

Essay on “Tales of Teancum Singh Rosenberg”

BY NICOLE WILKES

James kneels on the floor beside my daughter’s bed. “Once upon a time,” he starts, “there was a little girl named Kira.” Kira smiles, even though each night the story has the same beginning. Sometimes James spins stories about supernatural animals; other times Kira adventures with friends. The story always closes with bedtime, a sleepy little girl curled up with her bear.

The night before a campaign, ancient Greek soldiers would share stories of epic heroes whose bravery was more than legend—it was inspiration. In each legend enemies could have been extraordinary, a cyclops, Titan, or a god, or mortal men known for their cunning and skill, but all were a challenge to the warrior. Sometimes the hero triumphed; other times he fell. The story always closed with the message of bravery, honor, and the hope to become a legend.

Perhaps the bedtime story does not feed the nationalistic pride that a heroic legend does, but including a child in her own fantastical adventures expands her possibilities. We may believe that we use story for entertainment, passively viewing television or talking with our friends. But story maintains its place in our culture because it inspires us; we are drawn together through story.

“Tales of Teancum Singh Rosenberg” plays with story—the way stories shape a people, the way we are each shaped by story. Laid out like a loose tapestry of folktales, the tales weave together

stories from three distinctive religious backgrounds: Judaism, Mormonism, and Sikhism. At first these three religions appear to be at odds—could a family celebrate both Christmas and Hanukkah? How does one resolve the tensions of multiple cultural inheritances? Through story.

Teancum Singh Rosenberg is the legendary hero of a people whose identity has been shaped by story, not just by Rosenberg’s tales, but all of the stories he collected. Rosenberg seeks stories inside caves and under rocks, from the bones of the dead and from angels. His people gather Rosenberg’s legends and bind themselves together in the tales they have woven.

But this binding of story to a people, a family, an individual—this is not unique to the fictional culture in “Teancum Singh Rosenberg.” If we remember that Mormon was a keeper of story and Moroni’s only company was written on the Golden Plates, story is central in our religion. Though we walk down modern streets in a modern world, we carry the legacies of pioneers, Nephites, Hebrew prophets, and our ancestors. It is through storytelling that we maintain connections with our heritage. Our stories may be fragmented, but they are ours.

Teancum teaches his people, “We move through stories, we love through stories, mothers give birth to children, but we have to clothe them in stories or they will freeze in this cold.” Let us each continue to weave the cloth of story to keep warm. ■