

# An Indian Encounter: A Conversation with Jeannette Armstrong

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Article abstract

Jeannette Armstrong is an internationally recognized writer, teacher, artist, sculptor, and activist for Indigenous rights. Here, in robust detail, she describes her role and identity as a cultural archivist and knowledge keeper of the Okanagan – work she carries on in the tradition of her great aunt, Mourning Dove (Hum-Ishu-Ma), and that she has viewed as an academic responsibility since her teen years. Looking back to 1986, she discusses her founding vision of the En'owkin Centre in Penticton, British Columbia, a retreat where Indigenous artists and academics continue to work collaboratively towards the recovery of language and culture. In this conversation, Armstrong offers her views on the marginalization of Aboriginal cinema in Canada, the nature of the western canon, Okanagan oral literatures, and the mobilization of Indigenous systems of knowledge. In the context of the world's current environmental crisis, Armstrong identifies an urgent need for increased attention to Indigenous perspectives.

# An Indian Encounter: A Conversation with Jeannette Armstrong

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY PREM KUMARI SRIVASTAVA

**B**ORN IN 1948 ON THE Penticton Indian Reserve in British Columbia, Jeannette Armstrong writes that her Okanagan Syilx name means something like the image of light, rippling off moving water. The grandniece of Hum-Ishu-Ma (Mourning Dove, 1888-1936), considered the first Native American novelist, Armstrong obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Victoria and a Diploma of Fine Arts from Okanagan College in 1978. Armstrong's 1985 work *Slash*, the story of an Okanagan activist, is considered the first novel by a Native woman in Canada. In 1986, Armstrong became the director of the En'owkin Centre at Penticton. *Whispering in Shadows* (2004) is her semi-autobiographical second novel that continues the story of *Slash*, but through a female protagonist. In the early 1980s, she had published children's books, *Enwhisteetkwa (Walk in Water)*, (1982) and *Neekna and Chemai* (1983). Her collection *Breath Tracks* (1991) saw the flowering of her poetry, and *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction* (1990), edited by Thomas King, showcased a number of her stories. Her critical faculty was on display in *The Native Creative Process* (1991), a collaborative discourse between Armstrong and Douglas Cardinal on Aboriginal artistry, and "Land Speaking" in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing* (1998), which addresses the influence of land and Okanagan language on her writing. In 2003, Armstrong received the Buffet Award for Aboriginal Leadership in recognition of her work as an educator, community leader, and indigenous rights activist. Today, Armstrong, a writer, teacher, artist, sculptor, and activist for indigenous rights, is the cultural archivist and knowledge keeper of the Okanagan.

This interview was conducted in Vancouver in November 2010 at the time of the interviewer's visit to BC from her native India.

*PKS* The kind of scholarly attention that is being given to the "indigenous" in Canada, although not adequate, is not seen in India.

The tribals in India are called *adivasis*, and we have many tribal communities that are diverse and widespread in different parts of India. But India lacks funding, major initiatives, and serious attention to scholarly indigenous studies. The initiatives can be seen in little pockets. I am very happy to be associated with such initiatives for some time now. As part of a project with the Northern Himalayan Gaddi tribe, I looked at older women's oral narratives, primarily because they are soon to disappear, dying narratives. The project's objective and contribution was to document and record these narratives before they eventually disappear from the cultural consciousness of people. It was led by a team of academicians from the University of Delhi and Shimla with support from the Sahitya Academi, the National Academy of Letters in New Delhi. Here, in Canada, I was absolutely thrilled to go to the En'owkin Centre in Pentictin, Kelowna and witness with my own eyes the preservation or knowledge keeping of the Okanagan culture that is in progress there.

*JA* Oh good! It's too bad I wasn't there that day.

*PKS* I spent a good two hours at the Centre and interacted with quite a few people there who showed us around. I was with a couple of my friends from Calgary, who have been in Canada for the last twenty to twenty-five years. For them, too, this visit to the En'owkin Centre was a kind of an eye-opener, a disclosure of sorts. Unfortunately, the world outside, even in Canada, doesn't know too much about what is happening here.

In my present research in Canada, I am trying to look at First Nations' literature and culture: narratives — oral and written, folktales, legends, and their adaptations in cinema. What are your views on cinema as a kind of extended text? UBC has several First Nations' study programs. I have seen *Slash* in the hands of many students at UBC. Has anybody approached you for an adaptation of *Slash* into a film?

*JA* Yeah, there have been some. I just haven't thought a lot about them, mainly because I was more involved in looking at literature itself and looking at how the oral literatures of our people are structured — how they work and how some of the unique aspects are carried out in those oral stories. I know that *Slash*, for instance, was an experimental project to develop a framework I could tell the contemporary story through. *Slash*, if you call it a novel, is not really a novel. The narrative

is told using devices that would be used in an oral narrative told in the first person.

For instance, the movement of the four chapters is a reflection of how our Okanagan-specific — not other indigenous people, but the tribal people that I belong to — how their oral narratives work in four transitions. So those were some, I guess you could say, experimental parts of this process. I have never actually moved them beyond writing, taking them from the oral to the written stage. I think we have been criticized from the western canon, or the English-European canon, in terms of the way that our narratives are non-linear and the way that they are, in a sense, not based on the same kinds of critical areas that other literatures are analyzed from. I think one of the questions that I had in my writing was not so much about how to reorganize the material, but also how to write the material in a written form and retain the integrity of how we perceive oral literatures and how they work. So I really confronted and decided to question how some of those critical areas might influence our storytelling and decided to break those riddles or challenge them. I decided that I would write this novel and would create this format for it that wasn't a novel, that was oral, and create this sensibility of progression in the story from a non-linear and circular perspective. This central character, which is common in western canons, isn't really a central character. So I decided to challenge all of those areas. For instance, there isn't a classic type of resolution in my novel; there isn't, or doesn't seem to be, the classic point where in a novel you reach a climax and then there is a resolution. So these are some of the reasons that I was focused more on literature and never thought about it in a dramatic format. Further, I was spending a lot time academically writing my PhD and developing a process for analysis of oral works.

*PKS* Your novel is experimental in many ways. The real resolution can be when the protagonist, Slash, says that I have decided that I need and am needed by my people. The sense of worth that the protagonist feels creates a sense of resolution.

*JA* Oh yeah!

*PKS* I am reminded of Toni Morrison at this juncture. In one of her interviews, she said that when she was just striking out to be a writer, or earlier during her master's in English, while reading the entire gamut of European literature and the literary history of the US, she realized "*she*

was just *not there!*” It was then she decided to make Afro-Americans visible by writing for and about her own people. So while reading *Slash*, I realized that toward the end of the novel, when the protagonist felt that he was worthy and that his people needed him, it was akin to feeling, “I am visible” and “I am there for my people.” As a writer, you might not have thought about it, but as a reader, that was a great resolution. But, alongside this experimental style of writing, and the kind of written oral narrative you created in *Slash*, there are globally many oral narratives being adapted for cinema, including Zacharias Kunuk’s internationally acclaimed *The Fast Runner*.

*JA* I think for me that will be *another* area to look at. After working out some of the areas that for me were newly researched, when I wrote *Slash* and then later *Whispering in Shadows*, it was really a search for what it is that I am working with here; later on [I was] writing my PhD and looking at it and saying that this is why it is so, and this is how it works and this is why it is used. So, one of the areas I am really interested in is how oral narratives are performed live in first person. One of the issues, which I have with writing on paper, is that there isn’t the fluidity as with the oral performed literature. So, as a performed literature, there is a huge difference in terms of how the performance itself is informed by the fact that it is performed live and formed by the consideration that one has to have when there is a live listening audience. So the structural qualities that I came across are really much more about the considerations of a live audience rather than of the written format.

For instance, when you’re doing theatre, some kind of a consideration is given to it because it is a live performance. In live performance, the audience has to be able to follow the story coherently and make all the right connections. So, all the dramatic devices are organized for that to happen. In oral literature, the narrative is organized in such a way that the story is meaningful to the listener all the way through and there is coherence in all the themes and threads that are required for the resolution or for the development of a character, or a storyline. They are all a part of how the devices are organized. So, it makes for a much more dramatic story.

*PKS* In your second novel, *Whispering in Shadows*, the protagonist is a woman, whereas in the earlier text, you had a male protagonist. Both

the texts have creativity and imagination at their core, particularly the second one. If somebody approached you to make a cinematic representation of them, which text would you prefer to see appear on the big screen?

*JA* *Slash* would be more suitable because of some of the dramatic qualities of the plot, the story, the growth of the character, as well as the character's transformations. There are four changes that the character goes through in the novel. I think *Slash* would be much richer in that format than the other novel, which is kind of flat all the way through.

*PKS* What do you have to say about the gaze on Aboriginal literature and also the issues being taken up in Aboriginal cinema and documentaries that are made in Canada today?

*JA* Well, one of the challenges is, of course, that Aboriginal cinema is really marginalized. Enough support is not available for production. I don't think there is a lack of creativity or lack of material or a lack of desire to produce materials, but there is a lack of real support for all the different areas that are required to produce it. One of the main fault lines is the idea that, maybe historical documentation is more important and critical than literature or story. I think that's really where a lot of the people who are trained move toward, so a lot of creativity moves to the background or is put on the back burner. Still, some of it does come out despite the above historical focus. I think a part of it has to do with the pressure of necessity to document the history, document the reality and the political scope of some of the things that have occurred as a result of colonization and the necessity of telling the truth about it. So, there is a much greater need for creative production of our stories and particularly the way our narratives in literature work. That concentration and support just *doesn't* exist. There's very little tolerance in the major networks or the television producers like Aboriginal People Television Network (APTN). I don't want to sound too critical, but APTN copies the other networks and really only puts money for producing shows that other networks are doing, like cooking shows and APTN news programmes, which are also necessary. But very little support is provided by the network for any kind of experimental or creative television-produced cinema. To me, that's where the support should come from to create these things. You have to lead the way and you have to have the desire of many of the writers and the producers, who are Aboriginal, to move

forward in original and new directions. Most of the writers have to go to some other network or to do it from their kitchen table. That's not a good thing because you don't have the tools to produce things that could really make a difference in that art form.

*PKS* I think you've made some very important and significant points when it comes to historical documentation and the fact that there's hope and money and support for it, but when it comes to creative documentation, that's where you actually require support. I had a chance to watch some Aboriginal cinema, made in Canada, and there is plenty of good quality cinema, including Marie Clements's play *The Unnatural and Accidental Woman* (1997), which was adapted to cinema by Carl Bessai as *Unnatural and Accidental* (2006). Marie Clements was herself involved with the making of the film, which did get a mixed response. Zacharias Kunuk's *Atanarjuat The Fast Runner* (2001), based on an Inuit legend from thousands of years ago, got a good response and went on to win many awards, as well as being showcased at several film festivals. So, it is evident that there is a definite need and scope for such kind of cinema and productions. Have you seen the film *Unnatural and Accidental*?

*JA* No, I haven't seen it, but I have heard good things about it. My daughter, Tracey, tries to make me watch everything, and I will watch it.

*PKS* You have said, and it's been written about you, that you have been inspired by your ancestors. You write for them and write after them. Have you succeeded in paying homage to them?

*JA* Not yet, I don't think so. I think what I have been engaged in, in my own writing, has been to challenge and question the western canon and experiment with that, in terms of breaking those rules. So, it's almost from within a colonized perspective. I realized that after taking some time away from my writing and developing the theory related to Okanagan oral literatures. One of the novels that I took apart and looked at, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927), was written by my great-aunt, Mourning Dove or Christine Quintasket. She wrote that novel way back at the turn of the century; she wasn't schooled in literature and she wasn't aware of the western canon that was developing at that time. So her writing was following the rules and the format and the traditions of oral Okanagan literatures. I realized as I took the novel and read it that

even though all of it is fiction and the main character is to some degree autobiographical, the story is organized and the references that she uses and the format that she uses really are very clearly situated in, and based on, a true Okanagan spirit. So, I was really relieved to know that she wasn't interested in translating the legends or the myths into English. Though she ended up doing just that and publishing a collection that is still selling today, she remained interested in writing about our experience of the two worlds coming together in one person. I just feel that I have not paid the kind of attention and the respect she paid to our oral literature. So that's something I continue to search for. So, I don't feel that I have even come near to what she accomplished. In western literature, it is not seen as a great piece of literature, but in Salish literature, it's just outstanding; it just takes my breath away. I am working out some of the theory related to how I would take it apart and say that this is what she did; this is how she accomplished what she did through her writing. I'm going to publish separate papers, separate works on her approach, because I think it would be really important and helpful and I think that's part of my paying homage to that ancestor. And then to a lot of other things that come as a result of the work that I did, out of my literary analysis of some of the original oral myths and stories. I don't know if you have seen the story that was in Tom King's collection, called "This is a story." It is a contemporary story and an experimental piece as well. In my discussion about it, I look at how I would construct a story dealing with today's issues and realities and use that format to be able to accomplish what I know those stories are intended to do. I decided that I would write a story that was really fluid in the way that it organized itself in my mind. Once I made that decision, it just came and worked itself out on paper. So, I wanted to go back and look at that particular story and look at how I organized it and developed the process of writing it. I know that not a lot of attention is being paid to that story, but I would like to do a collection of a similar kind of creative work. So, I think, that would be what I would like to do; whether in writing, in cinema, or in theatre, I haven't made any decision about that.

*PKS* I was struck by the motto of the En'owkin Centre: "Where Education meets Tradition and Cultural Excellence." Could you say a little more about its significance and deeper meaning?

*JA* One of the things that I have always been very much aware of



is that I come from a family of knowledge keepers. This informed me at a very early age — in fact, as soon as I entered my teens, that it was an academic responsibility. In our tradition, we are trained in certain ways to be able to not only retain but also pass on the knowledge in various areas that are required for us to be able to say we are knowledgeable. So, many people in our communities are knowledgeable in one or two or three areas, and, so, part of our tradition is that people who are recognized and knowledgeable in certain areas all have responsibility and stature in the community as teachers, and later on as elders.

So, as I was growing up, something I was always confronted with was the idea that *there was nothing, we were invisible*, and knowledge was situated in the colonizer's academy. But the knowledge that we understood and practiced from within and were passing on and being trained to be able to not only understand, but also question and be able to pass on to others, wasn't anecdotal, or wasn't something that was primitive in form. There was a long tradition, and the fact that it was documented orally and passed on orally does not diminish the quality of that knowledge in all the different areas and disciplines that our people have, although, for some, our knowledge keepers do not match up with popular western academic designations. One of the reasons is that sometime back four to five hundred years ago, there was a separation between science and religion in western academies. That whole area has been really problematic for us as indigenous people because we do not see that separation. We know that separation creates the disassociation, for instance with the earth and other living things, disassociation within our selves, and dislocation from the things that make us human. I decided early on that I would try to find a way to be clear that our knowledge mattered, and to find a way to make it visible and to make it available and accessible to our people. If it had any relevance outside the domain of our people, I would be happy to be involved in that, but, primarily, my audience and responsibility is to my people, to our traditions, to our ancestors, and to our belief system. In all the understanding related to our existence that I, as an Okanagan person, have, our life form has to be a part of that, so that's really outside the academic tradition in which you can only inquire and write in a narrow format within the academy. So, that's been one of the major lifelong concerns that I have had which would help develop En'owkin Centre and develop some of the areas that I have been involved in. It also helped make clear

to me that it's not a matter of trying to fit into that, but it's really a matter of trying to figure out a way to perpetuate this and give validity to be able to operate in this world and within this country, Canada, that is surrounding us, and also oppressing in many ways, the voice that we are.

*PKS* So, in a true sense, you have been a cultural archivist and a real knowledge keeper.

*JA* Yeah, yeah, yeah!

*PKS* You have also treated this engagement with your own culture as a kind of healing.

*JA* To a large extent, the main thing was not that I was traumatized so much, but that I was angry. There are many reasons for me to be angry, because of the effect on me, my family, my community, and the people I live with, as we all connect with all those statistics that Canada pulls out regarding Aboriginal peoples: the high incarceration rate, the high suicide rate, the high illiteracy rate, the high poverty rate, the continued disappearance of women, the high rates of family violence, high drop-out rates in schools, and so on and on and on. All these statistics surround me in my everyday life, everyday existence within my family, within my community and within my workplace. It is not easy to be not angry and not be filled with rage and hatred. It's not so much that I did anything or was traumatized myself, because I did have a very strong family and I did have very strong teachings and a sense of identity, responsibility and pride all my life. I have never really stepped outside of that. But I do know that it has affected so many of my people negatively. You have to contend with that anger and rage, and not let it interfere with what you are able to do in a positive way.

*PKS* In all your writings, talks, interviews, poetry, and creative writing, there is a positive note and optimism, bereft of skepticism. This positive note must be taking you forward and surely be an inspiration to other writers. But, let me ask you a tricky question about the En'owkin Centre: Is it only by and for the First Nations? How about for other people: researchers working in this field? In September 2010, just before I came to Canada, at *Chotro III* in Delhi, I was listening to the famed Maori scholar from New Zealand, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, talk about the development of indigenous cultures in a positive way, and the need for the inclusion of others who look at these cultures in a genuine way,

much in the way the anthropologist Julie Cruikshank and other serious scholars working in this area would look at it. Is it not a positive thing to include non-Native scholars in First Nations writings and research projects?

*JA* I engage with it. I am probably better known internationally than here, because I engage with it, trying to bring that forward to institutions of learning or organizations that are involved with bringing indigenous thought or epistemology or philosophy and advance that. I think, for instance, about En'owkin Centre's connection with the University of British Columbia in the Indigenous Studies Degree programs; I am a faculty member within that program. I have helped found and develop that program within the university, so that the knowledge, perspective, and framing of indigenous thought, philosophy, understanding, and knowledge could be brought forward for the benefit of all people, as any knowledge system benefits all people. Knowledge should be mobilized for all people. It's not something that is held only by one group, and so I really feel strongly about that. As a result of my optimism, it can change and transform the world and can make some difference to all people. So participation in large forums, internationally and so on, is an important step. Environmental and social justice issues are also a part of the academic work that I do.

The En'owkin Centre, though, is for *my* people. It is a retreat for my people to be able to examine academically some of the issues outside of us or to recover some of our knowledge: language and culture. For us to be able to enter into a dialogue about how those perspectives or areas of knowledge might be relevant today, how they might be applied or utilized, and how we might think about them in practice in the contemporary sense and not be divided as though we were with one foot in two worlds, as some people have described being Aboriginal in Canada. I don't believe that we could exist with one foot in two worlds. We have to be able to synthesize and be part of whatever that world is, from within our identity. That is what En'owkin does, for us and our people. It connects to all of the other areas that I mentioned.

I believe that my responsibility does not just rest with my people. I really believe that the earth needs indigeneity. I strongly believe that it is the lack of indigeneity and instead the globalization and widespread development that is worrisome. I am not opposed to the idea of development. I think development is necessary: that's part of being human.

How we ethically understand, and are informed about, the things that we cause and the effects that we have and the decisions and the choices that we make needs to be informed by everything that surrounds us, not just for me, for my family, for my race or for my culture. That is one of the things I can speak clearly about in a global sense, in terms of saying, yes, the world requires indigeneity because, after all, the indigenous is part of what makes life natural and a continuum. As human beings, we have to learn; we have to become knowledgeable enough to be able to accomplish that continuum of life, and also to make life natural. When we can't do that, we are not learning; we are not knowledgeable; we are parasites on the earth and we destroy life rather than create life, work with life, embrace life, and uphold life. So, to my mind, many of the knowledge systems of the world are missing that really important component that indigenous tribal peoples have retained and maintained that sustains them within their landscape. This message is not getting out and also as to how each of the different areas interprets and speaks about what is vitally necessary. Every tribal group is indigenous, and it is necessary to be so. It is not just Okanagans, but every indigenous and tribal group that has a higher level of knowledge that is required at this time as we are in such a state of crisis.

*PKS* Looking forward to seeing your works in cinema because all the issues of orality and storytelling can be handled in cinema. Isn't Tracey, your daughter, picking up any of your works for full feature-length adaptation in cinema?

*JA* Yes, she is. In most of the film work that she has done, she has been very strong in making documentaries (the money comes for them) creatively. I don't know if you had the opportunity to interact with her. Her film *Magic on the Water* (2008) won a lot of awards, including a major award for indigenous film in the US. She has been highly recognized for creativity in that film. It is a four-part film that deals with the connection to water and spirituality related to water. But it is also the story of the reintroduction of the traditional "spirit canoes" into our nation and the journey of those canoes and the vision of the woman who had the vision to bring the "spirit canoes" back into the Okanagan. So her documentary is a real documentary in that sense; it is also about the man who had the vision to bring back the carving of the canoes and then the woman and the journey of the young people on the canoes and

the connection it has for our people with the waterways of our nation. It is a very beautiful film in terms of traditions and culture. The songs are situated in a contemporary manner, leading to revitalization of our culture.

*PKS* Have you been to India?

*JA* No, in fact, I have never been anywhere in Asia.

*PKS* Well, I hope you come to India soon. It has been a pleasure meeting you and talking to you, Jeannette. Thank you!

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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