

Interview of Jordan Wheeler

August 18, 1992, Calgary

Question: Talk to me about Jordan Wheeler, the writer. Tell me about where the ideas come from for your work.

Answer: Ideas come from a lot separate sources. Some grow organically, Others are basic plagiarisms, not of other works but people's lives. So, there are two sources.

One is, you think of something you want to say, then to try to find the people, the characters, the plot, to say it. The other way is to see people, see what is really happening in other people's lives and mutate that, fictionize it, and put that into a story.

Organically, sometimes I get angry or sometimes I'll want to say something specific. For instance, the story, "Exposure" was a story started off as an idea in my head where people, native people, no matter where we go in life, Calgary, Berkley, at one point we always come home. We go away and come back, it's like this huge umbilical cord.

That's the idea that I started off with, two brothers who are already set up. It developed and the thing that brought them back, it opened up a whole different other area for me to look at. I decided that one of them was terminally ill. I started playing around with that. Then I decided he had aids. So that opened up homophobia, the whole aids issue, how reserves treat people with aids. So, I uncovered all that, all that territory, from that one basic idea.

Ideas grow on each other. Like a DNA happening, how you get one cell, and hopefully it flowers into some beautiful creation. It doesn't always come out the way you plan it. Sometimes it comes out better, usually worse. There is always fix

up stages through the whole writing process. That's one way that the stories come.

The other way is, I'll see for instance, my own family. The clearest example that I have is when my grandfather died in 1983 and when he a stroke a year early, those two occasions, was the first time in my life that I had seen all my aunts and uncles in one place at the same time. They feuded, they were bitter, it was a big scrap throughout the whole funeral, during the whole time after his stroke. That went click. I came up with the story, "Hurts In The Snow", two brothers whose father dies. One comes home from Vancouver. There is a huge animosity between them and they have to work it out. You have to spice it up, somethings I stuck to, like the reserve and the whole funeral progression, his body on display in Regina, the native minister who did the service, transportation of the body to the reserve for burial. On the way in, my uncle went in the hearse with my grandfather. I sent two brothers in the hearse with their grandfather. The difference is that they get stuck in a blizzard on the way and spend the night in the back of the hearse with their grandfather.

Those are not, by no means, the only source of ideas, but those are the two clearest.

Question: Who is your audience, who are you writing the stories for? Are you writing them for Jordan?

Answer: That's a complex question, it's a complex issue. There are so many different sides to writing and there a huge spectrum. You have art on one extreme, pure art, where you are writing for yourself. You are writing for the beauty of the craft.

The other side is designed for kids between the ages of 9 and 12, there is this much violence because that's what kids go for. At various stages you write things, anywhere in that spectrum. There is a lot of stuff you don't write, where I want to write this beautiful short

story and then this stuff that I write for the kids.

You should know, going into it, and this is all in retrospect. A lot of writers would disagree with this, but you should have some idea of where this is going to once you start writing it. Once you start marketing your work, trying to publish it, you have to know who would publish something like this, for which audience. That just makes it a lot easier. You eliminate half the publishers from the list and you see what publishers go for this stuff and what audiences and way you go. You could wind up sending your novel to a publishers that just does children's stories or vice versa.

So, it is important but there is also the beauty of just sitting down with a pen and a piece of paper and going for it and seeing what you end up with. Then deciding who it would be good for.

Question: Do you focus your writing on a native audience?

Answer: I focus my writing on mostly native people. The audience, I hope, will include both non-native and native. When I write for native people, I am looking for verification. That it is authentic. That's the kind of feed-back that I want from my own people. The non-native people, I am looking for two things; a) shock and b) awareness. Those are some of the theories. For native children, it's "look, don't feel bad."

Question: Tell me about the process you go through when you are writing. Do you have ideas growing on ideas? Do you sit down, after you get the finished product, and start editing? What's the hours of editing compares to the hours of writing?

Answer: 3 to 1, before I submit it. The first draft is fun and creative and energetic. Then you spend 3 times that amount going over it. That'll include time with the publishers as well. It varies. If you get lucky and nail it on the first run, then you may have 2 polishing runs to go through it. If you don't have a clear idea when you start and

you don't have a clear idea half way through and you still don't have a clear idea when you finish, then you have a lot more work to do. It could be as high as 10 to 1.

The editing process takes awhile. That's where a lot of writers give it up. It can always be better. The stuff that I've already published, I've looked back at it and gringe. You could keep rewriting and rewriting. You would never be fully satisfied. At some point there has to be a cut off.

Question: Do you consider yourself a fiction writer?

Answer: That's my first love. That's my focal point, but I have to a lot of other writing to support that hobby. To make a living in this country as a writer, you can't limit yourself to one particular style. You write articles for magazines, scripts for film. You write manuals on how to set up a VCR, whatever writing is available. It doesn't matter what it is, you take all writing jobs you have to do that.

I am in the situation where I don't have any degrees from the University, so I don't have a professorship that I could fall back on, to use to support my writing. A lot of people do.

So in my situation, I write my face off all the time and when I can, I work a novel or short story. Sometimes, you can get a grant so that you can focus on the novel or short story.

Question: So, you are writing full time now?

Answer: Yeah. Even with this job, it's a writing process, it's a story department for a TV series. There is 3 story editors and 2 producers and a slough of writers, going to send scripts in for the 16 episodes. What we do basically, is sit around, come up with ideas, brain storm, over supper, over lunch, over an afternoon. Other times we'll pick the writers, get the scripts, go over the scripts, do the editing. We sit around

the telephone and go page by page, 60 pages of script. That's all writing.

Question: Were you born a writer?

Answer: I was born a cartographer. My first love was maps. From the time I was 10 I read all the maps I get a hold of. I had a globe, I had an atlas. I knew all the capitals of Canada, all the capitals of the United States, most of the capitals of the world. That's was my first love.

With cartography comes mathematics and that sort of clashed. After that I tried architecture and started drawing houses all the time. Then I saw mathematics and architecture clash. Finally, about grade 10 or 11, I discovered that I didn't have a difficult time doing an essay and getting a real hot mark on it. So I decided to work with what I was good at. So by grade 12 I had a couple of articles published in a native magazine. I was going to be a journalist, that and a stint in Canada World Youth, with The St. Paul Journal Volunteer Canada World Youth. I worked on a newspaper and found it really confining. Came back from that experience and went into one of Maria Campbell's workshops in Batoche.

It's hard to say who is born what? People have talent. Some people could be born a writer, but never write their whole life, if they are not in an environment where creativity is enjoyed, celebrated. There are a lot of creative people. Everybody has a creative edge with some kind of talent. Very few people are in an environment that helps nurture that creativity. Most environments are suppressive. You can people who are 30 or 40 years old who have boxes in the closet in the basement filled with poetry they have written all their life. Only them and their dog and their closest friend has ever seen them. Same with painting.

Question: Does your family see you as a writer?

Answer: My mother did, when I got older. My mother is a writer. My father is a writer, though he never did it. He did a couple of things. My father is a lot of things. He also has the skill of a writer. He was in the navy, he went to visit Hiroshima in 1952 and he tells a story of when this kid came up to him, asking him for change. He started digging in his pockets. An old guy pulled the kid away and spat on him and carted the kid off. That affected my father somewhere deep within. He came back and wrote an article for a BC newspaper. It was a pretty powerful piece.

Question: What kind of influence does your family over your writing? Do you write about them? Is your mother a big source of support for you?

Answer: I write about my family. I am getting better at disguising certain people. Everybody is a form of support. Agnes helps immeasurably. There are frequent road trips. She stays with the kids. Looks after them while I'm gone, by herself. Such as when I went to Calgary for three weeks, coming back to Winnipeg and loading up a u-haul truck and carting everybody off to Calgary.

My sister is very supportive. If I need any kind of historical fact, I just grab the telephone. She's a great resource.

My mother, if we weren't related, she would be a great press agent. She spreads the word all over the place.

Cameron is a lot of help. He helped me write a couple of stories. They have been inspiration for a few more stories.

Question: So, you write about them, but you disguise them?

Answer: To the average person, nobody would know. My sister picked herself out of one. Agnes has picked herself out yet.

Question: One of the things about native literature, what people are talking about, what I have read is

that in some ways native people are bond to the idea that they are always writing about family and community and that it is always a true story. When you call yourself a fiction writer you take that and twist it around.

Answer: I'll go with the standard, western cliché. Fiction is life. Fiction is reality. The only way to see ourselves is to read about it in fiction. Fiction mirrors a society, society's values, society's morals. That's where I think you get into our fiction. It reflects a whole different set of values. Those values are inherent with the family and the community. I don't want to use any 1990's, newwave catch phrases but it is more organic than the traditional western techniques.

Question: Do you speak a second language?

Answer: I wish. Unfortunately, I know more French than Cree. I have Cree tapes and I pick up the occasional phrase. My mother lost her language in residential school and my grandparents were very Christian so they resisted teaching me.

Question: Did you grow up in, what you described, the old tradition?

Answer: In a way. I grew up pretty urban. The first 7 years of my life was on Vancouver Island. I think when I started to become aware is when my mother started becoming aware. Her generation got a lot of shame in the residential schools. It wasn't their fault. It just happened. Some residential schools, the kids would recite, "My mother is a whore. My father is a drunk." It rubs off.

My mother met a guy named George Puduso out in the west coast, who lived just down the road from us. He was a traditional storyteller, a writer, a painter and an actor. He turned her prospective about who she was right around, just about the time that I was becoming aware. We were at pot lunches and listening to him. She was writing or going to the Friendship Centres,

doing radio and we were always going to places and I would hear people speak. Not necessarily telling stories, but really eloquent speakers. Going from there to Winnipeg with the whole family. My family has always been pretty political active, couple of gang members there, a powwow trail and the protest trail. That's the oral stuff that I got.

The storytelling wasn't formal, it wasn't a stage thing. That's another difference between western and aboriginal. The same with musicians, western music versus music from other cultures. It's just a sharing, nobody performs. That's the storytelling I heard at the Communicative Conferences in Morley. You sort of hang out with 5-7 people in a circle and one by one they would all share stories, jokes. That was the storytelling that I remember. Some were hilarious, some were in Cree, in the language I didn't understand. That was frustrating. It sounded like they were great. I knew in the translation it didn't pan out.

I remember at a friend's house, Maria Campbell, my mother and a woman named ? Thomas. I can't remember her name, we called her cocam. She was 89 years old. When she was little she remembers Paulene Johnson. She told stories that night, she drank and smoked. She started telling jokes that were sort of racey. I couldn't understand a word they were saying, but I got chased out of the room.

Winnipeg is one of the better places to grow up in and still keep in touch with your community. There are so many native people there.

Question: You consider yourself a contemporary storyteller. Where does that come from?

Answer: That comes from the fact that I tell stories in English. If I was a real storyteller, I would tell them in Cree. I would have been trained and tell them in Cree. Because I have been cut off from my language, I have been cut off from the

traditional stories. It is something you have to earn.

Question: Do you have any trouble working with the English language? Is the English language your own?

Answer: I know my way around it. Sometimes my thought patterns get crossed up in it. That just adds a little texture to the way word sentences. Sometimes editors don't like it and switch it around back to the previous way.

I got lucky in that my mother sent me to a school where I didn't have to float. High schools today, you can get very easily funneled into a program of education where you are not challenged. Where you don't have to work. When you find out you don't have to work, you don't. I got thrown into an environment where I didn't have that choice. I had to work. It was pretty stringent and heavy on English and math. I excelled in English.

I had really good English teachers. Even in public school, I had really good English teachers. I can honestly say that I knew what to do with a quotation mark. A lot of people didn't know. I knew how to string a sentence together. It's like any tool, before you can create the art you have to know how to use the tool. The language you use is just a tool.

Question: Part of this project is a section on your biography, a biography of you. What kind of things do people need to know about you to appreciate your writing or do they need to know anything? What would you put in a autobiography of yourself?

Answer: My first reaction to that is that it is more important what people want to know once they finish reading a piece of my writing. You can't predict that.

What would I want people to know? I am a father, a brother. I have straddled the line between the two cultures all my life. I have been able to

walk the tightrope pretty successfully. It has come in handy in some very practical ways. I used to travel in South Dakota, which is not known as tolerant place if you are a different color. Because I am lighter than the rest of my family, I would go in to pay for the gas, I would in to book a motel room and I was very practical. I have gone through racism from both sides. I am as hard on people who cut down Japanese and Vietnamese. Racism is racism.

I have experienced that kind of pain, that everybody has. I've been there. I'm 27 and I have seen a lot of things. What I am trying to say is that I know what I am trying to say. Not that I know what I am saying only that I'm trying to say. I don't know it all, but I know somethings. I'm not trying to give you a message and jam it down your throat. I'm trying to layer it into a story and use it to make a successful story.

The first thing I ever try to do is to create a story that if someone reads it, and finishes it, they can say Wow, Yeah! And when someone says, "What was it about? What was the theme?" and you reply, "I didn't thing about that. I just enjoyed the story." I am trying to be as subliminal as I can with any kind of message I put it there.

Question: Do you sit down and lay out conflict, internal conflict, external conflict?

Answer: Conflict is a hot item. The conflict between aboriginal storytelling techniques and European storytelling techniques are different. Western drama is based on conflict. If you have no conflict, you have no drama and without drama you don't have a story. Our stories don't utilize a lot of conflict. I haven't been trained in that art of storytelling and I think that I do use a lot of conflict in my stories. I know that structure. I have been to workshops and learnt that structure and I do use it. Three layers of conflict; inner conflict, interpersonal conflict and external conflict. I do use a lot of that

and I can't articulate the difference that well. I still don't have a clear enough understanding of the traditional storytelling techniques. The best I have heard it articulated to me so far is from David Moses. I wouldn't even begin to try and recreate what he said to me. But it sounded good.

Question: When I first told you about the project, I said that it was for metia writers. You said, "I don't necessarily identify myself as metia."

Answer: That's a weird thing. At one time I was metia, at one time I was Irish. I consider myself Cree because my mother is Cree. She considers herself as Cree because her mother is full blooded Cree. By the time you get down to me, I am 1/4 Cree. You are who your mother is naturally in society.

If you want to look at it a different way, I am metia, I'm Cree, I'm Jibway, I'm Assinboian, Irish, English, Scottish, French. I am a first generation mixed blood but there is a McNab in there, a Cree Dubois in there somewhere. It's just a question of identity. I don't have a clear sense of my identity. I know where I am right now. I know my past generations, but how do you label it. I have my medical metia membership card. Someday I will apply for my status, now that C31 is in place.

Question: One of the things that I am going to try to do with this particular publication is allow us to say who you are, who am I, regardless of what definitions are laid out there. I wasn't the least bit set back by your saying you weren't metia. In some ways, what you call yourself doesn't matter, it's what you represent and who you speak for.

Answer: The only reason why I say stuff like that is because divisions have been created, politically and it drives me up the wall. Several years ago we had The National Indian Brotherhood. There was status, non-status and metia. In the late '60's the government came along and said, "You guys want money?" Some said no, some said yeah.

What it came down to is that the only people who could get it were the ones who had a number. Suddenly the metia and the non-status separated from the rest and then the non-status and metia separated themselves. We used to be one people.