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## Interview with Yvonne Johnson

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MICHAEL JACKLIN

## Interview with Yvonne Johnson

Yvonne Johnson, great-great granddaughter of Plains Cree chief Big Bear, is the co-author, along with Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe, of *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998). Their book tells of how Johnson came to be the only First Nations woman in Canada serving a 'life twenty-five' sentence for first degree murder. It also narrates Johnson's experiences of repeated sexual abuse, inflicted on her by family members and strangers, beginning when she was two years old. As Johnson had been born with a cleft palate, she was unable to communicate to others her suffering and so the abuse continued for years.

Rudy Wiebe's interest in and engagement with the narratives surrounding Big Bear have been integral to much of his writing life. In 1973, he won the Governor-General's Award for fiction for his novel, *The Temptations of Big Bear*. As Wiebe reminds us though in the interview which follows, Big Bear's legacy was already there in his first novel, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. When in 1992 he received a letter from Johnson from the Prison for Women in Kingston Ontario saying she was a descendant of Big Bear and that she wished to clear his name, recover his medicine bundle and find her lost family, Wiebe responded immediately. They arranged a meeting and from this their collaboration began. Yvonne Johnson's life narrative, Wiebe was convinced, was a story that desperately needed to be told. As he says in his interview, it is crucial that a wide readership be given the chance to understand how and why these events have happened: what she has done and what was done to her.

The experiences of Yvonne Johnson and her family, as told in *Stolen Life*, are those that Big Bear feared his people would face, as with European-Canadian expansion across the prairies the Cree were dispossessed of their land and their food, forced to give up cultural practices and, in residential schools, to renounce their language and spiritual beliefs. The Johnson family story – her mother is Cree and her father was an American of Norwegian heritage – includes the residential schooling of her mother, the racial taunts and prejudice experienced by Yvonne and her siblings, the death in police custody of an older brother, Yvonne's alcohol dependency and abuse, and the prolonged sexual abuse to which she was subjected. For Yvonne Johnson, events were to culminate in a night of excessive drinking when she and three others tied, beat, sexually

assaulted with a stool leg, and strangled with telephone cord Leonard Skwarok, a man they barely knew but suspected, without any evidence, to be a sexual abuser and, for Johnson especially, a threat to her own young children. For her role in Skwarok's death, Johnson was found guilty of first-degree murder and sentenced to life imprisonment with no eligibility for parole for at least twenty-five years, the most severe sentence possible in the Canadian criminal justice system.

*Stolen Life* was one of the first books I read for my PhD research into collaborative Indigenous life writing in Canada and Australia. I found it a confronting, brutal, and painful reading experience. The experiences that Johnson narrates, the abuse inflicted upon her, and the violence that she participated in, are horrible to conceive. Yet I recognised that the publication of Johnson's story was a significant event in Canadian literature, in First Nations writing, and in collaborative life writing. *Stolen Life* won the Edmonton Book Prize, the Saskatchewan Book Award, the Writers' Guild of Alberta Award for non-fiction, and the \$10,000 Viacom Canada Writers' Trust Non-Fiction Award. It was also a finalist for the Governor-General's Award for non-fiction. In terms of collaborative life writing, the book raises issues of Indigenous narrative and authorship, voice and subjectivity, narrative strategies and editorial control, and relationships of power and vulnerability. It was a book which demanded serious critical consideration and engagement.

In 2002, I was fortunate to receive a travel grant from the Association of Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand, and a study grant from Deakin University, allowing me to travel across Canada interviewing Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants in collaborative life writing. Prior to departure, I spent some months establishing contact with writers and, in some cases, with family members of writers. Contacting Wiebe was straightforward; however, reaching Johnson was more difficult. My initial letter to Okimaw Ohci Healing Lodge (the correctional facility where Johnson was held after her transfer from Prison for Women in Kingston, as is narrated in *Stolen Life*) was returned, marked 'No longer at this institution.' I then learned from Wiebe that Johnson had been again transferred, this time to the Edmonton Institute for Women and so I wrote to her there. I received no written reply, but a few weeks before my departure from Australia a woman phoned telling me that she had spoken with Yvonne and that she agreed to be interviewed. With that verbal assurance, I made arrangements to visit the women's prison in Edmonton.

I met with Yvonne Johnson at the Edmonton Institute for Women on the 8th of August, 2002. The next day I interviewed Rudy Wiebe at his home. The following are edited versions of our tape-recorded interviews.

**MJ:** *Let's begin with how the book really began. You were at Kingston and you saw on the bookshelf a copy of *The Temptations of Big Bear*.*

**YJ:** Well, it's not the first time I'd seen a copy of *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Not many people have written about Big Bear. And the first time I saw it I was seventeen or eighteen. I lived in Uranium City, Saskatchewan. I saw it and I didn't want to touch it, because being part of the AIM movement back in the '70s, we were trying to fight against the exploitation of Natives and Native culture by non-Native people. Like coming up with Pochahontas and things like that that wasn't real but was Hollywood. So I saw it and I thought, no, this wasn't written by a Native person. But in the '70s we didn't have too many Native writers at all. So when I hit Kingston I felt like everything that I was was being questioned at the time - my Nativeness, being of the Cree Nation, being a descendant of Big Bear, which was proven when I got my treaty status. That's how I got re-instated as an Indian under the Indian Act in Canada. But I shouldn't have to explain any of this but a lot of times Native people say, 'Explain yourself. Tell me who your family is. Tell me who your ancestry is'. And a lot of that was through persecution of the government, that descendants of Big Bear were considered outlaws. So after Big Bear's death, we went into hiding. That's why I said that people were sent to the four winds. We didn't have a Reserve. So we lost our Band and wound up going into other people's Bands. So our whole family and bloodline got all mixed up and confused. A lot went to Montana so I didn't know. I was trying to find out who Yvonne Johnson was. I was searching for who Yvonne Johnson was, in all degrees: psychological, emotional, physical. Who am I? Where am I from? What am I for? I'm just here in prison, sentenced almost to death — a life imprisonment with no possible parole for twenty-five years. You start questioning who you are, the reality of your existence and why you're supposed to be.

Family communication broke down because I was shipped to the only federal prison in Canada for women, which is like over a 1,000 miles away from my people, who couldn't sometimes afford to drive from the Reserve to town which was 30, 40 miles. So, I was isolated and shunned from my family. I had to have something within myself as a human being to carry on. And I thought, identity, culture, base, find out who I am. I had no way of doing that. When I came out of the office, I saw that book, *The Temptations of Big Bear* on the shelves and just out of total defiance, and being the only book that there was, I thought, okay, I'll read this whiteman's book. You know, I'll see what he's got to say. When I read it, it was the first time ever that anybody wrote about Native people giving them a fair shake, the closest thing to a fair shake in history, or writing things. I knew nothing about compiling a book. I knew nothing... I didn't even realise that this is fiction. *Big Bear* is fiction. When I read it, he had times, dates, places and events. I didn't realise at that time that he most likely, and I'm just speaking out of turn here, he most likely went to the archives, pulled up this data out of the archives, and then that's where it became fiction because then he wrote his own depiction about it. I appreciated the way he wrote about Native people because we are proud, we are spiritual. We do have dignity. I liked the way that he portrayed my ancestry. And I kind of laughed thinking how stubborn I was for not reading this book back in the '70s. I looked at the book and I still remember the picture that was on the book. Rudy kind of looked like an old hippie, eh, and I thought, I could get along with this guy! And so I was hanging out at the library and I was reading Carl Jung. I got talking to the librarian there and I started reading a book, *Who's Who*, and I says, 'How would you get a hold of an author who wrote a book?' And she says, 'Who are you trying to get a hold of?' And I says, 'I don't know, this guy is he's still alive or whatever', I says, 'I'd like to get a hold of this Rudy Wiebe'. So, she went to a book that she had in her office and she goes, 'Try writing to this publisher', or whoever published the book. So, I did and I felt so shunned as a human being that when I wrote him, I think that's where the spirit came through.

There's more to this collaboration between me and Rudy than the collaboration itself. To me, it was a meant-to-be, because of who Rudy was, and how he portrayed and understood Big Bear, who I was as a descendant of Big Bear, that I

could see it as a spiritual thing, more than anything else. And that's just the kind of person I am. I try to deal with people on a spirit level, not on a conscious business level, because I figure if we deal with each other on a spirit level, how can you disrespect that? And that's the way that I see it. All the rest is unimportant if you have that value base, to be respectful of individual spirits, in that we're all spirits of the Creator, and nothing happens for nothing. Because can you tell me, in your lifetime, how someone like me and Rudy would even connect, much less get along, much less help each other. And so it had to have been is the way that I see it, the way that I want to see it. And that's the trust that I have there, knowing that there's spirits and ancestries that are before me, that are looking after me, and that this somehow has to be a must-be.

So I wrote a letter and I thought, 'Well, I'm going to scare him off. If I don't scare him off that says a lot'. So I wrote the letter and I explained who I was. I explained that I was in prison because so many people are in denial to even admit that they are in prison. I had nothing to hide. As they say when they read you your rights, 'You have nothing to gain. You have nothing to lose'. That's the way it is. So, I wrote him and I also wrote Hugh Dempsey. He wrote a book on Big Bear. Hugh Dempsey never wrote me back. He never got in contact with me at all in any way, shape or form. And I think some of that had to do with... he was married to a descendant of Big Bear and those descendants of Big Bear that are State-side and the ones that are in Canada, that chain got broken with Big Bear and it hasn't ever been mended. And so they are kind of segregated by this border which shouldn't be but which seems to happen in my family. So Hugh Dempsey didn't write me back or anything. I didn't expect Rudy to write me back. Like, who would write me? Who would? I wouldn't want to write someone in prison and I used to have penpals. You're a forgot person when you're in prison. I saw them duck out on me as soon as I got my sentence. Everybody ducked out on me. My family had to look at me almost as being dead because I wasn't going to be part of their life for that 25 years. It's just the human reaction, for lack of being able to do anything else. And you have to come to a conscious realisation of that while you're in prison or it's going to kill you. You just got to let it go too. But I try not to let it all go or otherwise I'd be totally institutionalised and never worth being let out. So I have to hold onto a little something. But reality hits home hard,

really hard. So I wrote this letter and I waited and waited and waited. I didn't hear nothing. I forgot about it.

I tried to write a family genealogy on the wall. I had a big piece of paper on the wall and at the top, according to Rudy's book, I put Black Powder. According to that, then I put Big Bear, then I realised, 'Well, who's after that?' There was a big hole in my family tree; and I asked, 'How am I going to fill this? How am I going to figure this out?' Indian Affairs have census and they wouldn't even tell me who my family was. Yet they'll give me my treaty card, saying that because of birthright I am an Indian, yet they won't tell me how that is. So I tried to ask my mother and that was a big thing. But my Mom since then has told me that Big Bear had a son and that son wound up having a baby with the daughter of the Hudson Bay Company Store Operator, at that Frog Lake massacre. So he had my grandfather, John Bear. Then John Bear married into my grandmother's reserve, which was Baptiste. But when I wrote Rudy, I thought he was going to send his records and files. That's what I wanted. I tried to write one archive in Toronto and they sent me a picture of another chief that wasn't even my grandfather. So I didn't trust them, and this was a Native organisation, sending me a picture of Poundmaker. So, I thought, 'he did this research, he did this book, he's got all that information'. All I want to do is to find out who my ancestry is, essentially. I guess I never wrote precisely. I did write about trying to bring my family ancestry together. First, he wrote me back. That surprised me. When I read the letter, he said, 'I don't think I can get you to understand how much Big Bear has meant to me in my life'. And *Big Bear* was, I think, the first book that Rudy had written to get himself educated and it won the Governor General's award. And that created a lot of jealousy, a whiteman writing about Native people in such a way that he actually went against the odds, or the norms. And to me that meant a lot, that he as a human being would do that and that people would be spiteful and jealous of that fact. So that spoke to me a lot about his character as a human being too. That just nobody wrote about Big Bear. According to the government he was dead and should stay that way. Rudy never let him completely disappear in records and archives though, like a dead ghost. He told me that he was born and raised on the Forks, where my great-grandfather was born, in the Mennonite community. But nobody ever spoke about the Native community. But he did. Even today, I

assume, the Mennonite community tells him, 'Write about Mennonites. Don't write about Indians no more'. But he still is in there. He too has a lot of gain from that, as the businessman and the professional person that he is. I don't want to believe that there is any hocus-pocus happening there. I refuse to believe that because I believe in the ultimate trust in him. And then it's not for me to say. Like I said, it's a spiritual thing. And that's where I leave it at the best of times. I didn't write the book for any form of prestige, any form of literature, any placement, nothing like that.

**MJ:** *Okay, well maybe you could talk about why you did write the book then.*

**YJ:** It was like a last will and testament. It was my final statement before I committed suicide. That was my goal. People claim that I wrote it to profit off crime. Baloney. Do you think that I would have shamed myself to such a degree, that I would have been so honest? Maybe other people who supposedly assumingly write for profit after their crime, glamourise it and are in denial and they lie. Nowhere in here have I tried to covercoat anything. And that was part of having the death wish. I'm not going to beat around the bush. What lies on the spirit of Yvonne Johnson is what I'm going to get off. When I commit suicide, that is like my last confession. I don't feel like I'm your Charles Manson, or I'm your Homolka or your Bernardo, and a lot of it had to go back to my case. A lot of it had to do with circumstances throughout history that were done to the Native people. Even Rudy himself said that they imprisoned Big Bear and they let him out long enough to die. They served their purpose. They used their system to kill my ancestry. Who cares about the real, real truth or the reality when it comes to a system? Native people didn't hold court of laws that way. In Native way it was a bigger capital punishment to lie than anything else. It's like I said about friendship. It's the same thing about lies. If you are called up in front of the elders, if you are caught in a lie once, they just write you right off. You go and you explain what happened. You explain your mind, your body, your spirit for what it is. Then explain what happened. They say, 'Either kill me or you help me'. But the whiteman's system ain't set up like that. And I was no first degree killer. I did not do what they said I did. Yet I knew what I did was bad enough. But that's something that I have to wear. But what would my existence be in this world if I



let history, or if I let prison record, or if I let court documentation, that somebody can pull out and write their own book about? I thought no. And I've seen dead body after dead body being carried out of that prison and everybody's saying, 'Why, why, why, why why?' Inquiries into these women's deaths. The cover up of systematic abuse done to the Native culture, through the system itself. Culture clashes. I wanted to have the last say if I was going to take my own life. I wanted the world to know even the confusion. Because in my mind... it's not confused in my mind. It's confused when I try to portray it to the world that accepts their own reality and their own system. They say, 'We're normal, you're not'. What is normal? What's classified as normal? That's why I was very, very truthful. Because I thought if I die and I stand before the Creator, at least I can say that I've tried. And I thought when I die I want it printed on my headstone... if someone stands over me trying to snivel around and weenie around and cry because I'm dead, and has the audacity to say, 'why?' I says I'll have it printed on my headstone, 'Read the book, stupid'.

**MJ:** *It was then that you began writing the journals, the diaries.*

**YJ:** No, I was writing those when I was thinking about killing myself.

**MJ:** *Yeah, that's what I mean, when you say that it's your last will and testament, that's what you're talking about.*

**YJ:** Yeah, I had no intention of writing a book before I met Rudy, but I did have the intention of having it written down. So I had this already going. That's why I say it's a spiritual thing. This is my quest. This is my way of giving some form of understanding back to the world. I speak for Big Bear. I try to. I speak for every silent abused woman, for everybody that has suffered what I have suffered, that has the inability because of shame or because of society's retardation, and that's what I call it, retardation. I'm not the retarded one. It's just that they don't accept me. They have not accepted my family. We're hard to kill. So, I wrote a book. I was given an opportunity and a chance to do that. It was like the Creator said, 'All right, you're going to kill yourself. What's your life for?' And then I thought I can't live through all of that pain and all of that suffering just to be carted out on a stretcher and put six feet in the hole. Where everything that I am is a lot of what I

was created into. Yet my spirit is good. I may not appreciate a lot of the acts that I did throughout life, nor do I appreciate the acts that were done to me. That's why I told my brother in a court of law, 'I love you. That's undeniable. You're my brother. You're my blood. But I don't have to love what you did'.

**MJ:** *Could you now talk about how your writing in those journals, and as you said it was a last will and testament, moved, after your contact with Rudy, towards life writing and the book?*

**YJ:** Well, he responded to my letter with excitement, knowing and having contact with a direct descendant of Big Bear who was actually in the same position as Big Bear was himself, because he was in Stony [Mountain Penitentiary], and I was in Kingston. It's hereditary, I guess, what's happened to the Native people. And in the letter he was saying stuff like he just kind of had the inner need to come and see me, my being a descendant of Big Bear and Big Bear being such a person in the forefront to his life. I take it his liking for the Native people, and curiosity, because I don't know how many of Big Bear's descendants he has actually interacted with in the past, and the culture. And I like to see friendship based on curiosity. And he came out and visited me... he came out and saw me and in friendship I offered him the four sacred medicines, tobacco, sage, cedar, sweetgrass. And I didn't know where anything was going at all. So I burnt the medicines and I left it to the spirit world. I pretty well said, 'Well I can't do anything, you guys got to help me now', sort of thing. So he came, he visited me. We were talking and visiting, just talking about things. At that time I was already writing, already determined, deep down in myself, to actually get my understanding out too, though our meeting wasn't specifically for that. Then the more we talked, he was writing for a magazine and he was saying something about doing an article around my conviction. And I told him, 'That's not good enough. That won't work'. I says, 'If you're going to do it, it would have to be in a book form'. He pretty well went away and thought about it. And somewhere along the line, before our afternoon meeting, I took some of the diaries that I'd already been working on and he was just amazed by that, I guess. And I told him, 'You can take it'. And part of the reason was, somewhere along the line, I don't know exactly where it took technical form, but I guess we always had a kind of

unspoken agreement that it would happen and that we'd play it by ear. And if I did not make it through, Rudy was to finish it for me, based on my journals. But like your contract says, I could pull out anytime I wanted. That opportunity was always given to me by Rudy. By the same token I'd always phone him as a friend and as a confidant. So when things got hard, when I had nobody to talk to... and sometimes I kind of got revenge. In the back of my mind I'd say, 'Okay, go ahead. Do you're damage to me and I'll get back to you. I'll write it in the book. So do your damage. I'm still going to have my last say. You may think that you control everything, but you're not going to control my life story'. And I guess I became more defiant in the possibility that I kind of had this leverage, that I got a strength in knowing that I was going to be heard, that I was going to be understood. At the same time I wrote the diaries, and he would say, 'Try to put it in book form'. So I would go back to my first memories and I would start writing and send it off to him. And unfortunately a lot of my life has been focused around the damage of sexual assaults and racism and prejudice and what it does to a child's mind, trying to develop when all the odds of reality are against you. And not only being a survivor, but being Native, and government and treatment, and people burning crosses outside our home. At the time they were having civil rights marches down in Louisiana and it was all on TV and Vietnam and being in Montana, Custer's last stand was less than 120 years before, so people were telling me that I'd killed their grandparents, and ahh....

So it was my way... like I didn't know Rudy would be able to dissect my writing the way he did. But that's where his professionalism comes in. And that's where this thing that you call collaboration came together. I don't believe we came together to write a book. I think we came together to collaborate to tell my life story and everything that went with it in the way that I saw it. And being a Native person, in the book I wrote, I don't think there is any other book written of its kind, where a Native person would divulge so much truth. So that's how that occurred. And it was never signed sealed and delivered until it was signed sealed and delivered, in my mind, because he gave me that opportunity. But there was a certain stage in mandatory things that there was no backing out, in terms of contracts. When you sign contracts with publishers it gets all professional and you get deadlines. That's when it was taken out of Rudy's hands. And Rudy, I want to

believe, has been protecting me along that way as much as possible. That's what friends do. I take that with his understanding as a human being to try to bridge between his world and my world, and his knowledge, and that's where we're total opposites of each other. That's why they say in relationships that you find someone who is like you. I say in relationships you find someone who is not like you because then you can actually have more things valid and in common and life is never dull because you're always trying to understand rather than improvise. I think that is what occurred between Rudy and I. And he had it in his spirit. He didn't have embedded racism or prejudice or hatred. That I can see a mile away. It's by the way someone looks at you and what they give off in their spirit. I've never seen that with Rudy. Just one time I kind of got short with him was when he was trying to lead me because I was shy. I was pulling back. And all he was attempting to do was to try to help me come out of where I was to meet him halfway in his world I suppose. And I think that was the only time I got short with him is that I turned around and I told him, 'Well that's awful white thinking of you'. And I hurt his feelings pretty bad because I didn't realise because of all of the trauma that I was going through in making it. And knowing that people once again were going to judge me.

People once again, are they going to understand? You know if people want to live in the reality of existence around them, they've got to be able to accept the truth of somebody else's understanding before change can occur. But I've never had that experience. I knew it in my mind, but life experiences there was not a single act done in my life that I can use as a teaching tool to develop that in myself until I met Rudy. And he's a teacher amongst teachers. I've been told that he goes world over, teaching literature and writing and he's hard on his students. And he expects what he expects from them. With me, I've been in his class now for ten years. And he's been very patient with me. And he's been very kind and he's been very understanding in giving and taking and life situations and nurturing and expanding. I've asked him, 'Rudy, would you ever write a book with anybody else?' And he says, 'No way'. He says, 'Once you were done with me, there's no more left'. I challenged and brought out things in his life that he'd never seen or understood, but knew kind of what existed. That's where my life experience, through my writing, like he didn't sit and say, 'Tell me your story and I'll write

it'. No, he says, 'You write it and I'll help you'. The book is all my writing until it gets to the courts and the trials. And that's where I pulled back because I didn't have an inkling and that's where his expertise came in, being able to line up the legal ramifications of the documentations, being able to question things where I couldn't because I was already found guilty. I was already shamed. I was already subhuman. They couldn't do that to him. And I do that to myself. No judge is going to be any harder on me than I am on myself. No jury, no inmate, nobody. I know what I've done, and more so, the Creator knows. But the Creator also knows that I believe those who have the harder lives have the better teachings, the better understandings if you are willing to persevere, get in there and see the truth. Not somebody else's understanding, but be able to take the understanding of society and the world but still hold your own in there, to care yourself on. Because bottom line, everybody that's judging me, they're going to be quick to judge, they ain't going to be as quick to help. So, Rudy didn't go out of his way to so called collaborate with me. I didn't go out of my way to collaborate with him. It was just something that had to be, something that was beyond him and beyond me. Together we are quite the team in the collaboration. You'll probably never ever get a book like that because of the personalism and individuality that went into it, the acceptance and the willing to understand. That's why I wrote my diary from events in my lifetime to events that were occurring to let him know how it is that I felt, how it is that I thought, how it is that I viewed the world, past experiences that I had. And for as many diaries as I've written, if they were all word for word condensed, I'd have a little encyclopedia of six or seven books. But it was just excerpts taken out of it that compiled this, which is one of the largest books published in Canada, 444 pages. That's pretty well how that happened. I want to believe that it was total humanness for a story that needed to be said. And we faced a lot of challenges. Laws, they were trying to pass laws to ban people like me from writing.

**MJ:** *I read about that, about making any kind of a profit from narrating the events of a crime [Bill C-220 regarding profit from authorship respecting a crime].*

**YJ:** They called it the Son of Sam bill. The media called it profiting off of your crime, in other words, glorifying your crime, revictimising your victims, and getting paid

for it. My book is my life story. Unfortunately, part of my offence became and is part of my life. When you make a book, that's what you've got to do. You've got to take highlights, or events that have changed you or altered you, or your life existence and around it. Like in order for me to cope, to understand my offence, I had to relive all of that. Like, how many times have I sat and thought that if whiteman's court was like Indian's court, it would be so much better. In whiteman's court they don't want to hear nothing. They only want to subject, create, build. Everybody is bad and evil and should be locked up and put away. You are not looked at as a human being. You are looked at as a sub-human being where you wear the sins of not only your offence, but you also wear the sins and are subject to everybody who sits in the jury and to the law itself. An all white jury, too. And that's not my world. That's not my understanding. That's not the way my people did things. If it was to happen in Native country, I would be taken up in front of the chief who has consultation with his women and his children and who becomes a spokesperson for the people. And I would also be taken up in front of the medicine people, in front of the elders, the leaders who have to guide religiously, in order to ensure the safety of the people for generations. If this occurred, they would have come in and said, 'What have you done? We're not going to kill you. We're not going to beat you. We'll deal with that afterwards. What's right important right now is what happened. Why did it occur?' Something that I realised was very hard was even dealing with my offence because I didn't deal with it. People don't realise that locking someone in prison and putting them in a cage doesn't help them deal with anything. It just toughens them up. It makes them more angry because they are not understood and if they are not understood, then they cannot rectify. They cannot change. In writing a book I'm able to do that. I'm able to rectify. I'm able to change. And the government didn't like it because not only did I tell them what had consisted of my life, but also I told them what had consisted of my parents, and my parents' parents. And the reality, because you are your ancestry. And I had to go back and try to make all of that better by writing this. And if they had taken me into a court of law and said, 'Yvonne, we want to know what happened', I think even back then I would have been stupefied, not because I was a hardened convict or anything. It was because I felt like my whole life was never understood. Right down to my very spirit. I felt inadequate as a human being. I couldn't hold my

face up without feeling judgment. And I was like that when I was in third and fourth grade. But you can't live in a world and keep hiding from it. You have no choice. But if I was now taken in and they said, 'Yvonne, what is it that occurred? What happened?' then I would tell them like what I told in the book. But then they would say, 'But why did you do that?' And I would have had to say, back then, 'I don't know. Maybe I'm crazy', because I didn't understand. Now I can understand patterns of abuse, hereditary abuse, hereditary neglect. Systematic abuse, systematic racial discrimination in government policies, from housing to education, to everything. How do you expect people to survive and live like that? And that's why you have such a high population of Native people in prison, or home based people the world over, like in Australia it's probably the Aborigines that are the big ones because they are the expendable people, they are the conquered. But you can't conquer what you never warred against in the first place. You just come in with like sheets over your head and brought in your government and your laws. You caged us, you imprisoned us. And that does something, like you are born with a rage. You are born seeing tears in your parents' eyes. What do you do? How do you handle that? Then you combine that with alcoholism and drugs, as an escape. More so drugs now, needle dope, heavy-duty stuff. It used to be alcohol when I was a kid, now it's worse. Now AIDS is killing us off left, right and centre.

**MJ:** *These patterns that you're talking about are systemic racism, systemic dispossession, did you become more aware of these patterns through reflecting on your life as you wrote your story?*

**YJ:** Yeah, because I was always too busy hiding. I'd fight when I had to fight. And I've spent a lifetime hiding when I wasn't fighting. And it got easier to do when you drink. And it's like I'm a Doctor Jeckell, Mr. Hyde. And a lot of times it was why I drank — to become that other person. I had no voice.

**MJ:** *Could I ask you now about reading Jung because lots of the comments in the book come from your reading of Jung and I think probably the writing in your journal was somehow informed by reading Jung as well.*

**YJ:** I had my diary here, and I had Jung's *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* here. They were very, very connected. Again, I can't explain that. He spoke to me. He had a lot of big fancy, whiteman words, what Native people call 'high words', unnecessary words that you can simplistically say just by actually pointing, or using hand signals or things like that. I'd like to think of Jung as a very ingenious man for his time. What I learned in my own spiritual walk was also guided by him. Through him I learned to accept myself. I would have loved to have just kicked back and interacted with him like I did with Rudy. Great minds debate, not proclaim rightness. And I knew he would understand. He spent a lot of time with original based people of the land, and with Native people of this continent. I could see in his writing our ceremonies. I can see in his writing our fasting, our beliefs in the tranquillity of mind, body and spirit. Bringing down the senses of a human body for food and for water, making a spiritual and psychological commitment to open yourself up to the realities of the world they call dream state, Native people call visions. He talked a lot about dreams. He talked a lot about dogma. Now I'm an adult I've got to go back and look at my situation and understand it. And nobody can do that for me. I have to do it. But with reading Jung and seeing his acceptance and his understanding, I was able to come out of it. I utilised that to even write of the horrific things that happened in my life, if this makes any sense. If I have to relive all of it, that might be too much for me. But what little has been released back to me, I was able to deal with through Jung. Because I was in prison, I didn't have anybody else. And when I went to talk to a psychologist, I actually blew their minds away. The elders tell me that I've had a hard life and that I'll continue to have a hard life and maybe I'm just fulfilling preordained destiny, fate. That's why I go through it kind of blindly because everything just seems to happen on its own. And the Creator has now chosen to give me voice when I've never had voice before. My voice is powerful, to hear me talk, but how many times — like in the Bible it talks about that guy who was out in the desert screaming forever and a day. That's what I felt like. I felt like that man that was out in the desert screaming forever and a day and nobody listened. Was that John? They finally beheaded him or something. I saw it in a movie. He was supposed to be close to Jesus but they said he was nuts because he was always out yelling in the hills. John the Prophet. I'm not equating myself to him, but I feel that I've been in that position.



**MJ:** *No one hearing you.*

**YJ:** Yeah, and being called nuts and crazy... Writing is a healing journey as long as your self-empowerment is not taken from you, or your identity. I believe in collaborative writing, but I also believe that because you have more knowledge in the publishing world doesn't make you any smarter than someone who doesn't. If you're entrusted with someone else's naiveness then that is actually a great gift that you should cherish. You have the ability to help, not become part of the problem.

**MJ:** *Okay, that leads into something else that I wanted to ask you. Before you talked about writing the book and working through all this experience as a survivor and I wanted to ask if you have any comments on how the book can help or guide others.*

**YJ:** That was part of the reason. Sometimes I wonder why I'm still alive, and I think about it when things get hard, but.... You've asked something really close to my heart and a lot of times I've got to be still and if I start shooting off I just lose it. Rudy has told me, 'Your story needs to be told'. And I would say, 'Who wants to hear about another drunken Indian who committed murder?' And he goes, 'You're explaining a part of society that exists that has never been explained before but has always been judged. Now it is your time to voice that opinion and have trust that through this mass media, beyond the people who chose to be around you, there is a bigger world out there and there is a bigger understanding'. And I thought how many times people play self-righteous and then they have to hide behind that. I can't claim self-righteousness. But I can claim the knowledge that I got through dealing with certain aspects of my life that other people don't chose to deal with at all. And that is something that I will carry with my spirit when I stand before the creator, that I'm okay with the Creator, that I'm okay with the spirit world. As long as I harm nobody here in anything that I do or say, or that I don't harm my body that the Creator gave me. I have disclosed about my abuse because I know I am not the only one who suffered. I know that every woman that I drank with and went to parties with on the street, nine times out of ten have suffered that. I can see my pain in my people's eyes. What I found was that after my book came out I had more people writing me from non-Native communities

explaining about the traumatic cause and effect of sexual abuse and the trauma in their life. When I did get the odd letter from a Native person, it was horrific, horrific in comparison. I don't believe that... some people if you were to slap them that would traumatise them maybe to the point that I got traumatised when they were shoving that chain-saw in and out of my face. Maybe now a slap on the face to me may not seem as severe. But abuse is abuse and none is greater or lesser than the other. Abuse is abuse and it shouldn't be accepted at any level. But I can see, through my own abuse and how it has impacted on my spirit, that I can see hurt in other human beings. It was like that in my book when I looked into the mirror and I saw the pain in that child's eyes even though I didn't realise it was my own reflection. So seeing my own pain and feeling that through eye contact, that touched my spirit, and I now have the ability to look at other people and see their hurt that they can't hide. They can't hide it through body language. Why do people walk the way they walk? Why do they talk the way they talk? How did they learn that? And it goes from simply things like do you drag your feet when you walk, do you pick them up, do you consciously think or are you just going through life, all of these dynamics. So I say deal with it. How I disclosed my abuse was, 'I will take the responsibility that is on me'. When I drink and when I was on skid row, I put myself in a bad situation, not knowing no better, or for whatever reason I chose to make that stupid choice, I can make that choice. But I never made the choice of them drugging me, raping me, impregnating me. So I will take mine and I will give to them what is theirs for their abuse. Once you do that it is a little easier to carry. I also know that part of the reason why I never disclosed was that it was too close to everybody else. And you think it's so sinful. You wear the sins and the shame of your attackers. When they do that to you they leave the essence of their evil onto you. Especially children are very spiritually susceptible to things, never mind what it does to the mind or the body. What it does to the inside, the spirit, the disturbance that goes on there that affects the mind and the body. And they always say it's so horrible and so shameful I'm not going to tell anybody. I asked for it. I wanted it. Whatever reasons you have in your mind. And I thought I can't tell them these horrible things. They're going to judge me. But I got to the point where I says, 'I'm already judged. I'm in prison, I'm doing life 25 and I'm thinking about killing myself, so what have I got to lose'. Even though at that time I didn't know what there was to gain, I just thought

there was nothing to lose. And I thought of all the abusers that have ever abused me and went on with life and went on with the silence. That's why I chose to go against my brother, to stop him from doing it to my sisters. Even though that court of law never found him guilty, that jury never found him guilty, that wasn't the point. The point was that I had to look at him and tell him 'No more'. And that empowering gave empowerment to my sisters. And that's where it all begins, to disclose, to get rid of it. I may have had a suicide mission, but I don't now. And I have no regrets for divulging my messed up life, because I'm able to disclose about my messed up life. They talk about an inner child. I was forever an inner child. Now I'm at an advantage because I'm a grown woman with a lifetime that now can go back to that inner child and tell that inner child, 'I'll speak on your behalf. I know what it is that you feel. I know what it is that you suffer from. Let me tell your story'. And that's like your spirit and everything that's stuffed down inside you. You have to deal with that and bring it to the forefront. Natives call it spirit walking in one's own self. And it's not an easy thing to do but it's a very powerful thing to do. And if there is revenge on your abusers, it's to live life well and full. And you owe it to yourself. And if it takes a book of this magnitude to shake the world, then do it. Become a world shaker because that's the life that was given to you. It's the life that you've got to deal with. But you can leave it here. When you stand before the Creator you can say, 'I've tried, and you know that I've tried'. I know that the Creator is not going to persecute me. At least I can look at him with straight eyes and say, 'I've tried. I don't know what it was I was down there for. I was winging it alone. But for winging it alone, I think I did pretty good'.

**MJ:** *Earlier we talked about the appearance of the book, the book as a physical object. I think it's really important to talk about. You referred to the physical book as a sacred bundle.*

**YJ:** You see in Native way you have what they call a bundle. And it's all in your understanding what your bundle is. Usually it's a square cloth and you put your medicines and sacred items inside. And it's like dressing it, putting it to sleep, putting it to bed, making sure dust and dirt don't get in, and putting a spiritual protection over it, which would be this outer coating of the bundle, the wrap that

goes around the sacred things. Okay, this book is a sacred bundle. I am sacred. You are sacred. All spirits of the Creator are sacred. What goes in between the front and back cover of this book is my life, which is sacred in the eyes of the Creator. I was scared of what people were going to do with what I wrote in here because other people see it as this and that. I see it as a bundle. I see the outside as being the coating of that bundle. My spiritual colours are red and green. On the back of the coating it's got the red and it's got forms of green in the blue in the sky. And it's on the front cover at the side. So I look at that as being part of that covering. Okay, there's four directions, north, south, east and west that come into this creation and this world. This is a little creation and a world unto itself. So I put the colours of the four directions on the cover of the book and they are the Cree sacred colours. And I put it in the four directions. That's why you've got it top and bottom, side to side because it covers the four directions. It seals the integrity of my spirit and my life-force that is in this book called my autobiography. If you look towards the inside, there is a little picture of a bear, and to me that's my spirit keeper. And it's also where the prayer is. See, non-Native people, they write all this other stuff. They write the notes and Contents and stuff like that. Me, any ceremony you begin with a prayer. Any ceremony you end with a prayer. My life has been one big long ceremony. Same as everybody else's. When I put it in a book form I tried to treat it as a bundle. And that's why it's got the little bear at my opening prayer. It's got the little bear at the closing prayer, because everything in between is that bundle. On the front they have me as a child. On the back they have my great-grandfather so that speaks of generations past, of generations now, and I try to speak to bring change for generations in the future. This is a legacy that I leave my children. Whiteman may put it in archives. Whiteman may use it differently than I do. Rudy covers that end and I just do what I got to do. I just leave it to the Creator because I'm a vocal person. Rudy is the writer, I'm the thinker. Rudy enabled me to write the way I do because he said that many people go to school for a lifetime to learn how to write what comes to me natural. Because I'm able to speak orally and I write as I speak. And maybe people might find that hard to read if their mind is trained to think as a very educated person. You forget to think as a human being. There's supposed to be a pattern of thought. Just because you can think, that's a gift. It doesn't mean you have to have a subjugated thought pattern. That's where Jung was good. He was

able to bring out those thought patterns and line it up like that. But I saw the truth behind it. So that's what that is all about, the cover of that.

**MJ:** *And you had direct input into those choices?*

**YJ:** This one, yeah. But they've got another cover now and they took the colours off because in the book writing world I guess you've got to please this well trained... you know they sit back and they think they know how people think and they advertise and they've got to get them like fish on a hook. And so that's when they said that the cover was too cluttered. Life is never too cluttered. If it wasn't cluttered we wouldn't have anything. But they wanted to make more room to put in what people had to say about it, as a promotion gimmick. But life changes, seasons change, and so do covers of books, it grows and matures. And now awards that the book has actually won, as far as I know, it was nominated for the Governor-General's award. And the minute there was a write up in the newspaper that says first time convicted killer wins highest honour in the country. I knew then and there that they had pushed it as far as they could push it. For the content of what this book is politically, historically. And Rudy's a historic writer. Rudy helped me use my right, to have freedom of speech. Even if I can't feel free in other ways concerning my life, it's a human right. And it's because all my fears, all the reasons why I should be dead are now all the reasons why I now need to be alive. And why everyone should have the ability to do what Rudy and I did. And it can be done. We are total respecters of each other. It does become an elite controlled thing but it should be opened up to everybody and anybody. And we shouldn't propagandise each other. After this book got published I had somebody writing me saying that the only reason this got published was because I was an Indian he was whiteman. Then, he says, 'I want you to work with me on my book'. And his was this hocus-pocus Hollywood, non-Native person writing about a Native person. So that doesn't speak volumes on my relationship with Rudy. I was highly insulted that somebody would even think that that is what transpired. But that goes to show. But I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't sell my people out. I never would have interacted with Rudy if I thought it was a sellout in any way shape or form. But Rudy is an elite person himself, too. And I'm not giving consent that everybody should write together because they can. They should write

together because they want to and they respect each other. And the end result is to make the world a better place. And not for one to feed off the pain and suffering of the other.

**MJ:** *You say that this experience of co-authoring, of collaborating, can be empowering when it's a respectful process and that more people should have this opportunity. In the numbers of First Nation stories that are getting published, and Aboriginal life writing in Australia as well, something that is being talked about to promote or ensure this respect is the notion of cultural protocols. The collaboration should be guided by the protocols of the community from which the narrator comes. The narrator's cultural basis, cultural values, cultural strengths should be the guiding principles of the collaboration.*

**YJ:** When you are going to collaborate on history that is factual, truthful and knowledgeable, you don't go there and assume and write what it is you want. You go there and you ask and you listen, and you keep asking, and don't be shy to admit to your own humility and say, and Rudy said this a lot of times, 'I'm just a whiteman. You've got to tell me this', which was pretty cool of him. But it was more of a willingness on his part to share everything that he was. And I have great, great respect for that. Verbal contracts and verbal understandings with Native people, with the original people, is the way that it should be. We have to start recognising the handshake. Native people have always had the handshake and they've always abided by that. But they used to shake like this. And that becomes a very personal promise. So I think it should be the people that decide because in your own naïveness you may change or alter something. And it's not because you are hateful or spiteful. It's just because you don't know, any more than I know about your system that I find unjust. And I'm a twentieth century Indian and I still feel the same thing my ancestors must have felt and I have pity on them. It must have been pretty scary seeing the first whiteman. But in all reality, the Native people were given teachings saying that they were going to come. The yellow people were going to come, the white people were going to come and the black people were going to come. But the black people were brought as slaves. So were the Chinese. And the whiteman came with a bad attitude!