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Caswell, Kurt. (2009). *In the Sun's House: My Year Teaching on the Navajo Reservation*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press.

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This is not a story of the Navajo. Nor is it a story of a white man who enters the landscape as a stranger but soon becomes a member, leader, and eventual savior of a tribe. There is no *Dances With Wolves* (Wilson & Costner, 1990) style Hollywood ending. Part of the reason he got the job, Kurt Caswell writes, is because he was *not* a budding anthropologist interested in studying American Indian tribes. He was a young educator, just 26 years old, returning from teaching in Japan and ready for his next adventure. He is currently an assistant professor of creative writing and literature in the Honors College at Texas Tech University. He went to the reservation to experience this adventure then move on to the next one. Instead, his time teaching in Borrego Pass changed his life. This is *his* story.

Unlike most reservation schools, Borrego Pass is run by the Navajo Nation instead of the Bureau for Indian Affairs (BIA). When the BIA targeted the Borrego Pass School to

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be closed in 1965, the people of the surrounding areas stepped in and petitioned to establish a grant school under the Indian Self-Determination Act (Caswell, 2009). The plan was formally submitted in 1971 (Stout & Pratt, 1971) and Dibe Yazhi Habitii'n O'lt'a, Inc. (Public School Review, 2010), better known as the Borrego Pass School, was incorporated by the state of New Mexico in 1972 (Caswell, 2009). In the book's afterward, Jim (2009) notes that this particular school is unique because part of this battle was for the creation of a curriculum that was relevant to the lives of its Navajo students. But as Caswell soon learns, this does not exempt the children and their families from the ravages of poverty, substance abuse, disease, abuse, and neglect.

All but two of the children in the school were Navajo. For most of them Navajo was their first language, and English their second. Their experience in Borrego Pass was different even from that of Navajo in other parts of the state, differences that caused Caswell's students to come to blows on a field trip with other Navajo students from Ganado, two hours away. When traveling to Chinle for an area spelling bee, Caswell learns that many aspects of the trip were as wildly unknown and unexpected as the competition itself. None of the students had stayed in a hotel room before or knew how to use the hotel room shower. None had eaten a meal in a diner with a waitress serving you, and were unsure how to respond to a waitress' questions. Many had never even used a telephone and were confused by the ones in their rooms.

Because of the hardships associated with teaching in this area, most teachers leave after a year or two. This causes mistrust and acting out on the part of the students at the start of each new school year.

How do I teach these children, I asked? How do I manage them in the classroom? How do I live in this place with them? How do I earn the respect of young Navajo who seemed to believe that all their problems were the fault of rich white people, like me? Of course, I wasn't really rich – I was just barely paying my bills. But to these kids, I was

wealthy beyond anything they might ever know in their lifetimes. This was not a money-in-the-pocket kind of wealth, but the kind of wealth that comes from the privilege of having choices. (p. 121)

While he is honest about his faults and mistakes, Caswell notes that he did not write the book to flagellate his younger self. Instead he reflects on these mistakes, what he learned from them, and how they shaped the person he is now. As lonely as he is frustrated, he buys a puppy he names Kuma, an impetuous dog whose own youth often leads him raise his hackles at the people who live in Borrego Pass. Like Kuma, Caswell reacts badly to the ways the children challenge him during the first few months he is there. When they push him, Caswell pushes back. It is not until the incident at Ganado does he realize that “despite their angry faces, their hands that threw the stones, their words that cut so deep, they were just children looking for guidance, support and love” (p. 163). It is here that he vows to overcome his own anger and fears in order to reach out to his students.

Initially the force of his anger surprises him, and he does not understand where it comes from. He finally realizes that much of his anger, frustration, and feelings of hopelessness stem from the fact that he finds himself caring. What can he do when all but one student had no plans to continue their education past the 8<sup>th</sup> grade? When students were beaten, left to starve, had lost 60% of the use of their lungs due to huffing gasoline? Borrego Pass is no longer the next adventure that he experience and remain untouched.

I had accepted this job at Borrego only to continue exploring; I never meant to care. And now that some measure of caring about what happened to these kids and this community had penetrated my defenses, I didn't quite know what to do. Caring just caused trouble for me. I could no longer live here without caring or leave here without regretting. Perhaps this had been my initial resistance to Borrego and to my students in the first place. Perhaps this kind of self-protection

had been my way all along. Now that I had broken through it and begun to feel this terrible desire to help, to save, I knew I had to get out. When I arrived I thought I would leave because that is what I did. That is what I had always done. I arrived in places and left them. Now I thought I would leave because I did not want to care about people whose lives seemed so battered and bruised as to be beyond healing. (p. 177)

He has no desire to be the savior of the Navajo Nation, just to make a difference in the lives of these specific kids. The ones who come to his classroom every day, living the lives of abject poverty he had only experienced in other countries. He notes that in all his travels, the horrors he saw were balanced by his own experience as an American citizen. But after spending a year in Borrego Pass he wondered if America was really no better than the rest of the world. He states, "I felt the loss of this belief in America very powerfully, and I acknowledged that I had lived for all my years in the fog of illusion" (p. 280).

While Borrego Pass is a uniquely encapsulated community (at least in the mid 1990s, the time period in which this story takes place), the experience of extreme poverty is not unique to Crownpoint, NM. While it may even be indicative of life on an American Indian reservation, it is not only American Indians who live this experience in the United States. However, it is Caswell's first experience with America's dirty little secret.

He wants to offer these kids the wealth of having choices, life options beyond what they currently expected. He knows this comes through education, perhaps the best weapon against poverty we currently have to offer. His story turns to Renee, his one student who wants to go on to high school and college, to find a way to do good for her people, as she explains it. They work together on a paper she is writing about the play *Romeo and Juliet* (1597/1993), far exceeding the scope of the assignment and both their expectations.

Of course Renee earned the highest mark on her paper, and that meant something to her. The part that surprised me was that it meant something to me. I had not expected to be so happy about Renee's good work. I carried those feelings around for days. That, I surmised, was the heart of teaching. Perhaps I'd be a teacher after all. (p. 270)

The title of this story comes from the Navajo creation story of Spider Woman (Burke, 2010). Spider Woman showed Monster-Slayer and Child-Born-Of-Water the path to the house of the sun. They traveled this path in search of their father, the Sun-God. In finding them and proving their worth, the Sun-God taught them how to protect the Navajo people by destroying all the monsters in the water and on the land. Caswell also finds himself in the house of the sun with monsters to slay. This story illuminates how education has the power to slay monsters by shaping the lives of everyone involved. It has the ability to open doors that we did not even realize existed. Not just for students, but for their teacher.

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### About The Reviewer

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