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Interviews

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Interviews

Abstract

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MICHAEL JACKLIN

Interview with Yvonne Johnson

Yvonne Johnson, great-great granddaughter of Plains Cree chief, Big Bear, is the co-author, with Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe, of *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998). Their book tells of how Johnson came to be the only First Nations woman in Canada serving a 'life twenty-five' sentence for first degree murder. It also narrates Johnson's experiences of repeated sexual abuse, inflicted on her by family members and strangers, beginning when she was two years old. As Johnson had been born with a cleft palate, she was unable to communicate to others her suffering and so the abuse continued for years.

Rudy Wiebe's interest in and engagement with the narratives surrounding Big Bear have been integral to much of his writing life. In 1973, he won the Governor-General's Award for fiction for his novel, *The Temptations of Bear*, although, as Wiebe reminds us in the following interview, Big Bear's legacy was already there in his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. In 1992, when he received a letter from Johnson from the Prison for Women in Kingston Ontario saying she was a descendant of Big Bear and that she wished to clear his name, recover his medicine bundle and find her lost family, Wiebe responded immediately. They arranged a meeting and from this their collaboration began. Yvonne Johnson's life narrative, Wiebe was convinced, was a story that desperately needed to be told. As he says in the interview, it is crucial that a wide readership be given the chance to understand how and why these events have happened: what she has done and what was done to her.

The experiences of Yvonne Johnson and her family, as told in *Stolen Life*, are those that Big Bear feared his people would face: with European-Canadian expansion across the prairies the Cree were dispossessed of their land and their food, forced to give up cultural practices and, in residential schools, to renounce their language and spiritual beliefs. The Johnson family story — her mother is Cree and her father was an American of Norwegian heritage — includes the residential schooling of her mother; the racial taunts and prejudice experienced by Yvonne and her siblings; the death in police custody of an older brother; Yvonne's alcohol dependency and abuse; and the prolonged sexual abuse to which she was subjected. For Yvonne Johnson, events were to culminate in a night of excessive drinking when she and three others tied, beat, sexually assaulted with a stool leg, and strangled with telephone cord Leonard Skwarok, a man they barely knew but suspected, without any evidence, to be a sexual abuser and, for Johnson especially, a threat to her own young children. For her role in Skwarok's death, Johnson was found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment with

no eligibility for parole for at least twenty-five years, the most severe sentence possible in the Canadian criminal justice system.

Stolen Life was one of the first books I read for my PhD research into collaborative Indigenous life writing in Canada and Australia. I found it a confronting, brutal, and painful reading experience. The experiences that Johnson narrates — the abuse inflicted upon her, and the violence that she participated in — are horrible to conceive. Yet I recognised that the publication of Johnson's story was a significant event in Canadian literature, in First Nations writing, and in collaborative life writing. *Stolen Life* won the Edmonton Book Prize; the Saskatchewan Book Award; the Writers' Guild of Alberta Award for non-fiction; and the \$10,000 Viacom Canada Writers' Trust Non-Fiction Award. It was also a finalist for the Governor-General's Award for non-fiction. In terms of collaborative life writing, the book raises issues of Indigenous narrative and authorship; voice and subjectivity; narrative strategies and editorial control; and relationships of power and vulnerability. It was a book that demanded serious critical consideration and engagement.

In 2002, I was fortunate to receive a travel grant from the Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, and a study grant from Deakin University, that allowed me to travel across Canada to interview Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in collaborative life writing. Prior to departure, I spent some months establishing contact with writers and, in some cases, with family members of writers. Contacting Wiebe was straightforward; however, reaching Johnson was more difficult. My initial letter to Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (the correctional facility where Johnson was held after her transfer from the Prison for Women in Kingston, as narrated in *Stolen Life*) was returned, marked 'No longer at this institution.' I then learned from Wiebe that Johnson had been again transferred, this time to the Edmonton Institute for Women and so I wrote to her there. I received no written reply, but a few weeks before my departure from Australia a woman phoned telling me that she had spoken with Yvonne and that she agreed to be interviewed. With that verbal assurance, I made arrangements to visit the women's prison in Edmonton.

I met with Yvonne Johnson at the Edmonton Institute for Women on the 8th of August, 2002. The next day I interviewed Rudy Wiebe at his home. The following are edited versions of our tape-recorded interviews.

MJ: *Let's begin with how the book really began. You were at Kingston and you saw on the bookshelf a copy of The Temptations of Big Bear.*

YJ: Well, it's not the first time I'd seen a copy of *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Not many people have written about Big Bear. The first time I saw it I was seventeen or eighteen. I lived in Uranium City, Saskatchewan. I saw it and I didn't want to touch it, because being part of the AIM movement back

in the '70s, we were trying to fight against the exploitation of Natives and Native culture by non-Native people. Like coming up with Pochahontas and things like that that wasn't real but was Hollywood. So I saw it and I thought, no, this wasn't written by a Native person. In the '70s we didn't have too many Native writers at all. So when I hit Kingston I felt like everything that I was was being questioned at the time — my Nativeness, being of the Cree Nation, being a descendant of Big Bear, which was proven when I got my treaty status. That's how I got re-instated as an Indian under the Indian Act in Canada. I shouldn't have to explain any of this but a lot of times Native people say, 'Explain yourself. Tell me who your family is. Tell me who your ancestry is'. A lot of that was through persecution of the government, that descendants of Big Bear were considered outlaws. So after Big Bear's death, we went into hiding. That's why I said that people were sent to the four winds. We didn't have a Reserve. So we lost our Band and wound up going into other people's Bands. So our whole family and bloodline got all mixed up and confused. A lot went to Montana so I didn't know. I was trying to find out who Yvonne Johnson was. I was searching for who Yvonne Johnson was, in all degrees: psychological, emotional, physical. Who am I? Where am I from? What am I for? I'm just here in prison, sentenced almost to death — a life imprisonment with no possible parole for twenty-five years. You start questioning who you are, the reality of your existence and why you're supposed to be.

Family communication broke down because I was shipped to the only federal prison in Canada for women, which is like over a 1,000 miles away from my people, who couldn't sometimes afford to drive from the Reserve to town which was thirty, forty miles. So, I was isolated and shunned from my family. I had to have something within myself as a human being to carry on, and I thought: identity, culture, base, find out who I am. I had no way of doing that. When I came out of the office, I saw that book, *The Temptations of Big Bear* on the shelves and just out of total defiance, and being the only book that there was, I thought, okay, I'll read this whiteman's book. You know, I'll see what he's got to say. When I read it, it was the first time ever that anybody wrote about Native people giving them a fair shake, the closest thing to a fair shake in history, or writing things. I knew nothing about compiling a book. I knew nothing... I didn't even realise that this is fiction. *Big Bear* is fiction. When I read it, he had times, dates, places and events. I didn't realise at that time that he most likely, and I'm just speaking out of turn here, he most likely went to the archives, pulled up this data out of the archives, and then that's where it became fiction because then he wrote his own depiction about it. I appreciated the way he wrote about Native people because we are proud, we are spiritual. We do have dignity. I liked the way that he portrayed my ancestry, and I kind of

laughed thinking how stubborn I was for not reading this book back in the '70s. I looked at the book and I still remember the picture that was on the book. Rudy kind of looked like an old hippie, eh, and I thought, I could get along with this guy! So I was hanging out at the library and I was reading Carl Jung. I got talking to the librarian there and I started reading a book, *Who's Who*, and I says, 'How would you get a hold of an author who wrote a book?' And she says, 'Who are you trying to get a hold of?' And I says, 'I don't know, this guy if he's still alive or whatever', I says, 'I'd like to get a hold of this Rudy Wiebe'. So, she went to a book that she had in her office and she goes, 'Try writing to this publisher, or whoever published the book'. So, I did and I felt so shunned as a human being that when I wrote him, I think that's where the spirit came through.

There's more to this collaboration between me and Rudy than the collaboration itself. To me, it was a meant-to-be, because of who Rudy was, and how he portrayed and understood Big Bear, who I was as a descendant of Big Bear, that I could see it as a spiritual thing, more than anything else. That's just the kind of person I am. I try to deal with people on a spirit level, not on a conscious business level, because I figure if we deal with each other on a spirit level, how can you disrespect that? That's the way that I see it. All the rest is unimportant if you have that value base, to be respectful of individual spirits, in that we're all spirits of the Creator, and nothing happens for nothing. Because can you tell me, in your lifetime, how someone like me and Rudy would even connect, much less get along, much less help each other? So it had to have been is the way that I see it, the way that I want to see it. That's the trust that I have there, knowing that there's spirits and ancestries that are before me, that are looking after me, and that this somehow has to be a must-be. So I wrote a letter and I thought, 'Well, I'm going to scare him off. If I don't scare him off that says a lot'.

So I wrote the letter and I explained who I was. I explained that I was in prison because so many people are in denial to even admit that they are in prison. I had nothing to hide. As they say when they read you your rights, 'You have nothing to gain. You have nothing to lose'. That's the way it is. So, I wrote him and I also wrote Hugh Dempsey. He wrote a book on Big Bear. Hugh Dempsey never wrote me back. He never got in contact with me at all in any way, shape or form. I think some of that had to do with ... he was married to a descendant of Big Bear and those descendants of Big Bear that are State-side and the ones that are in Canada, that chain got broken with Big Bear and it hasn't ever been mended. So they are kind of segregated by this border which shouldn't be but which seems to happen in my family. So Hugh Dempsey didn't write me back or anything. I didn't expect Rudy to write me back. Like, who would write me? Who would?

I wouldn't want to write someone in prison and I used to have penpals. You're a forgot person when you're in prison. I saw them duck out on me as soon as I got my sentence. Everybody ducked out on me. My family had to look at me almost as being dead because I wasn't going to be part of their life for that twenty-five years. It's just the human reaction, for lack of being able to do anything else, and you have to come to a conscious realisation of that while you're in prison or it's going to kill you. You just got to let it go too; but I try not to let it all go or otherwise I'd be totally institutionalised and never worth being let out. So I have to hold onto a little something, but reality hits home hard, really hard. So I wrote this letter and I waited and waited and waited. I didn't hear nothing. I forgot about it.

I tried to write a family genealogy on the wall. I had a big piece of paper on the wall and at the top, according to Rudy's book, I put Black Powder. According to that, then I put Big Bear, then I realised, 'Well, who's after that?' There was a big hole in my family tree; and I asked, 'How am I going to fill this? How am I going to figure this out?' Indian Affairs have a census and they wouldn't even tell me who my family was. Yet they'll give me my treaty card, saying that because of birthright I am an Indian, but they won't tell me how that is. So I tried to ask my mother and that was a big thing. But my Mom since then has told me that Big Bear had a son and that son wound up having a baby with the daughter of the Hudson Bay Company Store Operator, at that Frog Lake massacre. So he had my grandfather, John Bear. Then John Bear married into my grandmother's reserve, which was Baptiste. When I wrote Rudy, I thought he was going to send his records and files. That's what I wanted. I tried to write one archive in Toronto and they sent me a picture of another chief that wasn't even my grandfather. So I didn't trust them, and this was a Native organisation, sending me a picture of Poundmaker. So, I thought, 'he did this research, he did this book, he's got all that information'. All I want to do is to find out who my ancestry is, essentially. I guess I never wrote precisely. I did write about trying to bring my family ancestry together. First, he wrote me back. That surprised me. When I read the letter, he said, 'I don't think I can get you to understand how much Big Bear has meant to me in my life'. Big Bear was, I think, the first book that Rudy had written to get himself educated and it won the Governor General's award. That created a lot of jealousy, a whiteman writing about Native people in such a way that he actually went against the odds, or the norms; and to me that meant a lot, that he as a human being would do that and that people would be spiteful and jealous of that fact. So that spoke to me a lot about his character as a human being too. That just nobody wrote about Big Bear. According to the government he was dead and should stay that way. Rudy

never let him completely disappear in records and archives though, like a dead ghost. He told me that he was born and raised on the Forks, where my great-grandfather was born, in the Mennonite community. Nobody ever spoke about the Native community, but he did. Even today, I assume, the Mennonite community tells him, 'Write about Mennonites. Don't write about Indians no more'. But he still is in there. He too has a lot of gain from that, as the businessman and the professional person that he is. I don't want to believe that there is any hocus-pocus happening there. I refuse to believe that, because I believe in the ultimate trust in him. Then it's not for me to say. Like I said, it's a spiritual thing and that's where I leave it at the best of times. I didn't write the book for any form of prestige, any form of literature, any placement, nothing like that.

MJ: *Okay, well maybe you could talk about why you did write the book then.*

YJ: It was like a last will and testament. It was my final statement before I committed suicide. That was my goal. People claim that I wrote it to profit off crime. Baloney! Do you think that I would have shamed myself to such a degree, that I would have been so honest? Maybe other people who supposedly assumingly write for profit after their crime, glamorise it and are in denial and they lie. Nowhere in here have I tried to covercoat anything. That was part of having the death wish. I'm not going to beat around the bush. What lies on the spirit of Yvonne Johnson is what I'm going to get off. When I commit suicide, that is like my last confession. I don't feel like I'm your Charles Manson, or I'm your Homolka or your Bernardo, and a lot of it had to go back to my case. A lot of it had to do with circumstances throughout history that were done to the Native people. Even Rudy himself said that they imprisoned Big Bear and they let him out long enough to die. They served their purpose. They used their system to kill my ancestry. Who cares about the real, real truth or the reality when it comes to a system? Native people didn't hold court of laws that way. In Native way it was a bigger capital punishment to lie than anything else. It's like I said about friendship. It's the same thing about lies. If you are called up in front of the elders, if you are caught in a lie once, they just write you right off. You go and you explain what happened. You explain your mind, your body, your spirit for what it is. Then explain what happened. They say, 'Either kill me or you help me'. But the whiteman's system ain't set up like that. I was no first degree killer. I did not do what they said I did. Yet I knew what I did was bad enough; but that's something that I have to wear. What would my existence be in this world if I let history, or if I let prison record, or if I let court documentation, that somebody can pull out and write their own book about? I thought no. I've seen dead body after dead body being carried out of that prison and everybody's saying, 'Why,

why, why, why why?’ Inquiries into these women’s deaths. The cover up of systematic abuse done to the Native culture, through the system itself. Culture clashes. I wanted to have the last say if I was going to take my own life. I wanted the world to know even the confusion. Because in my mind ... it’s not confused in my mind. It’s confused when I try to portray it to the world that accepts their own reality and their own system. They say, ‘We’re normal, you’re not’. What is normal? What’s classified as normal? That’s why I was very, very truthful because I thought if I die and I stand before the Creator, at least I can say that I’ve tried. I thought when I die I want it printed on my headstone... if someone stands over me trying to snivel around and weenie around and cry because I’m dead, and has the audacity to say, ‘why?’ I says I’ll have it printed on my headstone, ‘Read the book, stupid’.

MJ: *It was then that you began writing the journals, the diaries.*

YJ: No, I was writing those when I was thinking about killing myself.

MJ: *Yeah, that’s what I mean, when you say that it’s your last will and testament, that’s what you’re talking about.*

YJ: Yeah, I had no intention of writing a book before I met Rudy, but I did have the intention of having it written down. So I had this already going. That’s why I say it’s a spiritual thing. This is my quest. This is my way of giving some form of understanding back to the world. I speak for Big Bear. I try to. I speak for every silent abused woman, for everybody that has suffered what I have suffered, that has the inability because of shame or because of society’s retardation, and that’s what I call it, retardation. I’m not the retarded one. It’s just that they don’t accept me. They have not accepted my family. We’re hard to kill. So, I wrote a book. I was given an opportunity and a chance to do that. It was like the Creator said, ‘All right, you’re going to kill yourself. What’s your life for?’ Then I thought I can’t live through all of that pain and all of that suffering just to be carted out on a stretcher and put six feet in the hole. Where everything that I am is a lot of what I was created into. Yet my spirit is good. I may not appreciate a lot of the acts that I did throughout life, nor do I appreciate the acts that were done to me. That’s why I told my brother in a court of law, ‘I love you. That’s undeniable. You’re my brother. You’re my blood. But I don’t have to love what you did’.

MJ: *Could you now talk about how your writing in those journals and, as you said it was a last will and testament, moved, after your contact with Rudy, towards life writing and the book?*

YJ: Well, he responded to my letter with excitement, knowing and having contact with a direct descendant of Big Bear who was actually in the same position as Big Bear was himself, because he was in Stony [Mountain Penitentiary], and I was in Kingston. It's hereditary, I guess, what's happened to the Native people. In the letter he was saying stuff like he just kind of had the inner need to come and see me, my being a descendant of Big Bear and Big Bear being such a person in the forefront to his life. I take it as his liking for the Native people, and curiosity, because I don't know how many of Big Bear's descendants he has actually interacted with in the past. I like to see friendship based on curiosity ... and he came out and visited me ... he came out and saw me and in friendship I offered him the four sacred medicines, tobacco, sage, cedar, sweetgrass. I didn't know where anything was going at all. So I burnt the medicines and I left it to the spirit world. I pretty well said, 'Well I can't do anything, you guys got to help me now', sort of thing. So he came, he visited me. We were talking and visiting, just talking about things. At that time I was already writing, already determined, deep down in myself, to actually get my understanding out too, though our meeting wasn't specifically for that. Then the more we talked, he was writing for a magazine and he was saying something about doing an article around my conviction. I told him, 'That's not good enough. That won't work'. I says, 'If you're going to do it, it would have to be in a book form'. He pretty well went away and thought about it. Somewhere along the line, before our afternoon meeting, I took some of the diaries that I'd already been working on and he was just amazed by that, I guess, and I told him, 'You can take it'. Part of the reason was, somewhere along the line, I don't know exactly where it took technical form, but I guess we always had a kind of unspoken agreement that it would happen and that we'd play it by ear, and if I did not make it through, Rudy was to finish it for me, based on my journals. But like your contract says, I could pull out anytime I wanted. That opportunity was always given to me by Rudy. By the same token I'd always phone him as a friend and as a confidant. So when things got hard, when I had nobody to talk to ... and sometimes I kind of got revenge. In the back of my mind I'd say, 'Okay, go ahead. Do your damage to me and I'll get back to you. I'll write it in the book. So do your damage. I'm still going to have my last say. You may think that you control everything, but you're not going to control my life story'. I guess I became more defiant in the possibility that I kind of had this leverage, that I got a strength in knowing that I was going to be heard, that I was going to be understood. At the same time I wrote the diaries, and he would say, 'Try to put it in book form'. So I would go back to my first memories and I would start writing and send it off to him. Unfortunately a lot of my life has been focused around the damage of sexual assaults and racism and

prejudice and what it does to a child's mind — trying to develop when all the odds of reality are against you — and not only being a survivor, but being Native, and government and prejudice and people burning crosses outside our home. At the time they were having civil rights marches down in Louisiana and it was all on TV and Vietnam and being in Montana, Custer's last stand was less than 120 years before, so people were telling me that I'd killed their grandparents, and ahh....

So it was my way ... like I didn't know Rudy would be able to dissect my writing the way he did, but that's where his professionalism comes in and that's where this thing that you call collaboration came together. I don't believe we came together to write a book. I think we came together to collaborate to tell my life story and everything that went with it in the way that I saw it. I don't think there is any other book written of its kind, where a Native person would divulge so much truth. So that's how that occurred. It was never signed sealed and delivered until it was signed sealed and delivered, in my mind, because he gave me that opportunity, but there was a certain stage in mandatory things that there was no backing out, in terms of contracts. When you sign contracts with publishers it gets all professional and you get deadlines. That's when it was taken out of Rudy's hands, and Rudy, I want to believe, has been protecting me along that way as much as possible. That's what friends do. I take that with his understanding as a human being to try to bridge between his world and my world, and his knowledge, and that's where we're total opposites of each other. That's why they say in relationships that you find someone who is like you. I say in relationships you find someone who is not like you because then you can actually have more things valid and in common and life is never dull because you're always trying to understand rather than improvise. I think that is what occurred between Rudy and me. He had it in his spirit. He didn't have embedded racism or prejudice or hatred. That I can see a mile away. It's by the way someone looks at you and what they give off in their spirit. I've never seen that with Rudy. Just one time I kind of got short with him was when he was trying to lead me because I was shy. I was pulling back, and all he was attempting to do was to try to help me come out of where I was to meet him halfway in his world I suppose. I think that was the only time I got short with him is that I turned around and I told him, 'Well that's awful white thinking of you'. I hurt his feelings pretty bad because I didn't realise because of all of the trauma that I was going through in making it — and knowing that people once again were going to judge me.

People once again, are they going to understand? You know if people want to live in the reality of existence around them, they've got to be able to accept the truth of somebody else's understanding before change can occur; but I've never had that experience. I knew it in my mind, but in

life experiences there was not a single act done in my life that I could use as a teaching tool to develop that in myself until I met Rudy. And he's a teacher amongst teachers. I've been told that he goes world over, teaching literature and writing and he's hard on his students. And he expects what he expects from them. With me, I've been in his class now for ten years and he's been very patient with me. And he's been very kind and he's been very understanding in giving and taking and life situations and nurturing and expanding. I've asked him, 'Rudy, would you ever write a book with anybody else?' and he says, 'No way'. He says, 'Once you were done with me, there's no more left'. I challenged and brought out things in his life that he'd never seen or understood, but knew kind of what existed. That's where my life experience impacted on him, through my writing, like he didn't sit and say, 'Tell me your story and I'll write it'. No, he says, 'You write it and I'll help you'. The book is all my writing until it gets to the courts and the trials. And that's where I pulled back because I didn't have an inkling and that's where his expertise came in, being able to line up the legal ramifications of the documentations, being able to question things where I couldn't because I was already found guilty. I was already shamed. I was already subhuman. They couldn't do that to him. And I do that to myself. No judge is going to be any harder on me than I am on myself. No jury, no inmate, nobody. I know what I've done, and more so, the Creator knows, but the Creator also knows that I believe those who have the harder lives have the better teachings, the better understandings if you are willing to persevere, get in there and see the truth. Not somebody else's understanding, but be able to take the understanding of society and the world but still hold your own in there, to care yourself on because, bottom line: everybody that's judging me, they're going to be quick to judge, they ain't going to be as quick to help. So, Rudy didn't go out of his way to so called collaborate with me. I didn't go out of my way to collaborate with him. It was just something that had to be, something that was beyond him and beyond me. Together we are quite the team in the collaboration. You'll probably never ever get a book like that because of the personalism and individuality that went into it, the acceptance and the willing to understand. That's why I wrote my diary from events in my lifetime to events that were occurring to let him know how it is that I felt, how it is that I thought, how it is that I viewed the world, past experiences that I had. For as many diaries as I've written, if they were all word for word condensed, I'd have a little encyclopaedia of six or seven books, but it was just excerpts taken out of it that compiled this, which is one of the largest books published in Canada, 444 pages. That's pretty well how that happened. I want to believe that it was total humanness for a story that needed to be said. We faced a lot of challenges. Laws, they were trying to pass laws to ban people like me from writing.

- MJ:** *I read about that, about making any kind of a profit from narrating the events of a crime [Bill C-220 regarding profit from authorship respecting a crime].*
- YJ:** They called it the Son of Sam bill. The media called it profiting off of your crime, in other words, glorifying your crime, revictimising your victims, and getting paid for it. My book is my life story. Unfortunately, part of my offence became and is part of my life. When you make a book, that's what you've got to do. You've got to take highlights, or events that have changed you or altered you, or your life existence and around it. Like in order for me to cope, to understand my offence, I had to relive all of that. Like, how many times have I sat and thought that if whiteman's court was like Indian's court, it would be so much better. In whiteman's court they don't want to hear nothing. They only want to subject, create, build. Everybody is bad and evil and should be locked up and put away. You are not looked at as a human being. You are looked at as a sub-human being where you wear the sins of not only your offence, but you also wear the sins of others and are subject to everybody who sits in the jury and to the law itself. An all white jury, too. That's not my world. That's not my understanding. That's not the way my people did things. If it was to happen in Native country, I would be taken up in front of the chief who has consultation with his women and his children and who becomes a spokesperson for the people. I would also be taken up in front of the medicine people, in front of the elders, the leaders who have to guide religiously, in order to ensure the safety of the people for generations. If this occurred, they would have come in and said, 'What have you done? We're not going to kill you. We're not going to beat you. We'll deal with that afterwards. What's right important right now is what happened. Why did it occur?' Something that I realised was very hard was even dealing with my offence because I didn't deal with it. People don't realise that locking someone in prison and putting them in a cage doesn't help them deal with anything. It just toughens them up. It makes them more angry because they are not understood and if they are not understood, then they cannot rectify. They cannot change. In writing a book I'm able to do that. I'm able to rectify. I'm able to change. The government didn't like it because not only did I tell them what had consisted of my life, but also I told them what had consisted of my parents, and my parents' parents, and the reality, because you are your ancestry. I had to go back and try to make all of that better by writing this, and if they had taken me into a court of law and said, 'Yvonne, we want to know what happened', I think even back then I would have been stupefied, not because I was a hardened convict or anything. It was because I felt like my whole life was never understood. Right down to my very spirit. I felt inadequate as a human being. I couldn't hold my face up without feeling

judgment, and I was like that when I was in third and fourth grade. But you can't live in a world and keep hiding from it. You have no choice. If I was now taken in and they said, 'Yvonne, what is it that occurred? What happened?' then I would tell them like what I told in the book. Then they would say, 'But why did you do that?' and I would have had to say, back then, 'I don't know. Maybe I'm crazy', because I didn't understand. Now I can understand patterns of abuse, hereditary abuse, hereditary neglect. Systematic abuse, systematic racial discrimination in government policies, from housing to education, to everything. How do you expect people to survive and live like that? That's why you have such a high population of Native people in prison, or home-based people the world over, like in Australia it's probably the Aborigines that are the big ones because they are the expendable people, they are the conquered; but you can't conquer what you never warred against in the first place. You just came in with like sheets over your head and brought in your government and your laws. You caged us, you imprisoned us — and that does something, like you are born with a rage. You are born seeing tears in your parents' eyes. What do you do? How do you handle that? Then you combine that with alcoholism and drugs, as an escape. More so drugs now, needle dope, heavy-duty stuff. It used to be alcohol when I was a kid, now it's worse. Now AIDS is killing us off left, right and centre.

MJ: *These patterns that you're talking about are systemic racism, systemic dispossession, did you become more aware of these patterns through reflecting on your life as you wrote your story?*

YJ: Yeah, because I was always too busy hiding. I'd fight when I had to fight. I've spent a lifetime hiding when I wasn't fighting, and it got easier to do when you drink. It's like I'm a Doctor Jeckyll, Mr. Hyde, and a lot of times it was why I drank — to become that other person. I had no voice.

MJ: *Could I ask you now about reading Jung because lots of the comments in the book come from your reading of Jung and I think probably the writing in your journal was somehow informed by reading Jung as well.*

YJ: I had my diary here, and I had Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* here. They were very, very connected. Again, I can't explain that. He spoke to me. He had a lot of big fancy, whiteman words, what Native people call 'high words', unnecessary words that you can simplistically say just by actually pointing, or using hand signals or things like that. I'd like to think of Jung as a very ingenious man for his time. What I learned in my own spiritual walk was also guided by him. Through him I learned to accept myself. I would have loved to have just kicked back and interacted with him like I did with Rudy. Great minds debate, not proclaim rightness. I

knew he would understand. He spent a lot of time with original-based people of the land, and with Native people of this continent. I could see in his writing our ceremonies. I can see in his writing our fasting, our beliefs in the tranquillity of mind, body and spirit. Bringing down the senses of a human body for food and for water, making a spiritual and psychological commitment to open yourself up to the realities of the world they call dream state, Native people call visions. He talked a lot about dreams. He talked a lot about dogma. Now I'm an adult I've got to go back and look at my situation and understand it. Nobody can do that for me. I have to do it. But with reading Jung and seeing his acceptance and his understanding, I was able to come out of it. I utilised that to even write of the horrific things that happened in my life, if this makes any sense. If I have to relive all of it, that might be too much for me, but what little has been released back to me, I was able to deal with through Jung. Because I was in prison, I didn't have anybody else, and when I went to talk to a psychologist, I actually blew their minds away. The elders tell me that I've had a hard life and that I'll continue to have a hard life and maybe I'm just fulfilling preordained destiny, fate. That's why I go through it kind of blindly because everything just seems to happen on its own. The Creator has now chosen to give me voice when I've never had voice before. My voice is powerful, to hear me talk, but how many times — like in the Bible it talks about that guy who was out in the desert screaming forever and a day. That's what I felt like. I felt like that man that was out in the desert screaming forever and a day and nobody listened. Was that John? They finally beheaded him or something. I saw it in a movie. He was supposed to be close to Jesus but they said he was nuts because he was always out yelling in the hills. John the Prophet. I'm not equating myself to him, but I feel that I've been in that position.

MJ: *No one hearing you.*

YJ: Yeah, and being called nuts and crazy.... Writing is a healing journey as long as your self-empowerment is not taken from you, or your identity. I believe in collaborative writing, but I also believe that because you have more knowledge in the publishing world doesn't make you any smarter than someone who doesn't. If you're entrusted with someone else's naiveness then that is actually a great gift that you should cherish. You have the ability to help, not become part of the problem.

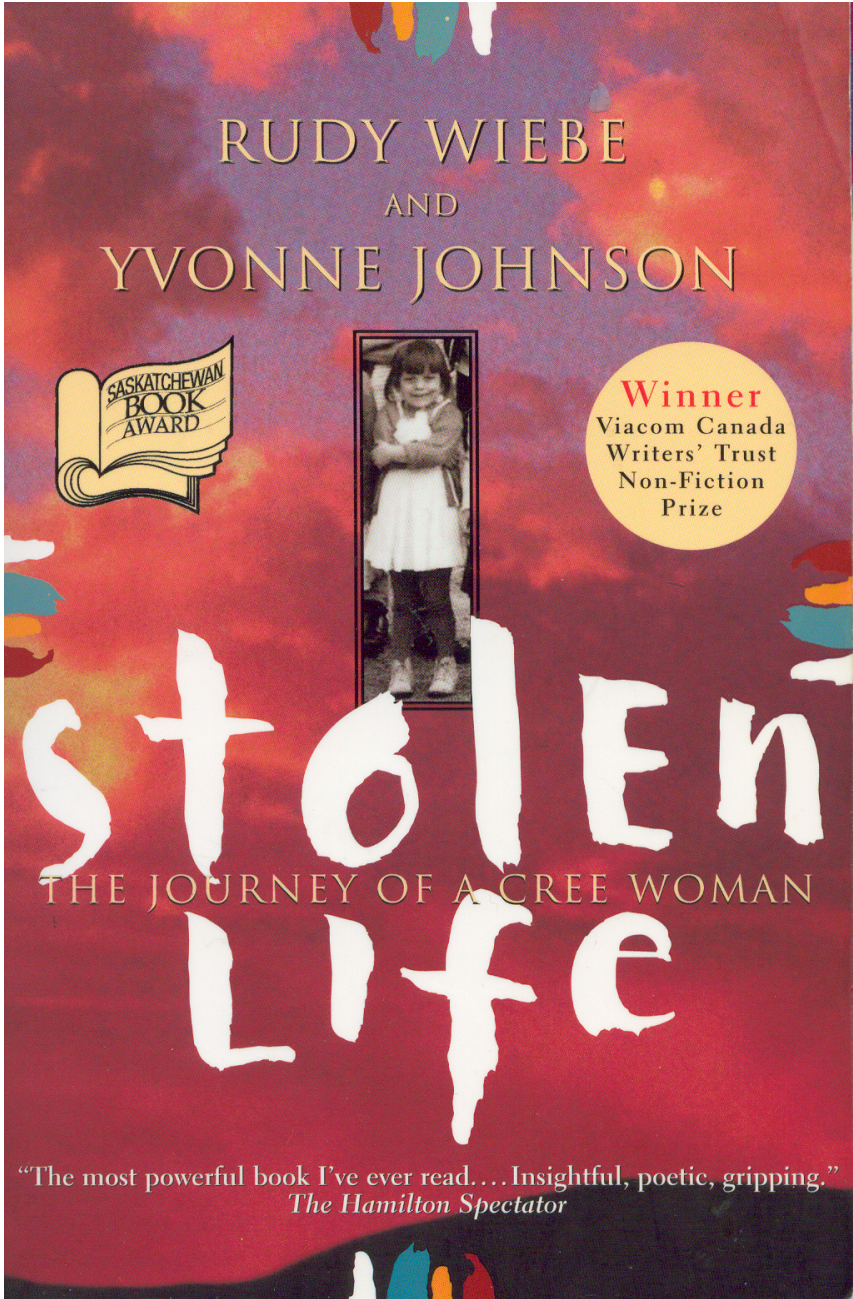
MJ: *Okay, that leads into something else that I wanted to ask you. Before you talked about writing the book and working through all this experience as a survivor and I wanted to ask if you have any comments on how the book can help or guide others.*

YJ: That was part of the reason. Sometimes I wonder why I'm still alive, and I think about it when things get hard, but.... You've asked something really close to my heart and a lot of times I've got to be still and if I start shooting off I just lose it. Rudy has told me, 'Your story needs to be told'. And I would say, 'Who wants to hear about another drunken Indian who committed murder?' and he goes, 'You're explaining a part of society that exists that has never been explained before but has always been judged. Now it is your time to voice that opinion and have trust that through this mass media, beyond the people who chose to be around you, there is a bigger world out there and there is a bigger understanding'. I thought how many times people play self-righteous and then they have to hide behind that. I can't claim self-righteousness; but I can claim the knowledge that I got through dealing with certain aspects of my life that other people don't chose to deal with at all, and that is something that I will carry with my spirit when I stand before the Creator, that I'm okay with the Creator, that I'm okay with the spirit world. As long as I harm nobody here in anything that I do or say, or that I don't harm my body that the Creator gave me. I have disclosed about my abuse because I know I am not the only one who suffered. I know that every woman that I drank with and went to parties with on the street, nine times out of ten have suffered that. I can see my pain in my people's eyes. What I found was that after my book came out I had more people writing me from non-Native communities explaining about the traumatic cause and effect of sexual abuse and the trauma in their life. When I did get the odd letter from a Native person, it was horrific, horrific in comparison. I don't believe that ... some people if you were to slap them that would traumatise them maybe to the point that I got traumatised when they were shoving that chain-saw in and out of my face. Maybe now a slap on the face to me may not seem as severe, but abuse is abuse and none is greater or lesser than the other. Abuse is abuse and it shouldn't be accepted at any level. I can see, through my own abuse and how it has impacted on my spirit, that I can see hurt in other human beings. It was like that in my book when I looked into the mirror and I saw the pain in that child's eyes even though I didn't realise it was my own reflection. So seeing my own pain and feeling that through eye contact, that touched my spirit, and I now have the ability to look at other people and see their hurt that they can't hide. They can't hide it through body language. Why do people walk the way they walk? Why do they talk the way they talk? How did they learn that? It goes from simply things like do you drag your feet when you walk, do you pick them up, do you consciously think or are you just going through life, all of these dynamics. So I say deal with it. How I disclosed my abuse was, 'I will take the responsibility that is on me'. When I drink and when I was on skid row, I put myself in a bad

situation, not knowing no better, or for whatever reason I chose to make that stupid choice, I can make that choice. But I never made the choice of them drugging me, raping me, impregnating me. So I will take mine and I will give to them what is theirs for their abuse. Once you do that it is a little easier to carry. I also know that part of the reason why I never disclosed was that it was too close to everybody else, and you think it's so sinful. You wear the sins and the shame of your attackers. When they do that to you they leave the essence of their evil onto you. Especially children are very spiritually susceptible to things, never mind what it does to the mind or the body. What it does to the inside, the spirit, the disturbance that goes on there that affects the mind and the body. They always say it's so horrible and so shameful I'm not going to tell anybody. I asked for it. I wanted it. Whatever reasons you have in your mind. And I thought I can't tell them these horrible things. They're going to judge me. But I got to the point where I says, 'I'm already judged. I'm in prison, I'm doing life 25 and I'm thinking about killing myself, so what have I got to lose'. Even though at that time I didn't know what there was to gain, I just thought there was nothing to lose. I thought of all the abusers that have ever abused me and went on with life and went on with the silence. That's why I chose to go against my brother, to stop him from doing it to my sisters. Even though that court of law never found him guilty, that jury never found him guilty, that wasn't the point. The point was that I had to look at him and tell him 'No more', and that empowering gave empowerment to my sisters. That's where it all begins, to disclose, to get rid of it. I may have had a suicide mission, but I don't now ... and I have no regrets for divulging my messed up life. They talk about an inner child. I was forever an inner child. Now I'm at an advantage because I'm a grown woman with a lifetime that now can go back to that inner child and tell that inner child, 'I'll speak on your behalf. I know what it is that you feel. I know what it is that you suffer from. Let me tell your story'. That's like your spirit and everything that's stuffed down inside you. You have to deal with that and bring it to the forefront. Natives call it spirit-walking in one's own self and it's not an easy thing to do but it's a very powerful thing to do. If there is revenge on your abusers, it's to live life well and full, and you owe it to yourself. If it takes a book of this magnitude to shake the world, then do it. Become a world shaker because that's the life that was given to you. It's the life that you've got to deal with, but you can leave it here. When you stand before the Creator you can say, 'I've tried, and you know that I've tried'. I know that the Creator is not going to persecute me. At least I can look at him with straight eyes and say, 'I've tried. I don't know what it was I was down there for. I was winging it alone — but for winging it alone, I think I did pretty good'.

MJ: *Earlier we talked about the appearance of the book, the book as a physical object. I think it's really important to talk about. You referred to the physical book as a sacred bundle.*

YJ: You see in Native way you have what they call a bundle. And it's all in your understanding what your bundle is. Usually it's a square cloth and you put your medicines and sacred items inside. And it's like dressing it, putting it to sleep, putting it to bed, making sure dust and dirt don't get in, and putting a spiritual protection over it, which would be this outer coating of the bundle, the wrap that goes around the sacred things. Okay, this book is a sacred bundle. I am sacred. You are sacred. All spirits of the Creator are sacred. What goes in between the front and back cover of this book is my life, which is sacred in the eyes of the Creator. I was scared of what people were going to do with what I wrote in here because other people see it as this and that. I see it as a bundle. I see the outside as being the coating of that bundle. My spiritual colours are red and green. On the back of the coating it's got the red and it's got forms of green in the blue in the sky. And it's on the front cover at the side. So I look at that as being part of that covering. Okay, there's four directions, north, south, east and west that come into this creation and this world. This is a little creation and a world unto itself. So I put the colours of the four directions on the cover of the book and they are the Cree sacred colours. And I put it in the four directions. That's why you've got it top and bottom, side to side because it covers the four directions. It seals the integrity of my spirit and my life-force that is in this book called my autobiography. If you look towards the inside, there is a little picture of a bear, and to me that's my spirit keeper. And it's also where the prayer is. See, non-Native people, they write all this other stuff. They write the notes and Contents and stuff like that. Me, any ceremony you begin with a prayer. Any ceremony you end with a prayer. My life has been one big long ceremony. Same as everybody else's. When I put it in a book form I tried to treat it as a bundle. And that's why it's got the little bear at my opening prayer. It's got the little bear at the closing prayer, because everything in between is that bundle. On the front they have me as a child. On the back they have my great-grandfather so that speaks of generations past, of generations now, and I try to speak to bring change for generations in the future. This is a legacy that I leave my children. Whiteman may put it in archives. Whiteman may use it differently than I do. Rudy covers that end and I just do what I got to do. I just leave it to the Creator because I'm a vocal person. Rudy is the writer, I'm the thinker. Rudy enabled me to write the way I do because he said that many people go to school for a lifetime to learn how to write what comes to me natural. Because I'm able to speak orally and I write as I speak. Maybe people might find that hard to read if their mind is trained to think



(Front cover of *Stolen Life*. Reproduced with permission of Vintage, Canada.)

as a very educated person. You forget to think as a human being. There's supposed to be a pattern of thought. Just because you can think, that's a gift. It doesn't mean you have to have a subjugated thought pattern. That's where Jung was good. He was able to bring out those thought patterns and line it up like that. But I saw the truth behind it. So that's what that is all about, the cover of that.

MJ: *And you had direct input into those choices?*

YJ: This one, yeah, but they've got another cover now and they took the colours off because in the book writing world I guess you've got to please this well trained ... you know they sit back and they think they know how people think and they advertise and they've got to get them like fish on a hook. So that's when they said that the cover was too cluttered. Life is never too cluttered. If it wasn't cluttered we wouldn't have anything — but they wanted to make more room to put in what people had to say about it, as a promotion gimmick. But life changes, seasons change, and so do covers of books, it grows and matures, and now there are awards that the book has actually won, as far as I know, it was nominated for the Governor-General's award. The minute there was a write up in the newspaper that says first time convicted killer wins highest honour in the country, I knew then and there that they had pushed it as far as they could push it for the content of what this book is politically, historically. Rudy's a historic writer. Rudy helped me use my right, to have freedom of speech, even if I can't feel free in other ways concerning my life, it's a human right. It's because all my fears, all the reasons why I should be dead are now all the reasons why I now need to be alive, and why everyone should have the ability to do what Rudy and I did. It can be done. We are total respecters of each other. It does become an elite controlled thing but it should be opened up to everybody and anybody. We shouldn't propagandise each other. After this book got published I had somebody writing me saying that the only reason this got published was because I was an Indian — he was whiteman. Then, he says, 'I want you to work with me on my book'. His was this hocus-pocus Hollywood, non-Native person writing about a Native person. So that doesn't speak volumes on my relationship with Rudy. I was highly insulted that somebody would even think that that is what transpired. But that goes to show; I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't sell my people out. I never would have interacted with Rudy if I thought it was a sellout in any way shape or form, but Rudy is an elite person himself, too. I'm not giving consent that everybody should write together because they can. They should write together because they want to and they respect each other. The end result is to make the world a better place, and not for one to feed off the pain and suffering of the other.

- MJ:** *You say that this experience of co-authoring, of collaborating, can be empowering when it's a respectful process and that more people should have this opportunity. In the numbers of First Nation stories that are being published, and Aboriginal life writing in Australia as well, something that is being talked about to promote or ensure this respect is the notion of cultural protocols. The collaboration should be guided by the protocols of the community from which the narrator comes. The narrator's cultural basis, cultural values, cultural strengths should be the guiding principles of the collaboration.*
- YJ:** When you are going to collaborate on history that is factual, truthful and knowledgeable, you don't go there and assume and write what it is you want. You go there and you ask and you listen, and you keep asking, and don't be shy to admit to your own humility and say — and Rudy said this a lot of times — 'I'm just a whiteman. You've got to tell me this', which was pretty cool of him, but it was more of a willingness on his part to share everything that he was. I have great, great respect for that. Verbal contracts and verbal understandings with Native people, with the original people, is the way that it should be. We have to start recognising the handshake. Native people have always had the handshake and they've always abided by that, but they used to shake like this and that becomes a very personal promise. So I think it should be the people that decide because in your own naïveness you may change or alter something. It's not because you are hateful or spiteful. It's just because you don't know, any more than I know about your system that I find unjust. I'm a twentieth-century Indian and I still feel the same thing my ancestors must have felt and I have pity on them. It must have been pretty scary seeing the first whiteman, but in all reality, the Native people were given teachings saying that they were going to come. The yellow people were going to come, the white people were going to come and the black people were going to come. But the black people were brought as slaves; so were the Chinese — and the whiteman came with a bad attitude!

THE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

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VINTAGE
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Front jacket photograph: Chris Harvey/
Tony Stone Images
Inset photograph of Yvonne Johnson at the
age of five courtesy of Yvonne Johnson
Back jacket photograph of Chief Big Bear
courtesy of the Public Archives of Canada



(Back cover of *Stolen Life*. Reproduced with permission of Vintage, Canada.)

MICHAEL JACKLIN

Interview with Rudy Wiebe

(Recorded August 9, 2002 at Edmonton, Alberta.)

MJ: *I'm going to begin my questions by asking you about that first letter that Yvonne Johnson wrote introducing herself. In the parts you quote in the beginning of the Stolen Life she asks for help researching her family's past and her ancestry. In that first letter there is no mention at all about writing her life story. So that's what I'd like to ask. How did that initial request for help tracing her ancestry change to the writing of her own life story?*

RW: Well of course I had a great deal of information about Big Bear [Yvonne's ancestor]. Actually there is another man who has a lot more, Hugh Dempsey, who wrote the biography of Big Bear, ten years later or something like that, in the early '80s. He told me he had never read my book, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, because he didn't want to be influenced by it. It's one of those what I find kind of goofy statements because I would think you'd want to be influenced by everything. He's still pretending, you know, the historian still pretends that it's possible to be objective about these sorts of things. And then he goes ahead and interviews the family. And that's really objective, right? It's as personal as you can get! Anyway, there was no way you could get Yvonne to the sources, her being in prison. There was no way you could get her to the sources. So I think I answered her something in that line; and we simply started talking about it, corresponding back and forth about that. But you see, nothing just happens... I wrote her a letter and she responded to it ... she felt herself guided to me and I was immediately hooked when she mentioned Big Bear. Here she is, exactly what Big Bear was afraid of in signing the treaty in his major encounter with the Whites. What was going to happen to his people, now that they were being overrun like this? And here is the most horrible example ... but I still didn't know, I didn't have a clue what she was in for. I wrote her a letter quickly saying 'I better write to you fast because you might be out of Kingston before this letter gets to you'. A very stupid thing to say, but she didn't indicate what she was in prison for. So, the first idea after we talked back and forth several times was that I would write an article about her. She then sent me a record ... the first writing of her memory of ... the first horrible memory of her first rape, when she was a baby, when she was a child, two years old or something ... going into the whole surround of this, a thirty-, thirty-two page statement that she made to the police. When I saw that and when I heard what she was in for, I thought that if she was

willing I would write an article for *Saturday Night* magazine. They agreed that this would be a great idea, and they actually financed my first trip — they said they would pay expenses and all that stuff to go and see Yvonne in prison.

MJ: *To go to Kingston?*

RW: In Kingston, yeah. So, it began not as a book idea at all, but as an article possibly for a magazine, to show how a life that is in a sense destroyed right from the beginning eventually ends up like this, in prison. I didn't have a clue yet how at that time, because they were still appealing the ruling, whether that sentence would be upheld in all its ... as it was of course shortly after. So it simply began that way.

MJ: *Yvonne also talked about that, about the proposal for the article and her response was that an article was not big enough, that you couldn't say it all in an article.*

RW: No, I know.

MJ: *But she also did say that in those early stages there was no intention of a book. She was writing her diaries, her journals, simply to get her story down, to make sure her story wasn't lost.*

RW: Yes, she had begun writing her diaries, the first diaries that I have — and I don't know, I think they are the first ones though — she had really begun writing in '91 when she first went to Kingston. Then she wrote to me in November '92, and I simply encouraged her. I said, 'write it all down, keep writing'. She said things like, 'my language isn't very good and I don't know how to spell'. I said, 'That doesn't matter. Don't worry about that. Write it down the way it sounds to you'. So she did that and her spelling became much better as she went along because she worked at it too. As you know the first thing for people who are not very skilled at writing, they're worried ... the teacher thing, you know ... they've been told in school, 'you can't write. You can't write because you can't spell'; or 'you haven't got the proper grammar', or something. Of course this is not important in terms of this kind of writing at all because you could easily figure it out. Her speaking skills are tremendous and I said, 'Just write it as you talk. Don't worry about the sentence structure', and she did that basically.

MJ: *Did you ever feel that she was writing for you, that you were her reader?*

RW: I think at a certain point that is true because, for example, I sent her things. Things that her father, for example, had given me when I went to visit him. I sent her pictures and I sent her maps and things like that; and these were clearly stimulants to her memory. She drew the maps over into her notebooks and so could track her memory; especially, say, some

of her hospital experiences: where something happened; where an assault happened; and where she ended up in the hospital. Or that arrest, where she appeared before the judge and so on. These things that I sent her helped her recall. Because you know you're sitting in a cell and you have absolutely nothing except your memory — if you dare to think about it — but with something visual in front of you, especially a picture or something like that, it changes quite a lot. So I think then her writing, in that sense, was not so much directed at me as being aided by some of the things I was able to send her from her own background which were not available to her in prison. That's one of the problems of writing in prison where you have nothing and that's why she's writing, generally, to people ... or she tried to write to people asking for information but nothing much came of it.

MJ: *I realised yesterday when I visited her, how cut off, how isolated you are in prison.*

RW: Have you been in a prison before?

MJ: *I've never been in prison.*

RW: You've never visited anyone in prison? It's a shocking experience, no matter what — and Kingston was especially a cruncher for me. These buildings look a little more humane but they're not really. They're just inhumane in other ways because people are captives. The whole point of the system is to make a captive of that person, to punish them....

MJ: *Yvonne's journal writing continued for a number of years, accumulating seventeen volumes. Journal writing by nature is not structured. It's not chronological. It follows threads of memory and points of trauma. I suppose your task then was to help transfer that journal writing to a more accessible narrative.*

RW: My basic problem with writing this book was the structural one. There is the structure of chronology, of course, which is the basic one; but a chronology of a life doesn't give you a book, a comprehensible book, right? The concept of book became very important for me as I tried to work this out because I realised that a life is not a book — a book in the sense that it starts somewhere with the reader's total ignorance of the situation and explains what happened so you can get to the point where the most difficult or the most dramatic or the most life changing thing happens, and then does something with that. I'm thinking very much in terms of a reader when I'm structuring a book, and chronology just won't do it because in a life story, this happens and then this happens and then this happens. There's no necessary connection. It's just something that happens to you. An accident, whatever, they happen. So the problem

with making a book of this was that Yvonne, I think, at first thought that it would be quite simple, you know, she'd just write it out ... and there were a couple of places in her journals where it was as if she herself was writing her book. But I said that the first important thing was just for her memories to come. When we discussed this ... and when we'd meet this is how she would talk — she would go from one memory to the other ... by association.... It was only afterwards that you could figure out the chronology of her life ... 'When did this happen?' ... she'd be talking about something when she was eighteen or nineteen in Winnipeg when we'd just been talking about something that happened to her when she was seven in Butte, for example. You can't do this to a reader. Well, you can do it to a listener, but a listener just hears a little bit of it and it's a kind of a complete story and it makes sense; but you can't do it to a reader. So it has to be worked out. So this was the matter of the journals, which stayed a long time on one incident or stayed around one incident, but then moved off into some other place as the memory flows. You don't want to stop that because that's where the strength of it is but that's not a book. So then my job was to go through the journals and first of all construct a kind of chronology about what happened to Yvonne. If there is something precise to hang onto — like there was a grade, a teacher — it was that teacher, then you know, okay, that was grade seven. But there were a couple of problems that Yvonne and I never did figure out, never did solve, and she still thinks that somewhere in there, there is a year, or I think there is a year's slippage somewhere, especially in her teens just after she ended school. She ran away from home and a number of things happened. We never got that quite straight, but in terms of the book perhaps it's not that important because between her leaving Butte and wandering around the United States and ending up in Winnipeg, there is a whole series of things that are very difficult to pinpoint. It was really a difficult matter, first of all, to establish the chronology, and then out of that life chronology to make a book which read in a way that's moving towards the crucial incident in her life, which is of course the death of that man in her basement in her own house, and then make a structure that is intriguing to a reader. That was the big difficulty, and one that I struggled with for years. At a certain time I thought, 'It can't be done. I can't do this. Life is too short'.

MJ: *Well, could I ask you, was it ever a possibility that the book could be constructed solely from Yvonne's journals?*

RW: Well, I don't know how you could have done it, in the sense that it would have been just a series of journals. It wouldn't have been a book — it wouldn't have been a book in the sense that it was structured and framed. No one will publish stream-of-thinking journals. It would have been too

confusing. She would have had to order them herself in some way. What she wrote in her journals was not something that could be published because of the way journal writing is. It's repetitious. It goes back and forth. It's non-time related. It's all kinds of things. A journal is not something you necessarily want to make public. A journal is something you do for yourself, first of all. At a certain time a journal writer becomes a writer who knows that this is going to be published and writes accordingly. This is much franker, more open, and completely unguarded and forthright.

MJ: *So in your task of organising this material and making it into a narrative that would carry the reader to that crucial moment, the incident of the death....*

RW: There's more than organisation, right? There's an enormous amount of selection. You select things; and many of the chapters that I wrote, that we worked out and agreed upon, when the editor read them, he said, 'we could cut this out. It repeats what we already know so you don't have to say it again. The reader has got it'. So all those notebooks, and all those conversations, and all those tapes — it's not only organisation but also an enormous amount of selection — what moment you are going to choose, or what small story you are going to choose to represent that entire era of her life? These are the things that are particularly difficult for someone, if they are writing about their own life, to choose because it's probably more simple for an objective person to do that. Then there's the further objectivity of an editor. As a matter of fact we ended up with two editors, a further editor who read the book strictly as kind of a technical, structural thing, who never met Yvonne at all, and simply picked up little details — legal details, or gave impressions like, 'this is too sentimental,' or 'you've said this before, it's overwrought'. So there was a series of objectivities going on before the book arrived at the present point.

MJ: *As well as organisation and selection, your input into the book is substantial in terms of the framing narrative that you write describing your meetings with Yvonne, describing the other meetings with family members....*

RW: Your question is why is it in there? Well, it's in there for two reasons. Partly because I'm a writer and I am discovering the story, and in that sense I'm a kind of surrogate reader. I am discovering the story somehow as the reader discovers the story. So in that sense it's not only a biography or autobiography of Yvonne. It is her life story, but there is a big chunk of me in there — me describing to you how I, as one person, discovered the story, because I think the story just blurted out or just told in its raw form as, say, Yvonne's long statement about what happened to her in her childhood, for example, is not the best way for the reader to encounter this story.

MJ: *Why not?*

RW: Because certain stories are too drastic for people to be blurted into. They'd be sort of like a disaster, a road accident ... sitting in our living room with a book in our hand ... you need to be introduced to them somehow ... not just to be dropped into it, in first person. I thought: that's not the way to tell this story in order for it to be told effectively, for it to impact on us the way that kind of pain should, truly, deeply, because at an accident we're just horrified. We shudder and run away from it. We block it out. We drive past it. We don't need this. Of course when life does it to us we have to experience it in such a way that we can't get rid of it for the rest of our lives. So my part, I felt, was to write how I discovered this story and explain exactly why I was in it in the first place; and as I mentioned in the book several times, there was a stage when I felt I shouldn't be in it. I shouldn't be doing this at all. Somebody else should do it; but I was encouraged very much by different Native women that I talked to — 'Perhaps at this time you are the only person because Yvonne trusts you. And being the kind of writer that you are, perhaps you're the only person that can do this'. I think out of this did come a different kind of book than one usually reads. It was partly because I got profoundly emotionally involved in the story myself and I wanted to be in there to show you how the emotion works in another party, in a party that in effect knows nothing. I'm just as much a stranger to it as you are as a reader, but I'm a reader with a certain kind of training who can help put this into a kind of a context.

MJ: *Well my next question would be that, having made the decision that this would be the best way to do the book, why is there not more of yourself in the book? Can I begin by asking again about that first letter? Yvonne asks, 'Who are you? How do you know so much? And what was the force behind you? And why did you choose to write about Big Bear?'* She asks these questions in that first letter but you don't answer in the book.

RW: Well I think I probably answered her in our conversations, as much as was needed.

MJ: *I'm sure you did, but I'm asking why that didn't become part of the book.*

RW: Well, for one thing, I don't think it needs to become part of the book because it's already there in *Big Bear*, to a certain extent, and in all the stories I've written since, especially ... just at the time, and this was the amazing thing, just at the time when I was working on this, there was the whole matter of the TV mini-series of *The Temptations of Big Bear* — have you seen it?

MJ: *I haven't, no.*

RW: Well, it was just in the process of getting made at that time. This began in 1982 or '81. A Montreal company first started working with me on it. I was working on the script all through the '80s and then by the '90s there was an Edmonton company here working on it and then eventually it ended up with Gil Cardinal, the director, and the CBC working on it. In fact when we launched *Stolen Life*, they were shooting Big Bear in the Qu'Appelle Valley, just north of Regina. So there was a kind of coming together of the whole thing, of this work with this amazing man who I have been involved with all my writing life. Big Bear is in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. One of the Cree descendants of him is in that novel. So he's been a presence in my entire writing life. I don't think a novelist who has spent his entire life being influenced clearly in various ways by this historical character who comes out of your own life and from the place where you are born, and who reflects not only that world, but also the spiritual world to which you yourself are very powerfully connected — well I don't necessarily try to explicate that in everything I write. There may be some of the essays in *Rivers of Stone* ... actually there is an essay in there about my experience of going to visit Big Bear's power bundle which is in New York in the American Museum of Natural History. I did that when I was working on *The Temptations of Big Bear*; and you see that's another thing. The last time I was in New York they wouldn't show it to me. They are bureaucratic now. You have to make appointments through the right people. Anyway, that's another story; but that's the kind of thing I couldn't take Yvonne to see. That's exactly what she was asking but it's the kind of thing you couldn't take Yvonne to see because she's in prison. They're not letting go of it, right? Actually that's another whole story about the bundle, but those are the kinds of things that drive this story, that make this story really part of me. Right behind you, look behind you there. See that? That's Big Bear. Joe Fafard, do you know him as an artist? [Wiebe indicates a ceramic sculpture]

MJ: *I don't.*

RW: He's a prairie ceramicist. He's a wonderful man. This is an early Joe Fafard, actually. That's Big Bear just after he'd been captured ... been taken prisoner. He surrendered himself to the RCMP. There's a picture of him sitting like that and six Mounties standing all around him, in Prince Albert, July 1885. So Joe wanted to do a statue of Big Bear and I gave him a number of pictures and he chose that one. I've had that since 1977 or something like that. Anyway ...

MJ: *Well, since you mentioned the power bundle maybe I'll mention this: when I talked to Yvonne yesterday, she talked about the book being a sacred bundle. Do you want to offer any comment on that?*

RW: Is that the way she sees it now?

MJ: Yes.

RW: What do you think she meant by that? Did she explain?

MJ: *She said that every spirit is sacred. A life is sacred. And she said that this book was the story of her life and she wanted it to be a ceremony and so opened it with a prayer and closed it with a prayer. She wanted the cover to represent the cloth which encloses the sacred bundle.*

RW: Yes, and she wanted her primary colours on there.

MJ: *Yes, red and green.*

RW: ... and blue and white. On the first edition the colours were only on the bottom of the cover. She wanted them on all four sides.

MJ: *So was she satisfied with the cover?*

RW: She said, 'It has to be in a circle'. The first edition doesn't have it. It doesn't have the circular thing, which is so important to her. Then on the paperback they fixed that up. So, I think that's a wonderful way for her to look at it. The book has gone all over the world and has been translated into a number of languages now. It's coming out in German this fall and she's had all kinds of readers respond ... did she tell you that?

MJ: *Yes she did. She's had letters from all over world.*

RW: Hundreds of people, all over the world. It's created problems for her too, in the sense that she's become a very public person. It's part of what she says in here, in this prayer, of having the courage to show her shame to everyone, what she has done, the people she has hurt. That is superb courage for someone to do that and to show that publicly and this is one of the things that make it very difficult for her family. I don't know if she talked about that at all.

MJ: *No. She did say that she was becoming reconciled with her mother.*

RW: Well this is one of the things that, you know, out of families you don't talk about what happens in the family — especially if you're a racial minority and you're a visual racial group and seen as that: you don't talk out of the family to give more ammunition to those who are racist and despise you. That's one reason why you don't see books like this around very often. There is that kind of shame; but she feels that it's important and she has the courage to show the guilt and the shame and also at the same time it shows what has been done to her.

MJ: *The only way to break the cycles of abuse is through speaking — making the circumstances of abuse known and able to be talked about and that's what the book does. All right, I'm going to ask about you again. In a sense the book is similar to the Latin American genre of testimonio, where someone without the skills to see their life story get into print entirely through their own writing, finds the assistance of someone who becomes their advocate. In the book, one of your roles is an advocate for Yvonne's case. So I'm going to ask, when did you realise that this was happening?*

RW: Well, the point I want to make on that matter is the first sentence in the prefatory note. 'This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived'. I was not going to do a critical life and examine her ideas and opinions and memories and then try to be objective about them and say, 'this is what really happened'. For one thing, I don't believe such a thing is possible anyway. As a novelist — someone who spends his life writing novels — I'm very much aware of the kinds of structural fiction that historians put into things in order to make sense of them ... and the kinds of things that people say to me all the time: 'I don't read novels. I just want to read true stories'. God save me! If I feel particularly vicious at the time I'll say something savage about that but the whole idea — it's simply a continuum. But to pretend that there is any sort of God-like objectivity there, or truth. It's a wonderful question. Pilate asked Jesus, 'What is truth?' I could explain endlessly. Five people experience the same thing at the same time, but they have diametrically opposed opinions about what happened, even when the evidence is there. Okay, evidence like someone had his arm cut off. I mean that's a fact. You can see it. Everybody can see it — but how it happened. ... My ultimate example in creative writing classes is always the Kennedy assassination. Even the Justice of the Supreme Court and all the highest level people issued a report which nobody believes any more. So this is very carefully stated here: 'This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived'. However, there is never only one way to tell a story. So I believe this explicitly and profoundly. All my writing life has only verified that most human experience is the same way. So when her sister for example — and I won't tell you which one — talked to me for three hours and tore me apart for this book, and said, 'That's not true, and that's not true, and that's not true', I had nothing to say. She felt that this book was a vicious lie. Of course there were things in there that she had experienced too, and which she agreed, 'Yes', and in fact she told me things that if I had known would have made the book even more horrifying than it already is, but I didn't know them or I hadn't been told them. Yvonne either hadn't told them to me or felt they were part of someone else's story in the family. So this is where you end up. I would

never emphasise that this is true in any objective sense, but it is as clear and as precise as Yvonne feels and remembers it and that's good enough for me. That's all I was trying to help her with — and to put it in the frame of my own experience of discovery, but in many places I disappear completely, especially toward the end — it's not important any more that I'm there.

MJ: *I do have to ask you about this — one of the issues is authorship: who is given first position? Yvonne's comment was that there was never any question in her mind that your name should be first. She wanted to show her respect and her honour for your involvement. Did you have any question about that?*

RW: Well, it's difficult, but you have to design the book somehow, and clearly, we are partners. Her name is just as large as mine. Partly, for the publisher it was a marketing thing. They wanted my name first because I'm a very widely-known author. This is partly what it's all about. Yvonne has been very good about that. Some people have objected to this. I don't know how to resolve that. As I say, I don't think she could have written a book that would be publishable. So in that sense, you might say I'm the book maker, but it's clearly her story. There is nothing of me in here, except the first chapter introduces us in such a way that you know who we both are in relation to each other.

MJ: *That's what I was asking about before, that there is very little of your subjectivity.*

RW: Except in the first chapter, and a few other places, like chapter 2 and 3, or 13. So it's obviously not my story. But it is my book, in the sense that I structured and made it in a way in which she couldn't have, but it's her story. We're partners here and, as she probably told you, everything is split. Everything is shared fifty/fifty. Unless she does something specifically herself now, and I have nothing to do with it, but it's shared fifty/fifty. There have been a few people that have remarked about that in newspapers.

MJ: *Yes, it's a common criticism.*

RW: So what is done with this, in the usual case?

MJ: *There is no usual case. The circumstances leading to any one collaboration are unique. There may be some patterns but I can't yet say that this is the way it's usually done; and authorship is very problematic because of readers' expectations. Autobiography is written by the narrator and collaborative autobiography just doesn't follow that pattern. It's not a biography. It's not someone writing someone else's life story in the third person. It's first*

person narrative but told through the joint efforts of the two or more people involved and our preconceptions are foiled in many ways by this, one of them being the jacket, the authors. Some of the collaborative books don't have an author acknowledged on the jacket. It's 'the story of ...' and then the name but no author, and you'll look inside on the imprint page and it will say edited by so-and-so. But there is no usual pattern to this. It's often left for readers to struggle with.

- RW:** Actually, one of the translated books has Yvonne Johnson's name first. I think it was the Danish book — but I had nothing to do with that. That was the decision of the publisher. Well, it makes sense because I'm not well known as a writer in Denmark.
- MJ:** *So there is nothing to gain by putting your name first.*
- RW:** Certainly there was nothing in marketing terms to be gained, and that's perfectly fine.
- MJ:** *In some of Yvonne's comments yesterday, and she laughed when she said this, she said there were things that she was telling you and you said, 'I don't know. I'm only a white guy. How do I know all this?' So I want to ask whether your work with Yvonne has influenced or changed or altered or transformed your perceptions, your understandings of First Nations experience?*
- RW:** Well ... I've always operated on the basis, and this is one of the reasons I could tell or could try to write a novel about Big Bear, that all human beings are human beings. The society we live in and the race and our people give us particular ways of living and ways of understanding the world; but every human being understands every human being in fundamental ways. We are not different species. We are a language species. We talk to each other. We live with each other. We care for each other. We love each other. There has to be a caring situation going on, or people don't survive. I mean a child simply won't live if it is not cared for. So we are profoundly the same in all the important ways that a species is the same. At the same time some of our experiences are very different; our experience of life is very different. I can see that just by going down to the Greyhound Bus depot, right, and I see people arrive there and the way security people behave. For me, with the gray beard and the white skin and obviously a well-to-do, middle-class person, they will never talk to me about loitering. But they see someone who has just arrived straight from the north ... these are things that you can recognise in a minute, but which you have never experienced yourself, unless you go to some other country and I've had that experience happen to me too ... and for women too ... For me working with Yvonne was a tremendous initiation. It was an introduction, not only an introduction,

but a deep experience of being a different kind of person, both in race and especially also in terms of being a woman and what she experiences and the way a woman is instantly identified as, ‘Oh an Indian woman. Here’s someone you could buy if you wanted her’, that kind of attitude. The kinds of experiences that she told me, and herself telling them to me directly, this was an experience that I’d never had before. In that sense it was a wonderful experience for a writer, to be offered that. That was the great gift that she gave me, in terms of this book, and that’s one of the major reasons why at a certain point when we were all ready to quit it seemed to be too great a gift not to continue with it.

The other thing that was important — I mean this should be told too in this kind of collaboration — this kind of collaboration is completely impossible to bring to fruition unless you have a publisher who really understands this. A publisher like Louise Dennys at Knopf Canada was absolutely crucial to this because she wanted a book like this. At a certain point when both Yvonne and I were trying to figure out how this could be written — and we thought for a while that maybe we should write it as a novel, you know, change all the names — it was Louise Dennys who, at one point when basically we were at the ends of our ropes, came out here and she and I went to the Healing Lodge together and she met Yvonne for the first time — she’d talked to her on the phone but she’d never met her — she came out here and we spent some days at the Healing Lodge and she was a really crucial part of why this happened. Then also the costs of the legal vetting: we had to get a couple of legal opinions on the manuscript. The best legal mind in Canada who is a personal friend of Louise’ and I know him too, Clayton Ruby, read this book. So without a publisher like that, really committed to the whole idea of telling this story and telling it in a way that would be effective as a book, and then publicising it really well and doing a great job in designing it and promoting it — that is really a crucial part of what happened in a book like this.

MJ: *In that last exchange you’ve mentioned a couple of times about the gift that Yvonne was giving you. One of the issues that I’m looking at is the idea of reciprocity, of exchange in collaboration. When a life story is told it is a gift and that gift brings with it in some cases obligations or the responsibility of the listener to give something back. So, what were your obligations in receiving this gift?*

RW: Well my obligation, and we’ve already talked about this in one sense, was to tell this story in such a way that it is understandable to a basically white, middle-class audience, the kind of person who is going to buy this book — and that ties in with what I said before. In fact it happened to me on the cross-country tour. At one radio station a man, of course a white man, said,

‘We’ve heard these stories before. We’ve heard thousands of these stories before’. I said, ‘Yes, you’ve heard thousands of bits and pieces. You see thousands of items every year in the newspaper. When have you ever read a story that really goes into the details of where this story started, who this person was and how it happened like this?’ He said he’d never read a book like that. No, he never had. So this is one of the reasons why it’s important for me as a well known white writer to put some effort into this, to show this story, so that people will read it and not say, ‘Oh this is another two paragraphs in a newspaper. This is another thirty second TV thing about a Native person sent to jail for some horrible crime. Some kind of horrible crime has happened and a Native person is involved in it’. No. That story is all too common. Everybody knows it, certainly in Canada or Australia. It’s horrifying. You see the stories all the time. ‘Another Native suicide’, right? You never know the story behind this. You never know. And Yvonne having the incredible courage to actually tell this story, beginning with what happened to her as a two-year old in her own home. That’s where this nightmare starts and this whole thing culminates in a kind of way when she’s starting to get an almost normal life. It’s not quite normal, but it’s relatively normal what she’s living in Wetaskiwin. She’s got a husband who works hard and she’s got a family to care for, and it’s then that her nightmares start — that’s when it starts coming up out of that horrible magma of her subconscious memory. That’s why she said — ‘this murder was horrible and it happened’ — but she said, ‘If I hadn’t been in jail for that I would have come to jail for something else’. She couldn’t handle it, and her husband is the kind of man that Yvonne could care for and he helped her a lot but was not one to help her solve her problems.... It’s her entire life that she has to relive. So this is part of the reason why this story, if she has the courage to tell it, should be told in such a way that we can grasp it, and the response that she has had over the years to it has been quite fabulous.

MJ: *Can I follow through with the question about reciprocity? You’re talking in terms of mainstream Canada.*

RW: Well, the society in Canada that controls the way our world is.

MJ: *I’d also like to ask in what way you see the book, given Yvonne’s ancestry, giving back to the Cree Nation?*

RW: Her emphasis on Cree spirituality is a very important thing; but you know, Native people are not automatically good people. They’ve got the same range within them as everybody. The thing that she gives back, in a certain way, beyond that spirituality, is this kind of mirror to the way Native society in Canada has become. You can’t go on blaming forever,

blaming white people for this, blaming white people for everything. There is a certain kind of human responsibility that every human being has, and you can't say forever, 'We've been wrecked by Residential schools and alcohol and it's all the White Man's fault'. There are plenty of examples of Native people who are not wrecked by that, who rise above it and go beyond that, but there are so many who say, 'The White Man is all at fault. Give us more money'. The Hobbema Reserve just outside of Wetaskiwin is a good example. They have unbelievable amounts of money. Money just makes it worse if you don't handle it right. Money doesn't cure anybody of anything. So that is another thing that the book gives back to the Cree people. This is the way particularly Cree women suffer in the whole scheme of things, of the social structure. The men get beat up somewhere and then come home and beat up their women and abuse their children. Then the women beat the children and the children beat the dog, or something like that. There's this horrible sequence of abuse that goes from top to bottom and Cree men can be as bad as anything a white man can do to you if you are a Cree woman. And that's what the book gives back, I think, in spades. A person is not all good and all bad either. This is one of the things that I ran into with Yvonne's mother. She would never talk to me. I said, 'Look, Yvonne wants to tell her story and she's telling it to me and if you talk to me, maybe this would help in getting the story told better'. Her father was wonderfully helpful to me, her father who abused her! But he's an old guy now and visiting him was one of the major experiences of helping this book come into existence because of all the help he gave me, not only in the way he talked but in the things he gave me: school records, photographs, maps, newspaper articles, things like that. I dug up some from the Butte Standard, but he had clipped them out. He had kept them. He kept everything! That house! That was a house! That was an experience! He's still alive. [Yvonne Johnson's father passed away in 2004] If Cecilia had been as helpful as Yvonne's father, then we could have got a better image of Yvonne's Native experience. But she wouldn't do anything. She just told me off.

MJ: *Well, in the book in those interactions with family, you come across as the enemy.*

RW: Well I'm basically that still. That hasn't changed much. The book probably only confirmed their worst fears. Well, they know the story better than anybody. So if Yvonne is going to be honest about what her memories are, they know it's going to be a tough story. There are some beautiful things in the family there too, but there are some very tough things. Is that generally the case, that the collaborator is the enemy, as far as the other part of the family is concerned?

- MJ:** *No, not always. Actually, of all of the books I'm looking at, yours is the worst case scenario for that positioning because of the nature of the story.*
- RW:** The other stories that you're looking at ... they're not so ... they don't deal with this kind of issue?
- MJ:** *They don't deal with sexual abuse within the family, no.*
- RW:** Or crime, or whatever?
- MJ:** *You've said that this is the first book of its kind in Canada to go into the circumstances in such depth, the hows and the whys of the crime and the abuse.*
- RW:** Is there something similar in Australia?
- MJ:** *To my knowledge, no. There are newspaper stories and investigative journalism which looks at these issues in Aboriginal communities, but there is no book length autobiography or life story which deals with this.*
- RW:** That's interesting to know. I know of none, in the sense of a Native woman who has had the courage to talk like this. That's quite amazing. It's a pretty unique story Yvonne has told; but you see it's not a unique story. You know, when I was in Winnipeg on the book tour, a Native woman who is a columnist for the *Winnipeg Free Press* came to talk to me. She wasn't going to write the story because she couldn't write that story — it was too close to her own life. She had a colleague come and we talked together, the three of us, and then he went off and wrote the story. Then she stayed behind and told me that in Winnipeg every single Native woman that she knew had a story of some kind of vicious abuse in her life. If it wasn't happening now with her husband, it had happened in her past, either from acquaintances, or on the Reserve, in her family with her uncles, her cousins, her brothers, her father, whoever. This is horrible. Every Native woman she knew, and she must have known hundreds. She said there was a line of abuse, often sexual abuse, certainly psychological and physical abuse, in every single Native woman's life, and that was why she couldn't write about Yvonne's story. You see this book is not in any sense ... the experience is not in any sense unique. It's just the fact that Yvonne has had the courage to do it that is unique. There're hundreds of articles and TV documentaries on it but they are quick. Things are just said. They can't be just said. You have to go through and experience them.

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Subsequent to my interviews with Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, Johnson applied for consideration under the 'Faint Hope' clause, section 7.456 of the *Criminal Code* of Canada. Under this clause, a convicted prisoner may ask a judge to review her or his case to allow for an application to a jury to have the parole ineligibility period reduced. In 2005, Yvonne Johnson's 'Faint Hope' hearing was successful and, subsequently, she was granted the right to apply for parole. Her application, however, was denied. In 2006, she was granted a series of 'Unescorted Temporary Passes' which have allowed her to visit her children. To date, she continues to serve her life sentence at the Edmonton Institute for Women.



Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson. (Photo by Louise Dennys.)

CARA CILANO

‘In a World of Consequences’: An Interview with Kamila Shamsie

Kamila Shamsie was born in Karachi, Pakistan, in 1973. Educated at Hamilton College (BA) and the University of Massachusetts (MFA), Shamsie published her first novel, *In the City by the Sea*, in 1998. She has since published three more novels: *Salt and Saffron* (2000), *Kartography* (2002), and *Broken Verses* (2005). Pieces of Shamsie’s short fiction have appeared in numerous anthologies, including *Leaving Home: Towards a New Millenium* (2001) and *And the World Changed: Contemporary Stories by Pakistani Women* (2005). In Britain, Shamsie’s *In the City by the Sea* and *Kartography* have both been short-listed for the John Llewelyn Rhys/*Mail on Sunday* prize, and she has also been recognised by the Orange Prize for Fiction as one of the ‘21 writers for the 21st century’. In Pakistan, *In the City by the Sea* also won the Prime Minister’s Award for Literature in 1999, and Shamsie was recognised with the Patras Bokhari Award for Literature in English in 2004.



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In addition to this creative work, Shamsie regularly contributes to journalistic and scholarly venues, such as *The New York Times*, *New Statesman*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Index on Censorship*, and *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. She has also served on the English faculty at Hamilton College (Clinton, NY, USA), where she teaches courses in creative writing. Currently, Shamsie divides her time between London and Karachi.

In the interview that follows, Shamsie speaks to the similarities between history and fiction, especially about how Pakistan’s past — from Partition to the intranational ethnic conflicts in Karachi of the 1990s — influences her novels. Another noteworthy avenue of discussion within the interview is Shamsie’s articulation of the function of aesthetics. Merging the novel as a genre with what she views as the inherently political nature of ideas, Shamsie contends that aesthetics are about precision in representation through the use of metaphor rather than about constructing a realm outside of or above politics.

This interview began as a phone conversation in February 2006 and was completed via e-mail.

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CC: *Do novels matter at this point in time? What are your thoughts on the role of storytelling, the role of fiction in a time when it's so clear that history is written by the people with the most power?*

KS: I suppose that was always true of history, so I don't think that is what has changed so much. Actually, you could say that now, because we have so many forms of communication, so many outlets, that in some ways that balance has shifted slightly away from the people with power. You do have more voices coming out. The problem with the novel, specifically, is your readership. Particularly in a place like Pakistan, where you have very low literacy rates. When you've written a novel in English, then your readership is even smaller. You can't really make grand claims about what role your novel — or anyone's novel — might have in the nation's consciousness. That doesn't mean that I'm giving up on it. I think there's always been a place for alternative forms of narrative, and they don't have a huge and immediate impact — occasionally they do, but that's very rare. But they stick around and there's a sort of ripple effect. People can go back to them. Everything you read sort of adds up to create the sum total of who you are. That's not to be underestimated.

CC: *What was it that made you decide to pursue writing in English if you were aware of readership limitations in Pakistan?*

KS: It's the only language I know well enough to write in. I didn't have a choice. Also, I write because I love the English language. To me, even if tomorrow I went out and became fluent in something else, my desire to write is so tied up with that particular language that I can't really see a separation.

CC: *You just used the phrase, 'alternative forms of narrative'. I would be inclined to view history as a form of narrative myself. I don't know that everyone would agree with us. What brings you to this way of thinking of history as narrative?*

KS: When you grow up under a military dictator with a lot of censorship, how else are you going to think about it? We used to open the morning newspaper and see how 'official histories' are being written, but you know they're fiction. It's also interesting when you grow up so close to Partition. I remember, at a very early age — because half my family is in India — thinking how easily I might have been Indian rather than Pakistani. If I were, I know I would view things very differently. I was aware, even as a young child, that there is no such thing as the fixed truth of what happened.

- CC:** *How did it come to pass that your family split? It sounds very similar to the family in *Salt and Saffron*.*
- KS:** It's extremely similar, though not so dramatic. My family is still speaking to each other. There was no silence across the border. Both my parents' parents had siblings who stayed in India and siblings who came to Pakistan. They have different reasons: some going with the Muslim League, others sticking with Congress. Some of it had to do with economic considerations: some people wanting to stay with their land, others thinking they had a better economic future in Pakistan. There were all kinds of reasons for that happening.
- CC:** *Is it accurate to say that your family is muhajir?¹*
- KS:** Yes.
- CC:** *So there's an obvious connection to Kartography. Can you explain some of those tensions that arose in the 1980s in Karachi?*
- KS:** At Partition, Karachi went — overnight — from being a city of 100,000 to a city of one million. Now it's a city of about 15 million. When that initial influx happened, it was all muhajirs from across the border. Because they came from parts of India where education levels were higher, the muhajirs came into Karachi as the most educated group. Obviously, that's going to lead to tensions; there are always tensions between migrant communities and existing communities. When there are such huge migrations, virtually overnight, it's going to be made worse by unbalanced education levels. Especially when the smaller and newer group has the advantage. That creates even more problems. There was a quota system set up in the province of Sindh, which I'm not going to go into too much, but by the 1980s the muhajirs in Karachi felt that the quota system there, which didn't exist in any other province, was hugely acting against them.² If you were from rural parts, if you could prove such connections, it was much easier to get university admission and civil service jobs and all kinds of things. The muhajirs politicised; there was a political group — the MQM — formed. It became a strong political party in Karachi, and it was a loggerheads with the central government, Benazir Bhutto's government, over all kinds of things. A lot of violence erupted from that. That started in the '80s and really reached a crescendo in the mid-'90s, when the latter half of *Kartography* is set.
- CC:** *When one looks at the muhajirs and the tensions in Karachi, it seems that historian Ayesha Jalal's views are accurate. She contends that Partition effectively enabled the mapping of a non-territorially defined ideology of Muslim nationhood onto a territorially defined geographic region.*

- KS:** It also has to be said that the non-territorially defined people come believing that the culture they come from is superior. The muhajirs came largely from parts of India with a very strong sense of their cultural heritage — Delhi, Lucknow, and so on. They came with the attitude that we're here to be Pakistani, but we're not here to be integrated into the ethnic life of the province we find ourselves in. Just because we live in Sindh, doesn't mean we're Sindhi.
- CC:** *The muhajirs wanted to raise identity above a provincial level?*
- KS:** They were very snobbish. They simply believed and continue to — and I say this coming from a family of this sort — that they were culturally superior. They did look down on the others, and they did have a sense that their way was better than the way of those who lived in the area. That was part of the tension. There was no question of integrating or amalgamating. Of course, the snobbery works both ways. I have sat in rooms listening to Punjabi friends of mine making horribly disparaging comments about muhajirs.
- CC:** *These are the sorts of ingrained tensions that, in Kartography, both Raheen and Karim are dealing with. Where would you put Karim? As a boy, he seems sensitive to this snobbery and privilege but, toward the end, he wants to embrace that superiority so that he and Raheen, as a couple, don't have to face all these difficulties. Raheen seems to be on a separate track.*
- KS:** The dividing factor in Pakistan, more than anything else, is class ... and also the snobbery of class. Raheen and Karim both belong to the upper middle class — the elite who, regardless of their ethnicity, are able to live in a certain bubble and not deal too much with anything else that's going on. Karim is a lot more sensitive than Raheen, particularly as a child, to everything that's going on. Then he moves away to England, and it's that odd sense of dislocation where you want to be passionately involved with something that you're not actually actively a part of. In his case, Karim writes all these letters to Raheen in which he gets upset over how she's not engaged enough with the place, but he never goes home to Pakistan. Raheen then thinks that it's easy enough for him to talk about, but she lives there. Karim just stays away and rants at her. I think that when Karim wants to slip away from the world he has grown up in simply so that he does not have to deal with the problems of ethnicity, privilege, and so forth, it's not really Karim's true self. It's a moment of pure exhaustion. He doesn't want to deal with it; he just wants Raheen in his life. By the end, Karim comes back: if we need to figure anything out, it's how are we going to exist in this class/nation context. Otherwise, it's not worth it.

- CC:** *If class is such a dividing force in the nation, as you've just described Karim and Raheen's love relationship, it suggests that there's no protective cover around one's personal life. Is there a divide — perhaps a permeable one — between one's personal and public positions?*
- KS:** In a way, yes. Both Karim and Raheen have to figure out a way to negotiate a personal self through all these issues of the public sphere; but you can't simply ignore the public sphere. All these issues of class and ethnicity and history and ethnic divide aren't just a part of the nation's history, but they've also become a part of your family's history. They become part of your daily life and how you interact with those around you. So, you have to take all that on board.
- CC:** *In Kartography, there is also the story of Maheen and Bangladesh. How are these class and ethnicity issues tied to this other storyline?*
- KS:** That storyline deals more with the ethnic problems. Maheen and Zafar both belong to the same social class. They mingle quite freely regardless of ethnic grouping. However, there comes a point in history when suddenly ethnicity exerts a kind of primary pull. You can't get away from it. You can't get away from the fact that Maheen is Bengali and that Zafar isn't. That leads to the rift between them. Zafar, much like Raheen, his daughter, later, is happy just to say, 'Let's ignore it. It doesn't really matter'. Of course, it comes in because of the public sphere pressing against you, making demands on you.
- CC:** *You used the word 'dislocation' when you were talking about Karim's departure from Karachi. I'm interested in this notion of 'dislocation', because, in several of your books, there is always this movement away. There's a return, too. How does this movement function in your fiction?*
- KS:** Different purposes. With Karim, it's very much about that sense of dislocation. He actually migrates, whereas the others — Aliya in *Salt and Saffron*, Raheen in *Kartography*, for instance — go away for university but come back to Pakistan. They're only away eight months of the year. Going away serves different purposes. When I started *Salt and Saffron*, I saw Aliya on an airplane. What is significant in that beginning when Aliya is in England is the people she meets there, rather than the place itself. There's irony in the fact that it's in England where Aliya can meet her Indian relatives, because they would never meet in Karachi. The 'going away' is used there to get Aliya to meet her relatives and to get her to meet a boy whom she would never meet in Karachi.
- It is a sociological fact; I never thought, 'will these characters go away or not?' It was just clear from their backgrounds that they would. If they didn't, then their not going away would become this big thing that would

need to be dealt with. I didn't particularly want that to be part of the story. So, now they've gone away; let's do something with that. For Aliya, it's being in England and meeting these relatives; but I didn't want her to be studying in England, because then she would meet them over a prolonged period of time. I wanted there to be just a short visit, and she meets Khaleel and her Indian relatives, and then she leaves again.

In *Kartography*, with Raheen, I wanted there to be a going away that in some way could have moved her closer to Karim and then didn't. But finally there's a way for her to experience being away from home ... and to miss home. Perhaps that should have brought Raheen and Karim closer together, but it doesn't — yet. I did want to have it be a way for her to have a stronger sense of Karachi as this place that she misses and loves, particularly because she's away when all the violence is going on. I think it strengthens her sense of being tied to the place. As she's in this university world, where everything is sort of bucolic and idyllic around her, she's away from this other world in which things are completely falling apart. She knows that this second world really is her world. Being away at university serves that function, to make her feel more strongly that she needs to go back.

- CC:** *From this quote, it sounds much like Sara Suleri's realisation in Meatless Days that she 'became historical, a creature gravely ready to admit that significance did not sit upon someone else's table like a magazine to which one could or could not subscribe' (127). Why does dislocation work in this way? Is it maturity? Responsibility?*
- KS:** I think it's a few things. One is the issue of maturity. For Raheen, it's between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. When you're at university, it's the first time really you're being asked to interrogate ideas. It's the early '90s, everyone's talking about identity politics in American universities. If you grow up in one place your entire life, you never actually question the place or your relationship to it. You're simply in it; and then you leave and go away into the questioning environment of the university. You're missing that place in ways you weren't expecting to, so the place becomes very much the centre of how you're framing your past. When you're at university in America, there's lots of questions that will be asked there. You have to find a way to make them relevant to your own experience. At that point, the strongest experience you're having right then is not being home. The relationship between you and the place itself becomes one that you start thinking about.
- CC:** *In Salt and Saffron, when Aliya is in London meeting her relatives and Khaleel, she starts using the vocabulary of postcolonial discourse. When you talk about being away from home and about interrogating these ideas*

at school, does the predominance of postcolonial studies assist in this? How does it not turn into a kind of nostalgia? An exclusivist, rigidified identity, that questing back for roots?

- KS:** I think one effect of the characters' considering their connection to place would be to make you question postcolonial studies, which seems like a hankering back to 1947 and even pre-, when you feel that the problems of your nation are so far past that already. To be entirely frank, when I was in university going to postcolonial classes, I would think, 'why are we talking about this stuff?' It's so not relevant. It might have been relevant to my parents' lives, but we're a completely different generation now. Our vexed relationship with subaltern positions or with the English is just not an issue. That makes you feel, on one hand, impatient with postcolonial discourse. On the other hand, at its best, it asks you to question the relationship of nations to each other, the relationships of different communities to a nation, of the individual to the nation, to the community. Yet, I am not sure how much of it Aliya takes on board. She's very flippant about it. Aliya has this great mechanism of being able to be very witty and bright in a way that often allows her not to think deeply about it. If you were to ask her a question in a classroom, she would have a very quick response but it wouldn't be a deep response.
- CC:** *All three of your women protagonists — Aliya, Aasmani, and Raheen — have that witty veneer. Though we, as readers, can see that all three of them have a deeper awareness of what's going on.*
- KS:** It's the strongest in Aliya; Raheen isn't quite as witty. She's funny with Karim, but she doesn't have Aliya's wit. So, Raheen is less able to charm her way through the world. With Aasmani, it's much more brittle. You can see the hurt much easier because there's so much she's trying to cover up. They all use their intelligence as a defense mechanism in a way that also works against them.
- CC:** *At a lecture here at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, Sara Suleri-Goodyear talked about generations. The first generation after Partition had the responsibility to establish what it meant to be a writer of Pakistan or of India. That's the older generation. What is the responsibility of this younger generation of writers of/from Pakistan?*
- KS:** The 'younger generation' certainly goes along with the topic of alternate forms of history that we talked about. Writers like myself, Mohsin Hamid, and Uzma Aslam Khan, who are all born within three or four years of each other — Sorayya Khan is just a few years older, but I'll put her in there as well — I think it's a question of, okay, we've got the nation, now what? There are so many areas of silence specifically in English language

literature in Pakistan. Urdu language literature is another matter. There's so much that hasn't been written about in English, whether it's the '71 war, the nuclear tests, or what happened in Karachi in the '90s, the Baluchistan stuff which no one has touched yet. Maybe in some ways by looking at them we're looking at the nation as it now exists and what's going on in it. I think it's still a question of nation because Pakistan is still such a young country. I don't think any of those initial problems are over; maybe more is getting added to them.

CC: *Earlier you talked about how issues of class, ethnicity, and history are tied up in the public sphere of the nation to the extent that they inexorably affect personal lives, as Raheen's and Karim's struggles demonstrate. Is your characterisation of the second generation of writers as still concerned with the problems of the nation also contending that these young writers are changing the novel as a genre — by which I mean: are these young writers somehow rendering the private aspects of novel-reading more public?*

KS: If there's an absence of the separation between the private and public, as we were talking about earlier, the novel must reflect that. The novel is essentially an individualist, private act — but even private acts don't exist in isolation. So, you read as a private individual in a certain public sphere.

CC: *What sorts of ways can novelistic conventions be altered so that readers have to acknowledge that they're engaging in the public sphere?*

KS: I don't think I'm saying anything radical of the novel. If you're in a political context, everything becomes political. The novel itself does not necessarily have to alter its form for that politicisation to happen. When the novel is really working, it is a way of using narrative to explore ideas — whether they're about love, nation, whatever it is. The novel explores ideas. You can't separate ideas from politics. To say that the novel is ever un-political is a false notion to begin with.

CC: *In your most recent three novels, you draw attention to the act of story-telling. In *Broken Verses*, this self-consciousness is accomplished through Ed's impersonation of the Poet. Can you talk about drawing attention to story-telling and the voice of the story-teller?*

KS: History and story are things that you can come at from different angles. The idea of there being a lot of different narratives going on at any given time in any given place is something that I was very interested in thinking about in *Broken Verses*. You can have one narrative about feminism in Pakistan saying it failed, or you can have another saying, here is this

incredible force that you now have to continue on with. Within Aasmani's generation there's a responsibility to recognise the powerful narrative that you can continue on from. With Ed's impersonation, I wanted to talk about the different narratives and how convincing one can be. You realise that there's actually another way of looking at something entirely. Perhaps a certain version of things was fed to you to create a certain specific reaction, to make you believe something that was never true to begin with.

- CC:** *How can we, as readers of your books — specifically — and as humans bombarded by narratives all the time, know when we can settle on something? Or is it always contingent?*
- KS:** You settle on the versions that seem truest to you. Near the end of *Broken Verses*, Aasmani says something like, 'This is the story I'm making up for myself; it's the one I'm willing to live with'. I don't think that means it's not to be trusted. There are many stories that are co-existing. Some of them are entirely false, and you have to see the falseness in them. Even among the true stories, there are different ways of looking at them. The way you look at them says a lot about who you are, what you believe, and what you're willing to stand up for. The books we read also shape our ideas of the world and what we believe of it.
- CC:** *Is Aasmani's relationship with her mother meant to demonstrate that feminism in Pakistan has failed?*
- KS:** No. I meant that the perceived failure of feminism in Pakistan was one narrative. Aasmani's failure, at the beginning of the book, grows out of her anger, her resentment, her feelings of abandonment. So, one of the things she does is to say that her mother's feminism was for nothing. By the end of the book, when she's watching the video Shahnaz sends her, her mother's saying, 'What really matters is what the next generation — Aasmani's generation — thinks of us because history is a rolling process. The seeds of what we have sown now may not bear fruit for many years'. What Aasmani then realises is that what counted most was that initial incredible stand they took and that you can't expect them to have done everything, to have fixed the world. You can't sit back and say, 'Well, they didn't fix the world, so why bother'. Instead, you have to say, 'I'm the child of that. They did what they could. Now I have to pick it up and move forward'. That's the position that I think Aasmani is inching toward at the end. I didn't want Aasmani to have the grand epiphany and suddenly become the great reformer.
- CC:** *Considering Broken Verses' ending ... you were just saying that the previous generation took a stand and embarked upon this battle or this conflict, how does the younger generation carry that forward? Is it always*

a process of assessment? Is it always trying to maintain the ground that was already won or is it a new project?

- KS:** It's always going to be the old situation of patriarchy, of course, though its manifestations may change. With Aasmani, it hasn't; the laws her mother was fighting against are still on the books. Some of those situations have stayed the same, but the world in many ways has moved forward. One of the things that Aasmani's generation has available to it that her mother's didn't is a much freer media. This is one of the only suggestions I have of Aasmani moving forward: her saying, 'Let's use the media in some way'. That is one way you have a different battleground, so that you don't have ten thousand women marching on the capital. Suddenly you've got the internet, the television, the radio; you've got all these other channels of reaching people; and then you have to then sit back and say: 'How can we use this? These are tools that we didn't have before. And we need to figure out what to do with them'.
- CC:** *At the beginning of this conversation, you confessed your admiration of the English language. Clearly this is tied to an aesthetic sense. Your piece on Agha Shahid Ali includes this wonderful line about pondering every word. You recall that you were skeptical; you didn't think it was possible that you would become that interested in language. At the same time, I hear you talking about your characters and your stories as real, as other human beings. Where does the aesthetic realm exist for you in your work, and how does it connect to what we will call 'reality'?*
- KS:** Aesthetics is the form I use to convey notions of reality. Here's an idea, now let's find an aesthetic form to translate that into; or let's see how I can discuss these things using language in the best way I know how to use it. Aesthetics isn't just about prettiness, of course. Ultimately, it's about being able to take whatever your medium is — whether it's clay or language or your own body, if you're a dancer — and deploying it with utter precision. Convey what it is you want to convey in a way that will strike other people.
- CC:** *I was just reading Speaking Havoc, which is an analysis of literary and cinematic trauma in South Asia. The author talks about the idea of aestheticising trauma and how that runs the risk of turning the trauma into a spectacle rather than turning it into an event with ethical implications.*
- KS:** I think the word 'aesthetics' tends to be used in a variety of ways. The way I've tried to define — it's not about, 'Oh, look, isn't this pretty' — it is about precision. I've been reading W.G. Sebald's *A Natural History of Destruction* where he talks about the failure of German writers to adequately deal with the firebombing of German cities. He says that when

they do try to write about it, they fail because they turn to aesthetics; their treatment sort of makes it prettified. I wondered how he wanted them to deal with it. Then, I read in a later part of the book a passage where Sebald approvingly quotes a passage which talks about destruction through powerful metaphor. For me, the use of metaphor is very much part of aesthetics. These distinctions we make to characterise aesthetics vary a lot. I think we need to avoid any way of making things pretty just to make them pretty even if the thing we are describing isn't pretty at all. Aesthetics has to be about affects. So you want your sentences to produce a certain effect. Aesthetics is the way you figure out the best way to do that.

CC: *I appreciate that articulation and your use of the word 'precision'. That word and your emphasis on affect recognises how any sort of representation is going to mediate what it's trying to represent. This aesthetic mediation, though, isn't meant to detach what's being represented from its contexts and its consequences. Which brings me to the phrase you used in your 'Migrate or Die' piece published in Index on Censorship: 'in a world of consequences'. Am I getting a glimpse of some unified way that you interact with the world through your writing? Precision — affect — consequences.*

KS: I think it's a sense of what I want to be doing. How well I'm doing is another matter. On the one hand, a novel is an artefact, a work of art but, on the other hand, it's a work of art that is placed within a world of consequences. I do have both these things in mind when I'm working on them. Hopefully, they shouldn't work against each other, but should inform each other in some way.

CC: *What is the next project you're working on?*

KS: The next project is a novel which spans sixty years. It starts with the bombing of Nagasaki. I've decided to move out of Pakistan for a bit.

CC: *How do you approach this? Are you doing tonnes and tonnes of research?*

KS: Tonnes. It's a novel that moves around. It starts in Nagasaki then moves to Delhi, Karachi, then moves to Turkey. It goes all over the place. While I was working on the Nagasaki portion, for every sentence I wanted to write, I found myself on the internet for hours checking various facts and details and going to the reference books I have. There is a different kind of work that goes into this section even though it's only about forty-five pages. Quite possibly it required more work than the next two hundred pages will.

CC: *Is it a nuclear thread that connects all of these places?*

- KS:** I started thinking it would be a nuclear thread, but it seems to want to be a migrant thread. One of the things that I've been looking at is this idea of, as people move from one place to another, what is their relationship to the place they move to and to the place they leave behind? Also, what is the relationship of the people already existing in a place to the newcomers? It looks at the latter half of the twentieth-century through a series of migrations and movements.
- CC:** *Tell me what you mean when you say that you thought it would be a nuclear thread but it wants to be about migration. How does your narrative get away from you?*
- KS:** It always does. Every time. The novel shapes itself. That's why I talk about my characters as though they're real: they end up doing things which can be very vexing but fabulous. To start with, I had the question of how could there be, in Nagasaki, a second bomb. How there could be a first bomb, I don't know — but how do you defend a second bomb? This has been in my head since I was about eighteen. So I thought, let's start a novel there. As soon as I put characters into that place, they wanted to go and do their own thing. There's a character who will migrate to Nagasaki and another who will migrate away from it. Very quickly I realised that was the thread I would follow.
- CC:** *Mentioning Nagasaki and the reality of two bombs makes me wonder how people who have perpetrated barbaric acts can carry on into the future in good faith. How do we Americans carry on? I also think about Musharraf in 2002 acknowledging what happened between the Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in 1971. What do you think about the victors carrying on and remaining human?*
- KS:** One thing we need to recognise is that they do and they are. The fact that Truman could drop one bomb and then a second bomb doesn't mean he didn't madly love his wife, for instance; but frankly, that doesn't mean a thing to the people of Nagasaki or Hiroshima, and why should it? I think one of the ways people carry on after their own barbaric acts is that it's so easy to justify so much. You say things like, 'they were hard decisions that had to be made'. That's language being used at its worst, when it's being used simply to justify, to ease a conscience. It's very effective. You really can convince yourself and many people around you of pretty much anything.

NOTES

- ¹ 'Muhajir' literally means 'migrant'. In post-Partition Pakistan it is the term used to refer to those people who journeyed across the new border from India to Pakistan.

Unlike other Pakistanis who may have regional and linguistic loyalties within Pakistan's borders due to their pre-Partition ties to places, muhajirs may be more readily identified as Pakistanis invested in the Muslim League's ideological concept of Pakistan as a nation for Muslims.

- ² This quota system was established to benefit the native Sindhis, who faced competition from the newly-arrived muhajirs, a generally better educated and trained, not to mention wealthier, segment of the population.

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