

Heart *and* Spirit

Between the mountains of the heart and spirit there are rivers made by a storyteller called Lee Maracle...

For years, native writer Lee Maracle had been nagged by the question: "What exactly is the difference between native and white world views?" The answer came mid-way through four years of sociology studies at Simon Fraser University when she analyzed the writings of John Stuart Mill.

"I was really close, and I knew I was close," she recalls. "I was at home, burning sweet grass. I decided to go for a walk and I ran into this old guy who I always told my problems to. I told him about John Stuart Mill and he told me the creation story. And I thought, he doesn't know what I'm talking about. But I realized he did."

The answer, Maracle concluded, has to do with Mill's axioms of "the greatest happiness for the greatest number" and "all men are motivated by pleasure and pain" — axioms which erase the individual and replace it with a faceless social unit.

"When he introduces this, then he has to define happiness, and he has to define pleasure and pain to his own sense of protestant respectability," Maracle says. But, she concludes, the western European assumption of objectivity of thought leads to "disconnection from the self."

"It's fundamental to all thinking in North America, this alienation," she adds. "There's a huge amount of alienation in the white community, which is why there's so much divorce, kids going off. I noticed that at school. It appals me."

For the 41 year-old Maracle, this recognition was something of a turning point. Raised in North

Feature by Karen Romell Photographed by David Neel

Vancouver by a native family that believed fiercely in native political and social independence, she endured the experience of attending white schools. But she remained with her family, where she absorbed her own culture through contact with individuals like Chief Dan George. Later, in her early twenties, Maracle immersed herself in radical, predominantly western politics. She also read Marx, Mao, Ho Chi Minh — but she read their poetry as well as their political essays. Then, at 25, after an ardent and passionate pursuit of political study, she took up creative writing.

Today, Maracle is one of the foremost native writers and speakers in the country. She has published an autobiographical piece (*Bobbi Lee*), as well as several works of fiction — *I Am Woman*, and her most recent work, *Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories*. She has also written poetry and political theory, and co-edited and contributed to *Telling It*, a book of feminist writing. She teaches creative writing at the En'owkin School in Penticton, an arts school for native youth; gives frequent readings and lectures across the country; and recently served on the visual and performing arts juries for the Canadian Native Arts Foundation in Toronto. Married to Dennis Maracle, a native performance producer and director, she has four children and one grandchild.

Maracle loves to talk, and she does so seamlessly and intensely, weaving a strong and complex fabric of thought, emotion and impression. She is disarmingly honest and unflinching in her opinions. It's a characteristic which would make her seem unduly tough, if she didn't laugh as loudly and often as she does, tempering her observations with frequent jokes.

Her references to her personal background are few, but revealing. The person who had the most impact on her, she reveals, was her great-grandmother, who died when Maracle was nine.

"She gave me the philosophical foundations for becoming a thinker, I suppose," Maracle says simply. "She was 14 when she first saw a white person. She lived through a lot of things: five epidemics, the great fire."

Maracle was also shaped by the experience of being one of only a few native students at a predominantly white school. "It was a shock to me to go to school," she says. "It bothers me still that kids have to ask to go to the bathroom. That's like asking to breathe."

"I think in white society the goal is to erase the self and the soul ... the whole goal is to alienate your heart and spirit from your mind."

"Heart" and "spirit" are words that come up frequently in Maracle's speech. She also speaks often about "us" and "them," about the differences between her own and white culture. Frequently condemnatory, she also speaks with a decisiveness borne of intellectual pursuit. She says that cultural differences are an issue that has always been with her. "I can't remember not thinking about it," she says simply. But, she insists, she is not a pessimist.

"I'm not a discouraged person. Courage is the ability to face the odds. But I wouldn't consider myself happy. There are a lot of things in the world that I'm extremely sad about, that never leave me."

One antidote to the sadness is the laughter that never strays far from Maracle's conversation. "It's part of how we are as a people," she adds. "The worse things are, the more we laugh. Laughter is healing medicine, so you create humour out of whatever is there. If you can't pay the Hydro, you have to make a joke about it. It's the poor man's survival food for the spirit."

Maracle's movement from her earlier political life to her activism today is bred partly from a realization of the gulf between native and western

philosophical and political thought, and partly from her experience of feminism. She believes that Native and female oppression must be addressed similarly: through cultural transformation. It was this recognition that took her from pure politics to the realm of creative writing.

"At a certain point I realized politics and political transformation weren't going to occur without cultural transformation, and the discovery of heart in story and poetry. So I switched from political to creative writing.

"I'd been a storyteller before, but it was a big change to manage the language ... the language of politics is pretty small, you can pick it up fast. When you start to get into creative writing you have to unravel your own journey, look at the impact the world has had on you. That's the difficulty of creative writing if you're going to do it honestly."

Writing is not, for Maracle, simply a form of self-expression. It's also an act of vindication and personal and cultural affirmation.

"There's racism, it's personal, real and social, and the mountain I have to climb as an Indian, its impact on me and consequently my struggle to be ... I'm reminded every day of my sacred obligation to humanity to actually live a full life under those

conditions of erasure. And writing does that for me. That's another reason why I write: 'In 1991 I was here, and here's evidence of my being.'"

Symphony conductor John Kim Bell, a Mohawk and the founder of the Toronto-based Canadian Native Arts Foundation, says Maracle is one of a growing number of native intellectuals

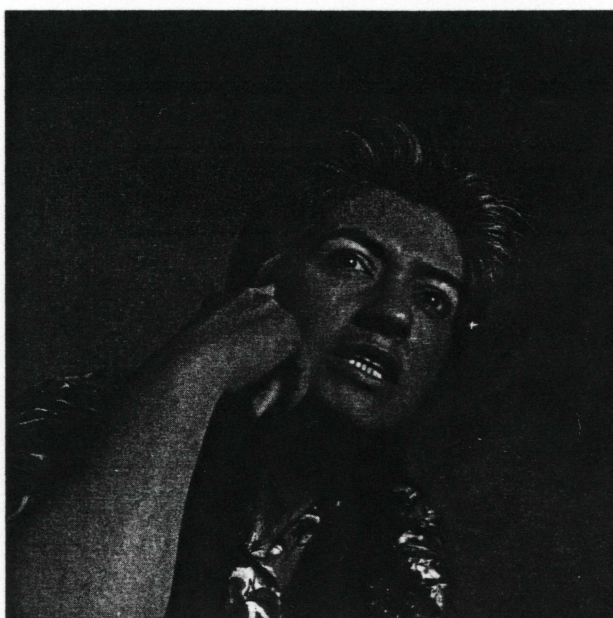
who envision a cultural resurgence for their people.

"We must progress down the cultural continuum, we too must evolve," Bell says. "We are a decimated people. It was outlawed for us to speak our language. We still suffer a lot of pain, and I sense Lee does too.

"What I appreciate about Lee, and where we connect, is what we've reclaimed. Our only intact image is the Indian of 200 years ago. This is reflected

in *Dances With Wolves*. It still perpetuates that the only Indians were Indians on the prairie, in buckskin, with long hair. Lee understands that it's okay for me to be a symphony conductor."

Maracle is also sitting on a native reading group, organized by Bell, which is editing a task force report on native culture and professional training. Before bringing together the committee, Bell spent a year travelling across Canada interviewing prospective participants.



"I saw Lee was a very strong thinker," he says. "She's very clever, and is able to pinpoint the issues."

Maracle herself sees encouraging evidence that more native people are finding a resurgent voice through artistic expression — particularly writing.

"I think a lot of native writers out there are refusing to be erased," she says. "My generation is really the first generation that learned English, and we're writing in great numbers. It's like a barometer to me, the power of our words and cultures, and the hugeness of our way of being."

For Maracle, native struggles and feminism are inextricably linked, parallel aspects of the same fundamental condition.

"Something ignored in the press is that 56 of the Oka warriors were women. They left early because they couldn't leave the children." And that, says Maracle, is the case all over the country, in every native organization, women play an important role as the backbone of the culture.

"A white man in his daily life, he's valid, he comes home, he comes to work, he's got all this affirmation all around him. He's constantly being validated by all these peons. (When lecturing) I personally make a point of not speaking to white men first if they have their hands up, because they get it all the time."

Maracle spent time at Oka during last summer's crisis. "During Oka, I had a half-dozen young men, white men mostly, to see me, and it was the first time I've ever been consulted by white men. I'm sure it's the first time they ever did it in their lives. So they're developing a heart, and that's because of the native movement and the women's movement."

Maracle believes the implications of the native movement are far-reaching in the context of a Canada which is questioning its own existence.

And she does not believe the defeat of the Oka warriors or, at a local provincial level, the defeat of the Gitksan land claims, has destroyed native determination or political will.

"That the barricades were defeated doesn't make any difference," she says. "We're still here and full of imagination. What is different is more and more of the population support the idea of our people seeking oneness with the Canadian population. Some of the people I know were convinced in the sixties that the Canadian population were all horrible, and I think it's the women's movement that changed that."

But Maracle does not advocate across-the-board native sovereignty: "I believe if every Indian in this country wants to be Canadian, they should."

When she is not travelling, lecturing or teaching, Maracle's home is in Sardis, an hour and a half east of Vancouver, which she shares with her husband Dennis and their children. The place she feels most at home, she says, is her kitchen.

"I guess I was always domestic — not that I should admit that as a feminist," she laughs. "I like sitting around talking to people. I guess I do that best in my kitchen. I write in my kitchen. It would be hard to interview me there, because all these people are around, and everyone's a storyteller."

Storytelling, she says, is inborn in her — she called herself a storyteller before she became anything else. It was, she adds, a natural cultural legacy. "I was in the house of Dan George and people like that all the time; the poetry is just the way they used to speak. It was sort of like TV, taken for granted. That's how we were ... in my house, nobody watches TV that much — unless it's the final game of the Canucks. I brought my kids up with music, dance, storytelling."

It's when she talks about the erosion of the

traditional native domestic life that Maracle betrays sadness. Her response is to write what she calls her "bent box poetry."

"A bent box is what traditional carvers did at the end of their apprenticeships. Nobody teaches you how to do it. It's steamed and cut into shape, and in the old days it was for the wife to put her valuables and cherished things in.

"I think what racism has done to us as a people is the men no longer treasure women in the same way they used to. We take our sons out to watch the salmon struggle upstream, and we tell them, this is how men feel about creation. The men are alienated from women. There's no love between us. And that leads to a whole bunch of discord and internal violence.

"What I want out of my life, I suppose, is the same thing my mother wanted — someone to treasure you. And for me it has to be a man."

For her next project, Maracle wants to go back to non-fiction: she plans to write a book on the issues of Canadian national identity and sovereignty. It would, she says, call upon her ingrained and formal skills as an analyst and a thinker.

"I want to try to untangle our whole relationship to Quebec. What I saw (in Chateauguay) was a split of Quebec on whether natives should have

sovereignty, and it's a fiercer split, because the Québécois are more desperate. So of course you're going to get the rock-throwing. What they put on the media was the rock-throwers, but what they didn't put on TV was that the people shipping food at night (to the Warriors) were Québécois."

Maracle's interest is also stirred by what she calls "the National Question."

"I think the country's ready for a book like that. I think there's a new climate. It's part of my personal contribution to a new Canada. It's a great country, and I think Canadians hold out great hope. It's a small country in terms of its people, but it could be tremendously powerful for paving the road for some of the worst conflicts existing in the rest of the world. There is a sense of peaceful-

ness in the population. A sense of justice. I think Canadians have the promise of justice. I think it's abused by the leaders it has, but it's waking up. Canadians will mosey along, but when they make a decision they tend to move in great style."

And her place in this country?

"I think I am a thinker. I am an intellectual, a very serious thinker. I write my thoughts down. I'm a seeker of truth. Of lasting truth." ■

