



READING GUIDE

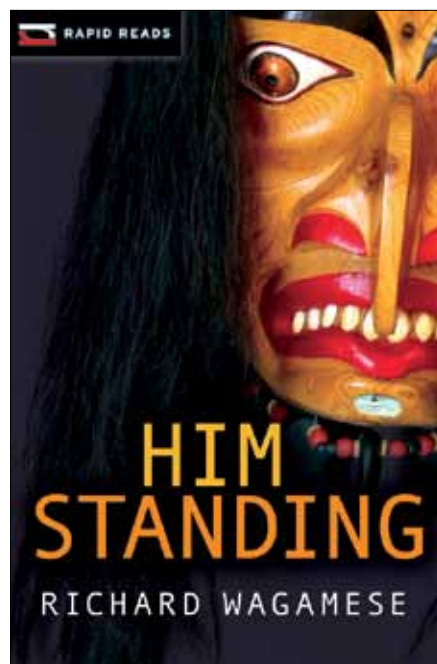
HIM STANDING RICHARD WAGAMESE

Reading level: 2.8

Interest level: Adult

Themes: thriller, Native mythology, relationships

978-I-4598-0176-9 PB



Summary

Lucas Smoke is a young Ojibway man who has found a niche carving masks on the boardwalk in his hometown. Taught by his grandfather as a young boy, Lucas has a knack for accurately rendering people's faces in wood, and he makes good money doing it. His girlfriend, Amy One Sky, is a model—and a fierce believer in Lucas's talents. Things are looking great for this young artist.

One day, a man in black turns up, wanting to cut a deal with Lucas. In exchange for \$15,000, the dark stranger wants Lucas to bring a long-dead legend back to life through a spirit mask. The man, Gareth Knight, knew of Lucas's grandfather's talents, and has observed Lucas for some time before making his proposition.

Lucas isn't sure about the deal: Gareth Knight makes him nervous, and anyway, his grandfather never taught him how to carve spirit masks. He doesn't even know which spirit he's supposed to carve, as Knight is purposefully vague. The gig makes him feel weird. But the money proves too powerful a temptation, and he grudgingly agrees. Part of the deal is to surrender to his dreams, where Knight assures him he'll learn more about his subject.

Once Lucas agrees, the dreams come fast and furious. He meets Him Standing, an age-old shaman whose magic is dark and terrible. Each dream broadens the story for Lucas and gives him a greater understanding of his subject. He awakens compelled to get back to working on the mask, and loses himself in hours of carving.

But the dreams exact a high price on Lucas. His personality begins to change as his spirit crosses wires with that of Him Standing. He becomes lethargic and unkempt, and acts aggressively toward Amy. Periodically, Him Standing breaks through, "possessing" Lucas and causing him to act out of character. It's terrifying for him and for Amy—but it's terribly exciting for Knight, who closely monitors Lucas's progress.

Lucas continues on his downward spiral for days on end. In an attempt to clear his head, he goes grocery shopping with Amy. At the market, he meets an old woman who recognizes in his face the influence of the dark shaman and flees. In the aftermath of her hurried departure, the couple discovers a feather with several beautifully designed beads on its shaft—a clear indication





of aboriginal art. Aided by some Internet research, the pair decide to visit a local glass artist for more information about the feather. When they turn up at the studio of Sally Whitebird, they are shocked to discover her to be the same woman from the market.

Relatively quickly, Sally Whitebird comes on side, wanting to help Lucas protect himself against the darkness brought by his involvement with Gareth Knight and Him Standing. She tells Amy and Lucas the story of Him Standing, and how the dark shaman was defeated by a clever rival named Otter Tail. She encourages Lucas to finish the mask in order to be able to complete the circle—and then break the cycle.

Guided by Sally’s instructions, Lucas becomes confrontational with Knight, wanting to goad the man to anger in order to take away some of his power. He continues working on the mask, seeking respite from the darkness by spending time at Amy’s home, a haven of positive energy. Lucas’s grandfather comes to him in a dream, guiding him and giving him the final piece of advice for how to escape Knight’s clutches and prevent Him Standing from re-entering the world.

When it comes time to present Knight with the finished mask, Lucas does so in a safe place that’s filled with light. He gives Knight the dark mask of Him Standing, but counteracts the power in that mask by donning another one he has carved—of Otter Tail, who once defeated Him Standing. Knight ends up taking a trip to the dream world, and Him Standing never crosses over into this world. Lucas and Amy are left in peace once again.

Questions for Discussion

1. In reading the first three paragraphs of *Him Standing*, we hear the protagonist’s unique voice clearly. It’s as though Lucas Smoke is speaking directly to us, establishing his personality with the way he uses language. What makes for an engaging voice? Think about other books you’ve read. When does a character’s voice fall apart or lose credibility?
2. Lucas Smoke has a natural talent and is lucky enough to be able to make a living creating art with that talent. What creative pursuit would you engage in if you could make a living from it?
3. Lucas learned much from his grandfather, and continues to learn from him through dreams as the story progresses. Discuss the importance of learning from our older generations. How have we drifted away from this knowledge? Give an example of how an older person’s experience has helped you.
4. When Lucas is working on a mask, he loses track of time. Sometimes he goes to what his grandfather called the “storytelling place.” He has no sense of time passing, nor knowledge of what’s going on around him. When we achieve this state in whatever activity we’re doing, it’s called *flow*. When do you feel similarly?
5. In chapter 2, Gareth Knight hands Lucas a wad of bills and promises ten times that amount if Lucas will carve him a spirit mask. But Lucas says straight out that he doesn’t carve spirit masks. What does his reaction tell us about his character?
6. When Amy asks how Gareth Knight knows her name, he says, “Come now, Ms. One Sky. One needn’t look far to find your face. And one needn’t look far beyond that to find out who the face belongs to” (ch. 3). What is your opinion of Knight’s implications of





ownership in this instance? Do people “belong to” each other? If so, why? And if not, why do we behave this way so often?

7. Lucas’s wellbeing suffers as a result of working on the mask. Have you ever taken a job that you knew would compromise your own wellbeing? Or that you suspected might do so? How do these kinds of experiences help us grow as people? What do we lose?
8. Lucas loves to carve, and he’s excellent at it. Yet, as Sally Whitebird observes, he doesn’t understand the spiritual reasons behind why he does it. What about you? Is there something you do for which you don’t have clear reasons or a clear understanding? Something for which you understand the how, but not the why?
9. How does the author use Lucas’s dream experiences to move the plot forward? What “rules” can he break in using dreams, legends and the spirit world in the story?
10. We have met characters like Him Standing before. Who does he remind you of? Consider literary sources as well as film sources. What purpose does this type of character serve?
11. In chapter 11, Sally Whitebird tells Lucas that fear is a power that we have learned to see as a weakness. What are your thoughts about her assessment of the nature of fear? What would you add?
12. Lucas reflects that for some reason, he trusts Sally Whitebird “with everything” (ch. 13). What is it about some people that makes us feel this way?
13. Amy becomes upset when Sally explains that Lucas’s soul is at risk of being trapped in the dream world forever once Him Standing enters the world of the living. Why does the idea of limbo, or purgatory, distress us so much?
14. Sally finds a safe spot for Lucas to present the mask to Gareth Knight. It’s at a bend in the river a few miles out of town. When Amy asks whether anyone knows its history, Sally replies that sacred places tell their story by feeling (ch. 16). What does she mean? How have you experienced this truth in your own life?
15. Can you derive a moral, or a message, from *Him Standing*?

