

Kegedonce's Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm chats with author Richard Van Camp

[Kateri] *What was the first thing you can remember writing?*

[Richard] I think it was in grade 4 or 5. It was a short story about my uncle Alexi finding a dinosaur egg in the back yard of our home in Fort Smith, NWT. I loved writing it because I was imagining something unreal happening to my uncle. I was discovering the gift--the dreaming--of writing fiction.

[Kateri] *What should readers know about you?*

[Richard] I love life so incredibly much and am grateful for the gifts and talents I was born with. I'm in debt to all my friends, family, mentors and students, authors and artists who I adore because you all inspire me.

[Kateri] *How has your work changed since The Lesser Blessed?*

[Richard] *The Lesser Blessed* was autobiographical in so many ways and I think it was such great therapy for me. Now I'm really removed from my work and I can imagine myself through fiction and imagine fiction through me. Sorry to sound like Yoda, but it's true. My fiction is now fiction. It may be inspired through me but it's imaginings spring-boarded from my real life.

[Kateri] *How does geography influence your work? Is your writing different if you're up North in the NWT compared to what you write in Vancouver?*

[Richard] The north will always inspire me. I notice now that I have short stories set in BC. 10 years ago I never would have considered this. I'm so enjoying writing from BC, which is now where I live, yet I find I have to continually return to Fort Smith and Yellowknife to recharge my writing batteries.

[Kateri] *Why do you write?*

[Richard] I write to celebrate the Great Mystery of life. You'll notice my writing is about the beauty of life--even in its capability of full throttling horror--as explored through my characters.

[Kateri] *What's the role of the artist/writer?*

[Richard] To be a scout, messenger and tattletale as well as to hold up mirrors and prayer flags and sorrow balloons.

[Kateri] *Does identity matter to you as a writer? Does it matter to you that you're a Dogrib writer? Should it matter to your readers?*

[Richard] What should matter is my work.

[Kateri] *What are you reading?*

[Richard] I'm reading a lot of graphic novels, comics and anthologies and Young Adult work, which I'll keep secret, for research for my new novel, *Blessing Wendy*. I'm also watching a ton of movies, a hellacious amount! I will say I've just finished the eternally wounding anthology, *Dark Times* edited by Ann Walsh with Ronsdale Press. This YA anthology deals with how young people grieve and I discovered my favourite short story of Lee Maracle's: "The Canoe."

[Kateri] *Is there a need for Aboriginal specific literary publishers? Writers' festivals? Writing and publishing grant programs? Why or why not?*

[Richard] Absolutely because the world and our own people are turning to us now to tell our own stories and any publisher or literary event or grant opportunities that can showcase and support such deserve full respect and encouragement and support.

[Kateri] *Why do you take so many photos of dogs?*

[Richard] Because dogs are our four legged angels upon the earth. They have such love and patience for us as human beings. Because they are our family. And because if you look at my snapshots of them, they tell you all you need to know about them if you look into their eyes. I'd love to take more portraits of cats but I'm horribly allergic. Sorry, Cat Nations!

[Kateri] *As a writer, do you think it's more difficult to make someone laugh or to cry?*

[Richard] I aim for both and hope I deliver because if I'm laughing when I'm writing it, I'm hoping I can convey this. If I'm sobbing as I write it and it hurts to write, I'm hoping and praying I can deliver that same voltage to the reader.

[Kateri] *What's the last book that made you laugh or cry?*

[Richard] Books that have made me weep openly are *The Curious Case of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon and *The Momma Poems* by Maurice Kenny. Books that make me laugh are *Post Office* and *Ham on Rye* by Charles Bukowski. As well, *A Widow for One Year* by John Irving is just frickin' hilarious.

[Kateri] *What makes you most proud about Angel Wing Splash Pattern?*

[Richard] I love that it's a collection that can make you laugh and cry and feel terror and forgiveness. It's also a celebration of sexuality and community and family and culture, and I was very grateful to Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm

for being such a kick-ass editor. I was grateful for our team who worked closely together to publish a book we could all be proud of. I'm glad you can listen to four of the stories in this collection on the Kegedonce website and also at www.richardvancamp.org

[Kateri] *What do you think is the best piece of advice to give to emerging Aboriginal writers?*

[Richard] It's very important that you read. Many students in creative writing courses or writers who are working on manuscripts are not reading and it shows. Learn as much as you can from the techniques of your favourite writers and employ them as you hone your own voice. All great writers are great readers first just like all great storytellers are great listeners first. And start telling the world your stories, your truth. Tell us something the world has never heard before.

[Kateri] *If you could only recommend one Kegedonce book to your friends, that wasn't your own, which one would you recommend and why?*

[Richard] In a heartbeat, I'd recommend *Without Reservation* because it's never been equaled. It's a collection of erotic writing and I think this is crucial to our empowerment and self determination because there's still so much shame out there in our communities about our bodies, our sexuality, our sensuality, our healthy lust and desire. It breaks my heart that there is so much shame out there and this is costing us lives, hope, and dignity when it comes to the high rates of Sexually Transmitted Infection. *Without Reservation* is hot, hungry, sexy, fun and playful--just the way it's meant to be!