AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN POWER
CONDUCTED BY CLAIRE MIKALSON

BIOGRAPHY

Susan Power is an acclaimed Native American novelist who weaves interlocking stories into rich tapestries that unite generations across time and place. Power is an enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe and the author of Roofwalker and The Grass Dancer, for which she received the PEN/Hemingway prize. A graduate of Harvard Law School and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Power has received numerous awards including a James Michener Fellowship, Radcliffe Bunting Institute Fellowship, Princeton Hodder Fellowship, and a United States Artists Fellowship.

PRAISE FOR SUSAN POWER’S ROOFWALKER

"The stories and essays in Roofwalker portray women and men negotiating an impossible path between Native American culture and a transplanted urban life in Chicago. Susan Power, awarded the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for the 1994 novel The Grass Dancer, is a product of such extremes, and her experience dominates this masterly mix of fiction and non-fiction."—Chicago Sun Times

"The fiction and essays here feel inextricably linked, not forced together; among the things they share is Power's inventive, clear-eyed prose."—New York Times Book Review

VISITING WRITER SHARES ADVICE ON SEVERING THE EGO AND CHOOSING THE WRITER'S PATH
Q: Why did you choose the path of a writer?

A: Since my earliest memory I've loved books more than anything; even before I knew how to read I was filling up pages. I knew the alphabet when I was three and would pretend I was writing. I've always had this need to write and I've written all of my life. I thought everyone loved to write, because that was my strategy for getting through things. It was only in high school I realized not everyone loved writing. But it wasn't until much later I decided to launch a career in writing. Writing was always present as a foundation, but it wasn't until my mother sent me a copy of Louise Erdrich's Love Medicine toward the end of my law degree that I began to seriously think of becoming a writer. The idea people were out there and interested in reading something like that, well it was a real epiphany.

Q: In many of your short stories issues of masculinity are present: fathers leaving children, abusive husbands, but also men who are compassionate and loving. How are men crucial to your stories as a woman writer?

A: One of my professors at the Iowa Writer's Workshop was a little freaked out about my male characters. I remember during a one-on-one conference he leaned forward and started stuttering, "Are you a f-f-feminist?" And I said, "Well I guess so." I asked him why he asked and he said, "Your men are always killed off. None of them are movers or shakers and if they are, they're killed off." I told him that was just the world I grew up in. The women in my family overshadowed the men. The women were the activists; the women were the ones standing up to policeman at sit-ins and protests. Though my father was kind and very liberal, he was not an activist the way my mother was. He'd rather sit at home and read, while my mother dragged me to the protests. The men in the stories reflect my worldview, where the women are the real movers and shakers who you better look out for.

Q: You often write in a child perspective. Many writers claim a child's voice is far more challenging to capture because of age differences and innocence. Would you agree with this?

A: A few years ago a woman was putting together an anthology of young adult fiction by native people called Moccasin Thunder and wanted me to write a young adult piece for the book. I just sat down and it came really easily and I'm not usually able to just sit down and write something. It's much harder for me to write fiction that isn't inspired by my own experiences. But for some reason I find it easy to write from a young adult perspective. Many people have encouraged me to write a young adult novel and I think I will. I just remember so vividly my youth. I identify with who I was at thirteen. I haven't forgotten any of that. I filled notebook after notebook of writings during that period. It's very easy for me to go back in time and put myself back in that place.

Q: The city of Chicago is often your setting. What is the importance of this city to you as a writer?

A: I was born and raised in Chicago. My mother is the one from the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota. Chicago isn't really written about in literary fiction. The great and vast midwest is often overlooked. I place myself there because that's where I'm from. The novel I'm just finishing is set in St. Paul, Minnesota, because that's where I'm at right now. I don't think I'd ever want to write about Chicago if I wasn't from there or didn't have a history there. I am a midwesterner. I lived on the east coast for many years, but I am midwesterner with a midwesterner's sensibility and voice.

Q: Would you consider yourself a writer who challenges notions of reality, with stories such as "Roofwalker" and "Beaded Soles" where readers question many truths, experiences, and notions of reality? Would you consider yourself to be a post-modern or metafictional writer?

A: When I go back and read the papers I wrote in college I don't recognize that person. I was such an academic. I don't in any shape or form align myself with any literary movement. I'm not saying labels are inappropriate, but I wouldn't place them on myself. When I'm writing, I'm trying to tell a person's story. Sometimes it's a pain, especially with this new story I'm working on because none of the people are like me or from my tribe, so I had to do a lot of research. But these people came to me and I had to figure out their story and tell it to the best of my abilities. My intention is for people to accept that my characters really believe what is happening as truth. I intend for people to see the reality in "Angry Fish" and for people to believe a statue could be real. This is my reality and this is some people's reality.
Q: You have a law degree from Harvard Law School. Do you ever use that degree?

A: I went to Harvard for college, then stayed and went to law school, graduating in 1986. But by the time I graduated, I knew I would never ever practice law. But I was still glad I got the degree because we did so much writing in law school. Lawyers are always trying to manipulate language, so it taught me an awful lot about precision and how to play with language.

Q: Are there any interconnections between legal writing and creative writing?

A: Before law school I was just undisciplined, except for academic essays. In terms of my creative writing, it was very undisciplined, pure creativity, sort of a hippie freedom of “Don’t tell me what to do.” Then law school came about and it wasn’t just about looking up a word in a dictionary. Suddenly, language was seen with more clarity and I began to understand language as an incredibly powerful tool.

Q: Do you find yourself writing stories powered by politics and society?

A: Politics and spiritual life informed me completely as a writer and a person even when I didn’t want that to be the case. I was raised by people who believed in a higher power. I was also raised according to a weird hybrid of Catholicism and more than one native religion, because I was exposed to several. I was taught to care about what was happening and not just to my people. Of course my mother taught me about the Dakota people and the Dakota history, but she and my dad were also involved in the Civil Rights movement for African Americans. I was raised knowing what happened to Japanese Americans during World War II and all about the Holocaust. This was in the early 1960s too. All of this was informing me, until I got into my twenties and wanted an apolitical life and didn’t want to believe in a higher power. Then things turned around and now I’m a very politically active person.

Q: The individual stories of Roofwalker and Grass Dancer encompass many voices, forming a community of stories when read together. It seems these characters may pass each other on the street or buy groceries from the same store even though they never meet each other in their stories. Was this reaction intended?

A: Roofwalker’s stories are differently inspired and written over a long period of time. So I wasn’t imagining them interacting with one another, but they come from the same community at roughly the same time. Roofwalker is meant to be a conversation between my actual experiences and pieces of fiction. Originally, each fiction story was to be followed by an essay, so readers would go back and forth between short stories and an essay telling the origin of the story’s seeds. I wanted this to be a conversation between a lived life and a dream life. However, my publisher thought this approach might be confusing, so the book was split into a fiction section and a nonfiction section.

Q: Do you believe there is a desire to see fiction and nonfiction as rigid opposites rather than forms of writing that exist on a spectrum?

A: I’m somebody who believes our so-called nonfiction is fiction. I don’t remember word for word what people say and I’m also conflating events for a creative arch. It’s all story. But then again I have a very different perspective. There are realities publishers have to deal with in the marketplace with many readers needing to know what is fiction and what is nonfiction ahead of time. I’m different because I believe it’s all story: history and religion are story. People get too freaked out about what actually happened.

Q: Any advice to writers reading this interview?

A: I think it’s important to divorce the ego from the work as much as possible. I had to learn to detach myself from what I had written so I could come back and look at the work with an editorial eye. In your first draft you just want to get it down and not be too critical, because the critique can get in the way. And I’m just now learning to get past that. In the end, you can always change things. Some pieces you need to set aside because you’re just too involved. I pulled out a novel I wrote right after Grass Dancer and I knew it wasn’t finished. Some sections were great and some were awful. I’m so happy I didn’t give it to my publisher, because now I see what is wrong and what needs to be done. I needed all this time and distance.