

## **“Dwellings of Enchantment: Writing and Renchanting the Earth”**

### **Writers’ interviews.**

What is your favorite place in the world?

There are places I love to visit and am grateful to have seen. For example, the hills and formations and caves with homes in Turkey when I visited Cappadacio with my friend Carmen Flys. This includes the underground world that exists there that was once called “home” to many escaping warfare. In spite of that history, in the present, it was most beautiful to see the hillsides and caves and stone formations in the light of dawn. Then is also the great beauty of the Southeast where my ancestors built mounds, some of them in the shapes of worshipped animals and some from our myths and Southeastern astronomy. Great pyramids were built along the rivers, as well as a great city. As a child, one enchanting place was with my grandparents in Oklahoma. I cared about that earth and the odor of trees and humid air, the changing light, and afternoon rains and fireflies.

I also have strong ties to rain forest and cloud forest, the way clouds move in and rain pounds the world and all the lives that are hidden there, but my favorite place is my home. Where I live, the dwelling place. In fact, *Dwellings* is mostly about this place and so is my new book of essays. I live in the country on a creek, in the only home on this road. It is a small place, a hundred year old summer house from which I hear the water in the creek all year.

Last year this creek had changed because of a strong flood and for the first time, it attracted a small group of migrating Sandhill cranes. We had a serious flood in 2013 that greatly changed the land and the water. When the Cranes saw the water from the sky, they landed here for a rest from their long migration to stay along what is now a braided stream. Their voices woke me one night and soon I recognized them from once hearing their voices in Nebraska. They remained three days before continuing on to New Mexico.

All these events attract me here, as does the wildlife that passes through. This region sustains much life. Deer visit daily and I hear them speak with one another. The mother voices. Occasional coyotes sing at night and once year a pack of wolves came through after the Yellowstone fire. Mountain lions have territory here. Elk bugle in the fall.

My little cabin is in a forest with an amazing variety of trees. The arborist here said it is the most varied amount he has seen in these mountains. I also love the many canyon walls and stones with many-colored lichens and mounds of mosses, the earth opening with

numerous varieties of wildflowers in spring and summer. But my closest outdoor companions here are the wild mustang and burro I adopted from the government holding pens. They were both rounded up, one from Nevada, one from Wyoming

The mountains and canyons here are great formations and I think of this land as a place that is enchanted by songs from the wind and those of the earth's long history. Once it was an ancient sea bed. Through time, the land here grew many stories, ancient and new.

The original tribes came here to be in a place of amnesty and to have peace with one another in what is a sacred land. I try to maintain that peace.

### **What place does nature occupy in your writing?**

My writing has always come from nature and my environment. It was the beginning of my work as far back as the 70's, to speak about and for the earth and all the lives of the people in Oklahoma/Indian Territory, as well. Growing up from childhood, I never believed that humans had the utmost intelligence. I give us credit for a certain kind of knowing but even then there are many other intelligences all around us. We sometimes forget this and that there is life and knowledge in the natural world. My work puts out its feelers, searching for the intelligence that goes beyond only the human.

For many of us, our writing comes from places we do not always know, but also feel, Whatever it is that a person must write, it is our own way, our direction, and we each follow our own path. For me, that path has been the environment and ecosystem, and so nature and animals are the most significant focus of my writing.

### **Do animals play a great role in your writing?**

Anyone reading my work knows that I write about animals more than anything else. They are the spirit of the world, again each with their own intelligence. It would be difficult for me to write a book without them. Whales were one of my topics for many years, and will be again. Then the Florida Panther called me there and that call became the book, POWER. I'm sure it was also to write about the difficult conditions in Florida affecting the panther, the toxic environment. It began as an accident. I was in a working group on reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act and said those two words. I don't even know why. But at the time it divided the room. Great conflict followed. The conflict came from a case in which a Seminole

man had killed a panther. So I went to Florida and researched the incident involving the killing of a panther and discovered that few were left and that those few were very ill. I stayed with the ranger and went to read the court records. I planned to do a legal article. But I was stopped on the road by a powerful storm. While I sat in the car, I heard the main character's voice and then I never wrote the article. Instead, I heard the voice of Omishto, the main character, and I followed that voice, that girl and what she tried to say. It became a novel.

I hoped the book would send attention to the beautiful, secretive, endangered cat. And also to the environment, but I did include the killing of the panther in the novel.

### **How about plants, minerals, and elements?**

Yes. *Woman Who Watches Over the World* is divided into sections by elements and the minerals. In the world as I understand it, all is living. And now the novel I am trying to finish is one about a plant doctor who studies medicinal plants in a rain forest.

But none of these things you mention are separate. Plants, minerals, animals, we people, all are interconnected and work together with one another to keep things whole. We do not live in a world of separation except by the words.

### **To what extent are your characters related to the environments you create for them?**

Completely related. They are the environments. They are the world they live in because the world creates us. It is just that too often we do not look and see all the life around us.

Most of my poetry has to do with an interwoven world.

The fiction has connections between characters and their environment. We are enfolded within the ecosystem.

### **To what degree might your writing be based on a scientific understanding of the world?**

These questions begin to seek the same response from me but let me say that in our global world there are not only many different ways of knowing, but also different kinds of science and ways of understanding and doing science. Western science is not even one that knows the most. The western way of doing research is too often one of disconnection and

removing materials from their place to study them. Other sciences are based on millennia of observation. My own work is based on indigenous knowledge systems and Native Science which consists of lifetimes of knowing that is passed on to new generations. I can't even pretend to be an expert in any knowledge. I learn what I can, but one lifetime is very brief. Still, I do also read and study western science and its findings so that I can keep both understandings in my mind and work with a combined knowledge. It is important for me to be informed and to try to be conscious of what is being learned. Or at least to try.

**Do various myths and mythologies inform your writing or inspire you? (Could you quote a couple of examples?)**

Yes, I try to look back toward the older stories and incorporate some of them. And especially the astronomies of our Southeastern peoples. I think some examples are not published yet, but writing about the big dipper as the sky people in their canoe coming to earth and an earth man falling in love with one of the young women from that canoe, then going to live with them in the sky. (Based on how the constellations move across the night sky.) Soon he becomes lonely, so they return for him and decide to have some time here and some there in the stars. It is a much longer story, but that is the beginning of it. And then there are the myths. I wrote a performance for the tribe when I worked for the Chickasaw Nation as the writer-in-residence. It was all based on mythology and on the historical nature of clans. It had music in it as well. My cousin made the costumes and they were amazing. It was a beautiful performance.

I know that inside my heart and in my thoughts, the stories come from somewhere that is deep in my own tribal understanding of the world, and so how could I not have our materials within the work at all times. I wouldn't call myth only story, but a way of seeing reality, of knowing this world, and of being. I have written a children's book based on one of the popular stories we tell our children that has to do with respect for spiders, and I constantly think about how much we knew of the great old growth forests. I love my people of the past, the ancestors, their great intelligence. Now, after five hundred years of colonization, who knows what direction we will take and what kind of people we will be in the future? Sometimes I worry that we will lose our indigenous knowledge, our original care for the world and all its important lives and their connections. I see such changes that take place even now.

**Which writers, if any, might have been the most influential on your writing?**

Any good writer influences me. I love to read and don't ever have enough time to just read. But I look especially to literatures in translation, particularly from the Spanish. Neruda is my best friend when I am searching for someone to speak with about writing. A book on the global forest has been my other best friend. I have read books that didn't do well and loved them, too. One called *Cellophane* which reminds me a bit of the Mosquito Coast. I try to keep up with not only other Native writers in the US but indigenous writers in other countries, too, and many are very exciting writers, very good.

The newer writing I see does not do much for me. Chapters a page long. Fiction I consider superficial and not deep story. Many of these have become good sellers but are not at all interesting to me. I look for depth. But I also read about different places, about science, and just finished a beautiful book on body grace that is excellent. I do not stay with just literature but try to read about current politics, and anything else that comes along to tug at my interest.

**How powerful do you find dystopic fiction, whether literature or cinema?**

I may have to look up dystopic. Does it mean a bleak view of life, of the future, of the world falling apart? That is what it sounds like. Looking it up, it sounds like a controlled world, one of political insanity. Right now, that seems like our reality, doesn't it? I don't know if I'd say it is powerful. I can't think of any examples of what I might have read. But when I come away from a book, I want it to have a resonance, a light that remains. It could be a dark light that makes me think and consider where we might be headed. It could be a hopeful vision to consider where we are headed. I prefer to have some hope but am also realistic enough to say we don't know what is next even in our own lives. I am a person with a disability and when I was young I never knew I would one day have an accident and ongoing problems for the rest of my life. Nevertheless, I can still write and teach and remember everything my students do during a term or semester.

Things happen in the world that are violent and painful. How many can imagine what it is like to have to be a Syrian refugee without a place to go? Is this dystopic? Or is it a form of serious truth? It is important to consider.

On the other hand, some people thrive and flourish in their lives. And is that Utopian or realistic?

I don't find either one powerful. I want a fiction or cinema that when I leave it, when I am walking away from it, I am thinking about this world changing into something more beautiful, to someone purifying water for others, toward love in the midst of whatever is happening. I want to learn what measures can be taken to make things more bountiful, to plant more trees, to repair what is broken.

**Would you agree with saying that all nature writers are mystics?**

I don't know who said that, but no, not at all. Some people just do it because they want to write about themselves in nature. Some do not see a full picture, but think it is "in." And what is a mystic? In my understanding of the word, few mystics at all exist. The ones I can think of as mystics are not being spoken about, are silent in the world, are learning to be full in themselves and in real and true contact with the world. They may not write at all. And just to write about nature doesn't at all mean a human being is a mystic, or even considering spiritual connections with self and other.

Many are individualistic and that takes them out of the zone of what I think you are asking. Just writing about nature is just writing. I might rather consider poets as mystics even more than environmental writers. Poetry has requirements that hold you close to the world of the soul.

**If there is such a thing as what Mark Tredinnick calls "the land's wild music," how do you think one can learn to hear it, and, and how might this wild music ripple into and give shape to one's writing?**

You would really have to ask him. It sounds so lovely. Somehow I think you are asking this for yourself. My own response to this would be to go out and listen to the land and write what it speaks.

**How much of your writing would you say is about re-enchanting the world?**

I don't think about this consciously, but for me, it seems that writing is all about enchantment. It is a form of magic, of something from beyond the ordinary mind of the writer. Beyond that one singular human.

Here is a quote from an essay I am doing that might explain some of this, including the meaning of the word, enchantment and about how, if it is possible, we might bring that quality back. This quote is also partly from direct experience I think we have all shared. It is just that some of us see each being in the world as part of the enchantment of our lives and ways of seeing, while others search for a unique experience:

The word, enchantment, is rich and complex in meaning. It is not only about a state of being, but it also means to chant. Encant, in one meaning, refers to poetry, cantos, or to chapters of a book. In a Navajo ceremonial complex the word might be considered part of a connected sacred system called Chantways that are usually healing in practice. Each one includes the recitation of something ancient that recalls for the people a story or song that will bring the people to wholeness. From the creation of the land, the mythic creation, the sacred beings who were first inhabitants, begin.

In some European accounts, as in the Odyssey, enchantment is a form of magic, as practiced by Circe or the Sirens through song or story, and they cast a spell over the listener. To keep the human present, to have them remain and unwilling to return or leave may be their purpose. It is presence, the being present, that is the important part of enchantment.

In the Yaqui Deer Dance, one elder said that it began in spring when a deer came from the forest with wildflowers in his antlers. It was the start of enchantment long ago and along came many songs and eventually a long ceremony. I have thought of this often, how the Yaqui had been forest people and were forced by the government into the desert where they live today. The forest is a place of enchantment for people, I believe, and other Native ceremonies where enchantment is at center, with song and dance, use forest plants as part of the dances, including the Christmas dances. It is also the place where large animals dwell.

It is not so much that we are trying to re-enchant the world. It is already there. It is that we are trying to keep our own selves in touch with that. It is the human being trying to remember that the entire world outside of them is a part of them, all enchanted. As I wrote in the essay **The Great Outside, the human** soul lives not just within the boundaries of our skin but outside them, too. The trouble we now have is that the world outside the skin is a hard one for many people. If you are not privileged to live in a world of nature, then the spirit that helps form you as a human may not be the one that is a wealth of nature, a beautiful world, one where deer live outside your home. If you are born in the inner city, then how do you find that

enchantment? So then, perhaps we have to find an integrity and wholeness that is different, that is inner. It may not be possible without the right help. Those fortunate in education or income, have a much easier choice, and more possibility.

**How much ecocritical theory or environmentalist literature do you read?**

I read other writers who write about the environment but I do not read theory or look for specific “environmentalist” books. I like to read about plants and all the underground communications, animal intelligence, forests interactions, the enormous variety of marine life, or anything having to do with the natural world. For me, this is part of putting a world together.

But I think of theory as something for people who have particular kinds of work, writing, or teaching to do. I only want to write. I love writing. I already have too many chores to keep me from this work of mine without having to think about theory. If my mind is engaged in such a manner, the writing would disappear. But ideas do come when I work on the land where I live. I have to keep it all up, the horse and burro to care, their fences to keep strong, a home I occasionally attempt to keep clean. It is already too much distraction. And I do not have an abstract kind of mind or way of thinking.

**Do you believe that literature can change the way humans think about our relationship to the natural world around and bring about not only awareness, but also political changes?**

Yes. All of those. I think literature has done this. I love some writers not even known, like John Hay, whose later book, **The Immortal Wilderness**, is so beautifully written about the world and how he sees this world, how he cares. I think every book we read about the environment teaches us, whether it is poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. We only have images and words to help us become aware and change the world, even politically. If not for these, how could it happen? Speeches don’t seem to work. Films often do, but those are a form of literature.

**Can you think of a case that you know of where policies may have followed from awareness raised by a great novel, or any other work of art?**

I believe policies on whales changed after Farley Mowat and I am sure there are other incidents. I will try to remember. Certainly in the 20's policies changed, but they were not always the ones the author hoped for. The Jungle changed the meat industry, although it didn't make life much better for workers, as he'd hoped. ....

**Do you think that most people reading your work are already cognizant of environmental issues, or do you feel like your writing might bring some of your readers to a different kind of understanding and consciousness?**

No. I don't think most people begin my books thinking they will be about the James Bay Hydroquebec dam project, as in Solar Storms, or that this novel or poetry will be about the natural world. They just begin reading and then, I hope, some undercurrent of enchantment moves and touches the hearts and minds in ways that are not me pushing them, lecturing, or telling them what to think. Those would be of little use, would not create change. It happens from the inside, the heart, then moves throughout the body and finally, finds its place in the mind. At least that is what I believe when I am writing. These are my hoped for changes. These are my reasons for working and being.

**How does your knowledge and care about environmental issues and non-human life affect your own life style and choices?**

In every way you can imagine, how I have decided to live, what I do each day about work, what I eat or try not to eat. It is so much a part of the person, that we don't even think of it, but I live with rescued animals and I pay more money on them than on my own living. I also do the upkeep on the forest and have not sprayed trees and as a result have the healthiest trees of all. I put in fencing so the horses can have grasses. It is a constant labor here and most people would not do it.

**If you could recommend a few ways to improve one's lifestyle in a way that could also reduce the negative impact of humans' activities on the planet, which would you suggest?**

One important thing is not to eat red meat. I have seen the agricultural run-off and slaughter house destruction of rivers, causing a loss of drinking water to people downstream. The special grasses are not local or native, the trees are cut and drought follows, the trucks create too much pollution, and in places where the animals are warehoused, it is even worse. We have to think of the farm workers and the use of pesticides on them, or the conditions under which they work, also.

Back to my home and to enchantment:

This little cabin has been enchanted in other ways than from the outside. It is created of the elements of this environment, the stones, the wood. Veins of quartz are in the land here and the home has a quartz fireplace that glows on a cold night, a ceiling beautiful with worm-written wood, polished, and old wallpaper from the 1920's which has nothing but leaves. I have spent much time looking up, feeling myself in the woods even while indoors.

But the most enchanted place was once the bedroom with all the lives from outside entering, the dragonflies and the intelligent wasps, even the hummingbirds. I placed the favorite flowers of hummingbirds inside.

For the first years, the windows opened inward. It was a cottage, after all, a summer cottage not meant for year-round inhabitation. I didn't think about that when I moved here as my year-round home. I moved here still recovering from a brain injury and with difficulty making decisions that were appropriate. But here I could see the stars and planets and think of the stars being born far away. It is a large world around me, yet such a small life I live in this place..

It all began when I placed two floral painted bird houses on the wall as decoration.. I left the cottage windows open in the daytime and soon, without my invitation, wasps inhabited the houses, setting up their nests of amazing symmetry. I let them be and we had the same schedule. I opened the windows when I rose. I closed them before bed. We managed to cohabit. One day I slept late and a wasp came directly over my head, fairly close, buzzing loudly in order to wake me. It was the best alarm I'd ever had. I opened the windows and let the waiting wasps go outside and off to their business. I learned from them, their intelligence, their way of communicating, how they recognized me and my participation in their lives to open windows.

Then, the hummingbirds arrived. To my surprise, they also came inside, so I planted hyssop throughout the room. It has a mild smell of liquorice. To my amazement I watched them enter and go from flower to flower. For me, it was a room of enchantment.

This small home surrounded by forest and it is easy to forget other homes are not too far away. From two sides of the house, there is only valley, forest, mountains very close in, encircling me in a kind of safety only such a world offers within a full circle of nature.