 36). King rehashes his own experiences in not fitting the typical guise of an Indian and refers to this juxtaposition as both a burden and an advantage within contemporary hegemonic society (pp. 48–52). Even as a youth, King was confronted with situations, such as when he asked Karen Butler to prom, that made it painfully clear that he was being discounted based on ill-informed assumptions (p. 39). Now as an adult, King himself candidly admits his own tendency to fall down the racist rabbit hole, evidencing the often indiscernible power of what I reason to be an "us versus them" or "in-group versus out-group" Western mentality.

Ultimately, King's discussion of cultural stereotyping raises the question—is there really any difference between a stereotypical conceptualization of an Indian and a racist conceptualization? This inquiry is especially meaningful in the context of social work practice as social workers are often confronted with challenges when working toward cultural competency within the helping relationship (Weaver, 1999, pp. 218–219). Social workers often struggle to recognize their own colonial presence, inadvertently allowing their values and socialization experiences pose threat to informed decision making when working with Indigenous clients (Weaver, 1999, p. 222). Consequently, social workers have a responsibility to be cognizant of their own prejudicial, perhaps racist, predispositions and to reconcile these before engaging in practice (Weaver, 1999, p. 222).

Chapter 3: Let Me Entertain You

Chapter 3 of the book brings awareness to the notion of commodification with respect to Indigenous culture and heritage. King engages readers in stories and historical accounts that illustrate Native Americans as entertainment spectacles to be exploited (p. 68). Using his own personal experiences as a catalyst, King reflects upon chronicled accounts of the capturing of Indian slaves by Christopher Columbus and the resultant American Indian genocide that followed (pp. 69–75). Perceived as "savage people" coming out of "the woods and swamps" (p. 75), Native Americans were challenged from the outset to remain true to their ethnic and cultural roots in the light of White power and control (Blackstock, 2009, pp. 28–30). From King's historical summary, it appears as though the "discovery" of Native Americans by Western settlers made it so that Native peoples had something to prove—a predetermined role to fill—in order to find a "place" in White hegemonic society.

Much like in the works of Giroux (2006), King attempts to exemplify the notion of Native peoples as commodified, yet easily disposable, exhibitions, telling the story of Ishi—"the wild man of Oroville"—whose entire adult existence served to entertain the White man (pp. 63–65). As recounted by King, Ishi, an Indian found starving behind a California slaughterhouse, was "rescued" by two anthropologists and given the opportunity to live and work at an anthropological museum. Part of Ishi's role at the museum was to educate White visitors in the way of "Indian arts and crafts" as a means to satiate Western curiosity and to protect his place among the privileged crowd (p. 65)—a visible sign of oppressive power being masked as cooperation (Tew, 2006, p. 41). While, to some, Ishi's new-found opportunity to live and work in the museum may have appeared uplifting and altruistic, King highlights

the oppression inherent in this story—a complex history of harm echoed in the works of Blackstock (2009).

King further draws upon his own experiences as an amusement commodity for non-Indigenous people in power. After being invited to speak on behalf of Indian Awareness Week at a local university, King, treated as a spokesperson of sorts, was struck with the harsh reality that, similar to Ishi, he was serving a designated role characterized by his Indian blood (pp. 62–69). Almost as one would imagine a freak sideshow, King was recruited and put on display (albeit seemingly of his "own will") as a type of human oddity—*look, a noble savage; they really do exist!* When King did not conform to traditional cultural assumptions of what Indians were "supposed" to look like, he was accused of being disingenuous in his cultural identity (pp. 67–68).

When one reflects on colonial patterns and histories of harm through the experiences of Indigenous nations, it becomes apparent that oppression functioning at the systemic level trickles down to form layers of personal oppression for each marginalized person (Monture-Angus, 1999, p. 65). As revealed in King's narratives, when Native Americans were not being reviled and eradicated by White people in power, they were used as modes of entertainment for the ignorant. These reflections appear to point to a friendly form of victimization that continues to underscore present-day treatment and self-perceptions of racial and ethnic minorities (Mullings, 2012). This, sometimes invisible, racism ultimately acts to reinforce the political structures and socialization mechanisms that ostracize Aboriginal peoples as "less than citizens" in predominant Western culture (Mullings, 2012, pp. 95–109).

Chapter 4: A Million Porcupines Crying in the Dark

Chapter 4 of King's book is especially poignant as it delves into the impact of American and Native literature and the process by which meaning is derived from stories told, whether oral or written. He discusses various themes relevant to Native culture including labor exploitation, the essence of racism, the preservation of Native identity, and the horrors of cultural destruction, among others (pp. 91–119). In particular, King reflects on the writings of Louis Owens, a Choctaw-Cherokee-Irish writer, and postulates the author's personal journey toward peace both for himself and for others, hoping that his words might someday change the world (p. 92). Irrespective of the messages hidden beneath the text, taken together, King appears to utilize the stories of Owens, Alexie, and others to signify a global responsibility for the pursuit of cultural knowledge and understanding. According to King, if we "stopped telling stories and reading the books, we would discover that neglect is as powerful an agent as war and fire" (p. 98).

While King does dedicate a significant portion of this chapter to discussing the horrific events of the residential school system as it impacted Native children and families, and thus, Native identity, I caution readers not to become swept up in the idea of storytelling as a means to relive and memorialize historical devastation. From my perspective, it appears that King encourages the telling and receiving of stories as a means to help others come to terms with their own personal struggles. Oftentimes individuals' beliefs in stories evolve to become landmarks or cornerstones of cultural

representation (p. 95). However, King appears to advocate for "saving stories" (p. 119) —underscoring the importance of realigning one's own orientation toward hope and cultural pride as opposed to victimization and defeat. While it may be difficult for Native Americans to construct a cultural identity outside of the harmful and discriminatory treatment history committed against their peoples (Blackstock, 2009, pp. 28–30), it is important that these stories of isolation and devastation are not the only stories being told and reflected upon (King, pp. 118–119).

Discussion of the suicide of Louis Owens directs attention to Native American struggle and the challenging journey toward truth. In contrast to postmodernist thinking (Healy, 2001), Owens' case illustrated an over-emphasis on one story—one version of truth—that ultimately dictated his worth, his value, and his destiny. From King's writings, I recognize the importance of challenging those ingrained assumptions and reframing one's own journey toward liberation. In Louis's story, he was Aboriginal. He was defined by narrow assumptions. He was shrouded by feelings of shame. I will go so far as to allege that he was immobilized by a certain fear; perhaps a particular dread from being branded by the very horrors he despised about Native history. But of course, truth is a subjective thing and our individual stories, while perhaps prescribed to us, are not written in stone (Healy, 2001). As stated by Fook (2012, pp. 127-128), we must recognize the ways in which we participate in our own disempowerment.

In reflecting on King's work, I contend that we all have a certain level of autonomy to rewrite our own individual stories, perhaps slowly, line by line. Being able to recognize one's one power to define what is real and what is truth is a critical move toward helping others trace their own paths out of the hollow. As is true for the profession of social work, practitioners have an obligation to facilitate the success of their clients by supporting them in the revision of their own stories—to encourage them to have an active hand in shaping a positive future from a not-so-positive past. I profess that these stories and what each person makes of them ultimately determine his or her trajectory through life. For this reason, social workers must remember to advocate for individuals who get lost in singular versions of who they are and what they are worth.

Chapter 5: What is it About Us That You Don't Like?

In his last lecture, King diverts the discussion to the history of legislation pertaining to Native peoples in North America. In particular, King casts light on the collection of broken treaties and oppressive laws and policies developed by White, privileged persons in power, and discusses the affects of such decision making on Native autonomy and culture. King utilizes the Native narrative of the coyote and the ducks as an analogy to illustrate governments' attempt toward Native assimilation and eradication (pp. 122–127). Much like the coyote's consistent and persistent stripping of the ducks' feathers in King's dialogue, parallels can be drawn to the behaviour of the federal government in removing pieces of Aboriginal culture in an effort to phase them out of existence. Whether through the seizure of Native land, the introduction of deadly diseases, restricted movement in and around the continent, or compulsory attendance at residential schools, the government directed a "cultural genocide" of Native peoples (Blackstock, 2009, p. 30).

In recalling Native stories such as the one with the ducks and the coyote, King makes it known that these traditional narratives anchor the ways in which Native Americans define themselves and their struggles toward identity and cultural equality in a "torturous" oppressive system (p. 132). While acknowledgement of and identification with one's heritage is significant in the construction in one's own identity, I argue that the inherent constraints in hegemonic society often act to limit individuals' own self-perceptions to simplistic forms of identity. By defining oneself based on history alone, one neglects to consider the multiple ways in which one's cultural and social identities have been formed and can be changed.

I contend that the same observation is true for social workers in practice. While working directly with clients, it may be intuitive for practitioners to draw upon political-based histories in the pursuit of understanding and empathy with marginalized individuals. While this approach to assessment is valuable in that it grounds social workers' understanding in a political "truth" common to members of common culture or historical background, postmodernists would argue that understanding should not be unidimensionally defined (Healy, 2001, 2005). Following postmodern thought, I agree with Mattsson (2014, pp. 9–11) and maintain that social workers must practice reflectivity and must be prepared to use an intersectional lens when attempting to understand cultural identity, the operation of oppression, and the pursuit of social change. Such holistic approaches to assessment and practice are imperative in that they are inclusive in operation and help to facilitate comprehensive, informed decision making (Mattsson, 2014).

Much as King discusses the concept of privilege and the tendency for White people to be blinded by their own White versions of truth (pp. 51; 137–138), it is critical that social workers be mindful of their own positions of privilege and frequently remind themselves of the ways in which their own unique versions of reality have been constructed (Fook, 2012, pp. 12–13; Healy, 2005, pp. 132–147). It is conceivable to suggest that contemporary Aboriginal people define themselves according to history, some according to myth, and some according to a combination of varied influences that make up their current reality. With this recognition comes the understanding that each of their stories will vary. Using postmodern philosophy, I stress the importance of appreciating the fact that not all stories sound or mean the same to different people. As social workers engage in practice, keeping an open mind and utilizing a balanced approach to assessment and relationship building is paramount (Derezotes, 2000, p. 30).

Afterwords: Private Stories

In an appropriate conclusion of his lecture series, King emphasizes the importance of stories and their ability to change the ways in which people choose to live their lives (p. 153). He uses his private stories, those tales not so easy to speak aloud, to illustrate the fact that simply being familiar with narratives—being able to recognize the wrongs as they have been and continue to be made in society—does not constitute meaningful, ethical action (p. 161). Through King's examples of the environmental crisis, the public's hands-free approach to inaction, and his own personal excuses for disengagement, I have grown to appreciate the dynamics of

ethical leadership and the processes through which social change is believed to emerge. Of course, being able to tell the tale is the first step in identifying a need for change; but is that enough? Is there a sense of ethical accountability hidden within all of us from which we ever so rationally disassociate ourselves? King himself admits, "I find it easier to tell myself the story of my failure as a friend, as a human being, than to have to live the story of making the sustained effort to help" (p. 166). Perhaps we all can relate.

From a social work perspective, I contend that simply knowing inequality and oppression exists is not enough. As guided by the Canadian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (2005), social workers are not only responsible for maintaining and increasing their professional knowledge, but they are also mandated to actively advocate for the equality of all persons in the pursuit of social justice. As seen in social workers' response to the residential school system and the horrific impacts on Aboriginal culture, even those people who are ethically bound to seek change sometimes find it easier to conjure up excuses and to place blame on the sensibilities of the times than to engage in progressive action (Blackstock, 2009, p. 32). According to Blackstock (2009), with respect to the history of harm perpetrated on Indigenous people, social work "misplaced its moral compass and in doing so perpetrated preventable harms to Aboriginal children" (p. 35). While King's sentiment is meaningful in that it stresses the importance of keeping history alive as to never forget and fade away, I insist that taking a more active approach to reconciliation is required.

Personal Reflection and Summary

Taken together, Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* explores how stories shape all individuals and influence how each person understands and interacts with the world around them. From the sharing of creation stories to personal memories, from historical narratives to myths, from Native and American literature to sagas of racism and social injustice, King uses the concept and literary technique of storytelling to accentuate the ways in which stories shape the policies, value systems, and individual orientations that guide individual existence. From King's perspective, the power of storytelling should not be underestimated, as it ultimately plays a significant role in forming each person's epistemic lens and directing personal life decisions.

In his reflection on the history of discrimination and oppression of Native populations, King offers vignettes from his family upbringing and from his work experience as a labourer, a hunter, a photographer, and an academic to exemplify the pervasiveness of cultural conflict both in his life and within the lives of those close to him. He is upfront about his own personal struggles with binary thinking and finds himself at odds with his own cultural identity on more than one occasion. Though sarcastic in his humor, King reveals moments of vulnerability in his lectures, admitting an intrapersonal conflict with respect to his culture, wavering between looking and behaving as an "authentic Indian" and refusing to buy into stereotypical visions of Aboriginal peoples. It is not until the very end of the book that readers are fully able to appreciate King's struggles and the weighted shame he carries with

respect to the arguably passive role he has played in the resistance of Indian oppression. Perhaps King prizes the resilience of Native culture on the telling of stories because for him, as a writer, this is the type of action that comes most naturally? Or perhaps he is alluding to something more profound—that all stories and claims to truth make up a never-ending pursuit for social power? Personally, I am still deciding.

One of the biggest take-away messages from King's work is his contention that stories make up who each of us are, and that depending on who tells and receives these stories, the vision of who we are or who we choose to be may differ. From the perspective of Western settlers, King recounts, Aboriginals were nothing more than barbaric simpletons who deserved to be abolished; from the perspective of Native Americans, they themselves were harmonious humans who just wanted to live in peace. Depending on the perspective held, narratives frame varying conceptualizations of *Indian* every time they are recited because these accounts inevitably change, evolve, and shift in distinctive meaning, according to King. This consideration is especially critical in the context of social work practice in the sense that practitioners must refrain from accepting a unitary account of an issue or a single interpretation of one's behaviour as the master story (Mehrotra, 2010, p. 419).

Particular to client assessment, social workers must consistently re-evaluate the scope of perspectives from which to view clients' situations, actions, and reactions (Cummins, Sevel, & Pedrick, 2012, p. 57). Placing priority on assumptive interpretations of meaning not only risks preconceived biases, but further negates the value of unique experience and individuality (Cummins et al., 2012, pp. 60–61). Hence, it is critical for social workers to engage in a multi-dimensional approach to assessment and to recognize that "understanding all aspects of the client's life is central to completing a thorough assessment" (Cummins et al., 2012, pp. 181–182). I contend that repeated reliance on a single story does not constitute truth; it can, however, give rise to overarching stereotypes and assumptions that shift civilization further away from global self-actualization.

The idea of responsibility is another prevailing theme in King's book. As individuals, we are responsible for the stories we tell, listen to, and choose to believe. Part of this duty is the ability to recognize that stories are true only so far as they resonate with the person hearing the story. For example, a social worker tasked with helping refugees settle in a new country may be told stories of trauma and strife from his or her clients' past. Ultimately, the "truths" of these stories are only meaningful to the degree that the social worker can apply his or her own experiences, understanding, and empathy. Acknowledgement of the existence of varying forms of reality is a professional responsibility that social workers must uphold during assessment and throughout the longevity of practice (Fook, 2012, p. 12).

By beginning each chapter of his book with the statement, "There is a story I know" and ending each passage with the admonition "But don't say in years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now," King puts the onus on his readers to make use of his narratives in ways that advocate for change. In the words of Blackstock (2009, p.

32), "The temptation to believe 'if we had only known—we would have acted differently'" acts to provide practitioners with false comfort in inaction. In shifting blame and excusing ourselves from accountability, we become complicit in the support of the systems that maintain our privilege and exercise control over marginalized groups (Blackstock, 2009).

King's lecture series serves as food for thought for social workers in that it assists practitioners in recognizing that the stories told and those listened to within the context of the helping relationship are socio-political constructions that reflect changing contexts, individual worldviews, and systems of oppression (Whittington, 2007). All assessments performed in practice inherently build upon informed constructions of truth that may, inadvertently, reflect the perspectives of the social worker more than viewpoints of the client (Whittington, 2007). Thus, when using narrative approaches to assessment, social workers must be prepared to look outside their powered "expertise" to deconstruct their own versions of truth as to ensure appropriate approaches to client empowerment and social change (Milner & O'Byrne, 2009, p. 180).

References

Blackstock, C. (2009). The occasional evil of angels: Learning from the experiences of Aboriginal peoples and social work. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, *4*(1), 28–37.

Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) (2005). *Code of Ethics*. Ottawa, ON: Author.

Clarke, S. (2008). Culture and identity. In T. Bennett & J. Frow (Eds.), *Handbook of cultural analysis* (pp. 510–530). London: Sage Publications.

Cummins, L. K., Sevel, J. A., & Pedrick, L. (2012). *Social work skills for beginning direct practice: Text, workbook, and interactive web-based case studies*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Derezotes, D. (2000). *Advanced generalist social work practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Dziegielewski, S. F. (2013). *The changing face of health care social work: Opportunities and challenges for professional practice* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Springer.

Fook, J. (2012). *Social work: A critical approach to practice* (2nd ed.). London, UK: Sage Publications.

Giroux, H. A. (2006). Reading hurricane Katrina: Race, class, and the biopolitics of disposability. *College Literature*, *33*(3), 171–196.

Healy, K. (2001). Reinventing critical social work: Challenges from practice, context and postmodernism. *Critical Social Work*, *2*(1). Retrieved from http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/reinventing-critical-social-work-challenges- from-practice-context-and-postmodernism

Healy, K. (2005). *Social work theories in context: Creating frameworks for practice.* London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

King, T. (2003). *The truth about stories: A native narrative*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.

Mattsson, T. (2014). Intersectionality as a useful tool: Anti-oppressive social work and critical reflection. *Journal of Women and Social Work*, *29*(1), 8–17.

Mehrotra, G. (2010). Toward a continuum of intersectionality theorizing for feminist social work scholarship. *Affilia*, *25*(4), 417–430.

Milner, J., & O'Byrne, P. (2009). *Assessment in social work* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Monture-Angus, P. (1999). Considering colonialism and oppression: Aboriginal women, justice and the "theory" of decolonization. *Native Studies Review*, *12*(1), 63–94.

Mullings, D. V. (2012). Racism in Canadian social policy. In Westhues & B. Wharf (Eds.), *Canadian Social Policy* (5th ed.; pp. 95–113). Kitchener, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Tew, J. (2006). Understanding power and powerlessness: Towards a framework for emancipatory practice in social work. *Journal of Social Work*, *6*(1), 33–51.

Weaver, H. N. (1999). Indigenous people and the social work profession: Defining culturally competence services. *Social Work*, *44*(3), 217–225.

Whittington, C. (2007). Assessment in social work: A guide for learning and teaching. SCIE Guide 18. Retrieved from the website of the Social Care Institute for Excellence, http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/guides/guide18/files/guide18.pdf

Reviewer Note

Correspondence concerning this book review should be addressed to Shari Fitzgerald, School of Social Work, Memorial University, St. John's, NL, A1B 3P7, Canada. Email: shari.fitzgerald@med.mun.ca