



2017 Emerging Tribal Writer Publishes First Book

Katy Fiore, an SDSU senior majoring in English, interviews Jessie Taken Alive-Rencountre, the 2017 winner of SDSU's Emerging Tribal Writer Award.

By Katy Fiore

In 2013, South Dakota State University established the Emerging Tribal Writer Award to encourage tribal writers who are beginning their writing careers to share their stories and culture with a broader audience. This award is meant to inspire tribal writers to honor and share their tribe's literary tradition. It is important for these tribes to share their culture and stories to encourage people to learn about tribal culture and history because the oral storytelling tradition is extremely important in Native culture, as it allows them to pass down their histories and stories to future generations. This tradition is vital because there is an unknown amount of information to be shared to help younger generations understand the histories and stories in Native culture.

This year's winner, Jessie Taken Alive-Rencountre, won the Emerging Tribal Writer Award for her story *Pet'a Shows Misun Light*, which focuses on the themes of kindness and compassion. This story is about a young boy named Misun who learns how to help others and bring light to their life from Pet'a, a wise tribal elder who shows Misun the importance

that people have in the lives of those around them. Misun is a Lakota word that means younger brother and Pet'a is a Lakota word that means fire. Jessie's cousin Erin Jensen illustrated the story.

For years, Jessie was a counselor for students in grades ranging from kindergarten to 12th grade. She wrote this story for students who struggled to understand their importance in the world. In October 2017, Jessie presented *Pet'a Shows Misun Light* in the traditional oral storytelling format at the Consider the Century Conference. It was amazing to hear the story told in this format because that was how Jessie originally created this story and it is a vital part of her culture. The story was well-received by everyone at the conference and was a great learning experience for all who attended.

Since winning the Emerging Tribal Writer Award, Jessie has published *Pet'a Shows Misun Light* with Mascot Books. I highly recommend this story regardless of your age because it has an incredible message that anyone can be reminded of the important role that they play in the world. Read an excerpt from Jessie's award-winning submission here. I had the opportunity to meet with Jessie and her family after the conference. She shared the following insights into her story.

How did your cultural background inspire your story?

My culture highly influenced my story. I had the privilege to grow up with a lot of our Lakota cultural teachings and ceremonies that were passed down to me through my parents and grandparents. Most of the teachings that were included in the story were teachings that were given to me at different times of my life as a young child and adolescent.

Is *Pet'a Show Misun the Light* based on any other story or stories you've heard?

No, the main lesson of the story came to me through a dream. The scene in the story where Pet'a shows Misun people's different lights and explains to him about hurt was something that I had been told in a dream. I was in outer space just like the char-

acter Misun was and an older man had shared with me the reason why people do hurtful things. In our Lakota culture, dreams play a big role. They are used for many different things like giving messages and teaching lessons. I have been blessed with many different dreams since I was young where I was shown many different lessons. This particular lesson was one that resonated with me and came at a point in my life where it was extremely helpful in my career as an elementary school counselor.

Who is Pet'a and what does he represent?

Pet'a is a wise character in the story that shares a very valuable lesson. He is older man that comes to help teach Misun. Lakota people value our elders because of the vast knowledge and wisdom they carry with them. In our culture we also believe that the Star People hold a lot of our wisdom. For centuries, our ancestors relied on the guidance from the Star People to help navigate them in their journey. Pet'a, be an old man from the Star People, represents the ancient and wise spirits. In a sense, he is helping guide Misun in his own spiritual journey as a young boy.

What are the major themes that you want your readers to take away from this story?

I want readers to be able to remember that we all come from the same place. It doesn't matter the color of our skin, how much money we have, the language we speak, or even our different interests, we all are connected because of the one source we come from. I believe we know this as young children, but we learn from modeled behavior around us. I also want readers to understand why some people's behaviors (perhaps someone they love) are the way they are. It's usually because they have experienced hurt and don't know how to forgive and forget how special they are. I hope that readers are able to be inspired to remember how special they are and to also help make our world a better place by helping those around them that are hurting.

The reasons why people are sad or mean are very relatable, how did you decide on the specific problems that lead the characters to be sad or mean?

I've had hundreds of little ones walk through my door and these seemed to be some popular themes. There are so many families that suffer from abandonment, abuse, bullying, and drug/alcohol use.

Who is your audience?

I initially had written this book for children in the elementary level. But, soon after I realized that the story can apply to all ages because it reminds us all of lessons that we all knew when we were born but unfortunately have forgotten.

How did you hear about the award and what made you decide to apply?

I actually heard about the contest when I took some of my students on a college campus tour. They were able to sit in on a class where Sarah Hernandez was presenting and she shared information about the contest with the class. I have always lacked confidence in my potential to become a published writer. That day when I heard of the contest something in me told me to submit the story. I figured I had nothing to lose by submitting it. What I have learned since submitting the story is the lesson of when you have that inner voice or instinct to do something, always follow it because you will more than likely have more opportunities open for you.

What is your next writing project?

I have a couple of ideas for more children's books. I definitely want to continue writing with them in mind. I think that is where we can make the biggest impact in our society, by teaching children at a young age about values. I want to continue to incorporate my teachings from my parents and grandparents into the stories. The values I have been taught growing up has helped me have a great outlook on life. I want to have many more young ones have the same experience.

Excerpt from *Pet'a Shows Misun Light*

Jessie Taken Alive-Rencountre

He saw some people standing with bright, blue lights in them. He also saw a lot of people kneeling, crouched to the ground with their heads down. He said "I see some people with lights and some people that don't have any lights." Pet'a then smiled and said "Are you sure? Look closer at the ones who are kneeling." Misun looked closer and realized that the ones that were kneeling did have lights! But they were very dim and hard to see. Pet'a asked "Why do you think some have brighter lights and some have dimmer lights?" Misun looked at those with the dim lights. He realized that they looked very sad, lost, scared, and angry. He looked at Pet'a and realized something that he hadn't realized before. Suddenly everything made sense! He knew that those with the dim lights were those like Lucy, the kids that hurt Lucy, Thomas' dad, Thomas, Sammie's mom, Sammie, people who want to solve things through fighting or war, and last but not least, his mom. Misun slowly said "Those with the dim lights forgot that they too have lights. They are sad. They are the ones that are angry, lost, sick, and scared." Pet'a smiled and said "you are right grandson. We are all born into the world with bright lights.

They are so bright that people are drawn to us. Over the years, others have hurt us with their words and actions. We see so much hurt go on and we begin to forget how beautiful we are." Misun looked around and saw how many people on earth were hurting. Everything made sense now. It was like he was given new eyes to understand. They act out of hurt. Pet'a watched as Misun observed the many people. He saw Misun's eyes swell with tears.

Pet'a pointed to some of the people and said "Grandson, look at those with the bright lights. They too have experienced a lot of hurt. The only difference between those with the dim lights and those with the bright lights is choice. Those with the bright lights have made a choice to remember how special they are. They have made a choice to treat others with kindness and love. They chose to have compassion and to forgive. They chose happiness. They remember where we come from. You see grandson, we all come from the same place. We all are born with the bright lights. Those with the dim lights are not bad people. There are no bad people, only people with a lot of hurt.