

How People Got Fire

Comment les humains ont obtenu le feu

Description

How People Got Fire is a short animated film that uses a combination of elegant charcoal drawings and rotoscoped animation to recreate Kitty Smith's oral story from the Tlingit Nation in Canada's Yukon Territory. Kitty Smith drew upon the oral tradition of the Tlingit and Southern Tutchone indigenous languages, as well as English to retell origin tales. According to Mrs. Smith, this version of *How People Got Fire* came from her father's people, the coastal Tlingit.



In a small northern First Nations village, a young girl visits Grandma Kay's house. Grandma Kay knows how to nourish the body and the spirit with her storytelling, bannock and care, but in her house things are not always what they seem. Another older world has a way of slipping in sideways. Books have a mind of their own, and stories that need telling come flying out of nowhere. Even household items, such as the photographs hanging on the wall, are brimming with animated life. As the ordinary reality of old yellow school buses and cups of tea falls away into the mythopoeic world of Crow and Chicken Hawk, Grandma Kay's storytelling reveals that there is little that separates us from the spirit world.

The live-action treated animation juxtaposed against allusive charcoal drawings suggests the coexistence of two separate, yet intimately connected, worlds. Employing the structure of a story within a story, *How People Got Fire* captures the oral tradition particularly the way in which it colours and informs external reality. As the time spent in Grandma Kay's house reveals the true depth of the spiritual and cultural memory of her community, the young girl's discovery that "now will never be now again" becomes part of the greater cycle of lived experience.

Background

The making of *How People Got Fire* was an intercultural and intergenerational collaboration. Storyteller Louise Profeit-Leblanc first learned the story behind the film from elder Kitty Smith. In 1988, a chance meeting between Ms. Profeit-Leblanc and composer/filmmaker Daniel Janke resulted in the development of a radio piece, produced with Kitty Smith's blessing.

In 1989, Kitty Smith passed away. In keeping with Tlingit Nation tradition, all cultural material and references to her were put aside. It wasn't until 2003 that Judy Gingell, granddaughter of Kitty Smith, approached Daniel Janke, saying it was appropriate to tell her Grandma's story again. In 2005, Janke began working in consultation with family members

Darlene Smith, Dianne Smith and Judy Gingell, and with NFB producer Svend-Erik Eriksen, to develop a film project.

During these consultations, numerous Smith family members talked about going to Mrs. Smith's small house in the village as children and hearing her tell stories. Storyteller and performer Sharon Shorty described similar experiences that she and her brother had when they were young. The film's lead animator, Chris Auchter, also recounted his own personal experience growing up on Haida Gwaii, and narrator Louise Profeit-Leblanc and Daniel Janke recalled similar events from their childhoods, in which grandparents provided care and passed on stories and teachings.



From this starting point, the framing element of the film developed as a composite story reflecting the common experiences of many people. Everyone involved agreed that this, combined with the oral nature of the internal story, presented unique circumstances.

The live-action shoot took place in the village of Carcross, Yukon in March 2006. The cast features Mae Hume, daughter of the late Kitty Smith, playing the role of Grandma Kay, as well as a group of young people from the Carcross-Tagish, the Kwanlin Dun, and the Champagne-Aishiak First Nations.



A team of trainees and experienced animators was assembled, and they worked in Whitehorse under the direction of head animator Jay White. Chris Auchter, who animated the internal story, continued his work in Vancouver. The film then went into post-production under the guidance of producer Martin Rose.

How People Got Fire was first screened in February 2009 at the Available Light Film Festival in Yukon and premiered in the village of Carcross to a delighted audience of family, cast and crew members, and townsfolk.

Curriculum Links

Social and ethical responsibility:

Listening respectfully to elders is valued in Aboriginal communities.

Passing on the oral tradition is an important responsibility for storytellers.

Caring for the next generation is demonstrated through storytelling and other forms of teaching. Visiting and caring for your elders is the responsibility of all family members in Aboriginal communities.

Aboriginal studies:

Aboriginal peoples' oral tradition contains stories about the origin of important aspects of history and culture.

Aboriginal peoples may speak non-standard forms of English that combine the conventions of Aboriginal languages with English.

Crow or Raven is a central character in Tlingit oral tradition. Aboriginal oral traditions contain a series of stories of similar trickster characters.

Aboriginal peoples maintain spiritual connections to ancestors.

Aboriginal peoples and their cultures - like any cultures - adapt, change and evolve over time. For example, this animated program is the result of cross-cultural collaboration on many levels. The filmmakers used contemporary animation techniques, black line-drawing and contemporary music to portray an old story from the oral tradition of the Tlingit peoples. This oral tradition continues today, as a continuum, unbroken.

Social studies:

The Tlingit are one of several First Nations whose traditional land is now within the Yukon Territory.

The role of anthropology in Aboriginal communities has evolved over time.

The Tlingit oral tradition is juxtaposed against the use of contemporary film and music as storytelling techniques.

Aboriginal peoples weigh the importance of sharing the oral tradition with a wider audience, as a means for cross-cultural understanding, against misinterpretation of their cultural traditions.

Health education:

Bannock is a staple food for many Aboriginal peoples in Canada.

Media Studies:

Live-action treated animation technique and line drawing on paper rendered via computer animation techniques.



Multi-media presentation of the oral tradition can be innovative and creative.

Pre-viewing activities**Discussions of social and ethical responsibility:**

What do elders do? How do they do it? Who are the elders in your community? Do you have elders that you visit? Has an elder visited your home or school? What are elders like? How

should we conduct ourselves around elders? Why are elders important? What responsibilities do we have for them?

Invite an elder to tell stories to the class. Determine the protocol for asking elders for assistance. Many elders are given gifts such as preserved or canned salmon in coastal areas and tobacco or sweet grass or sage in other areas, as well as honoraria for their knowledge and time. When hosting an elder, make sure there is a comfortable setting, speak slowly and always provide tea.



Discussion topics for Aboriginal studies:

Do you know the story of how the world began? The First Nations and Inuit have many stories explaining the origin of the world. These are known as origin stories. There are also many stories that explain the origin of geographical features, animals, plants, constellations, and insects - everything around us.



The text, *Life Lived like a Story*, by Julie Cruikshank in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned, contains many origin stories. Read or re-tell an origin story from the text. In Canada and in North America indigenous peoples spoke over 500 different languages. The patterns and conventions of indigenous languages often influence the way that indigenous peoples use English. An Indigenous form of English is evident in the re-telling of *How People Got Fire*. What are the patterns and conventions that you notice in the film?

Have you ever experienced storytelling? Have you ever heard a story from a family member or an elder? What was the story about? What did you learn from the story? Was the story funny? Was it entertaining?

As a theme, many Aboriginal stories have dealt with the notion of cooperation. In *How People Got Fire*, trickster Crow [or Raven, depending where in Canada the story originates] solicits cooperation from the other birds and Chicken Hawk steps forward. Read or retell Thomas King's version of *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, from *The Truth about Stories*. In that particular story, many animals step forward to contribute to the building of the Earth.

Social studies activities:

Locate on a map the various First Nations whose traditional territories reside in the Yukon. The text, *Life Lived like a Story*, contains a map that illustrates the territories of the Indigenous languages spoken in the Yukon. Locate the territories where Southern Tutchone and Tlingit are spoken.

Anthropology is an academic discipline that endeavours to study human cultures and societies. This includes a focus on indigenous peoples, and on recording and documenting all aspects of their culture. Anthropology has adapted and grown over the years, with new understanding and awareness. Many First Nations people are now involved in the field of anthropology.

What are the respectful protocols for documenting Aboriginal cultures in your area?

View *How People Got Fire* without the audio. Discuss possible musical accompaniment. Listen to *How People Got Fire* without the picture. Discuss how the internal story is communicated. Discuss possible images.

Health education:

Bannock is a staple food for many Aboriginal people.

Serve bannock, jam and tea during the viewing of *How People Got Fire*.

Some First Nations maintain that it is important to eat when listening to elders as a way to encourage learning.

Media Studies:

Explain the rotoscoping animation technique, which involves tracing over live-action film.

Explain the charcoal drawing method used in this film, an example of classical animation.



Post-viewing Activities

Social and ethical responsibility:

Is Grandma Kay familiar to you? Who does she remind you of? Why? What would you do if you were listening to Grandma Kay tell a story? What would you want to ask her? What gift would you give Grandma Kay for telling you a story?



Aboriginal studies:

How do you think the stories such as *How People Got Fire* might change when translated from an Indigenous language to English?

What conventions of indigenous forms of English are used in the film? What conventions of Indigenous forms of English do you hear in your community?

What is suggested by the animated photographs, notebook, and kitchen mugs?

Invite local elders to tell stories. Observe the local protocol for providing rides, gifts and honoraria.

Create a line drawing that shows the importance of elders to you and your community. Display the drawings and invite elders to view them. Collect the drawings and present them to the elder.

Social studies:

Who are First Nations in your area? What role have anthropologists played in collecting stories in your local Aboriginal community?

Read the introduction to *My Stories Are My Wealth* by Mrs. Angela Sidney, Mrs. Kitty Smith and Mrs. Rachel Dawson; *Nindal Kwäindür: "I'm going to tell you a story"* by Mrs. Kitty Smith and to *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Native Elders* by Julie Cruikshank in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned, to find out how the stories were collected.

Are these women respectful in their approach to collecting and publishing stories?
Is the film *How People Got Fire* respectful in its approach to telling the story?

Consider how important fire and heat are in your life. What aspects of life are possible with fire?
What aspects of life are impossible without fire and heat?

Imagine your life if you had to use wood to heat your home, and if there was not electricity.

Develop guidelines for ethical practices in documenting Aboriginal cultural traditions.
Use the guidelines in collecting and publishing stories from elders.

What is the meaning of juxtaposition?

The music in the film was juxtaposed with the storytelling, providing a parallel text.

Do you think this kind of juxtaposition was effective?

Health education:

Bannock is a staple food for many Aboriginal people in Canada.

Make bannock for a visit by a storyteller.

Ask family or community members for their bannock recipes.

Have a bannock making contest. Invite elders to be the judge.

Post the winning recipe on your school website with a photograph of the cook.

Encourage the exchange of health-conscious recipes based on traditional Aboriginal diets.

Media Studies:

Do you think the use of two different animation techniques was effective?

Why or why not?

Research the rotoscoping animation technique and line drawn rendering.

View "Yellow Sticky Notes" Jeff Chiba Stearns' statement on YouTube for an introduction to the amount of work is required to render line drawings for animation.

Create line drawings of an aspect of the oral tradition you have heard. How many drawings would you need to make a 5-minute film?



Bibliography

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