

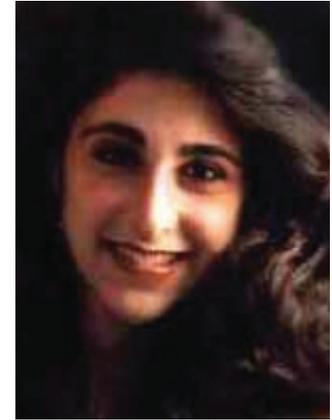


Jeannette Armstrong

Biography

Jeannette Armstrong, an Okanagan Indian, was born in 1948 and grew up on the Pentiction Indian Reserve in British Columbia. Armstrong is the first Native woman novelist from Canada. Interestingly, she is also the grand niece of Hum-Ishu-Ma (Mourning Dove, b. 1927), the first Native American woman novelist. While growing up on the Pentiction Indian Reserve, Armstrong received a traditional education from Okanagan Elders and her family. From them, she learned the Okanagan Indian language. She is still a fluent speaker of the Okanagan language today. In 1978, she received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of Victoria. The same year, she received a Diploma of Fine Arts from Okanagan College. Her education was a precursor to many remarkable career achievements. Today, Armstrong is a writer, teacher, artist, sculptor, and activist for indigenous rights.

At fifteen, Armstrong first discovered that she had a talent for and an interest in writing when her poem about John F. Kennedy was published in a local newspaper. Since then, her writing has helped reveal truths about herself and her people. She says, “The process of writing as a Native person has been a healing one for me because I’ve uncovered the fact that I’m not a savage, not dirty and ugly and not less because I have brown skin, or a Native philosophy.” She is proud of her Okanagan heritage. However, she knows that it is difficult for Indian people to be proud of their heritage while living in a society focused on European philosophies and ideals. Typically, Indian children are taught in public schools that white middleclass philosophies are “good” and Indian beliefs are “bad.” These teachings are appalling to Armstrong. She says, “The suicide rates and problems our people are having are a result of being told you’re stupid, ignorant, a drunk, you’ll never amount to anything -- just because you’re Indian. To me, that’s the biggest lie of all that needs to be dispelled.”



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1948
- * Okanagan Indian from Canada
- * Novelist, poet, and indigenous civil rights activist

This page was researched and submitted by Jolene Dupont Johnson on 5/6/98 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 8/9/04.



Jeannette Armstrong

Biography continued

To help eradicate these stereotypes, Armstrong educates people about the truths of Okanagan society and people. In 1978, Armstrong began working as a writer and researcher at the En'owkin Center, a cultural and educational center operated exclusively by the Okanagan Nation. Armstrong says the objective of the center is "to record and perpetuate and promote Native in the cultural sense, in education, and in our lives and our communities." To accomplish its objective, the En'owkin Center developed "The Okanagan Curriculum Project." This innovative project helps nonindigenous children learn about Okanagan culture. The Okanagan are employed to develop a curriculum of Okanagan history to be used in the public schools. Armstrong says that it is essential for the Okanagan to tell their own history. She strongly states, "The only correct version has got to be from our people! Nobody else can give the correct version, but our people. And we're going to stick to that!"

Armstrong also helps aid in the empowerment of all Native people by teaching them writing skills. In 1989, she became the director of the En'owkin School of International Writing where she teaches writing classes. The school is affiliated with the University of Victoria and is the first creditgiving writing program in Canada to be managed and operated exclusively by and for Native people. In writing, one of the obstacles for Native peoples to express oneself without the use of oral storytelling, in which the body and voice are used. Armstrong asks, "When you remove the body and put a piece of paper in its place, what happens? How do you compensate for that loss of the body?" Armstrong affirms that the "writing school" explores "how you replace the body in writing."

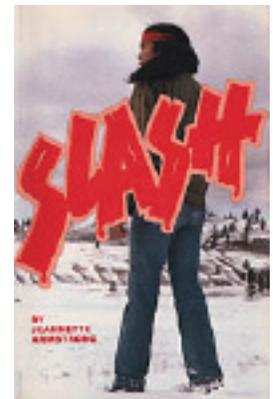
Armstrong is also concerned about the preservation of Indian land. As an indigenous civil rights activist, Armstrong fights for the right of Native people to keep land that legally belongs to them. However, for Armstrong, the issue extends way beyond land ownership. She says, "If any one person's rights within a democracy are not cared for, then everyone's rights are at risk, and asks, If indigenous rights are not protected, how are women's rights protected, how are any other minority groups' rights respected, if exclusive rights or freedoms are reserved for one group of people over and above the others?"



Jeannette Armstrong

Biography continued

Armstrong is a passionate writer who deals with such important issues as education and indigenous rights of Native people in her books. She is a talented writer who writes for both adults and young people. She includes young people in her audience because she wants to educate them about Native culture and history. Her first novel, *Slash*, tells about a young Okanagan man, Thomas Kelasket, who is in search of himself. His family clings to a traditional Okanagan life, one that includes powwows and hunting. Although some of his friends tease him, Thomas secretly admits that he likes speaking the Okanagan language and attending the powwows. He says “A lot of it had good feelings tied to it.” However, Thomas must attend a white school that tries to assimilate him into a white culture. Thomas’ father tells him to “be proud that you’re Indian.” But this is difficult for Thomas to do in a school filled with racism and hate. The principal tells Thomas and his Indian friends, “You Indians are lucky to be here. We’ll get along just fine as long as you don’t steal from the other kids.”



Thomas’ dealing with intolerance does not end with school. After attending a racist school, Thomas is forced to enter a racist society. He tries to deal with his suffering through alcohol, drugs, and political activity. But these outlets do not alleviate his pain and unhappiness. It is only through travel and brutal experiences that Thomas finally finds inner peace. At the end of the novel, Thomas learns his value as a person. He says, “I learned how important and how precious I was. I was necessary.”

Through her writing, Armstrong gives an honest representation of the harsh realities of Indian life. But she also presents an optimistic outlook to people. She believes a “connection” between aboriginal and European people can be made. In traveling to workshops, lectures, and readings in Canada, the U.S., and parts of Europe, she has seen and experienced that connection between people firsthand. She says, “If we can connect at that (honest) level between people, between individuals, between sexes, races, or classes, that’s what’s gonna make the difference and bring about the healing we human beings have to have to bring us closer . . . It’s not gonna be politics that will connect people. To touch and understand one another is to bridge our differences.”



Jeannette Armstrong

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Jeannette Armstrong

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