

Delightfully original campfire stories

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Campfire Stories from Northwestern Ontario

By Shannon Robertson; Illustrated by Eric Bowen

Faery Flower Press (134 pages; \$14)

By Deborah de Bakker

There is something enticing about a campfire tale. No doubt we humans have been telling stories around the flickering flames of campfires since we first acquired language.

Shannon Robertson became a camper when she met her husband-to-be, Rob Bowen, and he introduced her to the fun of staying in parks in a tent or trailer. When their son Eric was three, Shannon took on the role of campfire storyteller for their family. Not knowing any campfire stories, she made them up on the spot.

In *Campfire Stories from Northwestern Ontario*, her new self-published book, Shannon has written out five of these spontaneous stories and developed them in more detail, adding complexity to the characters, settings and plots. (She has also included one short tale told by her son Eric when he was nine.)

Campfire stories are often creepy, designed to scare kids just before they are sent off to sleep in dark tents. Shannon wisely prefers telling her son late-night stories that are spooky but not gruesome. So although these tales contain an element of the supernatural, there is nothing bloodcurdling in them.

Shannon has a good knowledge of the camping areas in the region, including Sleeping Giant, Quetico and Neys provincial parks. It is delightful to read stories set on lakes, islands, hills and trails of the parks in our area. She has also thoroughly researched local history and First Nations legends to enhance her stories.

The Giant Rises is a gentle story about the Sleeping Giant going AWOL and a young boy's search to find him. If you've ever had the unsettling experience of looking out over the harbour and not being able to see the Giant, you will appreciate Shannon's explanation. It turns out that the Giant has a love interest on an island near Neys. Yes, there is a Mrs. Sleeping Giant.

Water and Wood is a story inspired by the cemetery at Silver Islet, where there is (for real) "a pair of graves surrounded by old, greying picket fences. The old stone markers are faded and unreadable, but a grand old birch tree rises straight from the centre of one grave, stretching its branches way up above the surrounding canopy." Shannon creates a tale to explain the grave with the birch tree, involving 17-year-old Henry, who goes to work at Silver Islet silver mine in 1870.

The longest story is Spirit Ravine, a tale set in the future, when Eric is 18 and goes on a solo kayak trip in Quetico Provincial Park. As he contemplates his options after graduating from high school, he encounters pictographs and is helped by a spirit guide.

Shannon is a good writer and has taken great care with her stories. Self-publishing is challenging, because the author is responsible for many jobs normally done by other professionals. This book is attractively put together with a lovely cover photo of the Giant and very sweet illustrations by Eric, who is clearly a talented 11-year-old. My only quibble is that it would look more professional if it were formatted in the standard way for books, with indented rather than block paragraphs.

(Deborah de Bakker is a Thunder Bay writer and avid reader.)