



VG Interview: Susan Power

Shari Oslos (SO): Have you read what critics had written about your first book, *The Grass Dancer*?

Susan Power (SP): I'm sure I've missed things here and there but I've read some of it.

SO: How do you feel the critics have responded the most to your book?

SP: From most of what I read it was really positive. That was a nice surprise because you just don't know what to expect. It always made me feel pretty good. . . I didn't really read one where they made me really angry or I thought, "Oh, they are just so wrong." I just feel like this is interesting.

SO: Were the critics saying things that you kind of expected them to say?

SP: Well, the one thing that people mentioned over and over, although I actually do disagree with this, is they talk about how my work is an example of magical realism and making references to writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez. I really feel that given the culture I was raised in, this is not magical realism, this is actual reality to me. It might not be another culture's reality but it is not a literary strategy for me. I'm really writing character's reality. It never offends me when critics characterize it that way because I understand where that's coming from. It's their cultural interpretation. But I think it's a mislabeling so whenever I get the chance to talk about it I always mention that. But it's not something that upsets me.

Interview by: Shari
Oslos
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SO: What do you expect readers to get out of *The Grass Dancer*?

SP: I'm really good this way, I have no agenda whatsoever. I don't write with an agenda where I think, "Ooh, I want to teach them this." I really write out characters' stories. The characters come to me unbidden. I don't ask for them to come, but they sort of start haunting me and I have to figure out what their stories are. So really I know that it's something beyond my control; what a reader makes of my work is beyond my control. I'm just always amazed people read my work. It's just always kind of a little dull to me and I think, "Oh, this seems pretty obvious." It's a world that I'm so familiar with that it doesn't seem all that interesting. Once I've figured out the story it's like, "Well, there we are. Okay, goodbye."

I guess one thing that concerns me is that because my characters happen to be Indian, I worry a little that people read it and think, "Oh, this is what it's like to be Sioux" or "This is what it's like on a reservation." This is just a human experience. If you have five different reservation Indians you're going to have five entirely different experiences. So, I guess I worry too much that people read my work sometimes as history or as sociology, or as ethnography, when it's really fiction. That is all it's meant to be.

SO: Did you consciously model some of your characters on real people?

SP: Not consciously, purposely, but I think like most writers we certainly draw on bits and pieces of people we're familiar with. There are some incidents in the book that are definitely inspired by things that have happened to me. I have this chapter that is called "The Medicine Hole," where they're searching for this Medicine Hole and when I was fourteen years old my mother and my aunt and another aunt dragged me out on a hot summer day in North Dakota. It's so dusty and it's so dirty and there are all these snakes, and I'm really a city kid and they're making me look for this damn Medicine Hole. And I was like, "Aargh, we're never gonna find this." This is not my idea of a good time. So, you know, that kind of thing I'll remember when I'm sitting down to write, and all of a sudden it will become this whole other story.



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SO: How long did it take you to write *The Grass Dancer*?

SP: Well, the first one looks like it was easy compared to how long the second one [*War Bundles*] has taken. [*Grass Dancer* took] two and a half years. I sold it to a publisher before it was finished and so I had a deadline. I'm a procrastinator so all of a sudden I realized I had like two months before the deadline and I had half a book to write, so I wrote half of it in eight weeks. Actually, some of stuff that I wrote in my crunch time was my favorite. I am somebody who often produces some of my best work under serious pressure. But I don't recommend this.

SO: Do you have a favorite character from the novel?

SP: He doesn't have many pages but I love animals, so Chuck Norris is one of my favorites. I love dogs and cats, and in this next book I have this great gnarly old cat named Nixon and I have so much fun with him. But probably the real major person in the book who, I think actually is the Grass Dancer of the title, even though she is not a literal Grass Dancer, is Cuwignaka Duta, or Red Dress from the 1860s. Because grass for me, in the book, represents the preservation of culture. I feel like she is the heroine. Even though she does some terrible things, I think for the highest of reasons, she became like a heroine for me. So she is probably my favorite character, the one that inspires me the most. Although I have no intention of going around trying to kill people.

SO: You mentioned your next book, and I have read that there are possibly two other books coming out soon?

SP: I think one of those may be a mix-up; there is another author named Susan Power and sometimes things get confused. I just sent off another installment [of *War Bundles*] to my publisher today, thank God. So that will be coming out then a month after I hand it in. Then I have another novel I have contracted to do with them but that will be another couple years.

SO: Say more about the title of your new book.

SP: I want to call it *War Bundles*, but I don't know if the publishers will let me or not because they were worried about having "war" in the title, and they think it will scare off women readers. We'll see what happens.



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SO: You've probably looked at your page on *Voices From the Gaps*.

SP: No, this is all new to me because, as far as computers, I did most of my novel having just a typewriter. Actually I always write longhand first and that doesn't change even though I have a computer and all that. So I just use my computer to type in my work eventually and so I've never been on the Internet and I don't have e-mail, I don't know anything about any of that stuff. People are always like, "What's your e-mail address?" And I'm like, "Hello, I have no e-mail. You have to actually call me or write me. That's it."

SO: What brought you to St. Paul?

SP: I'm from the Midwest, I'm from Chicago, and I had been living on the East Coast for a long time I was tired of it. I wanted to come back to the Midwest and, I had these Native writer friends who were telling me I should really think of the Twin Cities and so three years ago I just moved here. I really like it; it's sort of like having all the benefits of Chicago but not as many of the difficulties; not as crowded.

SO: Is there anything specific that you would like people to know either about you or your work?

SP: I am always so amazed that people are interested at all in my work, or that it gets taught; that's always a shock to me. I guess maybe, the thing that's important to me is that, like so many of other writers I have a lot of other interests and a lot of other things I love doing and, actually I nearly went into acting, I mean I just love performing -- singing, dancing, choreography, all of that -- which is wonderful to have that background as a writer because we have to give performances so much of our work. So it helps to be able to get up and be dramatic or funny or whatever. So, I think people think of writers as just living in this little closet somewhere and that's all we do. Most of the writers I know have all kinds of other things they do as well.

SO: Is there absolutely anything that you don't want them to see on the Web site?

SP: Only baby pictures you don't have access to.



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SO: Also, we're having a hard time finding biographical information about you. Is there anything you'd like to share?

SP: I was born in Chicago, in 1961. My dad was born in Ithaca, New York but lived in Albany, New York. My mom is from the Standing Rock reservation from Fort Yeats, North Dakota. I've been married but am now divorced and set up my ex-husband with the woman he is married to presently and I went to their wedding. So I'm a good loser. Not much all that interesting. I was in school for way too long. I graduated from Harvard at college and then Harvard Law School and then I went to the Iowa Writer's Workshop and then the M.F.A Program so I just did way too much school. And I'm not going to do any more. And just writing and acting and whatever.

SO: Who were your biggest influences when you were growing up?

SP: In terms of writing it would have to be Louise Erdrich, the Ojibwe writer from Turtle Mountain. She is one of my favorite favorite writers. I was just an absolute Shakespeare fanatic as a kid. When I was twelve I think I memorized ALL of Romeo and Juliet. I mean every single solitary word of it.

In life, I guess my mom has been the biggest influence because she has a wild imagination and she would take me all over the city of Chicago and just tell me stories. And it was only as an adult that I would figure out, "Oh, some of this is not Chicago history, some of this is my mother's story."

This sounds so corny, but I was raised so much in this atmosphere of activism and when I was a kid we were really involved in the Civil Rights Movement so when I was about three or something I met Martin Luther King Jr. So probably he just had such a huge impact on me because my parents were always talking about all these issues in our home. So leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. , not just him but representing people who actually do things.

SO: You use the Sioux language so much in your book we were curious as to whether you had a Dakota name, what it is, and how you spell it?

SP: It's the name of a rare type of prairie flower. Of course, the way we spell things there is no absolute way since it wasn't a written language. When I spell it, I spell it "W-a-n-a-k-ch-a W-a-sh-t-e-w-in. " The "n" is silent though, it is just sort of a nasal sound and that is why we stick the "n" in there.