

## Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

# Touching Grass

by Kristy Jackson

## Introduction

The B.C. Human Rights Commissioner's Book Club offers monthly book selections that use stories to help readers connect with human rights issues and with the characters they encounter. We hope to bring together a province-wide community of readers to deepen their understanding of human rights and those who are most affected by human rights issues.

This guide has been prepared to assist parents, teachers, librarians and other trusted adults explore themes in *Touching Grass*.

The story follows Tristen, a young gamer who is sent to a Dene First Nation culture camp. There he learns to connect with nature and his Dene culture. The book explores themes of resilience, friendship, colonialism and the importance of culture and community.

## Discussion questions

1. What did you think of the story? Did you learn anything new?
2. What was your favourite moment or scene in the book? Why? Compare your answers with others.
3. Video games and gamer culture are very important to Tristen. Why? Are they important to you?
4. At the beginning of the story, Tristen is most comfortable inside and online, and he is very resistant to spending any time. Why do you think that is the case? What does he do when his mother makes him spend the day outside?

5. In the book, is technology presented as a positive presence in Tristen's life, or a negative one? Or is it a little of both? Use some examples from the book to explain your answer. What role does technology play in your life?
6. When Tristen is at the Dene culture camp, he learns many things about his roots and Dene culture. Did you learn something new about Dene culture? What is it?
7. There are Dene words used throughout the book. Why do you think the author felt it was important to include these words? What words did you learn?
8. The importance of the land in Dene culture is another important theme in the book. Why is the land, and being on the land, so important to the Dene characters in the book? How do characters like Tristen's mother, Anna and Mr. Hunter describe this connection to the land?
9. The character of Bear is an important friend and role model for Tristen at the Dene culture camp. He is also quite different in his behaviour and attitudes from the other boys in the story, like Mike and Vince. How is Bear different from these other boys? How does he show care for Tristen and others?
10. Elders play an important role at the culture camp, offering teachings, stories and prayers to the young people there. What skills do the Elders teach Tristen? What stories does he learn from them?
11. What kinds of things do young people learn at the culture camp? How are they taught and who does the teaching? How is this different from the way students learn at Tristen's school in town?
12. Tristen has a very hard time learning some of the skills at camp. What were some of the skills that he found the hardest to learn? How did he overcome this difficulty?
13. Tristen is delighted to learn that there are some new activities at camp that he is very good at. What are those activities? Why do you think he is so good at them?
14. At the beginning of the story, Tristen relies too much on his online experiences. However, while at camp Tristen discovers that some of the skills he has developed by playing video games help him at camp. What are those skills and how do they help him?

15. Tristen is surprised to learn that Adam Hunter, Anna's father, also plays video games and thinks that they can help sharpen some skills that are useful on the land. What are those skills?
16. What do you think the author is trying to tell us about the connection between technology and Dene culture?
17. Wolves are a very important part of Dene culture and play a key role in the story. What role do wolves play in the Dene origin story Tristen hears at camp? How do people in the story talk about the connection between wolves and Dene people? How does Tristen experience this connection to wolves?
18. In the story, girls and women are Tristen's protectors and mentors. How do Tristen's mother, his friend Sally from school and Anna from the culture camp protect and guide him? How does he show them respect and gratitude for their help?
19. What lesson did Tristen learn about asking for help from adults? What does he learn about the difference between asking for help and being a tattletale?

## Activities: Indigenous land and languages

What do you know about the Indigenous culture and language of the lands where you live?

Some students may be from the Indigenous communities where you live and others may not. Everyone is welcome to work on this activity at their skill level, whether an absolute beginner or a fluent speaker of local Indigenous languages.

A glossary, like the one at the back of the Touching Grass book, is an alphabetical list of words and their meanings. As a class, learn some words from the Indigenous language where you live. Then think of a creative way that you can share that knowledge with others!

First decide who your audience will be. The audience are people who may be interested in reading the glossary.

- For example, your audience could be students at your school, or the parents of students in your class or grade, or the teachers in your school or your wider school community.

Second, decide how you will teach them about the words you have learned. Try to make sure the format you use is a good fit for your audience.

- For example, a written book may not be the best tool for kindergarten students to learn these words, because they are not yet strong readers.
- Be creative with your ideas! For example, you could create a video, a song or a short play that helps other learn about the words. You could also create a slide presentation, a booklet or posters.

Third, create a plan to share your finished product with your intended audience!

Extension activity:

Think about sharing your creation with a wider audience!

If you would like to share your work with our Office, please email us at [education@bchumanrights.ca](mailto:education@bchumanrights.ca). We are curious to learn more about the words you have learned and to see the unique way you present these words to others!

## Indigenous ways of learning

Touching Grass is a book about a boy who learns about his Dene culture at a land-based culture camp. Tristen's story shows us that there are many ways of learning.

### Activity 1

In the story, we learn that the Dene way of teaching and learning is different from the one Tristen experiences in school. Create a list of the similarities and differences between the two ways of learning.

To do this ask yourself questions about the two learning environments like:

- What are the young people learning about?
- Why are they learning those specific things?
- Who is teaching them?
- How are they learning?

### Activity 2

In the book, we learn that Indigenous ways of learning at the Dene culture camp often involve:

- learning by watching, listening and trying things
- learning from Elders, family members and the community
- learning that is connected to the land and the places around us
- learning that is connected to memories, the past and ancestors
- learning through stories that share knowledge, values and experiences
- learning with your whole self: your thoughts, feelings, actions and values
- learning through relationships and responsibility to others

Choose one of these Indigenous learning principles and find an example of that kind of learning in the book or ask students to think of ways they have learned through these methods in their own lives. Instruct students to draw a picture of what happened and who was there when the learning happened. They can also write a short paragraph about the learning to accompany the picture.

### Activity 3

Divide students into small groups. Give each group one scenario:

- you want to learn how to fish sustainably
- you want to learn the history of your community
- you want to learn how to care for younger children
- you want to learn about local plants

Ask each group to discuss:

1. What are the different ways you could learn about these topics?
2. How could you learn this through Indigenous ways of learning?

Ask each group to present and explain their answers to the class. After each group has presented have a class discussion.

- What did you notice? Is there anything that surprised you?
- Were there examples where both approaches could work together?
- Which scenarios seemed especially suited to learning through experience?
- When have you learned by watching rather than being told?
- Did you learn everything you know at school?
- Who are the teachers in your life?

- Think the languages you speak. Did you learn them at school or at home?
- What do you think schools can learn from Indigenous ways of learning?

## Resources

### First People's Principles of Learning

[The First Nations Education Steering Committee](#) (FNESC) has educational resources about Indigenous Principles of Learning. Find them at: [First Peoples Principles of Learning – First Nations Education Steering Committee FNESC](#)