



A Teacher's Guide for *Beast* by Richard Van Camp

Warning: This guide contains many spoilers. Proceed with caution!



Douglas & McIntyre

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Violence and Abuse including references to physical violence, including and historical warfare.

Homophobia and Discrimination including instances of homophobic slurs and discrimination against LGBTQ+ characters.

Death and Grief: Loss of a parent and loss of a child are significant parts of the narrative.

Substance Use: Mentions of alcohol use and alcoholism.

Bullying and Isolation: Characters experience social isolation and are subjected to bullying.

Fear: There are references to gore and potentially unsettling supernatural elements.

OVERVIEW

Set in the Northwest Territories, *Beast* is a novel about teens from the Tłıchǫ Dene, Cree, and Métis Nations that combines a coming-of-age story with horror, adventure and romance. For as long as the central protagonist, Lawson can remember, his life in a small Northwest Territories town has revolved around “the Treaty” between the Dogrib (Tłıchǫ Dene) and the Chipewyan, set down centuries ago to prevent the return of bloody warfare between the two peoples.

On the Dogrib side, Lawson and his family have done their best to keep the pact alive with the neighbouring Cranes, a family descending from of a revered Chipewyan war chief. But even as Lawson and his father dutifully tidy the Cranes’ property as an act of respect, their counterparts offer little more than scowls and derision in return, despite the fact that both families are Yabati—warriors responsible for protecting the treaty.

Worse still, it seems that one of the Cranes’ boys is doing all he can to revive the old conflict: the cold-eyed Silver, fresh out of jail, has placed himself in the service of a cruel, ghoulish spirit bent on destroying the peace. Lawson and his friends must find a way to destroy the Dead One and save the community from violent conflict.

This latest feat of storytelling magic by celebrated author Richard Van Camp blends sharply observed realism and hair-raising horror as it plays out against a 1980s backdrop replete with Platinum Blonde songs and episodes of Degrassi Junior High. Unfolding in the fictional town of Fort Simmer—the setting of previous Van Camp stories—*Beast* delivers a gripping, spirited tale that pits the powers of tradition against the pull of a vengeful past.



RICHARD VAN CAMP (PHOTO BY WILLIAM AU)

THEMES

Coming of Age, Finding Identity

Lawson Sauren, Cody Cranes, Shari Burns, and Isaiah Valentine are teens of Tłıchʼo Dene, Chipewyan, Métis, and Cree heritage. By facing an evil spirit and those it possesses, the teens form friendships and develop maturity as defenders of their communities and keepers of their Indigenous histories. Lawson grows into his role as a Yabati (warrior, protector) of his tribe; Cody, a gay teen, finds friendship and acceptance; Shari, psychic, is romantically involved with Lawson and his main ally in his fight with the Dead One; and Isaiah, a Cree grass-dancer, comes into his own as an inheritor of his grandfather's powers and a keeper of ceremony. These main characters must battle the dark side of the spirit world alone, without adult help. Ancestral heritage and group cooperation is key to their success.

Indigenous Cultures

Beast celebrates Indigenous cultures and values. As a Yabati, Lawson is expected to “protect, accept, respect . . . and defend with honour” (3). Service to the community is a core value, as represented in Lawson's peace-keeping role and in the community work of his late mother. The power of ceremony is represented in Isaiah's grass-dancing and in the protocols with which the teens approach each other and their elders. New friendships or requests for help begin with the offerings of traditional emblems of

respect—medicine pouches, food, eagle feathers. The main characters walk in two worlds: they are goofy teens, fully plugged in to 1980s pop culture, but at the same time they live in an indigenous world of ceremony and spirit presences.

This stipulation that the teens must confront the dark side of the spirit world alone, bound by a deal that bars them from directly asking for adult intervention, amplifies the stakes of their journey, as they must rely on their inherent capacities and each other, while also seeking vital knowledge from Knowledge Keepers and Elders without directly asking for help. A central thematic element is their Indigenous heritages, which emerges as a vital resource. Success hinges on their ability to reconnect with fragmented lines of Indigenous knowledge—wisdom that has been endangered by generational disruptions, while also drawing joy and inspiration from the mainstream pop culture that surrounds them. Their journey symbolizes the broader implications of cultural continuity and underscores the critical role of collective effort in re-establishing pathways to cultural connection.

Romance

The romance between Lawson and Shari is a subplot of the novel. Although Lawson is initially attracted to the stunningly beautiful Roxanne Valentine, ultimately, he connects with Shari as their friendship deepens. On one hand, they are high school students with a shared passion for pop culture; on the other, they are Indigenous youth who build their relationship through respect, honour and protocol. For example, Lawson recognizes he must ask Shari's father for permission to invite her to their high school prom, even though Shari has signaled her willingness to go with him. Shari leads in the physical element of their relationship and Lawson respects her wishes. Their romance is a study in the excitement and intense emotion of first love, in conjunction with respectful courtship and restraint.

Grief

Grief is another theme in *Beast*. When the novel opens, Lawson and his dad are still mourning the death of Roberta Sauren, mother and wife, in a boating accident two years prior that shook the entire community. Lawson has become reclusive ("I was numb and I was alone" (31)), finding solace in mainstream pop culture alone, and his father absent and forgetful (32). Sonny Nets, Lawson's uncle, is also in a state of

extended mourning, salted with guilt and bitterness, over the death of his three sons in a house fire. Sonny expresses his misery through alcoholism. Over the course of the novel's events, these characters begin to process their losses and heal through the recall of their Indigenous practices and the forming of new relationships.

CHARACTERS

The Saurens and their relations

Lawson Sauren: a 17-year-old Tłıchǫ Dene Yabati and the principal protagonist. A descendent of Edzo, a great Dogrib warrior and co-creator of the Peace Treaty between the Tłıchǫ Dene (Dogrib) and Chipewyan tribes, Lawson's job is to defend the Treaty. When Silver Crane, son of a Chipewyan family, is possessed by an evil spirit, Silver does what he can to break the Treaty and renew warfare between the tribes. Lawson must fight the spirit to free Silver and his brothers and save his own people from war. He must also learn to cope with his grief over his mother's death, navigate his first romantic, and help his Uncle Sonny overcome his own past trauma.

Roberta Sauren, Lawson's mother: She was a community leader who ran the Friendship Centre in Fort Simmer and a cultural teacher of youth. Roberta could move between the mundane and spirit worlds, a capacity that Lawson inherits. A hero to her community, Roberta died in a canoeing accident when she gives her lifejacket to Stanley Cranes.

Lawson Sauren Senior: Lawson's father (Smarty) has a knock-out punch. He is a smart and handsome bookkeeper during the day, but he works evenings as well as a bingo caller or MC at dances. His busyness comes out of his grief over the death of his wife Roberta. His challenge is to let go of a stifling grief and live again.

Sonny Nets: Lawson Sauren's Uncle Sonny is a Knowledge Keeper, but after a tragic fire in which he lost his three sons, he began to drink. In his sober times he is a generous mentor; drunk he behaves badly. With Lawson's compassion and respect, he resolves sobriety and begins to pass on Dogrib culture and cooking skills to his nephew.

Darrel, Sonny Junior, Ray: These were Sonny's children and Lawson's cousins, lost in a house fire. They return as spirits, visible to Lawson who has his mother's gift of sight. They help Lawson defeat the Dead One.

The Cranes

Lester Cranes: Father of Silver, Cody, and Stanley, Lester Cranes is an ill-tempered man who mocks the Sauren family and takes advantage of their respect for the Peace Treaty. He claims to be descended from Akaitcho, the Chipewyan war chief who was an original party to the Treaty with Edzo (Lawson's ancestor), but we learn that he is not (95). Cody, we discover, is the true inheritor and he is not Lester's biological son. Lester has behaved badly after his wife left him and he felt humiliated (95); he asserts himself through aggressive behaviours and by grooming Silver as a warrior (95-6).

Silver Cranes: The main antagonist. Born with a leg deformity and asthmatic, Silver is envious of his athletic brother Stanley and makes a deal with the Dead One for healing and power. When the story begins, he has already bargained his soul and the souls of his brothers for fame as a feared warrior. Possessed by the Beast through the agency of Slitter, a small demon that resides in his gut, he is instructed by that spirit to create havoc in his community and break the Peace Treaty so that war will come again to the North. As a slave of the demon, Silver is ruthlessly brutal and capable of all manner of crimes, including murder. Lawson has to free Silver as well as Cody and Stanley.

Cody Cranes: A troubled teen who acts tough to avoid bullying for being gay. After he has vandalized an elementary school, he ends up in a back-to-the-land rehabilitation program with Social Services and the RCMP. The program is steered by Lawson's mother, Roberta, and Cree Elders Dave and Mary Prince. Through the program, Cody meets Lawson and lets his guard down, becoming friends with Lawson.

Stanley Crane: Once a star athlete and the pride of Fort Simmer, Stanley is the victim of his brother Silver's obsession with power. Silver has sold Stanley's soul to the Dead One, leaving Stanley in a zombified state. In the climatic scene, when Lawson and friends confront the Dead One and free Stanley's soul, Stanley recovers his abilities in time to deliver a death blow to the evil spirit and reclaim his identity.

The Valentines

Betty Valentine: Married to a trucker who is rarely home (a source of grief and tension), Mrs. Valentine takes over Roberta's job at the Friendship Centre. Her tact and kindness help Lawson to overcome his paralyzing grief at his mother's loss. Mrs. Valentine's particular gift is the catching of eagle feathers before they touch the ground, a capacity that is considered very fortunate. Eagle feathers are spiritual signs; given as emblems of respect they can seal friendships. The feather that Mrs. Valentine gives to Lawson is instrumental in helping Sonny turn around his drinking habit, in welcoming K'ailaza, the peace maker, and in taming Silver's gang of thugs.

The Valentine boys: Linus (grade 5) and Patrick (grade 7) are rambunctious boys who begin to come into their Cree heritage when they help out in the welcome ceremony for K'ailaza.

Roxanne Valentine, Isaiah's sister, is a "Cree goddess." Her beauty is a temptation for Lawson, but he is loyal to Shari.

Isaiah Valentine: A Cree boy, about Lawson's age, Isaiah arrives in Fort Simmer just in time to help defeat the Dead One. Shari intuitively understands his gifts—his medicine—and encourages Lawson to make friends ("Operation Cree Love" (109-110; 112). Isaiah becomes a key supporter and fellow traveller in Lawson's mission to defeat the beast. He is a grass-dancer and his performance in an important scene with K'ailaza, the peace maker, helps to turn the tide of events in Lawson's favour.

Other characters

Shari Burns: A cool and beautiful Métis girl, Shari Burns, has been Lawson's classmate since kindergarten, but moved away after grade eight. Shari returns from a stay in Calgary just in time to revive Lawson's spirit after his first encounter with Silver and the Dead One. Shari is a psychic, known in the community of Fort Simmer as "Body Finder" (11) after she directed RCMP to the location of a lost kayaker that no one else could locate. After this and another psychic event in which she tells her biology teacher to return home because his wife is having a heart attack, she has to hide from a community that was terrified of her ability. Shari accompanies Lawson throughout his adventures, providing indispensable help in his confrontation with the dark spirit world.

K'ailaza: The name means “moon” in Chipewyan (121). K'ailaza is related both to the Chipewyan and the Dogrib. He visits Fort Simmer with his daughters as a stop on a tour of Northern communities to promote peace and share stories. As a respected Elder, he is greeted with a community feast. At the event (“Eye of the Tiger” chapter), Silver and his gang show up to convince K'ailaza that Lawson has broken the Peace Treaty. Silver brings food that is poisoned to kill the peace maker and start a war. Lawson, Isaiah and his brothers, and Shari must expose Silver. This is where Lawson's moose nose soup, Isaiah's grass-dance, Shari's help in distracting the zombified Stanley Cranes (Silver's “muscle”), and Mrs. Valentine's eagle feather all come into play. Ceremony and communal cooperation combine to defeat the evil spirit.

The Dead One: Sometimes called the Father, Lord, poison root, soul stealer, or Medicine Eater, this spirit takes the horrific shape of a skinned bear clothed in maggots. It can produce any number of Slitters. It seduces its victims with promises of power, but it lives on death and ultimately destroys those that serve it. The Beast is constantly hungry and demanding of bodies and souls.

Slitter: A small demon that emerges from the Dead One. This creature can jump into people's mouths and live in the gut where it directs them to do the will of its master. The Dead One can create any number of Slitters.

Mr. Bicksley: Shari Burns's biology teacher. Shari warns him that his wife, Sharon, is having a heart attack.

Mr. Burns (Carlson): Shari's dad, a hunter, trapper and proud Métis, someone who Lawson decides he doesn't want to mess with (101). Mr. Burns warms to Lawson when Lawson approaches him with respect and protocol: he asks for Mr. Burns's permission to take Shari to the prom.

Dìga Dek'o: a female red wolf, enslaved by the Dead One. When Lawson frees her, she offers him her medicine whenever he needs it. She becomes his spirit companion.

Joey: Roxanne Valentine's boyfriend.

Nark, Sado, Vip, Pyro, Sid, Rancid, Ronny: Silver's gang members.

Linda Net: Sonny's ex-wife.

Dave and Mary Prince: Cree Elders. They accompany Roberta on the cultural trip to Lake Tsu.

Charlie Snow: Cody’s biological father and once Fort Simmer’s mayor. Silver attacks Charlie with Slitter in order to get to Cody. When Slitter slides into Charlie’s body, Charlie becomes zombified and gives up his son.

Sharon: Mr. Bicksley’s wife.

Stan the Man: manager of the old folks’ home.

Starla: Lawson’s dad’s girlfriend. We meet her only in a mention at the end of the story, when both Dad and Lawson have recovered enough from Roberta’s death to move on.

Steve: Shari’s mom’s boyfriend.

Therese: Cody’s mother, Lester Cranes’ former wife.

Harold Valentine: Isaiah’s grandfather and master grass-dancer.

SETTINGS

Fort Simmer: a fictional small town in northern Canada—“the hickey capital of Canada . . . a truck town, a tough town, a rugged beauty of a town” (39) with a muffaloose as a mascot.

Lake Tsu: site of cultural trips organized by Roberta Sauren.

The twisted forest: a spirit forest that is the nest of the Dead One. It is a place of winter, rot, death, and imprisoned souls (51-52; 269-88)

POP CULTURE REFERENCES

Beast is set in 1986. Lawson and his friends are eager fans of mainstream pop tunes and cultural tropes of the day and they move easily between these and their Indigenous practices. Van Camp has created a play list on Spotify of 1980s songs mentioned in the novel. See the QR code in the back matter of *Beast* for access. Van Camp also references current events of the era include excitement over the return



of Halley's Comet and the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which had come to public awareness only a few years prior. Gay men and teens like Cody Crane faced significant stigma not only because of the disease but also due to the prevailing prejudices around homosexuality.

RESOURCES

YouTube: *Telus Talks with Tamara Taggart and Richard Van Camp: We Are All Storytellers* (37:11 minutes)

YouTube: *Inhale: Recovering Family Medicines Through Storytelling with Richard Van Camp* (2:15 minutes)

YouTube: *Weetigo (Wheetigo) War Roth*, advertisement for graphic novel by Van Camp and Christopher Shy on the Wheetigo (a type of the Dead One in *Beast*) (13 minutes)

YouTube: *Truth North Country Comics podcast: Van Camp on Wheetigo War Roth: "Indigenous Story Weaves Grippingly Haunting Tale"* (29:03 minutes)

YouTube: *Save Our History—Tlicho Nation Social—History* (9:49 minutes)

YouTube: *Dogrib Folk of Canada* (3:36 minutes)

Quick facts on the Dogrib people: [Tlicho \(Dogrib\) | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Tłıchǫ history: [Tlicho Way of Life | Tlicho History](#)

Tłıchǫ Research and Training Institute: [Lands Protection | Tlicho Research and Training Institute](#)

Indigenous Peoples Atlas, a resource for Indigenous culture, the effects of colonialism, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: [First Nations | Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada](#):

Chipewyan Dene, general information: [Dene | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Cree people, general information: [Cree | The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Cree grass-dance: YouTube (multiple sites): Men's Grass Dance; Northern Cree Singers- Grass Dance; Northern Cree Grass Dance Song @ FSIN Pow wow

Alice Legat, *Walking the Land, Feeding the Fire: Knowledge and Stewardship Among the Tłıchǫ Dene*. University of Arizona Press, 2012.

In the Dene worldview, relationships form the foundation of a distinct way of knowing. For the Tłıchǫ Dene, indigenous peoples of Canada's Northwest Territories, as stories from the past unfold as experiences in the present, so unfolds a philosophy for the future. *Walking the Land, Feeding the Fire* vividly shows how—through stories and relationships with all beings—Tłıchǫ knowledge is produced and rooted in the land. Anthropologist Alice Legat undertook this work at the request of Tłıchǫ Dene community elders, who wanted to provide younger Tłıchǫ with narratives that originated in the past but provide a way of thinking through current critical land-use issues.

PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

The above-named resources are examples of information on the Tłıchǫ Dene, Chipewyan, and Cree cultures of Canada. There is a wealth of online material, written and visual—Nations' websites, government information, YouTube videos, audio resources—that students can use for pre-reading research projects. Divide students into teams and have them research the three Indigenous cultures featured in the novel: the Tłıchǫ Dene, Chipewyan, and Cree. Individual team members could choose a specific area such as territorial boundaries; traditional stories, songs, and dances; tribal history; land use; current statistics (population) and relations with non-Indigenous government bodies (Treaty information). Have each team present their findings to the class. Presentations could be creatively presented in written, visual, or audio form.

Beast is set in 1986 and it is full of references to mainstream media culture of that era—pop music, TV shows, and movies. Ask students (singly or in groups) to use the QR code at the back of *Beast* to access the pop music referenced in the novel. Van Camp's music references range from heavy metal to rap to pop. What do these genres say about mainstream culture of the 1980s? How does metal compare with Madonna, for instance? (Lawson, Isaiah, and Shari are into metal. Why?). Describe the imagery and emotions evoked by some of these pop bands. How does pop music of the 1980s compare with pop music now?

PROJECT IDEAS

Have students make a list of protocols used by Lawson and his friends and note the scenes (chapters and page numbers) in which these occur. Some examples are paying the land with tobacco or fireweed (7), speaking to plants and animals that are to be harvested (7), medicine walks (7), making medicine bags (22); burning cut hair (30); the offering of medicine bags (217), the giving of eagle feathers (202), making and offering food, and ceremonial music and dance. The scene in which K'ailaza is welcomed is a good one for protocols (246-262). What do these practices tell us about Indigenous relationships?

Ask students to list the medicine powers of the main characters. For instance, Cody is a healer, Shari a psychic, Lawson a protector, and Silver can read minds (47); at the same time they are ordinary teenagers. Roberta says that every family has medicine power, although people can lose it with alcohol (16). Have students list their own gifts.

Among the themes of this novel is the coming of age of Lawson and his friends. Ask students to describe Lawson at the beginning of the story and Lawson at the end, and then list the key events that bring about changes in him. Ask students to show, with reference to particular scenes, how Lawson's journey exemplifies Dogrib values.

After students have read and discussed *Beast*, ask them to watch the brief YouTube video by Richard Van Camp listed above, titled "Inhale: Recovering Family Medicines Through Storytelling." Invite students to tell stories of their own families that have been meaningful to them.

Ask students to identify emotions and situations that might lead to "possession" by the Beast and ask them how they would handle such difficulties. For example, Silver is challenged by his crooked leg and asthma; he becomes a bully first before getting into more deadly crimes. How does the beast captivate its victims? What are the emotions or circumstances that might lead someone to let it in? Is Silver the only one with weaknesses? How do the other characters handle their vulnerabilities?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- *Beast* opens with a chapter titled “Don’t you (Forget About Me),” the title of a song by Simple Minds. The first page of each chapter also has an image of a small bird. What is the significance of this title in chapter one, and what are we meant to remember?
- Why do you think Van Camp titled his chapters after pop songs? How do the many references to non-Indigenous pop culture contribute to our understanding of Lawson and his peers.
- Lawson is initially resentful of having to do yard work for the Cranes to protect the Peace Treaty. When does his attitude begin to change?
- Lawson says that he cannot speak Dogrib (5-6) and that he had to learn French as a second language in school. (See Sonny’s comment that there are eleven official languages in the North (36-37)). What does it mean to lose touch with one’s language? What would it mean to you?
- Lawson’s mother, Roberta, takes a group of students to Tsu Lake to meet Cree Elders and participate in a back-to-the-land program (6). What do the students do and how does it affect them? (6-7; 15-16; 23-24) For example, Cody Cranes goes on the trip to Tsu Lake as part of his rehabilitation program. What is he being rehabilitated from? How does the trip change Cody? (7-10)
- After the trip to Lake Tsu, Roberta Sauren tells Lawson, Cody and the boys that they “all walk in two worlds now” (15). What does she mean by that? How would you describe the two worlds?
- In chapters 1 and 2, Lawson and Cody have a conversation about the Cranes family (9-12; 17-19). What do we learn about the Cranes? Are there clues here that help to explain the Cranes’ behaviours?
- Roberta shares some stories with her group of students at Tsu Lake (15-17). What do the stories tell us about the Dogrib and Chipewyan cultures? What are the value terms embedded in these stories and how do they affect Lawson and Cody?
- What is the significance of a medicine dream? (21) When and where does Lawson have his dream? (64-72; 288)

- What is the significance of the chickadee that recurs throughout the story? (21)
- Chapter 3, “Sledgehammer,” opens with a description of Lawson’s father and Uncle Sonny. Describe these characters, especially the relationship between Dad and Sonny (26-29).
- After his mother’s death, Lawson takes refuge in pop songs (32-3). Check out the lyrics to some of these songs. What do they tell us about Lawson’s state of mind?
- How does Sonny help Lawson and Dad with their grief over Roberta’s death? (33-34)
- What is a muffaloose and why might it be a fitting mascot for Fort Simmer? (39)
- When Lawson catches Silver and Stanley breaking into the Legion, he tries to avoid a fight. How does he appeal to Stanley and Silver for peace? (44-50)
- The chapter titled “Eyes Without a Face” is about Lawson’s first encounter with the Dead One and Slitter in the twisted forest. Describe these figures and the setting as closely as you can (the smell of rot, the misshapen limbs, the mask-like face, the hunger (60, 73)). What do these features tell us about the nature of the Beast? Check out Indigenous stories about the Weetigo / Wheetigo or Windigo and listen to Van Camp’s podcast on the Weetigo (listed under Resources). (Note that spellings vary: this creature is common to a number of Indigenous cultures).
- How does the Dead One lure people and animals into its service? (60, 62) Why do you think it was successful with Silver? If, as Shari says, this beast steals souls through false promises (81), how might one resist? Is there anything about Lawson that might make him vulnerable to possession by the Dead One?
- Lawson manages to escape his first encounter with the Beast. What saves him? What is the deal he makes with the Dead One? (66-73; 75)
- After meeting the spirits in the twisted forest, Lawson runs into Shari Burns. What are Shari’s gifts and how does she revive Lawson? (77-80)
- Why do you think Lawson has to promise not to tell adults about his encounter?
- If this novel is about Lawson’s battle with the Dead One and defense of the Dogrib / Chipewyan Peace Treaty it is also about his grief over the death of his mother (84-86). Are these two spiritual journeys related, and if so, how? Which

characters and events help Lawson along the way? This could be a team research project.

- Before Stanley's soul is captured by the Dead One, he is a star athlete. What are the factors that lead to his capture? (86-88) Is Silver the only reason that Stanley falls prey to an evil spirit?
- What can we know about K'aílaza? (91) How does Lawson receive the news that this peacemaker is coming to Fort Simmer? (92)
- In the chapter titled "Talk it Out," Shari urges Lawson to ask the Valentines for help in his mission to save the Cranes boys from the Beast. Think about this strategy in relation to popular movies about a lone hero who conquers all the bad guys by himself. What does "Operation Cree Love" (100) contribute to our understanding of Lawson and of Dogrib communities?
- Shari tells Lawson that to save the Cranes boys he will have to return to the spirit forest via the Beneath (102). What do you think she means by "Beneath"?
- Lawson arms himself against Slitter with a tennis racquet (104-05). How can a racquet help him against an evil spirit?
- The chapter "Dancing with Myself" (again, it's the title of a pop song) deepens our picture of Lawson when we see him at a school dance. Grief over his mother's death has isolated him and made him feel like an outsider (107). Have you had similar feelings for any reason (you don't have to make your reasons public)? What are some of the effects of feeling like this?
- What is Shari's role at the school dance? Why does she dance with Isaiah when it is really Lawson who interests her?
- In the chapter "Our House," Lawson meets the Valentine family. Consider the description of the house and its contents in this chapter. Is there a way in which this household or indeed all of Fort Simmer might be considered muffaloose country (119). [Teachers: the Valentines' house is a study in hybridity, juxtaposing contemporary non-indigenous elements and Cree heritage components. The house could be considered as a cipher of the two worlds of the novel].
- Problem-solving for the main characters of this novel involves the recall (the calling upon) of their Indigenous heritages. Trace this process throughout the

novel for each major character. For example, Dad is consumed with grief, Sonny is a drinker, Lawson has to face the Beast, Shari is isolated because of her psychic powers, Isaiah is a newcomer to the community and shy about his grass-dancing, the Cranes boys are possessed. How do each of these characters move forward?

- Mrs. Valentine is the new director of the Friendship Centre, a position that Lawson's mother held before her death. What is the role of the Centre in the community? How does the fact that the Centre has been locked since Roberta's death speak to the situation in Fort Simmer? For instance, the narrator tells us that the Drop-In Centre is padlocked and rumor has it that a youth worker has stolen money that should have gone to the upkeep of the Centre (120). How does this story-fact support the main plot, Lawson versus the Beast?
- How do Roberta's mottos, "Make Yourself Proud" and "Lead with love" play out in the plot lines of the novel?
- Dinner with the Valentine family! What are the effects on Lawson? (126-27)
- The chapter "Tormentor" (128-30) gives us a glimpse into Silver's thoughts. What are his fears and wishes and how do these make him vulnerable to the Dead One?
- The first scene in "Send Me an Angel," the chapter following "Tormentor" shows us Lawson and Isaiah wrestling (131-32). You might also notice that Isaiah's room is covered in heavy metal posters. What is the relationship between this scene and the preceding one with Silver? Why is Lawson twisting Isaiah's neck? What do you make of the scene in which Isaiah and Lawson are playing with a knife? (133-36).
- Discuss the meaning of the grass-dance as Isaiah explains it. Why does Lawson think Fort Simmer needs this? (137-41).
- What does Shari's mix tape tell us about the budding relationship between her and Lawson? (143-44)
- Judging by his actions, Silver is Lawson's enemy. What do you think of Lawson's burning of the nunchucks he stole from Silver and the prayer he offers along with that gesture? (145) Why does this weapon no longer "need to exist" ? (145)
- Consider this scene: Lawson is getting ready for a singing, after burning the nunchucks. He parks at the drugstore where he can see the church, the old folks' home and the Legion. This is where he notices Silver's blood on his shoes and

decides to get rid of them. How do the buildings and the shoes speak to Lawson's situation and to the character of Fort Simmer? What can we surmise about the history of the town from these buildings? (146)

- When Shari pulls up in her dad's truck alongside Lawson, she is crying over the death of Cliff Burton, a Metallica band member (147). Why do you think Shari and Lawson are so in love with this band? Check them out on YouTube! Consider as well that Shari's bedroom is covered in posters of rock bands and Rambo (157-58). How do you reconcile these posters with Shari's personality?
- The chapter titled "Black Magic" is about Silver and his gang, and Slitter's possession of the Cree Elder, Charlie Snow (Cody's father). What does this chapter tell us about the power of the Dead One? (153-155).
- As Shari and Lawson talk over how to confront and stop Silver and his gang, Lawson asks, "How do we take on a gang without fighting?" (159) Discuss their strategies as laid out in this chapter ("Even if you Dream" 156-167). Have you ever had to confront a dangerous situation? What would you do if under the same constraints as Lawson and his friends? (Remember: no adults!)
- Read the chapter titled "Cool Rider" (168-77) carefully. The Valentine family is not without its own troubles. What does Lawson do to help the family out? What are the effects? What do the Valentines do for him?
- What is the significance of the eagle feather that Mrs. Valentine and Roxanne give to Lawson? Trace the trajectory of the feather throughout the rest of the novel.
- Mrs. Valentine gives Lawson some photos of his family (176-77) and Lawson decides he will take the photos to K'aílaza. Why would he do that?
- Consider the scene between Lawson and Isaiah, when Lawson tells Isaiah everything that has happened and asks for his help as a grass-dancer. What is the significance of the fireweed that Lawson offers Isaiah? (182)
- Why does Isaiah say that the Dead One can be starved and killed? (183) How might "ceremony and Cree backup" (185) contribute to this mission?
- In "The Dead Next Door" (186-88), Lawson sees the ghosts of Sonny's boys who died in a house fire. This is Sonny's tragedy and at least one factor in his drinking. Why do you think Lawson can see these ghosts?

- In the scene that follows Lawson's sighting of the ghost boys, we see Sonny drunk (189). How does Lawson handle this visit from his uncle? Why does Lawson give him an eagle feather when Sonny has let the family down with his drinking? (194-95)
- The chapter "Evil has no Boundaries" (207-210) is about the destruction of Cody's dad, Charlie Snow, and Cody's capture. Think about the details of this scene—the gang members with dead eyes, the holes that will bury Charlie's heart and that will suck Cody into the evil forest of the Dead One. Given that this is a scene about black magic, anything could happen. Why these particular details?
- Sonny's truck is called Ragged Glory. It has a muffaloose hood ornament, a Fort Simmer pride logo and a .22 bullet hole in it. What do these details say about Sonny and Fort Simmer? (212) Why does Sonny give Lawson his truck? What is the significance of this gesture? (233)
- In "Take Hold of the Flame" (220-234), Sonny teaches Lawson how to make moose nose soup. Identify the ceremonial elements of this scene. How does the making of the soup help both Sonny and Lawson? How does the spirit world come into the soup making process?
- According to Sonny, how do evil spirits gain power in this world of flesh and blood? (227-28)
- Lawson has a special relationship with the red wolf that he met during his first encounter with the Dead One (66-70; 152; 228-9; 248; 296). What is the nature of that relationship?
- In the scene where Lawson and his friends approach the circle in which K'aílaza and his daughters and where Silver and his gang are assembled they advance with the several items. Which items did they assemble, and what was the purpose of each? Lawson urges his friends to think of their ancestors (245-46). Given this scene, how are evil spirits to be resisted?
- Consider Lawson's address to K'aílaza and the crowd (251) including Silver and his gang. How does he win over the gang members? (252-3) What happens to these tough guys when K'aílaza has them pass around the eagle feather that Lawson has given him? (253-54)

- What is the Dead One's ultimate plan? (261) What does K'aílaza mean when he says this creature feeds on medicine power? (262) Can you think of any comparable figures in your culture?
- To destroy the Dead One and save Stanley and Cody, Lawson has to soul dive (267). How does he do this and who helps him? (267-8). Do you have any comparable practices in your culture?
- The Dead One is constantly hungry. It eats to grow large enough to come into the living world and destroy it (271). When Lawson arrives at the twisted forest, the beast is eating Caribou alive. Over and over, we are told that this creature is cruel and insatiable. Can you think of ways that such an evil spirit manifests itself in your world?
- Lawson is afraid of the Beast but he invents a prayer to steady himself and give courage. Who and what does he call on and why does this work for him? (274)
- Part of Lawson's quest is to free Cody and Stanley. What are the traps that he must avoid? Why do you think Lawson would lose his own soul if he touched those of Stanley and Cody? (277)
- Stanley is the one who spears the Dead One. Why does it have to be Stanley? (280-85)
- In the middle of the final confrontation with the Dead One, Lawson and Cody do the YMCA dance. Then, after Stanley spears the Beast, they burn it, because, Lawson says, he's "seen enough Friday the 13th movies to know that nothing is officially dead until you cremate it" (285). Why the YMCA dance? How do these pop cultural references fit into this scene?
- Lawson's last task is to liberate the wolves (287-8). Why can he never tell anyone about the wolves, especially the red one?
- When Lawson returns from the twisted forest and Shari takes him home he says "I was changed forever" (289). How has Lawson changed? Who has he become?
- In the penultimate scene, Lawson's dad arranges to bring his girlfriend Starla to meet Lawson (294). What is the importance of this gesture? What is to happen to Roberta's things and why?

- Your narrator leaves a message for you “if the Dead One ever returns” (299). Is he speaking only to the Tłıchǫ Dene, Cree, and Chipewyan peoples? What might be the message to others outside those cultures?
- Read the “Acknowledgements” at the end of this novel. What do these tell us about the author and how do they relate to the work of fiction you have just read?

PAIRINGS

Richard Van Camp and Christopher Shy, *Wheetago War Roth*. Renegade Arts Entertainment, 2024. Graphic novel about the reawakening of cannibalistic giants once banished by Dene spirits.

The Lesser Blessed (film version of Richard Van Camp’s novel of the same title), Dir. Anita Doron (2012), movie. Troubled Indigenous teens struggle to find a place and identity.

Three Feathers: The Movie (2018), Dir. Carla Ulrich. Indigenous youth spend nine months on the land.

Monkey Beach (2020), film version of Eden Robinson’s novel, *Monkey Beach* (2000), Dir. Loretta Todd. A young Indigenous woman returns home to a dysfunctional family.

The Trickster series, by Eden Robinson (text): *Son of a Trickster* (2017); *Trickster Drift* (2018); *Return of the Trickster* (2021)

SELECT VOCABULARY

Chipewyan

Dene Sorulthen: protector

Denendeh: Land of the People

Cree

astum: come, come here

hai hai: thank you

keemooch: on the sneak

kookum: grandmother

moonyows: white people

mushom: grandfather

nicimos: sweetheart

ogeenanz: Venus

oskâpêwis: helper

tapwe: truth

Dogrib

dìga dek'o: red fox

eẖts̱: grandparent Tł̱cẖ

̱k'q̱ / inkwo: power

mahsi / mahsi cho: thanks, thank you

nah: here

naka: aurora borealis

neẕ: good

nohtii: Creator