

Review: *Sagkeeng Legends = Sagkeeng Aadizookaanag*

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Craig Charbonneau Fontaine. *Sagkeeng Legends = Sagkeeng Aadizookaanag*. Halifax & Winnipeg: Roseway Publishing, an imprint of Fernwood Publishing, 2012. 69 pp. ISBN: 978-1-55266-517-6.

Sagkeeng Legends = Sagkeeng Aadizookaanag is based wholly on recordings made in the 1980s by the author's late grandmother, Josephine Courchene. This short compilation includes two legends shared with her by her husband, John C. Courchene. Born in 1914, John briefly attended the Fort Alexander Indian Residential School and was considered illiterate in the English language. A fluent speaker of Anishanabemowin from Sagkeeng First Nation in Manitoba, John did not consider himself a storyteller. Yet these recordings suggest otherwise.

Charbonneau calls these two legends “pebbles of knowledge where a mountain stood before the onslaught of colonization began to erode the very foundations of our cultures” (8). Oral traditions, such as storytelling and the sharing of legends, were an integral and vital way of passing knowledge on traditional medicines, culture, local biodiversity, kinship, governance, and community protocols, to name a few, amongst families and communities. According to the author, “Oral history is crucial in determining Indigenous Peoples’ connection to our lands” (11). He also went on to say that the stories “provide our connection to our place in the Sagkeeng First Nation...as well as provide evidence of the rich history of the Courchene family” (11).

The author deliberately chose a decolonized approach to sharing these stories. He not only placed the English text alongside Roman Orthography and Syllabic versions of Anishanabemowin, he also chose to have each page accompanied by an illustration by First Nations artist Lloyd Swampy. He acknowledged that the depth of these legends could only truly be understood when one hears and understands them in the language in which they were originally shared.

“Aadizokaan Beshig” and “Aadizokaan Niish” are the two short legends included in the compilation. The brevity of the stories does not mean they are either simple or light in content. In fact, they touch upon complicated challenges experienced by children, men and women, family groups and communities. They also provide resolution to challenges through the assistance of spiritual beings and the characters in the legends. Indeed, each of the stories offers a glimpse into the vital relationships between people and the spirit world, land-based survival, medicines, the inter-dependence amongst and between human beings and animals, and cultural protocols. Like many legends, these do not offer up a clear message to the reader. They are meant to invoke thoughtful interpretation and learning.

Though specific to the oral history of the Courchene family, this book is accessible to all audiences, across all ages. It is significant in that it provides a sampling

of how First Nations peoples' stories, legends and oral histories can be recorded, preserved and shared.