

Border Trickery and Dog Bones: A Conversation with Thomas King

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Article abstract

Thomas King discusses whether or not he thinks *Green Grass, Running Water* is a Canadian novel, a Native novel, or both, the borders that cut between races, and the discomfort that the insider/outsider phenomenon creates for certain groups of readers. He also articulates his resistance to being labelled a comic writer and makes comparisons between *Green Grass* and *Truth and Bright Water*. He later discusses his radio show, *Dead Dog Café*, and his photography.

Border Trickery and Dog Bones: A Conversation with Thomas King

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER ANDREWS

THOMAS KING RECENTLY published his third novel, *Truth and Bright Water* with HarperCollins. An acclaimed author of fiction and criticism, King also has written television and radio scripts (including the popular “Dead Dog Café Comedy Hour” broadcast on CBC), poetry, children’s books, has written and acted in the made-for-television movie of his novel *Medicine River*, and is an accomplished photographer who has exhibited his work in several American and European galleries. Currently, he is Associate Professor in the School of Literatures and Performance Studies in English at the University of Guelph. I met with Tom King on December 17, 1999 in Toronto, where we talked over breakfast.

JA I taught *Green Grass* this fall to a graduate class and the students loved it, and, as I’m sure you know, it’s taught frequently in Canadian literature courses at Canadian universities. The course I was teaching explored the concept of an English-Canadian canon — if there is one — and we talked about what constitutes a “Canadian” text. Of course we didn’t come up with any easy answers, but we had a good discussion. I wonder whether you think *Green Grass* is a Canadian novel.

TK (laughing) Well, since I am a Canadian citizen and it was written in Canada, and it was written about places in Canada and characters who are, by and large, Native and Canadian — for all of those reasons it’s a Canadian novel.

Now, is it a Canadian novel in that sort of aesthetic sense? I don’t know. The kinds of things that you could bring up on a superficial level, that sort of pairing off of Canadian against U.S. that appears in the novel, the characters that come out of the U.S., the attitudes that they bring with them — such as Dr. Hovaugh who brings along his servant in the form

of Babo — that kind of attitude of excess, that expectation that things are going to be as you imagined them to be, which is what Hovaugh works on: Hovaugh not only is a stand-in for God — in the Jehovah joke that plays there — but he also is a stand-in for that American attitude that if you imagine something to be this way then you can make it be that way just because of who you are. So, Hovaugh's not so much pissed off that the Indians have escaped or that the tree in his garden is not doing so well; he is dumbfounded by it. Why would they go? What's wrong with the tree? What's happening to the world that I had every expectation I was in control of?

You could argue that's a very American attitude, as opposed to Lionel Red Dog who is minorly injured by the fact that all of a sudden he's forty years old and he hasn't made a success of himself, but he doesn't seem to be particularly concerned about it. He is saddened, but even that great scene where he stands in front of the mirror in the morning and snaps on the lights and grabs his fat and makes all of these pronouncements about what he's going to do — a new cake of soap, a new razor for the razor blade — and then he puts on his old jacket and is perfectly happy with it; that might be seen as typically Canadian. This idea that you put up with what you've got and not try to excel in a superficial way. But both of these stances are not only suspect, they're clichés. And so, if you try to tie any of that to a sense of something Canadian in literature, you'd be in quicksand up to your neck right away.

It may be that what I'm dealing with is not so much a Canadian sensibility in the novel as a Western sensibility. I can defend that more easily because, in part, that's created by the landscape, and even more than my being Canadian or American I'm a Westerner. California may not be the true West; it may be places like Nevada and Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana, Alberta, Saskatchewan. But it's a landscape that I've been familiar with all my life. It has a power that I really only came to understand when I came to Alberta. Even though I had written before I came to Canada, I had not written seriously. I had no kind of stimulus to really get me going, and even though Helen (Helen Hoy, King's wife) was in large part the stimulus for me, in the end, it was the landscape that gave me the setting for my fiction. The landscape still haunts me. I haven't written anything of major weight other than that kind of prairie landscape. I'm going to try to get away from it in the next novel only because people are going to say, "Ah, another one of King's prairie novels." I've written three; that's my trilogy. See, I got the trilogy done. Gonna get a boxed set of these things: *Medicine River*, *Green Grass*, *Truth and Bright*

Water. They're all about the same areas, they all feature some of the same characters, always a carry-over. I always liked that. I might even bring the dog [Soldier] back in the next novel. People got really pissed that I killed the dog.

JA (*laughing*) Well, the dog's terrific in *Truth and Bright Water*.

TK I had to go back and rewrite those sections because people were saying that they cared more about the dog than they did about Lum. I thought, well okay, that's okay to a point, but I've got to balance it off just a little bit. Anyway, I don't know what to tell you about the Canadian/U.S. thing. It's as hard an argument to get into as what constitutes a Native sensibility in a novel.

I can say this is a Native novel because it's written by a Native. Therefore it is a Native novel. Playing with those constructs, forgetting the fact they don't exist. The joke is that Natives did not create that construct. That construct is created by whites and it was created as an oppressive thing. So the joke is that now that mantle of oppression has become, to some degree, an advantage. The call for equality just delights me in some ways because what it means is that those designations were created for advantage and not for ours, and as soon as that advantage shifts then the construct itself needs to be revisited. But of course, now we hold on to that construct. We're not willing to let it go, even though I understand that I should to make the world a better place. I'm not willing to, not because it is important to me, but it is important to my kids. My daughter, who is darker than my boy, every so often catches shit for that at school. We have to tell her it's not because they don't like you, it is simply because you're Native and you need to know that. It's the same thing I suppose that black parents tell their kids. Those constructs are important because we've had to live with the negative for so long that now that the positive is there, maybe the world will be a better place; maybe one of these days those constructs will be gone and just human beings will just be human beings. But I'm afraid human beings being human beings is pretty scary all by itself.

JA And the border's not going anywhere...

TK ...and the border's not going anywhere and we keep constructing new borders. As soon as we get rid of the old ones we construct new ones. The big joke for me always was — and this is pretty well documented — that rich black women get along with rich white women better than they get along with poor black women. So you have all these borders that cut right through race too. Race is not a common denominator particularly.

In some ways it is and in some ways it is not. You've got race, economics, social standing. All these things just sort of mix and match around.

JA You're often claimed by Canadian reviewers and academics as a Canadian writer and yet with American reviewers and American academics you're claimed as American.

TK (*laughing*) Works for me.

JA It's a great strategy. I'm thinking of someone like James McManus and his review of *Green Grass* in the *New York Times*. I was struck by the fact that he seems to miss all the Canadian intertexts and references.

TK Oh, yes.

JA It's really frustrating to read that kind of review. How do you make sense of those different perspectives?

TK Well, it doesn't even matter if it's a Canadian or an American reviewer. Reviews are a funny thing. First of all you always hope that you're going to get a reviewer who understands what you're doing. McManus in the review for *Green Grass* obviously didn't understand and really wasn't much interested in it. What he saw was that sort of superficial, funny puncturing of stereotypes and clichés and that was unfortunate because of course that review could have made the book a lot bigger in the States and overseas than it was. So in some ways that review is a kind of lazy review. I don't mind critical reviews, but I *like* the intelligent ones.

Because there are lots of places you could take me to task in *Green Grass*. Nobody has — yet. I could do it myself easily enough. But the McManus review was disappointing for that reason. I suspect that he did not see either the Canadian or the American allusions, and not to give him too hard of a time, those are not easy to come by. I mean somebody may know Mulholland in the States just because there was a fellow who wrote a thing called *The Cadillac Desert* which went through the Owen's Valley fiasco and Mulholland's culpability in that particular mess on diverting the water. But I doubt many Canadians know Clifford Sifton.

JA I had to look it up.

TK Yeah... so to expect reviewers to know all those things when, as academics, we're struggling to keep up with this kind of nonsense, is a bit too much. And reviews never get very deep into what the book is about. They generally tend to be — in the newspapers at least — descrip-

tive. So you can't expect too much from a review. In the end, all you can hope for reviewers is that they liked the book. And if they didn't like the book, that's it: either they liked or didn't like it. No matter what they say, how intelligent it was....

Now, there was a very intelligent review in *The National Post* of *Truth and Bright Water*. I forget who did it but it came at the same time that *The Globe and Mail* and *The Toronto Star* came out and that particular review talked about the misery in the book. The title of the thing was "The Brilliance of Misery Well Done" and it was one of the few reviews that looked at the sorrows in the book rather than the yuk yuks. I'm afraid I have a reputation now firmly established as a comic writer, which I'm desperately trying to run away from, and I thought I had scampered out of harm's way with *Truth and Bright Water*. I thought that for whatever laughs are in *Truth and Bright Water* nobody can see this book as a comedy, and yet the reviewers see it as a comedy. I'm saying, "Please, no!"

JA Why the resistance to being labeled a comic writer?

TK Partly it's because comic writers don't win literary awards. Comic writers aren't taken seriously. Comic writers are enjoyed, and even if you're a satirist people have a good time with it but they don't....

Somebody who writes this goddamn ponderous novel about some historical moment in the Canadian diaspora, you know, people go, "Oh boy, that was just... that was deep!" And you look at it and it's the same old-fashioned novel we've been reading since the nineteenth century, and while it's a well-told story, nothing happens beyond the story. I don't object to novels like that; I just don't find them interesting.

By the time you finish there's nothing left to think about. You've enjoyed the characters, you enjoyed what they did, it was a good read but I could have read a mystery and had the same sort of response. It's as though some of that stuff tends to be kind of a genre fiction. For me, the novel is a great opportunity because of its great surface. For me, the novel is a thing that you can get a person's imagination moving with. As a writer, that's all I'm concerned about: engaging the reader's imagination. I'm not interested in answering questions. I'm interested in making them think about what the possibilities are. When I finished *Medicine River* people wrote me and said "Why didn't you get Will and Louise married?"

JA Oh no, that would ruin it.

TK I said, "Why would I do that?" And then they wrote me and said, "Well, are you going to do a sequel where they do get married?" And I'm

thinking to myself, don't you understand that at the end of the novel if you want them married you can marry them. If you want them to get together you can make them get together. You as a reader can create that for yourself. You can say to yourself, I believe they get together. But for me to say they get together ruins it for half the people.

JA I like the fact they stay where they are and do not feel compelled to conform to the community's expectations that they will get married.

TK There's nothing wrong with that relationship. It certainly is a relationship that Louise likes, and Will is not injured by it in any way. His friends may give him a hard time from time to time but...

JA It's easier for him.

TK Yeah, it's no big deal. And Louise understands. The thing for me that comes out of all of that is that recognition that Louise and, by example, other women understand that perhaps living one's life as a single parent is not the horrible thing that people create it to be, that there are worse things that you could run into in your life.

My father took off when I was about five years old and I've always held it against him. In my novels I keep writing about fathers who either desert their families or who are assholes. Now, I don't know that my father was an asshole but what I can gather from my half-brothers and -sisters, who I've just met a couple of years ago — I didn't know I had any — was that he was a decent sort of guy who liked to screw around. But for some reason his desertion really ticked me off and I'm still today pissed off about it. I always hoped as a young man I'd find him and be able to talk. My big scenario was to find out which bar he was hanging out in, because he did hang out in bars, and go in there as a grown person — now, he wouldn't recognize me — and sit down and just engage him in conversation. I would tell him a story about me as a man and a father that mirrored his story and see if I could draw out of him what had happened in those early years because evidently he talked...

It's a whole story unto itself but he left us and disappeared for a number of years, and when he resurfaced again with another wife in Illinois, he didn't say anything about his early life. That part of the family did not know about my brother and sister, did not know that he had even been married before. It came as a huge shock to them.

JA A whole other family that didn't exist...

TK Yeah, so anyway, where was I?

JA So that's why the father figure is so important. That's interesting because in all of your novels there are father figures that either are in people's lives and terrible fathers or they are gone entirely.

TK I have an inordinate sense of responsibility in that regard. It's over-exaggerated. Actually it's not healthy. My mother did not budge from her position as father and mother for us. The one thing I knew about my mother was that she had this tremendous strength in that area. I have argued about the way in which that strength manifested itself from time to time, but it was something she imparted to me that made me say, "I'm not letting that happen to my kids. I'm not going anywhere." It's still infused with my writing. I try to be careful with it. In *Green Grass* I created a very nice father. Lionel's father is a great guy. It was very hard for me to do that. I really had to work at it. And he's a minor character, hardly that big in the novel. But I had to work like hell to get the right balance because I wanted to keep being sarcastic.

Portland Looking Bear and Elvin, the father in the new novel, are as far along that line as I can go. Portland is very sympathetic in many ways. He wants to be an Indian in Hollywood. And Elvin is not a particularly nice guy, but he's nicer than Franklin, his brother.

JA At least Elvin tries.

TK He tries, but he tries in the most inadequate way. The kid comes to Elvin and says there's something about a woman and Elvin gives him a box of condoms.

JA (*laughing*) And the car. When Elvin brings the car and says I'll fix it eventually for you.

TK That's right. Eventually I'll fix it for you.

JA I recently wrote a review of *Truth and Bright Water*. I think of it as exemplifying the concept of associational literature that you've talked about in "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial." It's a quieter book. I also felt much more excluded than I had when reading *Green Grass*. What makes this novel different from *Green Grass*?

TK I hadn't thought about that element of exclusion but you could be right because what includes you in *Green Grass* is your role as an academic. You could almost look behind the curtains in *Green Grass* and see me, the Wizard of Oz, this little guy at this big microphone going, "AND NOW...". You can see behind the allusions. So on the one hand you've got the story that's a lot of fun, but on the other hand you can see — god,

this is going to sound conceited — that educated sensibility at work, that critical sensibility at work. I've always said that *Green Grass* probably more than my thesis was my dissertation.

JA I can believe that.

TK As a matter of fact, when I sent copies of it to my dissertation committee, who were friends of mine, I said, "This is probably more of a dissertation than the dissertation." One of the guys agreed. He said, "Yeah, your dissertation was interesting but this is quite brilliant." Which really pleased me. I was all aglow. But with *Truth and Bright Water* I do keep the reader at a distance. For one thing I'm working with two teenagers, not adults, and that's going to create some separation. I'm also dealing with one of the teenagers who will create distance all by himself, and that's Lum. You don't want to get too close to him. There's also that distance that things like the Cousins create. And there's that vastness of the prairies which is much more in evidence than in *Green Grass*. Of all the novels I've written so far, probably the landscape is more visual or, as one reviewer called it, cinematic, in this book than in other books. I think I can actually feel the environment as it comes through.

JA It's a character in and of itself. It's present everywhere in *Truth and Bright Water*.

TK In some ways it's a kind of oppressive presence. I hadn't really thought about that until I'd finished the book and went back and reread it and thought, whoa, wait a minute, do I want to do this? There were two questions that came up: how oppressive did I want to make it, and secondly, the other very interesting question was what did I want the mother's role to be? Because in some of the earlier drafts one thing I wanted to get at was that there is no salvation for these kids within the community. There is no one there to protect them because in many cases what's happened to Native peoples is they've wound up in a position where they're hardly able to protect themselves. And while there are no overt kinds of offensives against them you still have people like Miles Deardorf, who is more than insensitive, less than racist. One of my very favourite scenes, one of the touches I loved most of all — I do entertain myself writing; if I didn't I'd have to stop writing — is when they come out of the graveyard for the funeral and find Deardorf's business card stuck under the windshield of the car. I'm thinking to myself, Miles, you asshole, don't do that.

JA *Truth and Bright Water* feels like a very different novel. The reader is left with so many unanswered questions. There seems to be an

incredible distance between the reader and the community depicted in the text. It's very much a process of watching rather than being part of the community.

TK I'm hoping that with all the funny stuff that's there, and there certainly is, but it's kind of slant laughter in this one; in *Green Grass* you had some pretty big belly laughs that you could get involved in, especially with the old Indians and what not, but this one I tried to create so that if you're laughing you're doing so where people can't see you. There's one scene where Lucy Rabbit says about Marilyn Monroe, "She died young of drugs. Sounds like an Indian to me." When I read that in public it's funny what the laughter will do. It'll come out and then just cut off when the audience realizes that, whoa, wait a minute, am I supposed to be laughing at that?

JA Why include Lucy Rabbit? I find her fascinating: the Marilyn Monroe, the dyed hair that isn't going to ever be blonde. And the fact that she says Marilyn Monroe was actually Native.

TK Lucy Rabbit's included in there because I wanted to have a variety of characters who are trying to make it in the world, find a comfortable zone in which to exist. So you've got Franklin, who is a brutal asshole, and yet he's the only who is trying to make something of the tribe's economic opportunities. Even though these things don't work out very well, the idea of putting tourists on the sidecar of a motorcycle and having them shoot buffalo with a paint splat gun is brilliant. As an economic device, it's brilliant. The fact that it doesn't work is unfortunate. But it is damn brilliant. Can you imagine? I would put money into a thing like that. Out on the Alberta prairies some place you get a herd of buffalo that don't mind a little run every morning, and put German tourists in sidecars. They would go nuts over that. Make a video of the whole thing. They could come back and show their friends. They haven't hurt the buffalo.

It's the very kind of egregious enterprise. I took up golf this summer in July and I am now an avid golfer and I'm trying to work up a project where I can go on a golfing vacation and write an article and pay for it at the same time. Now, I know that golf is a rich white man's sport, but it gives me such pleasure playing all these courses in the outdoors. Well, same thing with the buffalo hunt... and no one's hurt. They just put a couple of holes in the middle of a field some place — of course, it's coated with insecticide and pesticide and everything else.

One of the things about *Truth and Bright Water* that I wanted to do was to point out that life is not the easy thing that we might like it to be,

and the division between people and what they do is not an easy division. Even though all we see is that brutality, in the background Franklin is trying to work for the tribe to get it going. We don't like him because of what he does to Lum, and rightly so. Elvin, who is a harmless sort of slug, is useless. He may do no harm in the end, but he does no good. The boy's mother, who is probably one of the most sympathetic characters in the book, has this huge thing, this feud she carries on through the quilt that she makes.

JA The quilt with the razor blades. Don't lie on top.

TK You're okay as long as you're underneath and not trying to get in. She does not protect her son. She provides little comfort for him in the end. And Auntie Cassie is full of charm and good cheer, but has never recovered from mistakes that she made early on in life that she might want to reverse but can't. Monroe Swimmer, who comes back from Toronto, this famous Indian artist who has enough money to change the world, and yet the ways in which he tries to change the world in some ways don't make any kind of sense. Painting Indians back into a picture where they are bleeding through might be an interesting exercise, putting iron buffalo on the prairies is an interesting exercise, painting the church out of existence is an interesting exercise. He goes through all of these things, putting kites up in the sky to teach the sky about blue, and platforms in the grass to teach the grass about green. But in the end it doesn't save Lum. It doesn't save Tecumseh. Doesn't save Soldier. Lucy Rabbit — long way around — is that same kind of character. Lucy is trying to make some sense out of the world and she has latched onto Marilyn Monroe as a sympathetic character who she's going to try to save. In some ways she's going to try to save Marilyn Monroe by demonstrating that you can be Indian and blonde.

JA Or orange.

TK Or orange, as the case may be. The other thing too is that Lucy sees herself as the same sort of sympathetic character that Marilyn Monroe is. She never says that but it's fairly obvious that she comes there not just to do Marilyn a good deed, but in some ways she'd rather be blonde. That's the tragedy of Lucy. So, they're set pieces in kind of a chess game that I play in the novel and Lucy happens to be one of those pieces. I had the chance to pull Lucy out of the novel and I opted not to do that because she filled an important position for me. But I did take a character named Charlie Ron out of the novel, who was the major character in the book

at one point, and just referenced him in a couple of instances as having died already. But he was a lot of fun.

JA What kind of a role did he play in previous manuscripts?

TK He looked after the ferry and lived in a small house on the edge of the reserve. He was like one of the old Indians from *Green Grass* which is why I got rid of him because he pulled the novel in two different directions and once I got rid of him then the novel really began to take shape in its final form.

JA I want to ask you a question about the ending of *Truth and Bright Water*. Who brings the purple freesias at the end to Tecumseh's mother? She trims them, she nurtures them, until they're virtually dead.

TK Yeah, interestingly enough, I had the final line for the novel before I began the novel. And sometimes it doesn't work out like that, you have to change it in the end, but I like that last line so much: "She trimmed them carefully until there was nothing left but the stems." Which is the way in which she lives her life, and it's the way in which many Native people live their lives. You start off with something that has all this potential and all this beauty and things just get trimmed away until there's nothing left but the stems. I can't read that section in public because it has too much of an effect on me; I can see it coming and I can hear it resonating and even now it affects me. But what was the question?

JA Who brought the flowers?

TK Oh, who brought the flowers? Well, see, it doesn't matter.

JA Well that's, I guess, part of the point. I don't *need* to know but in a way it's one of those mysteries that the reader wrestles with throughout *Truth and Bright Water*.

TK Who brings the flowers to Monroe's place that Tecumseh sees there? Is it Auntie Cassie? Is it his mother? The minute I answer the question, not somebody else — that's the beauty — I close part of the novel down and to be honest with you, while I think I know, I'm not sure. Because I like the idea that they might be the father's, although the mother says they're not. I like the idea that they could be from Monroe Swimmer. I also like the idea that she may have bought them for herself. There's all those possibilities. You can believe maybe that Monroe bought them and that's romantic or that the father bought them and that's a little pathetic.

JA Conciliatory...

TK Conciliatory. Whatever. But if she bought them for herself. If you as a reader come up with that reading then it really puts a kind of movement to that last part of the novel that is very powerful. Now, I don't suggest *that* in the book because it was too much at that point but it is one of the possibilities I considered. And it works really well. If I said to you, "It's the mother who buys the flowers for herself," how does that change your reading of the book?

JA It challenges my assumption that the flowers are from a male suitor, something that the novel hints at but never confirms. The buying of flowers is another demonstration of her independence; she recognizes her own needs and takes care of them.

TK Don't forget that she's the one that goes behind Santucci's and picks up these flowers all the time to please herself. So it could be that she's bought the flowers for herself, and that makes me cry. But I leave that for the reader. The reader and the critic and the fun that they can have with that sort of thing.

JA The new novel is situated once again on the Canadian/American border, and that's a subject you always talk about in your work. What do you find so compelling about borders?

TK The fact that there is one. The fact that right in the middle of this perfectly contiguous landscape someone has drawn a line and on one side it's Canadian and therefore very different from the side that is American. Borders are these very artificial and subjective barriers that we throw up around our lives in all sorts of different ways. National borders are just indicative of the kinds of borders we build around ourselves. I take those on in a short story called "Borders," as a matter of fact, where the mother constructs a border. She is Blackfoot, but she will not move from that. She'll not cross over to the U.S. or into Canada. The odd thing about the border in *Truth and Bright Water* is that even though it is there and even though I talk about it, the Canadian side, the American side, going back and forth, the border for the characters is non-existent.

JA Exactly. The ferry goes back and forth, between nations, and yet the characters don't think much about it.

TK No. There are no border guards there. The people in *Truth and Bright Water* don't talk about there being a border to cross over, and yet the bridge itself indicates this border; the river indicates the border;

the bucket signifies that there is a division of some sorts. But the characters ignore it. They ignore it the same way they ignore the bridge. There's this derelict bridge out in the middle of nowhere and nobody much pays attention to it except for the fact that it really screwed things up economically. But aside from that.... And of course the bridge itself is a *Picture of Dorian Gray* kind of structure. As these relationships between people in general and between races and between countries deteriorate... this bridge symbolizes that. It won't hold the weight of people trying to cross back and forth.

JA In *Truth and Bright Water*, Monroe Swimmer is an exception — he is aware of the border, especially when he erects the iron buffalo statues across the Prairies and looks across the river that separates Truth from Bright Water. He stands there with Tecumseh and he laughs about the fact that there are the two borders and how ridiculous it is. Then he sings the theme song from *Oklahoma* after an honour song and there's that kind of moment of absurdity. What statement does this scene, with its multiple intertexts, make about borders?

TK It's more than that. You've got that Native honour song, then you've got *Oklahoma*, which was written by an Indian. Lynn Riggs wrote a thing called *Green Grow the Lilacs*. *Oklahoma* is taken from that in part, and Riggs is Cherokee. So it even has more resonances than that. The state of Oklahoma also was Indian territory.

JA The Trail of Tears.

TK Yeah, you know, "Oklahoma, where the winds go sweeping down the plains." That's Alberta also. I always try to figure out ways to make what I do in fiction lean in a number of different directions at the same time or touch on things. It's like those sour ball candies that you put in your mouth and they sort of explode and they go off in all sorts of different directions. Or like Szechuan food.

JA When I told friends I was interviewing you the one thing that people kept mentioning was Dead Dog. That was their first response: "Oh, he's the man who writes Dead Dog." It seems to me that the radio show targets a very different audience than your books. Who is the show written for?

TK I really don't know. I say that because I thought I knew what my audience was and it turns out I was wrong. We get letters from cab drivers in Moncton. We get a lot of letters from ten- to fourteen-year-old kids. I

get letters from people like Garnet Rogers. I just got a Christmas card from Robert Bateman, who I've never met, who loves Dead Dog. He says, "This is a card for Dead Dog." He sent it to Dead Dog. I get academics who use it in their classroom. My brother who's down in California ran into two truck drivers from Canada who knew Dead Dog and when they found out he was my brother they bought him coffee and asked him all kinds of questions about the show. So I have no idea what that audience is. It seems to go across all lines. I'm sure there are groups of people who hate it, who just cannot stand it. I don't think it's the kind of show that you sort of like. I think either you like it and you like it a lot or you just hate the sonof-abitch and think it's the stupidest, most racist, puerile thing you've ever heard. One of the problems is a lot of people who should like the show don't because they find it racist. We got one letter from a woman who said, "If this is written by Whites it's not funny at all, but if it's written by Indians then it's hysterical." Talk about a border being drawn. Dead Dog is a chance for me to talk about the problems that I see in the world. It really is a fifteen-minute bitch session with the world at large. The Captain Dead Dog Awards are exactly that and so are things like Conversational Cree. That whole idea of learning to say in Cree "How long will we be in port and is there a charge for the deck chair?" conjures up the kind of world that we've created for ourselves. Now some people don't like that and some people don't like the fact that people make fun of what they consider to be the benefits that they derive from an upper-middle-class life. If, for instance, I write this article on golf in the Dominican Republic, it will be a satiric article that looks at affluence. There are a lot of people out there who don't like that, who think that that's just an old dead tired horse that we keep beating. Leave it alone and let them play as they want to play.

You really can't enjoy a world much where one percent of the population is making all of the money and fifty percent of the population is below the poverty level. It's not a world that you want your kids to grow up in. If, just for a practical reason, you live in a gated neighbourhood and you send your kids to a private school, at some point they have to come in touch with that other world. And if that other world is this poverty-stricken disease-ridden sort of ghetto, it's going to affect you at some point. You may be able to avoid it for a while but it will not let you alone and at some point it will overwhelm you and of course that's what the rich are worried about. They're so afraid of that that they're not willing to do anything about the state of the world and help it. And we're lazy. As a group we are generally lazy. We believe in the environment, we do nothing to

change it. We believe in sharing things, we do little sharing, or if we do it's in a kind of organized way that will make us feel good at the same time and give us feedback. Rather than just do it because it's the thing that you should do. And I'm as guilty of it as anybody is.

JA Many people don't know that you're an accomplished photographer, that you've taken that self-portrait on the back-flap of *One Good Story*. You've also done a variety of photographic exhibits. What photography projects are you working on right now?

TK Well I'm working on that major book, that book of black and white photos of Native artists in North America. I call it the *Medicine River Photographic Expedition*. I'm going to do the photo book and then I'm going to try to do a text-book that talks about the travels and also about Native politics. And then I do all sorts of other exhibitions. I'm doing a Millennium exhibition with Jane Ash-Poitras and Rebecca Belmore and I think maybe Gerald McMaster but I'm not sure about that, at the Edmonton Art Gallery in November of 2000. And then I'm going to be doing a series of photographs in and around the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. I've got a grant to do the photographs. It will be with Native kids, probably. That will be a major exhibition for me and a major series of photographs. I'm a little different than a lot of fine art photographers in that I don't make my living as a fine art photographer. And so I'm free to do whatever I want to do. I don't have to keep producing when I don't feel like it or when I don't have an idea. Generally I work in series so I'll get an idea for a series and I'll construct the photographs as part of a series. Almost like a story. I've got one called "Indians on Vacation" that I've been working on that probably is about three quarters done. I'll probably have about a dozen photographs in the actual finished series, the series that I publish. And I've got one on an Indian drum. I sing with a powwow group, and about a year ago we put together a big buffalo-hide drum. What a lovely thing. I took pictures of that as we were working on it and also got all my Indian kitsch stuff out, so I'm juxtaposing this very traditional thing against all this kitschy shit. And I did pinhole photography and some large format stuff. Then of course the "Lone Ranger Mask" series, which has been quite successful. I've had pictures published in *Hungry Mind* and *Harper's*.

JA And the exhibit at the Weisman Museum in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

TK And the Ansel Adams Gallery in San Francisco, California dis-

played some of the “Indians on Vacation” and some of the “Lone Ranger Mask” photographs during the fall of 1998.

JA Is the “Lone Ranger Mask” series now finished?

TK No I’m still taking pictures of Natives in Lone Ranger masks. I’m looking for the best photographs that I can find. I did the same thing Edward Curtis did. I took around a box of Indian paraphernalia and part of it was the Lone Ranger mask, but I had arrows-through-the-head and phony baloney Indian wigs that some of the people put on. It became very clear that the most successful piece of paraphernalia was the Lone Ranger mask. And the artists that I showed my box of goodies to inevitably went to that. Just put on that mask. That they could be the Lone Ranger. Which, of course, is that great conceit in *Green Grass* where the reason the Ranger never takes his mask off is because if he did you’d see it was a woman, a Native woman. So that’s been a lot of fun. I may even do a small monograph on that at some point which includes those photographs and maybe an essay. The essay in *Hungry Mind* was a lot of fun. I enjoyed that.

JA The *Books in Canada* article with Greg Staats was great too. That was an interesting discussion of what goes on behind the scenes when photographs are being taken.

TK That was where it started. Greg Staats and I were both going to do that book, and then Greg suddenly had to drop out because he had to make a living as a photographer and I didn’t and he didn’t have the time or the money to do that sort of thing.

JA You produced a second children’s book in 1998, called *Coyote Sings to the Moon*, after publishing the quite controversial *Coyote Columbus Story*. What motivated you to write the second book?

TK I’ll have traditional stories kicking around in my head and my kids are at an age where I can still tell them those wild tall-tale stories and sometimes my daughter, in particular, loves stories — she’s only ten — and so if I come up with a good story for her then I’ll see if I can publish it. I don’t write kids’ stories on a regular basis because if the story isn’t engaging I’m not interested in it. I could do it probably just because now I’ve got a name and I’ve been published. Editors will look at my stuff. They won’t simply shove it off to the side of their desk, which they used to do when I was starting out. The manuscript for *Medicine River* sat under somebody’s desk for nine months. They didn’t publish the book in the end. They never even read it before it got published.

JA How many publishers did the manuscript of *Medicine River* go to before it appeared in print?

TK It just went to one publisher and then I got an agent and then the agent got a couple of companies interested in *Medicine River*. They had a bidding war, this is the joke — they had a bidding war and the bid went up a hundred — bucks. *Medicine River* wasn't a money maker when it originally sold. Since then, as a university text it's been quite good. Both the books have done well as trade paperbacks in universities. And I suspect *Truth and Bright Water* will do reasonably well too. But I know that *Green Grass* is the book to work with because it has everything an academic can possibly want stuffed in there. It gives you more to talk about than simply good characters and nice scenery.

JA Students really engage with it. My graduate students enjoyed it so much they gave it to all kinds of people as gifts afterwards. I had one student who is forty and gave it to her mother and then her twenty-year-old son. And she said both equally enjoyed it. So I think it's one of those books that spans generations. I don't know that *Truth and Bright Water* will do that. Equally interesting but a different book.

TK Yeah, it is. And I did not want to write another *Green Grass*. If I have to write a sequel or repeat myself I think the writing quality goes way down. Everything in *Green Grass* is an allusion, almost. Even names like Portland Looking Bear: it's spelled B-E-A-R but in actual fact he really is sort of stripped bare by the whole experience of Hollywood. The names, the characters that appear. It's a lot of work but also it can wear thin very quickly and so one book you're in and you're out, and you don't do it again. I've got the first chapter written of the new novel. It'll be fun.

JA You had said that you're moving the setting of the new book. Where is it located?

TK It's going to start on the West coast with a man who goes out to one of these large gated communities' subdivision lots to commit suicide.

JA South of the border?

TK No. Tofino, around Tofino, although I don't say where it is. It's called Gideon Bay and it's lot number six of Gideon Bay but in actual fact it was a lot that I saw at Tofino called lot number six at Rosie Bay. That was my dream lot.

JA So the protagonist goes out to die on the dream lot?

TK What's happened is he and his wife had seen this dream lot two years before and his wife blew him off and said, "This is crazy. This lot is too much money; there's no way we can afford it." And it was. I mean the actual lot that I saw was \$500,000.

JA So did Helen say no way?

TK Helen looked at me and said, "You gotta be kidding." I'm smart enough to know that there's no way we can afford that. No way in hell we could afford that. I'd have to win the lottery to do it. Even winning the Giller and the Pulitzer and the Governor General's Award wouldn't do it. And I was really saddened by that because I've always loved the ocean and I thought, there it goes. There goes one of my dreams. I've seen the lot; I cannot have it. So I've got this guy who feels much the same way. He's realized at last that there is an end to his life, that he can't have that lot and that is the sort of wall that's been put up. And so he goes there to commit suicide and he's Native — part Native — and he takes a drum along that his wife had bought him years ago at a tourist shop. He doesn't know how to play but he's heard songs and he thinks that he'll just strip himself naked and in the bright sunshine on the edge of this lot with the ocean coming in, low tide on the sand, he'll sing his death song, he'll make up a death song, and die. This the end that he's imagined for himself. As he stands there he gets all his clothes off and he gets his drum out and he can't think of a death song, so he starts singing a round dance song and he's sitting there and the fog comes in, and it's very dark and grey and he can't see a damn thing and he's really pissed off because he doesn't want to die in the fog so he sits there playing this drum and says, I'm going to damn well stay here 'til the fog lifts. And so for days he's there with his drum, and then all of a sudden out of the surf in the darkness something nudges his leg and he discovers that it is a dog that's been washed up on shore.

JA So the dog came back!

TK So maybe the dog comes back. The dog hangs around with him for a little bit and then goes off into the woods. Then all of a sudden this child washes ashore. He looks down and sees that it's an Indian kid and she washes ashore and she's half naked like himself, and so he's singing this song and he gets the idea that he may be conjuring up these people up out of the ocean by singing. As he sings, he sings louder and louder, some more people wash up on shore. And they huddle on the rocks with him because they can't see anything else, and they begin singing with him

and then more people come ashore 'til he's got about thirty or forty people standing around and he's feeling good, like a saviour. He's feeling like he might be Jesus Christ, he might be the Second Coming, but what he doesn't realize is that these people are Chinese immigrants. They're not Indians at all. But the reader realizes that. So they disappear off up the beach like that but he's energized. His life has some meaning again, he's been given this power to do things and so he goes and follows the dog back into the woods and they disappear. They'll come back, but that's the opening chapter and then it goes other places. I shouldn't say it's not like *Green Grass* because I do play on Christian mythology once again. I can't get away from that. I'm fascinated by Christianity.

JA When you talk about that opening scene with the immigrants coming out of the water and this man thinking that he's conjured up these people from the ocean....

TK That sort of raven and the clam shell and conjuring things up....

JA Several critics have talked about your work as magic realist and I'm curious about your reaction to such a label, which seems fitting given the description of the opening chapter you've just outlined. Would you call yourself magic realist?

TK I don't know that I'd call myself magic realist because I'm not sure I understand exactly what the term means and because it really is applied to the South American magic realist movement primarily. Gabriel Garcia Marquez...

JA Isabel Allende too...

TK Isabel Allende, yeah.... What I like about the magic realists and what I adapt for my own fiction — and maybe I am a magic realist — but I like the idea that you can move beyond reality in a way that doesn't make the novel seem eccentric or fantastic. In *Green Grass* the real, as it were, and the fantastic are so intertwined so as to dovetail into one another that it's hard to draw a line between where one ends and the other begins. I think that's one of the tricks I try to accomplish, is to say that there is no line between what we can imagine and what we understand or what we see. If that makes me a magic realist then so be it. But I really am concerned about breaking the borders down between reality and fantasy. It really frees me as a writer. When I was working on *Green Grass* I began with the idea that I was going to start in the Garden of Eden and work my way forward from there. But I couldn't get going and the reason I

couldn't get going was because I was basing this world I was trying to create on Christian precepts. It was only when I said, hey wait a minute, what if the Garden of Eden comes much later in the story of Creation and what if the real story is the Native story and the Christian story is the secondary story? And as soon as I said that it opened up the entire book to me, as it were, and I just went racing through it. I couldn't write it fast enough.

JA Really? So it was a fast write.

TK Once I got to that point. *Truth and Bright Water* has a fair amount of magic. The figure of Rebecca Neugin, that ghost-like figure is really a character right off the Trail of Tears, the march in the 1830s to Oklahoma. These Cherokees are represented by George Guess, who of course was Sequoia, and John Ross, who was principal chief of Cherokees at the time of removal, and Rebecca Neugin, who is a real historical character who was a young girl of eight when the Trail of Tears took place and she was ripped out of her house so quickly by the soldiers that the only thing she could take with her was a duck, and on the first couple of days on the trip she was holding onto the duck so tightly she killed it. And when they interviewed her in Oklahoma, when she was in her eighties or nineties, the thing she remembered most vividly was that duck and that march. It still haunted her. That story of Rebecca Neugin haunted me for a long time until I was able to use it in the book. She's one of those characters that no one's going to figure out particularly because they're not going to know what a tear dress is to begin with. That was a kind of dress that Cherokee women had to make on the Trail when they first got to Oklahoma because the soldiers would not let them have scissors. So they had to tear the material. They actually tore the material and then they folded it over so you couldn't see the ragged edge and sewed it that way. But in my book I have them tearing the dress so you can see the ragged edge. It gives you a clue that something's amiss. That part of the book is dense in the sense that not many people are going to see that as any more than a kind of an odd character that may mean this, may mean that, and I knew that going in, but here's my attitude: everything is based on North American white experience. Canadians don't even know their own history for Christ's sake, and I was not going to gloss my history. I wanted people to understand that I think Native history is as common as Jacques Cartier arriving in Canada. In a number of my books editors have asked me to gloss terms or events so the reader understands what's happening. I've refused to do that. Because what it does is it "others" that text, like the language, that Cherokee

language in *Green Grass*. In *Truth and Bright Water* the editors kept saying, couldn't we asterisk it? Put it down at the bottom? I said no. If they want to know they can ask me and I'll tell them. It's not a secret. And if readers want to look it up they can look it up. If they want to find a Chero-kee speaker they can do that too. Nobody glosses French in Canadian novels.

JA You're foregrounding the insider/outsider phenomenon and the discomfort it creates for certain groups of readers.

TK I don't mind making the readers feel like outsiders because in some ways it's kind of an interesting sensation for them. It may be uncomfortable but it's not something they normally experience.

JA For me it's fascinating because your novels make me work but I also think very differently when I walk away from a book where I feel like I'm an outsider than a book that immediately makes me feel like an insider.

TK Books that make you feel like an outsider may get you to examine what you do and who you are in a greater fashion.

JA A good example of this insider/outsider divide is the divination ritual that takes place in *Green Grass* when the Lone Ranger, Hawkeye, Robinson Crusoe, and Ishmael come together and they decide they're going to start the story proper. The ritual is given in the Cherokee language. What significance does that ritual have for you?

TK Well, it's part of a thing called "going to the water" and basically it is just a request to know the future or to be able to see part of what the future has to offer. It's a device for the reader in some ways to understand that something is going to happen, that these guys aren't there just for a little comic relief, as it were, that they're actually about to restructure the world or at least make an attempt at it. It's the same thing that Monroe Swimmer does. A lot of my characters do that in the novels. I guess I'm trying to remake the world to save it in some ways in the novels through a variety of characters who I understand ahead of time are going to be unsuccessful. But their attempt is worth the doing because you never know who you're going to encourage.

I mean David Suzuki takes a hell of a lot of flak about what he does and what he says, but the strength of Suzuki is not what he does or what he says, it is the symbol that he becomes and the inspiration he provides for somebody else. Because the next person who comes along may be far more successful than Suzuki is and far tougher than Suzuki is. People who don't like Suzuki talk about him being a popularizer but whether he is or

not you have to have those people there at certain points in the development of a society.

JA So the ritual does that?

TK The ritual does that. It suggests that these people have more power than they might seem to have, that they may have come from this insane asylum but, nonetheless, they have something that they can do with the world, about the world. And maybe they screw it up. I mean, that's what they do. Maybe they do some good. By the end of *Green Grass* the question is: have they changed the world in any appreciable way? Well, yes and no. They have in some ways been privy to the flood that destroys Eli's cabin, although you could blame that on the three cars. I love that joke.

JA And the references to the toilet bowl. It seems to me that Native humour often revolves around scatological issues.

TK It does. If you read traditional stories that reflect the way things were back then, scatology and sex were two of the things that the stories were about. That's because Native people are basically conservative, but they'll tell these stories in part as cautionary tales, sometimes about Coyote in particular, just to get that information out. They'd be appalled if you told them their minds were on sex all the time.

JA I'm thinking of the toilet in the Dead Dog that keeps overflowing. Customers go into the bathroom and Laetitia says, "Be careful." It's always the white tourists that are using those bathrooms.

TK Well it's the same thing that happens out at Happy Trails where the toilets are backed up. On the most basic level you could say that King has suggested that the world is so full of shit that it can't be contained. On the other hand, a little bit more critically, I'm working with the idea that we do nothing about the kinds of "wastes" that we create in the world, nor do we have any place to put it. As long as we continue to do this our metaphorical toilets are going to back up. That's part of the problem with society in general; we create these things that have no value; they simply clog up our systems. We don't need another highway. God help us. We're gonna get one. What we need is a really good rapid transit system that allows us to get on en masse and move from one place to another and not be in individual cars chugging along, clogging up the atmosphere, because at some point in time we're going to run out of toilet space, a septic tank, and it's going to come back. It already has. And all we do is hope science will find a pill that will take care of smog and pollution.

JA I think a lot of people find the toilet references and scatological humour in your novels disconcerting, but I find them really thought-provoking.

TK A friend of mine who read *Truth and Bright Water* felt that the mustard-coloured slick that comes out of the ground was a little much.

JA Oh, I quite liked it: Happy Trails...

TK Oh yeah, Happy Trails. That's from that Gene Autry song: (*singing*) "Happy trails to you..." I think it's Gene Autry.

JA In a broader context, how do you think the field of Native North American literature and the publishing industry's regard for Native authors has changed over the course of your career? Are things better now than they have been for Native writers?

TK Well, I think they're better in the sense that publishers will actually read material by Native writers, that they'll be interested in looking at some of the stuff because they know it has selling power. The bad news is that, especially in the States, the readership in the States, the publishing houses in the States will deal with one Native at a time. So if you're the top Native dog then you get all of the attention. For a while there it was N. Scott Momaday, and Leslie Silko, and James Welch – the big three. Then it was Louise Erdrich and Michael Dorris. And now it might be someone like Sherman Alexie.

JA Alexie is who I was thinking of.

TK Whereas in Canada I don't think that's so true. I think what's happened here is there are not a large number of Native novelists. But Tomson Highway's written a novel, as have Lee Maracle, Beatrice Culleton, Basil Johnston, and Richard Wagamese. But you can almost count them on two hands. And that will develop. So it is a better place. The publishing world is a better place for Native writers than it was twenty or twenty-five years ago, when nobody wanted to read about Native stuff. Part of that's the ethnic movement that comes out of the States. It was the old civil rights movement that branched out into an ethnic movement and swept over North America. Whether or not that will last, I have no idea. That's the tough thing about being a Native writer producing Native material. If for some reason you are no longer the flavour of the month then either you're going to have to stop writing about Natives and write about something else or you're dead in the water. And people don't get tired of those very old-fashioned novels that are

set around a good story and good characters. It's like representational art. I'm not suggesting it's bad stuff, but it's more. A lot of novels are more illustrative, to borrow a term from the art world, than they are profound pieces of writing and I find that more of a problem for me than the distinctions made between Native and non-Native writing because I think one of the things that Native writing, and maybe other ethnic writings, have done is to open up writing more generally to different possibilities.

I'm not tied into the realistic novel. Traditional Native stories aren't tied into realism. When you've got Coyote who's got, in the most egregious part, this enormous penis that he carries around in a wooden box strapped to his back and chipmunks eat it, and crows pick at it, and he loses it in gambling games, gets it stuck in the crooks of trees when he's wearing the damn thing.... That sort of stuff is silly, it's fantastic, but it also suggests something about, not just Coyote, but us. At one point — this is a more contemporary story — Coyote has this beauty contest where he judges people on how big their breasts are — women on how big their breasts are — and it's a great story. It's a contemporary piece that somebody has made up — it was a Native piece — another Coyote story. A lot of the traditional stories will make you laugh or make you squirm the same time that they're commenting on society, and I like those kinds of stories. I know that there are books written by very gifted writers that also suggest those.... For instance, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*. I loved that novel. But by the time I was done with it there was nothing else left to do with the novel. I didn't want to read it again. I didn't walk away thinking this has really got me thinking about relationships between the haves and the have-nots, between the butler and master. I wasn't really concerned with that particular point in time when fascism is the fashion in England. What I thought was, that guy can write great characters and he can tell a good story, but that was it. Whereas someone like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, his short story "The Very Old Man with Enormous Wings" — I still remember that story. I still wonder who the old man was and why he was in that chicken coop and what he was supposed to do, if anything. Those questions are fascinating questions because I'll come up with different answers, and I love that sort of stuff. Now, I suppose that's taste. I tend to think of it as sophisticated taste but I could be wrong about that.

JA But it fits with your novels. I find I go back and I read and I re-read them and I find new things every time. Reading becomes this kind of continual process of interaction.

TK Well now you know it could have been the mother who bought the flowers for herself in *Truth and Bright Water*.

JA You've altered my understanding of her character.

TK Just to throw that out and say that it's a possibility — how could she tell her son that she gave those flowers to herself? That she arranged it. She wouldn't. She couldn't. But who got them for her? Well...

JA One last question: I'm thinking here of Will's participation in the community photograph in *Medicine River* — what do you see happening to the study of Native literature over the next twenty years, and where will you be in that picture?

TK To answer the second part first: if I'm alive I'll be writing novels. I don't know what's going to happen with the study of Native literature. I don't know if Native scholars or non-Native scholars are going to try to develop some kind of a Native-based critical process to look at Native novels, or if we're simply going to take things like postcolonial and poststructuralist criticism and just use that to evaluate everything under the sun. That kind of cookie cutter approach. I'd like to think that a Native-based process could happen but I don't know who's going to do it. We'll see. So I don't know the answer to the first part of the question. The second part of the question is easy. I'll just keep doing what I'm doing as long as they let me do it. And even afterwards, probably.

(Thanks to Jonathan Dewar for his timely and careful transcription of this interview.)

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