

The Northern Dimension: Tomson Highway's Visit to Finland

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Award-winning playwright and novelist Tomson Highway (Cree) is Canada's best-known First Nations writer. From 1986 to 1992 he was Artistic Director to Native Earth Performing Arts, Toronto's only professional Native theatre company, and the crucible and catalyst for a whole generation of talented First Nations dramatists. His early plays, *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), established him as a major First Nations dramatist. In 1994 he was awarded the Order of Canada. In 1998 his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* became a Canadian best-seller. In the same year, *Maclean's magazine* named him as one of the 100 most important people in Canadian history.

Tomson Highway's work continues to attract attention and debate with such plays as *Ernestine Shushwap Gets Her Trout* (2005), and his writing for children is of considerable importance. Significantly, all his storybooks for children (*Caribou Song/atihko nikamon*; *Dragonfly Kites/kiweeginapiseek*; and *Fox on the Ice/mahkesis miskwamihk e-cipatapit*) are told in both English and Cree. It is through the pioneering efforts of First Nations writers like him that Aboriginal creative writing as well as Aboriginal literacy and education have undergone a renaissance in the last few decades.

I invited Tomson Highway to be a plenary speaker at the Canada Seminar 2002 at Helsinki University, an international symposium entitled "First Nations: Symbolic Representations," jointly organized by the Nordic Association for Canadian Studies (Finland), the Department of English, Helsinki University, and the Canadian Embassy.

Fascinated by the presence of the Cree/Ojibway Trickster figure Nanapush/Wesageechak in his major work, which chimed with my own research into the Trickster figure in world

literature as an emblem of humour and survival in the face of historical adversity, I had first contacted Tomson in the late 1990s. He was extraordinarily generous with his time and interest. On the basis of the articles I had by that time written on him, he sent me the typed manuscripts of two of his plays, *Rose* and *Ernestine Shushwap Gets Her Trout*, before they were published.

Although a world traveller, Tomson had not previously been to Finland, and was particularly excited about the idea of meeting with Sámi peoples. An itinerary was drawn up, a whirlwind tour that would include the Canada Seminar in Helsinki, and talks and piano performances at Tartu University, Estonia, and St. Petersburg as well as a journey to Northern Lapland.

On March 1, 2002 over 150 people flocked to the Festival Hall of Helsinki University to listen to Tomson Highway deliver his plenary "The History of the World in 60 Minutes Flat." Curiously, there is a cross-cultural coincidence that links Highway's work and Finnish literature. A key scene in Highway's work, represented in both *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Caribou Song*, is where two brothers escape from being trampled by a herd of caribou by climbing on a large rock. It is strangely similar to a well-known scene from Aleksis Kivi's *Seven Brothers*, where the brothers scramble to the safety of a rock to avoid a herd of marauding wild bulls. These two scenes are coincidental, no allusion is implied, but it illustrates the power of the mythic imagination which transcends cultures. In effect, this was also the theme of Tomson Highway's talk. Contrasting Greek, Christian, and Cree mythological worldviews, he argued that to destroy mythology was, ultimately, to destroy ourselves.

Tomson Highway's delivery is extraordinarily fast, words and ideas shooting forth like meteors,