



Voices from the Gaps

Joy Harjo

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I believe those so-called ‘womanly’ traits are traits of the warrior. Vulnerability is one, you know. The word, warrior, it applies to women just as well. I don’t see it as exclusive to a male society. Male and female traits are within each human, anyway. I’ve known some of the greatest warriors in my life. They’ve stood up in the face of danger, in the face of hopelessness. They’ve been brave--not in the national headlines, but they’ve been true to themselves, and who they are, and to their families. Their act of bravery could have been to feed their children, to more than survive.

— From an interview with Helen Jaskoski

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Biography

On May 9, 1951, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the daughter of Allen W. and Wynema Baker Foster was born and enrolled as a member of the Creek tribe. The talented Native American, Joy Harjo, came from a family of Muscogee painters which she herself planned on becoming. Harjo is not a full-blood Native American and she did not live on the reservation. However, she is a full member of the Muscogee tribe. At the age of sixteen, she moved to the Southwest to attend the Institute of American Indian Arts. Switching her major from art to poetry, Harjo graduated from the University of New Mexico with a B.A. in poetry in 1976. Harjo then received her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Iowa in 1978.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1951
- * Native American poet
- * Member of the Muscogee tribe

This page was researched and submitted by Sarah Mischler and Scott Christensen on 11/23/96.



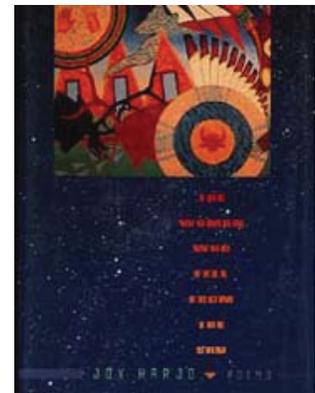
Joy Harjo

Biography continued

Approaching poetry as a visual artist, she brought her writing to a professional level. Harjo taught at the Institute of American Indian Arts, Arizona State University, and the University of Colorado, before becoming part of the English department at University of New Mexico in 1990. In addition to her busy lifestyle, she has a son named Phil and a daughter named Rainy Dawn.

The love of language that Harjo possesses comes from her father's grandfather who was a full-blood Creek Baptist minister and her mother who composed songs that could translate heartache. Other important influences include Leslie Silko, Simon Ortiz, Galway Kinnell, and Leo Remero. She attended class with Leslie Silko and Galway Kinnell which inspired her to become a poet and use the beauty of words to her advantage. Since that time, Joy has released six major books containing her powerful works of poetry. *The Last Song* (1975), *What Moon Drove Me to This* (1979), *She Had Some Horses* (1983), *Secrets from the Center of the World* (1989), *In Mad Love and War* (1990), and *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* (1994) are Harjo's pieces to her poetic puzzle. Besides writing poetry, Joy is a member of a band called Poetic Justice that combines music with poetry. She has also many screen writing credits, including teleplays, public service announcements, and public broadcasting/educational television work. Joy has and continues to edit several literary journals, including the *High Plains Literary Review*, *Tyuonyi*, and *Contact II*.

Beginning to experiment with words, Harjo displayed the significance of the Southwest landscape where she grew up. *The Last Song*, which was published in 1975, often linked the landscape to the idea of survival. Also in *The Last Song*, the poem "3 A.M." mentions the balance between contemporary American life and ancient tribal truths, which Harjo blends together magnificently. Throughout her six major books, the idea of survival is central to the individual and the Native Americans as a people. In "The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window" from *She Had Some Horses* (1983) an Indian woman hangs from a window ledge, contemplating suicide. Harjo brilliantly attaches the reader to the character, allowing them to imagine themselves hanging and weighing the options of life and death.





Joy Harjo

Biography continued

The essence of survival creates a strong base for much of her work. Building onto earlier works, Harjo strengthens her ability to build concrete poems. For example, the desire to find meaning, both personal and universal, with the concept of mythic space remains a main theme in her poetry. The mythic space represents all of the matter in the world that remains unexplainable, yet is too important to be ignored. It began with “Black birds,” “Winter Sun,” “3 A.M.,” and “Space,” from *The Last Song*, which all deal with the distance between the mythic and mundane. Even in her recent book, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, which was published in 1994, the concept of mythic space remains.

Critics have several different views on Harjo’s work throughout her writing career. Some believe Harjo attempts to be too passive or carries a banner for too many causes. Viewing Harjo’s poetry for the first time may lead the reader to think this way; however, the ideas she relays to the reader have deep and powerful meanings that exist inside the words. Harjo does not tell her readers how to feel, but instead tells the truth as she sees it. Also, her poetry is not about being “politically correct” but instead about continuance and survival. While all Native American cultures value the powers of memory, Harjo’s poems bring to non-Native American readers an awareness and understanding of the strength of memory. A harmonious balance is achieved in Harjo’s poetry in the combination of the past and present, of the mythic and mundane. Harjo has received many awards for her work, including the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, the Poetry Society of America’s William Carlos Williams Award, and the American Indian Distinguished Achievement Award, as well as other grants and fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1978. With a powerful voice and a clear vision, Joy Harjo moves in and out of the realms of dream and reality, hope and despair, and survival and extinction, pulling together the diverse strands into a harmonious, balanced whole.



Joy Harjo

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