



# *Whispering in Shadows* by Jeannette Armstrong

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## **Search for Soul and Home**

Using a variety of literary techniques, Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Whispering in Shadows* is a journey of discovery towards the intimate voices that guide the world and our souls. The book tells the story of Penny, a Native American of the Okanagan tribe. Her story is one of complexity involving her journey through life as an artist, environmental activist, a single mother, a Native American, college student, daughter, sister, friend, and casualty of cancer. Along this journey, the reader is involved with Penny in discovering the complex systems that govern our modern society and the complex traditions that ultimately return us to our own humanity and mother earth.

The novel is a rich tapestry of different literary forms. In addition to the traditional genre of the novel, Armstrong chose to incorporate poems, letters, and entries from Penny's own diary to tell the story. This technique provided a unique opportunity for the story to become multi-dimensional, told from the standpoint of the narrator, but also from the perspective of Penny, the main character. This form of storytelling made the book one that was more enjoyable, yet sometimes made following the course of events difficult. Time is almost intangible in the novel. The further the readers engage with the novel the more they notice that events jump around, and that years go by in a few sentences. Armstrong's technique is to help readers understand the social and political statements she makes in her book.

As a Native American artist and activist, Penny engages in projects attacking the oppressive forces of society throughout the novel. Her environmental activism leads her on trips around the world in support of native populations. As she travels, Penny develops complex theories about the world and social reality. She comes to understand through her own life experiences and interaction with others the oppressive forces at work. On one level, these forces, these "whispers," cannot be heard, and they transcend time. The non-linear approach illustrates how history has made society the oppressive entity it is now. As the world around her continues to develop, Penny is able to comment on many of the social issues facing her people. The novel becomes an analysis, as expressed in one of the poems within the novel, of the systems of "globalization and supremacy deceit and grudging paternalism systemized racism colonial practise and government structured racialization power enforcement might makes right the colour of oppression and racism is money and blood" (185).



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The novel is a journey through life and the discovery of humankind's relationship with themselves, with others, and with nature. Armstrong uses Okanagan traditions throughout the novel. Penny learns the traditions of her tribe and family early in the novel from her "Tupa," and it is this background that allows Penny to return to her family and homeland by the end of the novel as she battles cancer. The journey towards understanding herself and her relation to those around her is difficult for Penny. Her choices throughout the novel, however, are always rooted in the traditions of her Native American heritage. By the end of the novel she comes to understand her role in the universe and how she will be returned to the earth after her death.

*Whispering in Shadows* is a wonderful and beautifully crafted journey for any reader. The entanglement of poetry and traditional prose allows the novel to work and deliver its message in various levels. Much like the title, the novel continually "whispers" to the reader. Finally, the story allows the reader to relate on some personal level to the feelings and situations Penny faces. Whether it is the pressures associated with being an activist or the personal feelings relating to dying of terminal illness or losing a loved one, the novel is an all-encompassing journey through and about life.

*Reviewed by Paul Eaton*