

Interview of: Alice Lee
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Question 1: Are you a poet? How do you define what you are as a writer? There's ways that the community defines you and there are ways that you define yourself. You said to me one time, just in conversation, "This is a play, but it's a series of poems because I am a poet you know." Right? How do you perceive yourself?

Answer: That's a difficult question because I think it's other people who have labelled me as a writer. I don't necessarily call myself a writer. I don't necessarily call myself a poet, or a playwright or a fiction writer. To me words are gifts and they are given and I feel really privileged that certain words have been given to me and I can then return this gift to other people. I think there are specific structures that are identified as a writer, or as a person who has been given these words, have had to fit myself into.

For example, I have taken different Cree writing classes at the University level and one class I took was fiction writing from Fred Wah and all year I wrote really long prose poems and I try to pass them off as fiction to him and he knew bloody well all I was doing was writing poetry or that's what he thought it was and he come up with the term "text" and I really liked that and I don't know if it's a new academic buzz for it or whatever, but he said at the beginning of the class, "There really is no structure. What you are working with is words and your working with the text." That allowed me, because I always felt really restricted by the existing structures that were there, that allowed me total freedom to experiment and do whatever I wanted. And so I did. I experimented with it. And I ended up having to hand in one particular piece for my mark for the year and I chose the piece called, "Cafe Talk".

I entered that piece in Graham's Short Short Story contest where it won a honourable mention.

Okay? But, where do I call it a prose poem? I think I sent it somewhere else and called it a prose poem and they published it as both and Fred actually saw it as a prose poem, because I got a -B in the class. He told me I did not fulfil the existing requirements with what was identified as fiction or

short story. In reality what I had written was a prose poem, so therefore, that's where I got the mark that I did.

So I really don't see myself, well I guess I see myself as a poet, because that's what "they" tell me I am. They will pick up a particular piece of work and say, "Well, this is a poem." or "they" will say, "This is a short story." or this is that and they will label, because I think that's the way the structure is right now. There are places to fit pieces of work into, therefore, they are fit into those places.

What I also found is that, as the person who has created it, is that I have some power in it, where I can say that this is a prose poem or this is a short short story.

With the play that I have done, it was actually a mistake because as part of National Book Festival Week, I was asked to do a reading with the Calgary Public Library and the irony is that they had two other people they had chosen to read as well. One of them was Mel Hertzke, who is the encyclopedia man, that's what I know him as. The other person was Owen Beatty, who is a historian I believe. So I saw myself as the token Indian and the token women. So they had this nice little thing wrote up about how I was going to bring the images of my past back to life, on the poster.

I thought, well, if I'm going to do this then they are really going to hear what it is like, they are going to hear about the high percentages of suicide in our community, they are going to hear about the high unemployment, they are going to hear about all those issues that effect our

lives, the poverty, etc., etc. What they wanted was the dancing proposement mentality and that what I call the real pastral scene with your village and your dancers and this and that.

This dialogue that I have taken, actually what I have done is taken prose poems and different short pieces of fiction and short stories that I have done and I have done the script. I didn't tell her I did it the Indian way which was in my head, right? It was all written and finished in my head. Fortunately it wasn't on paper so the time is drawing near and Amythest is saying, "Well if you want me to work with this script, then you are going to have to give it to me." And so I said I would give it to her on Monday and this was a Friday, so I think I spent two days, Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night, Sunday, even Sunday night writing this thing. I stayed up two days and nights and wrote this, right? So I actually had a script to present to her on the Monday, so that she could get together with her players, the actors and actresses. So, I got it to her and that's how we did it and I said basically this is a performance piece because in my own mind, that's what I thought it was. I don't know what performance piece means, I don't know the definition of that, if there is a set definition or not. I just knew that that was what I wanted to do.

I've always like to dress in character when I have done readings because I think it's really boring for people to just get up there and read out of a book. That's just my perception of it and so what I have always done in the past is I will dress up in character from one of my pieces. For example, I dressed up as a nun and I did some work on the whole issue of sexual abuse and the Catholic Presidential Schools. I dressed up in old wedding dresses when I have done my work on women's issues. I dressed up like a hooker once too. It was a great outfit.

But anyway, we did this as a performance piece for the Calgary Public Library and a women named Jean Paro was in the audience who was one of the

editors for the book writing circle, who really liked what I had done, who saw the potential for it to become a play. In her own mind, it was a play. Like I said, it was a series of prose poems strung together, just fit together, to present a story. To present the picture of how it really was like with native people. The picture that nobody wants to look at or acknowledge or that is presented as statistics so the really person isn't there anymore. It's just the statistics and numbers that are shown.

In this case they had to deal with real people or characters. She liked it and had actually put in a proposal to the Special Projects Committee with the University of Calgary to workshop it as a play. She phoned me up a few weeks later and said she had some money for me if I would like it. The University of Calgary has given you this much money and so that is how I ended up re-writing it. Basically it was two pieces because there was a whole part in it on Louis Riel and there was a part on my English professor, if you want to hear that story.

We did it again as part of native awareness, we did Glen Booth Theatre, and it was very well received by the audience. I actually acted in it. That's what was good about it. I really wanted to act and there was a character, an old women. So I said to the director, "I'm really interested in this part." So she made me read for the part and she told me she would give it to me if I dyed my hair black. So I went around with pitch black hair for about a month. It was great. I went through a whole personality change. I was really more outrageous than I normally am.

As a result of the performance of the Glen Booth Theatre, there was a couple of women, who sit on the board of directors of Minet Theatre, who saw the performance and liked it. They offered me a spot at the Campus Theatre and so we will be doing the play there in the Spring. We've got a three week run and two week rehearsal space. I won't be acting in this one because I want to focus on the writing. I'm almost afraid because

like I said, it was almost a mistake. I never did intend to write a play.

So that goes back to the whole idea of structure. For me it was a performance piece because that's how I could get away with presenting what I had come up with in terms of stringing the prose poems together and showing those little pictures of what the issues are and what people's lives are and that other people would perceive it as a play and that they could call it a play. So, now it's a play. But to me it's still words that were given to me in the form of, if you want to call it, prose poems. I just don't know. I like what Fred Mah said about text and words. I acknowledge that they are gifts and that they are something that is given to me.

Also with the play, I introduced two spirit character, and I really struggled trying to find dialogue for them. What I did is just go lay down and take a rest. Like I said, I did this in a couple days and a couple of nights. It was the same thing when I rewrote it to do it at the Glen Booth. I just lay down and actually dreamed the dialogue. The words were given to me in a dream and I always keep a pen and paper by my bed because a lot of my writing comes from that place of sleep. I just got up and wrote it down. When I edited it, I felt very strongly about not touching the dream dialogue and the way it was presented worked out fine. It didn't need to be edited at all because they were given words from, I don't want to say where they are from, they were given to me.

Question 2: Some people call you a poet. Now people are going to call you a playwright, they'll have called you an actress. When you go to perform this play, are they going to require you to edit and are you going to have pressure to reform your play around the structure that drama or plays usually take? or already exist?

Answer: That's an interesting questions. I think the opportunity is... it is going to be labelled. This play will be labelled native theatre as I

have been labelled a native writer. The conclusion I have come to, and I have really struggled over this, is that I have no control over what people out there say and do and how they define me and what slot they put me into. I don't have any control over that. When I am called a native writer, like people will say, well Alice Lee, she is a native writer. Part of my cultural background is native, that's part of who I am. That's a very important part of who I am as a writer because like I said, words are a gift and they are given to me.

I am also a writer. I have spent over 10 years taking classes at the Saskatchewan Summer School of the Arts from writers like Edna Alfred, or Gertrude Storey, Paulette Gyels, who is Governor-General award winner, Reg Sylvester, who is a writer from Edmonton, Alberta, Garry Highland is a poet. Those are just some of the people I have had the opportunity to study with at the summer school. What they shared with me is their knowledge of the craft. It is a craft. It is something that I have spent hours and hours trying to perfect, trying to present in such a way that I think will meet the existing standards, but also be presenting in such a way that it was given to me. I think that is where the Indian comes into it, that cultural component comes into it.

So when it comes to someone okay, a play is, and then the definition of what a play is. Well, this play never started out that way. This play started out with me telling someone I had done it, when I had done it in my head, so it was done in a structure that probably doesn't exist because it is just there in my mind. It was done in such a way that words were given in terms of the dialogue so I wasn't looking at presenting dialogue in a certain way that it has to be presented in plays. I have never taken a playwriting class. I have probably seen two or three plays and read several when I was working on this so I could get an idea of how to present it.

I think, because it is going to be labelled an Indian play, the opportunity is there to define maybe what an Indian play is or an opportunity to redefine theatre because my concept of theatre may not necessarily be the concept that exists and that is defined.

I'll give you an example. Alberta theatre projects did ??? Sisters a couple of years ago and a friend of mine wanted a part in that play. I had a real fit because I heard they were just bringing the actresses from the East and they weren't auditioning ones from the West so I made a big scene and harassed other theatre projects to the point where they finally agreed to audition me.

Now, I have no theatre experience, right? So, I had made a point of saying I was going to bring two of my friends along for this audition as well and they agreed to that. What we were told was that we were to do a three minute traditional piece and a three minute contemporary piece. So, all week we each went out and one woman wrote her own contemporary piece and another woman had just picked a play. My friend and I had just picked a play by George Rygo, which is "Sunrise on Sarah". I memorized this really grosse piece where her father got caught up in farm machinery. A friend of mine did a piece from, "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" which is also a George Rygo play.

For the traditional piece, we all looked at each other and said, "Traditional Indian Grandmother." So all week we are doing these little improvs or minets of what a traditional Indian grandmother would do. It was getting towards the end of the week and I said, "You know you guys, I don't think this is right." I just had a feeling that that wasn't what traditional was, so I phoned up the secretary. She said, "Simple. Traditional is Shakespeare." I said, "Who, She Shakespeare?" No, like Romeo and Juliet.

The night before the audition, I am up until midnight memorizing Romeo and Juliet. Then I thought I would be really smart and I went out

and rented the video. The scene that they wanted us to do is where she takes this poison. When they did this video, they cut that scene right out. I watched the whole video, trying to watch this actress doing it so I would know how to do. It was really funny.

But that just go to show, what we thought was traditional was far from what they thought as traditional. So I am sure what will happen is that the reviewers will apply the existing definition of a play and theatre on this particular piece. I don't have any control over that because that's what they are going to do. I will probably fail to meet what their definition is. For me as a women who is part native and for the way the play began, I don't know that you can apply a standard to that.

Just recently I went to a writer's festival in Oklahoma City. It was a festival of North American writers. What I came away with from there was that there is a definite native voice that is emerging and it is a native voice. It is not a non-native voice, it is a native voice. What totally blew me away is that I listened to many readers and I would hear images that I always thought were just mine. I thought those were my images. That's what I work with in my work. Those are the images that are given to me.

Well, if they are given to me, then why shouldn't they be given to other native people, as well, to work with. I would hear full sentences that were my sentences, that I spent hours and hours constructing in a certain way because the words were given. Then I had to set them up in a certain way that meet the existing "literary" standards. I just came away from there stunned because what I heard was my voice, but also an echo and an echo and an echo. I don't know if that makes sense. This is my voice, but it also belongs to this group of people, which is where I am from. That was reassuring and it was validating, because I spent a number of years sitting in creative writing classes at the University having non-native writers say to me,

"I don't understand what you mean, I don't understand what you are trying to say." I had one woman, in particular, say, "Well, I see a little bit of anthropology and sociology and psychology but Alice, I really don't understand what you're saying."

It has always been really frustrating to sit in that environment and to attempt to write. Attempt to learn their way of writing. Take their way of writing and try to fit my words into that structure and it hasn't always happened. What has happened is that a piece of work has emerged and then "they" will label it. So I simply work with the words that are given and if "they" choose to label it as a poem, as a piece of fiction, or as a play. It really isn't a play. It's a group of prose poems strung together. It has become a play. I think that with all the jonners that are there, as a writer, I can say to them that this is what this is. Who are they to say it isn't because it can be a poem or it can be this, it can be that. When I write a story, I treat each sentence as though it were a line from a poem.

You could take one of my short stories, and say that this is very long, long poem. Different people with their different views, have said that I've got this powerful, poetic, prosy style. There are many things that are said, so I just present the words. I have identified standards for myself and I try to meet those standards. I know I can write according to their literary standard because I have proven that. My work is being used in Universities as a result of writing The Circle of Bees and in women's study classes, it is being used in English classes. One of the comments that was made to me at a conference in Edmonton was the simplicity of my words. I found that really interesting that they liked the simplicity of the language. Sometimes there are gaps. Sometimes I struggle with what I want to say and I know that is because I don't know my own language which is Cree. I know that there is a particular emotion or feeling and that there are no words to express that in English. I know,

inside of myself, that if I knew Cree those words would be there for me. It's like it's on the tip of my tongue or it's somewhere in the back of my skull and I search and search and it is just about there but it's not there. One of the things I am going to do about that is that I will take Cree lessons in the Fall. I will learn my own language. I am quite confident that those words are there for me in that particular language because they don't exist in the English language.

Question 3: In some ways then Native literature is binding and you're being slotted into certain fields but in another way it's a space of freedom in that you can define and write the way you want to write and that once we can begin to define our own literature, our own joggers, our own way of looking at literature, you'll have all the freedom in the world. Do you see it that way?

Answer: I think so. I think what I'm doing right now is taking that freedom, at the risk of getting certain marks in English classes because I know I will never get an A. It's always a -B or a B+ because I am not sticking exacting to what is their ...; I think what I have done is allow myself that freedom from the time I started to write. I've always played with that. Because I don't have any other structure to write in, I have had to look at the model of existing structure that is there. Just recently, I have discovered that there is a distinctive native voice, as a result of the conference in Oklahoma. I know that there is a place for me then, where I will fit in, because I have never fit in, I have not been allowed to fit in these University classes because I have been restricted to word usage. For example, I have been told, "You can't use the word, "power" or you can't use the word "love" because those are loaded words." What does that mean, loaded words? Why can't I use the word "power"? One thing I found with native people, as part of the audience, is that they are very receptive. I can read a piece of work, and nobody questions it, they simply accept it. They understand what I mean. Whereas in a class of

non-native people and I am the only person of native ancestry there, the dialogue that I have encounter is, "What do you mean by that? I don't understand what you mean. What are saying, what are you talking about?" So I have always really struggled and been really frustrated because I know what I know and I really struggle at attempting to communicate that to them. So that again, I guess you look at audiences. It gets confusing. There are existing standards and there are standards that are emerging out of our own native voice. Native writers are finding their voices. We are now just getting published. In the past we have had non-native writers write for us, write in the native voice. My experience with that is that there are some people who get it, they get it. I would actually think that that was a native person talking because they have been able to cross that cultural barrier and know what it is like and be able to communicate that in there writing. Those writers are few and far between.

What happens with a lot of the other writers is that there is a distortion that occurs because they don't get it. So it is communicated as a distorted voice and that is not what the native voice is, it is not a distorted voice. I feel very strongly about this, the whole idea of voice appropriation. I would not attempt to write as a black woman. I would not attempt to write as a Jewish woman. I would not attempt to think that I would even begin to imagine what it was like to be black and yet there are those writers out there who think that. That is their argument, in terms of imagination. For example, Darlene Barry-Quaye who wrote the book, "Boneberg" which won major awards. Her argument was that there is freedom of imagination. She can imagine what it is like. I don't think anybody can ever imagine what it is like. I don't think they can. I don't think they have any right to be appropriating that voice in their imagination when there are a lot of native writers around to tell the real story, to tell the way it really is so that no distortion occurs.

Question 4: Who do you write for? Who is your audience?

Answer: That's a difficult question.

I write 1) because the words are given. I write for the people who will go out and buy the books. I write for the people who are interested enough to pick it up and read it. I don't think audience when I am writing a piece of work. The words are there, they are given. They will reach who they are to reach.

Question 5: Tell me about what you bring to your writing as a person, your history, your background. What's important for your audience to know about you to appreciate your writing?

Answer: That's a loaded question.

I don't know ... you see I guess I would look at that from as a reader. When I read someone's work. I don't need to know who they are, where they were born, where they come from. What I take from the work is the basic truths that are in that work. That's their gift to me, basic truths in life. I will come away from a good book and I will have an insight that I didn't have before. I will have a little piece of knowledge about life that I never had before. I will look at things differently and I will be more careful in what I say to someone and how I perceive someone or something. I will not be as judgmental or whatever, because that's what that piece of writing has given me. I would like to think it has made me better understanding of a situation or a person. So when readers look at my work, I don't know that it is important for them to know that Alice Lee is 34 years old. I don't think they think that, that this is a woman who was raised in a family of 8 children, whose mother was Cree and French or where the father was English. Those details of my life are unimportant to the reader. What is important is the message there in the words.

Growing up in a small community, where there was a lot of racism, I think has really added to my

work. I know what racism is from both sides. I know what it is like to go to school and be called an Indian because my mother is part Indian. I know what it is like to go out to the reserve and stand at the door and be afraid to walk in because I never knew if I was welcome or not because I would hear "monas", which is white person. I would know they were talking about me.

So, I know what racism is and I think that knowledge, I would like to think that that knowledge, is reflected in some of the pieces. If I can communicate that pain of experiencing racism to other people, if there is some way they can recognize the trauma that children go through as the result of racism, then that's what I want them to take note of the writing. I don't want any credit. I don't take any credit for the words because like I said before, they are given to me and I therefore give them back. That understanding is given to me and I therefore have a responsibility to give it back. And I do feel a real responsibility to my readers, because some of my subject areas are tough. Some of them are very difficult. One of the words that I'm really getting tired of hearing is, "You're work is so intense. Can't you write something lighter." If my life would have been lighter, then I could write comedy. I would love to write a good comedy and instead I write all these dark things about life. There is a real darkness there. As well as the darkness, there is a lightness, in that I try to work hard with that issue in the play that I wrote, is the lightness and darkness in people. There is good and there is bad and you acknowledge the bad and you know that it exist and you take the good from it. You always learn. There were really negative experiences in terms of growing up and being ostercized at school because 1) we were part Indian 2) we were very poor, to try to take the positive from that.

Question 6: This would be a good time to tell us about Cafe Talk.

Answer: A piece that I did for out of place. Yeah, the small town that I grew up in, and I won't mention

it because I'm sure the town council will try to sue me, village council. They had a town toilet in this woman's yard, I mean it was an outdoor toilet, this was in the early '60's. It was a beautiful toilet because it was real classy, it was painted and it had a triangle in the door. It was painted green and white and they had wallpaper on the inside and two seats. They had real toilet paper, a cadillac of town toilets.

My sister and I would always go to this town toilet. We would get chased out. It was in this woman's yard and she was almost the guardian of the town toilet. She kept a real close eye on it. She used to chase us out of there everytime we went in because in this small town, they always had toilets over by the CN tracks and those were the toilets the Indians were supposed to use from the surrounding reserves. The Indians were not supposed to use the town toilet.

I will never forget sneaking in there, admiring it, and being chased out of it and not being allowed to use it. Now, in retrospect, what I see is a distinct parallel to what happened in the U.S. with black people. That whole issue of racism. The fact that they were a different color of people. They were excluded from certain things. Native people are a different color of people and we were excluded from certain things, including the town toilet.

I carried that with me in my head for a long time and when I did the story, "Cafe Talk", I thought it would be a good way to bring that out. Also, I used John Diefenbaker. I couldn't believe that man. I believe he was the prime minister responsible for getting Indian people to vote in this country. They didn't get it until 1960. It was in the early 1960's that they did finally get to vote. I found irony in that we were allowed to vote but were not allowed to use the town toilet. Diefenbaker, when he died, he had to have his body taken across country by train. I was living in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan at the time. I wanted to go and I never went because I thought who wants to go and look at this dead

Diefenbaker, right? What happened was that a man in the crowd got so upset that he actually had a heart attack and died, but that's another story.

I used Diefenbaker in there because I know he was the man that got the Indian people to vote and they thought it would change things. Getting the votes didn't change a whole lot of things if you look at the situation the native people are in today. It really didn't change a lot. That's where that story came from.

Question 7: Can I ask you about a few of your pieces now? Can I ask you about "Grandmother's Debts"

Answer: Yes, that's an interesting piece.

The Saskatoon Public Library had a contest. It was a poetry contest where you went to the library. You had 1/2 hour. They gave you a page out of the dictionary. They circled a word in the dictionary and you had to write a poem from that word.

I was working for Statistics Canada at the time, it was 1986, the end of census. I was at a meeting in Prince Albert and I knew that if I went back to Saskatoon and wrote this poem, I would win the contest. I knew that. Right? I knew that if I could get back to Saskatoon to this contest, I would win the contest.

So, I made it back to Saskatoon. I went in, I can't remember what my word was. I don't even know if it was dance. I had this word, maybe it was dance, so I furiously wrote away for 1/2 hour and I won the contest. I got first prize.

So, that how that poem became to be. I wrote it there. I put it away for a number of years, took it out, took a good look at it and edited it. That's where that poem can from.

I spent a lot of time with my grandmother when I was small. I think, part of that poem, what comes in the racism and what native women have to deal with. It's bad enough being a woman in

society with a stigma attached to that and the sexism, etc., etc., but to be a woman of color, there is a double whammy there. I think that where the lines say, "I thought if only I could have been a white woman, not a metia woman, perhaps then he would have asked me to dance." Because a woman of color is always aware that she is a woman of color. Society doesn't let her forget.

I like the idea of the knees for the grandmother, she says, "I have very nice knees, my girl." Despite the fact that she was looked at as a woman of color, she knows she is a woman, she knows she is attractive, she knows a beautiful woman, and nobody can take that away, no matter what color she is.

It's one of my favorites.

Question: When I look through your work, I see, and you know that I have a limited background in your writing. I am educating myself. You write about women's issues, tender issues. You cross gender and cultural issues. Do you want to talk a bit about the themes in your work?

Answer: It always go back to what I initially said, in terms of being a writer in that the words are given. The themes, I don't sit down and think that I have to write a poem about racism, or I have to write a poem about this or that. At times I do, because I think it is a way of showing, moving away from the "Dances with Wolves" mentality about native culture. That it's all this and it all that and that everything is fine. It's not fine.

Often I will work with the themes of suicide. We have all lost someone to suicide, all of us have. We have the highest statistics for suicide in this country, as native people.

The issue of alcoholism. We have all experienced that in our backgrounds. It's there. It ties into that cycle of poverty that our people have lived. They haven't opportunities for education.

Sometimes those themes will arise from the situations and then the words will be there to talk about those situations.

People will say, "Well, are you a feminist because you write about women's issues." I don't know what feminism means. I think that that whole term has been stretched and pulled out of shape. I like to think what I am is more of a humanist or egalitarian. I want women to have equal rights. If I am going to do a job that a man is doing, and I am doing the same work he is then I want to get the same pay. I want to have that recognition. Look at women, women like native people, do not have a vote in this country or a voice. I don't know, I am not a historian and I am not good at dates, but they did get it before native people but it wasn't until...I mean there was the whole suffer-jet movement and all that, everything that they did that made it possible for women to get to vote.

So, when people say, "Are you a feminist? Are you this or are you that?" I guess I am a humanist and whether it is equal rights for woman or equal rights for people of color, that's how I like to look at myself.

Question: When you were talking about your clothes this morning; Hostage. Sometimes the sources for your poems and the inspiration for your poems come from interesting events.

Answer: Often it is real life. Someone will say it is interesting. What I have used their structures, like fiction, to speak our truths, or my truths. I shouldn't say our. I can only speak for myself. I have used their structures to speak my truths. With the Hostage poem, I was listening to the radio. I was in Saskatoon. The radio announcer came out with a line, "The body found three days ago on the north side of the city has been positively identified as the remains of a woman reported missing several years ago. However, authorities are have difficulty locating next of kin. Her name will not be released."

It was like an echo in my head. I heard, "Her name will not be released" and I was really angry because I thought this was a woman who was murdered, this was a person who had a family. This was a woman who possibly had children. She had a life.

What made me so angry was that the radio announcer had turned her into a little, into remains. There was nothing there. There was remains. I was so angry. It was really bizarre. What came to my head is that why doesn't someone claim this woman's body so that her name can be released. You know how sometimes you think something, and you kind of shake your head, and you think, "Oh my God. How could you really think something so bizarre or so outrageous because you could claim her body and then her name will be released."

The poem came from that. That was a real life. That was a life and the media turned it into a death. It put me into a rage, it sent me into a rage. I realized that women are held hostage in many ways. There are women who sit in their kitchens and hear things like that. Really they are hostage to their kitchens, to their houses.

Sometimes something will happen, or I will hear something and that that's where the piece comes from. Again, the words are given, to be able to communicate that, to articulate that.

Question: Do you want to talk a little about the structure of your writing, or your style?

Answer: One of the styles I use is fragmented-sentences. I think it is just part of who I am as a person. One of the criticism I would get from instructors, writing instructors, was that I would get my work back with big red letters saying "Fragmented Sentences. You can't do this." or "Fragmented Sentences?" and yet I persisted to continue to write in fragmented sentences. Interesting enough I am now recognized for writing in fragmented sentences. That's become my voice and I think it has a lot

to do with who I am as a person because I am part Indian and because I am part white, I have always felt fragmented because I have pieces of each culture. It's like the Indian-ness, I will have little pieces of knowing that I can put and start to make a whole picture with. There is so much missing. I think I have come to accept that this is a life-long process, that these pieces of knowing are something that are going to accumulate in our lifetime. I may never see the whole picture. Just the fragments are there.

I guess I have always tried to explain the fragmentation as ... I think it has a lot to do with denial of culture, as well. It was always such a bad thing to be Indian.

I can remember one incident where my mother got company and she hid her barnet. She said there were white people coming, as if it was something to be ashamed of. Maybe it had to do with that stigma attached to being native, as well. There were certain pieces I could show, and certain pieces I had to hide.

I find it ironic that my voice is a fragmented voice, with the writing. It's still a whole voice.

Question: Does writing come easy to you?

Answer: No. Writing, I think what people have to realize, and other writers realize, that writing is very hard work. It is many, many hours. A lot of things, and it's not the actual writing, I will work with something in my head for a long time. If I'm laying awake at night, I will be thinking of something and actually writing it in my head or if I'm sitting on a bus or a train or in a car, I will be thinking of things; the thoughts are there. That's part of the process in writing it.

It is a tremendous amount of work. It takes a tremendous amount of energy.

Question: Do you get an idea and come out with an initial draft and then edit? What process do you use?

Answer: Actually, just talking about the fragmented sentences, one of the process would be when I write now, I will often take a piece of paper and I will write the word fragment and underline it. Then I will start to write images, words, dialogue, senses. From that piece will emerge, the words will be given to me and I will begin to write simple words, one word or two words. I will have a whole page of fragments. From that page, I will be given the words to put those fragments together. That's how the piece will emerge.

I found myself doing that a lot this year. That is the structure that I use when I'm writing. It's a lot of work.

Another thing, I guess an analog for it is, when I am working with the words, I think of bead work, I think of watching my grandmother do bead work. I think of watching my mother do bead work. The hours and hours that they spent and how careful they were in their choose of the color of bead and the pattern they used, and the flowers. The bead work flowers, and the pictures that emerged. I guess, in the back of my head, an analog would be is that I wrote a couple of words in beads and how they are presented to the reader is that sometimes a dull color is sometimes a very bright color and it is how they are presented on a page. That's always in the back of my mind.