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MICHAEL JACKLIN

Interview with Rudy Wiebe

(Edmonton, Alberta, August 9, 2002)

MJ: *I'm going to begin my questions by asking you about that first letter that Yvonne Johnson wrote introducing herself. In the parts you quote in the beginning of *Stolen Life* she asks for help researching her family's past and her ancestry. In that first letter there is no mention at all about writing her life story. So that's what I'd like to ask. How did that initial request for help tracing her ancestry change to the writing of her own life story?*

RW: Well of course I had a great deal of information about Big Bear [Yvonne's ancestor]. Actually there is another man who has a lot more, Hugh Dempsey, who wrote the biography of Big Bear, ten years later or something like that, in the early '80s. He told me he had never read my book, *The Temptations of Big Bear*, because he didn't want to be influenced by it. It's one of those what I find kind of goofy statements because I would think you'd want to be influenced by everything. He's still pretending, you know, the historian still pretends that it's possible to be objective about these sorts of things. And then he goes ahead and interviews the family. And that's really objective, right? It's as personal as you can get! Anyway, there was no way you could get Yvonne to the sources, her being in prison. So I think I answered her something in that line; and we simply started talking about it, corresponding back and forth about that. But you see, nothing just happens... I wrote her a letter and she responded to it, right... she felt herself guided to me and I was immediately hooked when she mentioned Big Bear. Here she is, exactly what Big Bear was afraid of in signing the treaty in his major encounter with the Whites. What was going to happen to his people, now that they were being overrun like this? And here is the most horrible... but I still didn't know, I didn't have a clue what she was in for. I wrote her a letter quickly saying, 'I better write to you fast because you might be out of Kingston before this letter gets to you'. A very stupid thing to say, but she didn't indicate what she was in prison for. So, the first idea after we talked back and forth several times was that I would write an article about her. She then sent me a record ... the first writing of her memory of ... the horrible memory of her first rape, when she was

a child, two years old or something ... going into the whole surround of this, a thirty-, thirty-two page statement that she made to the police. When I saw that and when I heard what she was in for, I thought that if she was willing I would write an article for *Saturday Night* magazine. They agreed that this would be a great idea, and they actually financed my first trip — they said they would pay expenses and all that stuff to go and see Yvonne in prison.

MJ: *To go to Kingston?*

RW: In Kingston, yeah. So, it began not as a book idea at all, but as an article possibly for a magazine, to show how a life that is in a sense destroyed right from the beginning eventually ends up like this, in prison. I didn't have a clue at that time, because they were still appealing the ruling, whether that sentence would be upheld in all its severity — as it was of course shortly after. So it simply began that way.

MJ: *Yvonne also talked about that, about the proposal for the article and her response was that an article was not big enough, that you couldn't say it all in an article.*

RW: No, I know.

MJ: *But she also did say that in those early stages there was no intention of a book. She was writing her diaries, her journals, simply to get her story down, to make sure her story wasn't lost.*

RW: Yes, she had begun writing her diaries, the first diaries that I have — I think they are the first ones though — she had really begun writing in '91 when she first went to Kingston. Then she wrote to me in November '92, and I simply encouraged her. I said, 'write it all down, keep writing'. She said things like, 'my language isn't very good and I don't know how to spell'. I said, 'That doesn't matter. Don't worry about that. Write it down the way it sounds to you'. So she did that and her spelling became much better as she went along because she worked at it too. As you know the first thing for people who are not very skilled at writing, they're worried ... the teacher thing, you know ... they've been told in school, 'you can't write. You can't write because you can't spell'; or 'you haven't got the proper grammar', or something. Of course this is not important in terms of

this kind of writing at all because you could easily figure it out. Her speaking skills are tremendous and I said, 'Just write it as you talk - 'Don't worry about the sentence structure', and she did that basically.

MJ: *Did you ever feel that she was writing for you, that you were her reader?*

RW: I think at a certain point that is true because, for example, I sent her things. Things that her father, for example, had given me when I went to visit him. I sent her pictures and I sent her maps and things like that; and these were clearly stimulants to her memory. She drew the maps over into her notebooks and so could track her memory; especially, say, some of her hospital experiences - where something happened; where an assault happened; and where she ended up in the hospital. Or where that arrest happened, or where she appeared before the judge and so on. These things that I sent her helped her recall. Because you know you're sitting in a cell and you have absolutely nothing except your memory - if you dare to think about it; but with something visual in front of you, especially a picture or something like that, it changes quite a lot. So I think then her writing, in that sense, was not so much directed at me as being aided by some of the things I was able to send her from her own background which were not available to her in prison. That's one of the problems of writing in prison where you have nothing and that's why she's writing, generally, to people ... or she tried to write to people asking for information but nothing much came of it.

MJ: *I realised yesterday when I visited her, how cut off, how isolated you are in prison.*

RW: Have you been in a prison before?

MJ: *I've never been in prison.*

RW: You've never visited anyone in prison? It's a shocking experience, no matter what — and Kingston was especially a cruncher for me. These buildings look a little more humane but they're not really. They're just inhumane in other ways because people are captives. The whole point of the system is to make a captive of that person, to punish them...

MJ: *Yvonne's journal writing continued for a number of years, accumulating seventeen volumes. Journal writing by nature is not structured. It's not chronological. It follows threads of memory and points of trauma. I suppose your task then was to help transfer that journal writing to a more accessible narrative.*

RW: My basic problem with writing this book was the structural one. There is the structure of chronology, of course, which is the basic one; but a chronology of a life doesn't give you a book, a comprehensible book, right? The concept of book became very important for me as I tried to work this out because I realised that a life is not a book – a book in the sense that it starts somewhere with the reader's total ignorance of the situation and explains what happened so you can get to the point where the most difficult or the most dramatic or the most life changing thing happens, and then does something with that. I think very much in terms of a reader when I'm structuring a book, and chronology just won't do it because in a life story, this happens and then this happens and then this happens and there's no necessary connection. It's just something that happens to you. An accident, whatever, it happens. So the problem with making a book of this was that Yvonne, I think, at first thought that it would be quite simple, you know, she'd just write it out ... and then there were a couple of places in her journals where it was as if she herself was writing her book ... But I said that the first important thing was just for her memories to come. When we discussed this and when we'd meet this is how she would talk - she would go from one memory to the other ... by association ... It was only afterwards that you could figure out the chronology of her life ... 'When did this happen?' ... she'd be talking about something when she was eighteen or nineteen in Winnipeg when we'd just been talking about something that happened to her when she was seven in Butte, for example. You can't do this to a reader. Well, you can do it to a listener, but a listener just hears a little bit of it and it's a kind of a complete story and it makes sense; but you can't do it to a reader. So it has to be worked out. So this was the matter of the journals, which stayed a long time on one incident or stayed around one incident, but then moved off into some other place as the memory flows. You don't want to stop that because that's where the strength of it is but that's not a book. So then my job was to go through the journals and first of all construct a kind of chronology about what happened to Yvonne. If there is something precise to hang onto — like there

was a grade, a teacher — it was that teacher, then you know, okay, that was grade seven. But there were a couple of problems that Yvonne and I never did figure out, never did solve, and she still thinks that somewhere in there, there is a year, or I think there is a year's slippage somewhere, especially in her teens just after she ended school. She ran away from home and a number of things happened. We never got that quite straight, but in terms of the book perhaps it's not that important because between her leaving Butte and wandering around the United States and ending up in Winnipeg, there is a whole series of things that are very difficult to pinpoint. It was really a difficult matter, first of all, to establish the chronology, and then out of that life chronology to make a book which read in a way that's moving towards the crucial incident in her life, which is of course the death of that man in her basement in her own house, and then make a structure that is intriguing to a reader. That was the big difficulty, and one that I struggled with for years. At a certain time I thought, 'It can't be done. I can't do this. Life is too short'.

MJ: *Well, could I ask you was it ever a possibility that the book could be constructed solely from Yvonne's journals?*

RW: Well, I don't know how you could have done it, in the sense that it would have been just a series of journals. It wouldn't have been a book - it wouldn't have been a book in the sense that it was structured and framed. No one will publish stream-of-thinking journals. It would have been too confusing. She would have had to order them herself in some way. What she wrote in her journals was not something that could be published because of the way journal writing is. It's repetitious. It goes back and forth. It's non-time related. It's all kinds of things. A journal is not something you necessarily want to make public. A journal is something you do for yourself, first of all. At a certain time a journal writer becomes a writer who knows that this is going to be published and writes accordingly. A journal is much franker, more open, and completely unguarded and forthright.

MJ: *So in your task of organising this material and making it into a narrative that would carry the reader to that crucial moment, the incident of the death....*

RW: There's more than organization, right? There's an enormous amount of selection. You select things; and many of the chapters that I wrote, that we worked out and agreed upon, when the editor read them, he said, 'we could cut this out. It repeats what we already know so you don't have to say it again. The reader has got it'. So all those notebooks, and all those conversations, and all those tapes — it's not only organisation but also an enormous amount of selection - what moment you are going to choose, or what small story you are going to choose to represent that entire era of her life? These are the things that are particularly difficult for someone, if they are writing about their own life, to choose because it's probably more simple for an objective person to do that. Then there's the further objectivity of an editor. As a matter of fact we ended up with two editors, a further editor who read the book strictly as kind of a technical, structural thing, who never met Yvonne at all, and simply picked up little details - legal details, or gave impressions like, 'this is too sentimental,' or 'you've said this before, it's overwrought'. So there was a series of objectivities going on before the book arrived at the present point.

MJ: *As well as organisation and selection, your input into the book is substantial in terms of the framing narrative that you write describing your meetings with Yvonne, describing the other meetings with family members...*

RW: Your question is why is it in there? Well, it's in there for two reasons. Partly because I'm a writer and I am discovering the story, and in that sense I'm a kind of surrogate reader. I am discovering the story somehow as the reader discovers the story. So in that sense it's not only a biography or autobiography of Yvonne. It is her life story, but there is a big chunk of me in there — me describing to you how I, as one person, discovered the story, because I think the story just blurted out or just told in its raw form as, say, Yvonne's long statement about what happened to her in her childhood, for example, is not the best way for the reader to encounter this story.

MJ: *Why not?*

RW: Because certain stories are too drastic for people to be blurted into. They'd be sort of like a disaster, a road accident ... sitting in our living room with a book in our

hand, we don't want ... You need to be introduced to them somehow ... not just to be dropped into it, in first person: I thought that's not the way to tell this story in order for it to be told effectively, for it to impact on us the way that kind of pain should, truly, deeply. Because at an accident we're just horrified. We shudder and run away from it. We block it out. We drive past it. We don't need this. Of course when life does it to us we have to experience it in such a way that we can't get rid of it for the rest of our lives. So my part, I felt, was to write how I discovered this story and explain exactly why I was in it in the first place; and as I mentioned in the book several times, there was a stage when I felt I shouldn't be in it. I shouldn't be doing this at all. Somebody else should do it; but I was encouraged very much by different Native women that I talked to - 'Perhaps at this time you are the only person because Yvonne trusts you. And being the kind of writer that you are, perhaps you're the only person that can do this'. I think out of this did come a different kind of book than one usually reads. It was partly because I got profoundly emotionally involved in the story myself and I wanted to be in there to show you how the emotion works —as another party, a party that in effect knows nothing. I'm just as much a stranger to it as you are as a reader; but I'm a reader with a certain kind of training who can help put this into a kind of a context.

MJ: *Well my next question would be that, having made the decision that this would be the best way to do the book, why is there not more of yourself in the book? Can I begin by asking again about that first letter? Yvonne asks, 'Who are you? How do you know so much? And what was the force behind you? And why did you choose to write about Big Bear?' She asks these questions in that first letter but you don't answer in the book.*

RW: Well I think I probably answered her in our conversations, as much as was needed.

MJ: *I'm sure you did, but I'm asking why that didn't become part of the book.*

RW: Well, for one thing, I don't think it needs to become part of the book because it's already there in *Big Bear*, to a certain extent, and in all the stories I've written since, especially.... Oh, just at the time, and this was the amazing thing, just at the

time when I was working on this, there was the whole matter of the TV mini-series of *The Temptations of Big Bear* — have you seen it?

MJ: *I haven't, no.*

RW: Well, it was just in the process of getting made at that time. This began in 1982 or '81. A Montreal company first started working with me on it. I was working on the script all through the '80s and then by the '90s there was an Edmonton company here working on it and then eventually it ended up with Gil Cardinal, the director, and the CBC working on it. In fact when we launched *Stolen Life*, they were shooting Big Bear in the Qu'Appelle Valley, just north of Regina. So there was a kind of coming together of the whole thing, of this work with this amazing man, who I've been involved with all my writing life. Big Bear is in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. One of the Cree descendants of him is in that novel. So he's been a presence in my entire writing life. I don't think a novelist who has spent his entire life being influenced clearly in various ways by this historical character who comes out of your own life and from the place where you are born, and who reflects not only that world, but also the spiritual world to which you yourself are very powerfully connected — well I don't necessarily try to explicate that in everything I write. There may be some of the essays in *Rivers of Stone* ... actually there is an essay in there about my experience of going to visit Big Bear's power bundle which is in New York in the American Museum of Natural History. I did that when I was working on *The Temptations of Big Bear*; and you see that's another thing. The last time I was in New York they wouldn't show it to me. They are bureaucratic now. You have to make appointments through the right people. Anyway, that's another story; but that's the kind of thing I couldn't take Yvonne to see. That's exactly what she was asking but it's the kind of thing you couldn't take Yvonne to see because she's in prison. They're not letting go of it, right? Actually that's another whole story about the bundle, but those are the kinds of things that drive this story, that make this story really part of me. Right behind you, look behind you there. See that? That's Big Bear. Joe Fafard, do you know him as an artist? [Wiebe indicates a ceramic sculpture]

MJ: *I don't.*

RW: He's a prairie ceramicist. He's a wonderful man. This is an early Joe Fafard, actually. That's Big Bear just after he'd been captured ... been taken prisoner. He surrendered himself to the RCMP. There's a picture of him sitting like that and six Mounties standing all around him, in Prince Albert, July 1885. So Joe wanted to do a statue of Big Bear and I gave him a number of pictures and he chose that one. I've had that since 1977 or something like that. Anyway ...

MJ: *Well, since you mentioned the power bundle maybe I'll mention this: when I talked to Yvonne yesterday, she talked about the book being a sacred bundle. Do you want to offer any comment on that?*

RW: Is that the way she sees it now?

MJ: *Yes.*

RW: What do you think she meant by that? Did she explain?

MJ: *She said that every spirit is sacred. A life is sacred. And she said that this book was the story of her life and she wanted it to be a ceremony and so opened it with a prayer and closed it with a prayer. She wanted the cover to represent the cloth which encloses the sacred bundle.*

RW: Yes, and she wanted her primary colours on there.

MJ: *Yes, red and green.*

RW: ... and blue and white. On the first edition the colours were only on the bottom of the cover. She wanted them on all four sides.

MJ: *So was she satisfied with the cover?*

RW: She said, 'It has to be in a circle'. The first edition doesn't have it. It doesn't have the circular thing, which is so important to her. Then on the paperback they fixed that up. So, I think that's a wonderful way for her to look at it. The book has gone all over the world and has been translated into a number of languages now. It's coming out in German this fall and she's had all kinds of readers respond ... did she tell you that?

MJ: *Yes she did. She's had letters from all over world.*

RW: Hundreds of people, all over the world. It's created problems for her too, in the sense that she's become a very public person. It's part of what she says in here, in this prayer, of having the courage to show her shame to everyone, what she has done, the people she has hurt. That is superb courage for someone to do that and to show that publicly and this is one of the things that make it very difficult for her family. I don't know if she talked about that at all.

MJ: *No. She did say that she was becoming reconciled with her mother.*

RW: Well this is one of the things that, you know, out of families you don't talk about what happens in the family - especially if you're a racial minority and you're a visual racial group and seen as that: you don't talk out of the family to give more ammunition to those who are racist and despise you. That's one reason why you don't see books like this around very often. There is that kind of shame; but she feels that it's important and she has the courage to show the guilt and the shame and at the same time it shows what has been done to her.

MJ: *The only way to break the cycles of abuse is through speaking — making the circumstances of abuse known and able to be talked about and that's what the book does. All right, I'm going to ask about you again. In a sense the book is similar to the Latin American genre of testimonio where someone without the skills to see their life story get into print entirely through their own writing, finds the assistance of someone who becomes their advocate. In the book, one of your roles is an advocate for Yvonne's case. So I'm going to ask, when did you realise that this was happening?*

RW: Well, the point I want to make on that matter is the first sentence in the prefatory note. 'This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived.' I was not going to do a critical life and examine her ideas and opinions and memories and then try to be objective about them and say, 'this is what really happened'. For one thing, I don't believe such a thing is possible anyway. As a novelist — someone who spends his life writing novels — I'm very much aware of the kinds of structural fiction that historians put into things in order to make sense of them ... and the kinds of things that people say to

me all the time: 'I don't read novels. I just want to read true stories'. God save me! If I feel particularly vicious at the time I'll say something savage about that but the whole idea — it's simply a continuum. But to pretend that there is any sort of God-like objectivity there, or truth. It's a wonderful question. Pilate asked Jesus, 'What is truth?' I could explain endlessly. Five people experience the same thing at the same time, but they have diametrically opposed opinions about what happened, even when the evidence is there. Okay, evidence like someone had his arm cut off - I mean that's a fact. You can see it. Everybody can see it — but how it happened... My ultimate example in creative writing classes is always the Kennedy assassination. Even the Justice of the Supreme Court and all the highest level people issued a report which nobody believes any more. So this is very carefully stated here: 'This book is based on what Yvonne Johnson holds to be her own truths about the life she has lived'. However, there is never only one way to tell a story. So I believe this explicitly, and profoundly. All my writing life has only verified that most human experience is the same way. So when her sister for example — and I won't tell you which one — talked to me for three hours and tore me apart for this book, and said, 'That's not true, and that's not true, and that's not true', I had nothing to say. She felt that this book was a vicious lie. Of course there were things in there that she had experienced too, and which she agreed, 'Yes', and in fact she told me things that if I had known would have made the book even more horrifying than it already is, but I didn't know them or I hadn't been told them. Yvonne either hadn't told them to me or felt they were part of someone else's story in the family. So this is where you end up. I would never emphasise that this is true in any objective sense, but it is as clear and as precise as Yvonne feels and remembers it is and that's good enough for me. That's all I was trying to help her with - and to put it in the frame of my own experience of discovery, but in many places I disappear completely, especially toward the end - it's not important any more that I'm there.

MJ: *I do have to ask you about this – one of the issues is authorship, who is given first position. Yvonne's comment was that there was never any question in her mind that your name should be first. She wanted to show her respect and her honour for your involvement. Did you have any question about that?*

RW: Well, it's difficult, but you have to design the book somehow, and clearly, we are partners. Her name is just as large as mine. Partly, for the publisher it was a marketing thing. They wanted my name first because I'm a very widely known author. This is partly what it's all about. Yvonne has been very good about that. Some people have objected to this. I don't know how to resolve that. As I say, I don't think she could have written a book that would be publishable. So in that sense, you might say I'm the book-maker, but it's clearly her story. There is nothing of me in here, except the first chapter introduces us in such a way that you know who we both are in relation to each other.

MJ: *That's what I was asking about before, that there is very little of your subjectivity.*

RW: Except in the first chapter, and a few other places, like chapter 2 and 3, or 13. So it's obviously not my story. But it is my book, in the sense that I structured and made it in a way in which she couldn't have, but it's her story. We're partners here and, as she probably told you, everything is split. Everything is shared fifty/fifty. Unless she does something specifically herself now, and I have nothing to do with it, but it's shared fifty/fifty. There have been a few people that have remarked about that in newspapers.

MJ: *Yes, it's a common criticism.*

RW: So what is done with this, in the usual case?

MJ: *There is no usual case. The circumstances leading to any one collaboration are unique. There may be some patterns but I can't yet say that this is the way it's usually done; and authorship is very problematic because of readers' expectations. Autobiography is written by the narrator and collaborative autobiography just doesn't follow that pattern. It's not a biography. It's not someone writing someone else's life story in the third person. It's first person narrative but told through the joint efforts of the two or more people involved and our preconceptions are foiled in many ways by this, one of them being the jacket, the authors. Some of the collaborative books don't have an author acknowledged on the jacket. It's 'the story of ...' and then the name but no author, and you'll look inside on the imprint page and it will say edited by so-and-so. But there is no usual pattern to this. It's often left for readers to struggle with.*

RW: Actually, one of the translated books has Yvonne Johnson's name first. I think it was the Danish book — but I had nothing to do with that. That was the decision of the publisher. Well, it makes sense because I'm not well known as a writer in Denmark.

MJ: *So there is nothing to gain by putting your name first.*

RW: Certainly there was nothing in marketing terms to be gained, and that's perfectly fine.

MJ: *In some of Yvonne's comments yesterday, and she laughed when she said this, she said there were things that she was telling you and you said, 'I don't know. I'm only a white guy. How do I know all this?' So I want to ask whether your work with Yvonne has influenced or changed or altered or transformed your perceptions, your understandings of First Nations experience?*

RW: Well ... I've always operated on the basis, and this is one of the reasons I could tell or could try to write a novel about Big Bear, that all human beings are human beings. The society we live in and the race and our people give us particular ways of living and ways of understanding the world; but every human being understands every human being in fundamental ways. We are not different species. We are a language species. We talk to each other. We live with each other. We care for each other. We love each other. There has to be a caring situation going on, or people don't survive. I mean a child simply won't live if it is not cared for. So we are profoundly the same in all the important ways that a species is the same. At the same time some of our experiences are very different; our experience of life is very different. I can see that just by going down to the Greyhound Bus depot, right, and I see people arrive there and the way security people behave. For me, with the grey beard and the white skin and obviously a well-to-do, middle-class person, they will never talk to me about loitering. But they see someone who has just arrived straight from the north ... These are things that you can recognise in a minute, but which you have never experienced yourself, unless you go to some other country ... I've had that experience happen to me too... and for women too ... For me working with Yvonne was a tremendous initiation. It was an introduction, not only an introduction, but a deep

experience of being a different kind of person, both in race and especially also in terms of being a woman and what she experiences and the way a woman is instantly identified as, ‘Oh an Indian woman. Here’s someone you could buy if you wanted her’, that kind of attitude. The kinds of experiences that she told me, and herself telling them to me directly, this was an experience that I’d never had before. In that sense it was a wonderful experience for a writer, to be offered that. That was the great gift that she gave me, in terms of this book, and that’s one of the major reasons why at a certain point when we were all ready to quit, it seemed to be too great a gift not to continue with it.

The other thing that was important — I mean this should be told too in this kind of collaboration — this kind of collaboration is completely impossible to bring to fruition unless you have a publisher who really understands this. A publisher like Louise Denny at Knopf Canada was absolutely crucial to this because she wanted a book like this. At a certain point when both Yvonne and I were trying to figure out how this could be written — and we thought for a while that maybe we should write it as a novel, you know, change all the names — it was Louise Denny who, at one point when basically we were at the ends of our ropes, came out here and she and I went to the Healing Lodge together and she met Yvonne for the first time — she’d talked to her on the phone but she’d never met her — she came out here and we spent some days at the Healing Lodge and she was a really crucial part of why this happened. Then also the costs of the legal vetting: we had to get a couple of legal opinions on the manuscript. The best legal mind in Canada who is a personal friend of Louise’ and I know him too, Clayton Ruby, read this book. So without a publisher like that, really committed to the whole idea of telling this story and telling it in a way that would be effective as a book, and then publicising it really well and doing a great job in designing it and promoting it — that is really a crucial part of what happened in a book like this.

MJ: *In that last exchange you’ve mentioned a couple of times about the gift that Yvonne was giving you. One of the issues that I’m looking at is the idea of reciprocity, of exchange in collaboration. When a life story is told it is a gift and that gift brings with it in some cases obligations or the responsibility of the*

listener to give something back. So, what were your obligations in receiving this gift?

RW: Well my obligation, and we've already talked about this in one sense, was to tell this story in such a way that it is understandable to a basically white, middle-class audience, the kind of person who is going to buy this book — and that ties in with what I said before. In fact it happened to me on the cross-country tour. At one radio station a man, of course a white man, said, 'We've heard these stories before. We've heard thousands of these stories before'. I said, 'Yes, you've heard thousands of bits and pieces. You see thousands of items every year in the newspaper. When have you ever read a story that really goes into the details of where this story started, who this person was and how it happened like this?' He said he'd never read a book like that. No, he never had. So this is one of the reasons why it's important for me as a well known white writer to put some effort into this, to show this story, so that people will read it and not say, 'Oh this is another two paragraphs in a newspaper. This is another thirty second TV thing about a Native person sent to jail for some horrible crime. Some kind of horrible crime has happened and a Native person is involved in it'. No. That story is all too common. Everybody knows it, certainly in Canada or Australia. It's horrifying. You see the stories all the time. 'Another Native suicide', right? You never know the story behind this. You never know. And Yvonne having the incredible courage to actually tell this story, beginning with what happened to her as a two-year old in her own home. That's where this nightmare starts and this whole thing culminates in a kind of way when she's starting to get an almost normal life. It's not quite normal, but it's relatively normal what she's living in Wetaskiwin. She's got a husband who works hard and she's got a family to care for, and it's then that her nightmares start - that's when it starts coming up out of that horrible magma of her subconscious memory. That's why she said — 'this murder was horrible and it happened' — but she said, 'If I hadn't been in jail for that I would have come to jail for something else'. She couldn't handle it, and her husband is the kind of man that Yvonne could care for and he helped her a lot but was not one to help her solve her problems... It's her entire life that she has to relive. So this is part of the reason why this story, if she has the courage to tell it, should be told in

such a way that we can grasp it, and the response that she has had over the years to it has been quite fabulous.

MJ: *Can I follow through with the question about reciprocity? You're talking in terms of mainstream Canada.*

RW: Well, the society in Canada that controls the way our world is.

MJ: *I'd also like to ask in what way you see the book, given Yvonne's ancestry, giving back to the Cree Nation?*

RW: Her emphasis on Cree spirituality is a very important thing; but you know, Native people are not automatically good people. They've got the same range within them as everybody. The thing that she gives back, in a certain way, beyond that spirituality, is this kind of mirror to the way Native society in Canada has become. You can't go on blaming forever, blaming white people for this, blaming white people for everything. There is a certain kind of human responsibility that every human being has, and you can't say forever, 'We've been wrecked by Residential schools and alcohol and it's all the White Man's fault'. There are plenty of examples of Native people who are not wrecked by that, who rise above it and go beyond that, but there are so many who say, 'The White Man is all at fault. Give us more money'. The Hobbema Reserve just outside of Wetaskiwin is a good example. They have unbelievable amounts of money. Money just makes it worse if you don't handle it right. Money doesn't cure anybody of anything. So that is another thing that the book gives back to the Cree people. This is the way particularly Cree women suffer in the whole scheme of things, of the social structure. The men get beat up somewhere and then come home and beat up their women and abuse their children. Then the women beat the children and the children beat the dog, or something like that. There's this horrible sequence of abuse that goes from top to bottom and Cree men can be as bad as anything a white man can do to you if you are a Cree woman. And that's what the book gives back, I think, in spades. A person is not all good and all bad either. This is one of the things that I ran into with Yvonne's mother. She would never talk to me. I said, 'Look, Yvonne wants to tell her story and she's telling it to me and if you talk to me, maybe this would help in getting the story told better'. Her father was

wonderfully helpful to me, her father who abused her! But he's an old guy now and visiting him was one of the major experiences of helping this book come into existence because of all the help he gave me, not only in the way he talked but in the things he gave me: school records, photographs, maps, newspaper articles, things like that. I dug up some from the Butte Standard, but he had clipped them out. He had kept them. He kept everything! That house! That was a house! That was an experience! He's still alive. [Yvonne Johnson's father passed away in 2004.] If Cecilia had been as helpful as Yvonne's father, then we could have got a better image of Yvonne's Native experience. But she wouldn't do anything. She just told me off.

MJ: *Well, in the book in those interactions with family, you come across as the enemy.*

RW: Well I'm basically that still. That hasn't changed much. The book probably only confirmed their worst fears. Well, they know the story better than anybody. So if Yvonne is going to be honest about what her memories are, they know it's going to be a tough story. There are some beautiful things in the family there too, but there are some very tough things. Is that generally the case, that the collaborator is the enemy, as far as the other part of the family is concerned?

MJ: *No, not always. Actually, of all of the books I'm looking at, yours is the worst case scenario for that positioning because of the nature of the story.*

RW: The other stories that you're looking at ... they're not so ... they don't deal with this kind of issue?

MJ: *They don't deal with sexual abuse within the family, no.*

RW: Or crime, or whatever?

MJ: *You've said that this is the first book of its kind in Canada to go into the circumstances in such depth, the hows and the whys of the crime and the abuse.*

RW: Is there something similar in Australia?

MJ: *To my knowledge, no. There are newspaper stories and investigative journalism which looks at these issues in Aboriginal communities, but there is no book length autobiography or life story which deals with this.*

RW: That's interesting to know. I know of none, in the sense of a Native woman who has had the courage to talk like this. That's quite amazing. It's a pretty unique story Yvonne has told; but you see it's not a unique story. You know, when I was in Winnipeg on the book tour, a Native woman who is a columnist for the *Winnipeg Free Press* came to talk to me. She wasn't going to write about the story because she couldn't write that story - it was too close to her own life. She had a colleague come and we talked together, the three of us, and then he went off and wrote the story. She stayed behind and told me that in Winnipeg every single Native woman that she knew had a story of some kind of vicious abuse in her life. If it wasn't happening now with her husband, it had happened in her past, either from acquaintances, or on the Reserve, in her family with her uncles, her cousins, her brothers, her father, whoever. This is horrible. Every Native woman she knew ... and she must have known hundreds. She said there was a line of abuse, often sexual abuse, certainly psychological and physical abuse, in every single Native woman's life, and that was why she couldn't write about Yvonne's story. You see this book is not in any sense ... the experience is not in any sense unique. It's just the fact that Yvonne has had the courage to do it that is unique. There're hundreds of articles and TV documentaries on it but they are quick. Things are just said. They can't be just said. You have to go through and experience them.

Subsequent to my interviews with Yvonne Johnson and Rudy Wiebe, Johnson applied for consideration under the 'Faint Hope' clause, section 7.456 of the *Criminal Code* of Canada. Under this clause, a convicted prisoner may ask a judge to review her or his case to allow for an application to a jury to have the parole ineligibility period reduced. In 2005, Yvonne Johnson's 'Faint Hope' hearing was successful and, subsequently, a she was granted the right to apply for parole. Her application for parole, however, was denied. In 2006, she was granted a series of 'Unescorted Temporary Passes' which have allowed her to visit her children. To date, she continues to serve her life sentence at the Edmonton Institute for Women.