

**INTERVIEW WITH  
JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG**

## **My Interview with Okanagan Educator and Indigenous Rights Activist**

### **Jeannette Armstrong**

Jeannette Armstrong (1948- ) is a significant modern Canadian novelist and an indigenous rights activist. Armstrong believes that the process of writing as a native person has been healing one because she has uncovered the fact that she is not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not less because she has brown skin, or a native philosophy. The following interview has been taken through e-mail in August 2009.

N.M. - Naziya Modak

J.A. - Jeannette Armstrong

**N.M. Would you please tell me something about your inspiration behind all the activities that you have carried throughout your life?**

J.A. My inspiration has always been the teachings of my people, in terms of how we as humans "ought" to relate with reverence to the rest of the life-forms we live with on our lands.

**N.M. In the period of Globalization do you think whether the next generation will accept whatever hard efforts you have taken for the native people and will they really shoulder their responsibility?**

J.A. One of the teachings of my people is that we as humans are but a part of a larger system, and our individual efforts therefore do have effects in ways we cannot make assumptions about. So we can choose to assume that our efforts will be wasted or we can do our best assuming that each thing we do will have an effect and if we do all we can within our spheres of influence, then there will be many small outcomes which all together could effect a greater change. I have been fortunate to see real change outcomes in the 30 years of work for the revitalization of our language and culture, which at its centre is most compassionate to nature.

**N.M. What suggestions you would like to bestow to other tribes all over Canada to preserve their culture?**

J.A. My suggestions is that our languages, which are endangered toward extinction, are as priority to restore to everyday use. Those languages represent the diversity of response to the natural world, as Indigenous languages and contain important messages related to sustainable living within the natural world.

**N.M. Your first and most important novel *SLASH* is really very interesting with its protest theme. Is it somehow related to your real life?**

J.A. In a thematic way it is. Not in biographical life circumstance, although I was involved in some of the actual historical events and incidents described and incorporated into the novel's structure. For those reasons it has been critiqued as a historical or political novel as well as a work of "creative non-fiction" because the historical events and incidents as well as the settings and some public characters are historically true, while the main characters are fictional.

**N.M. Being an eminent female writer, it would have been more convenient for you to describe the events taking the female character, then why have you selected Tommy Kelasket i.e. the male character as a protagonist?**

J.A. Two reasons. First, I wished to create a change narrative. That is I wished to change the narrative of the colonized aboriginal male from rage, destruction and hopelessness, to one of traditional indigenous values, comprised of understanding, healing and compassion. Second, the historical period of the 1960's to the 1980's saw a great change in our Aboriginal communities in which women worked to stand up the men of our

communities whose spirit was crushed by the weight of cultural violence and domination.

**N.M. Has any other community got inspired seeing your struggle and tried/ trying to preserve their culture in the same way as you are doing?**

J.A. Absolutely. I give workshops and talks in aboriginal communities all over Canada and the USA to inspire and to provide ideas and methods.

**N.M. What was your real intention behind writing the novel *Slash*?**

J.A. To correct some of the terrible lies and misconceptions about that time period from an insider view.

**N.M. You are such a marvelous and enthusiastic person who is striving for her people in its real sense. But are you satisfied with whatever activities or efforts that you have carried till now?**

J.A. Of course, if I died tomorrow, I feel I would have made a difference in a positive way.

**N.M. I am highly impressed by your willingness to participate in vivid activities for your people. But I want to know about your future desires, whether you would like to continue the previous activities on**

**which you have worked on or would you like to commence other activities?**

J.A. I am mostly involved in trying to contribute to the dialogue related to environment, since that is central to the Okanagan ethics and practices. I do a lot of work with non-aboriginal organizations on social changes toward the care of nature.

**N.M. You are such a hard worker, that you have done a lot of exertion throughout your life. Have really people taken your exertions into considerations, in what aspect?**

J.A. I am a humble person, but yes, in some ways that may be of some future significance. In particular with notable thinkers and international organizations involved in the work of ecological literacy, the development of a gift economy and sustainable community.

**N.M. Generally it is an opinion that the children of a particular member should follow their parents. Is it true that your children too are interested in carrying out such activities for their people? As you are.**

J.A. Yes, in their own creative ways.

**N.M. Is there any culture of the surrounding communities that influenced you? How?**

J.A. Yes. I have always been influenced by other communities whose spiritual practice bridges the divide between the human and nature.

**N.M. It is said that child is better known in its cradle. So I want you to ask that when you were of fifteen years, when you started writing and now nearly in your sixties, what difference occurred in your opinion regarding an Okanagan culture?**

J.A. I think the greatest difference is that many children of the Okanagan are now growing up with pride and dignity in their identity rather than the few of us who lived traditional lives as Okanagans back then.

**N.M. Thinkers always have some debates in their mind. So as you are the writer you might also have some debate in your mind regarding the activities which you have made possible, is that debate continued or ceased?**

J.A. I think that the debate about the overwhelming odds against cultural recovery have shifted in my favour, however, the spheres of influence related to the

environment and its recovery has worsened, and so the debate continues whether efforts will make any differences there.

**N. M. Being an activist, being so busy a person now at this age what is your daily routine?**

J.A. I teach and work at En'owkin for 8 hours, come home and play, work and teach my four grandchildren, and enjoy the work of gathering and preparing traditional foods with my family out on the land as much as I can during daylight hours about 3 or 4 hours a day and all day on weekends and holidays. At night I write or read for an average of 3 or 4 hours nightly or carry out family oriented counseling or visiting with younger members to advise. I sleep for 6-7 hours now. I used to only require 4-5 hours of sleep, given the high energy system my body was adjusted for in my puberty training.

**N.M. How do you relate yourself with the English tradition of novel writing?**

J.A. Not well. It was a convenience for the message, but I enjoyed subverting its narrow delineation in western literary tradition.



**N.M. How would you assess your own writing in the Global context?**

J.A. I believe that the Aboriginal and Indigenous voice has value for the Global context in terms of Indigeneity as social paradigm and consequently promote authentic Aboriginal voice which can be accessed globally.

**N.M. Have you, by any chance, been related with India? Would you like to say something about Indian cultural ethos/ literature?**

J.A. I do have interest in Indian cultural ethos and literature and find aspects of spiritual practice and ritual that resonate with my own cultural understanding. I am not well read in contemporary literatures, although have dabbled in readings in English of sacred text, since that is an area of particular interest to me.

**N.M. What message you would like to convey for the present generation all over the world?**

J.A. Unless we as humans can intelligently construct a way in which to live as a part of the great reciprocity which is nature, we remain unenlightened, uneducated and failures in the greater scheme of our planets life force. Perhaps Indigeneity as a social paradigm is important

to understand and creating a definition for, setting principles and practice in a contemporary context which will shift the paradigm of global aggressions destroying our environment.



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