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16. WRITING SURVIVANCE

A Conversation with Joseph Boyden

ALLAN J. RYAN

It takes an exceptionally intense and clear vision for a writer to persuade us that there is anything new to be said about the Great War, now creeping steadily towards its centenary anniversary. Yet every now and then a book comes along . . . that rescues from the mire and carnage a genuinely new perspective on the awful events of 1914–1918. Focussing on the rarely told stories of indigenous people enlisted into the Canadian army, Joseph Boyden's first novel, Three Day Road, *is one such book.*

The Glasgow Herald

There are . . . lyrical moments which possess an eerie power—especially where Boyden writes about the northern landscape and the human relationship to it. He has illuminated a forgotten corner of the Great War, and that, in itself, is a prodigious achievement.

Julie Wheelwright, *The Independent*

Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* exemplifies the idea of survivance in that it actively brings into the present in a richness of character delineation and historic detail a little-known history of Aboriginal presence in one of the grand master narratives of colonial construction that imagines Aboriginal experience as an absence. The novel provides a compelling counternarrative that honors the lives and historical contributions of Aboriginal peoples and offers entry into a world and world view foreign to many readers but made accessible through the skilful interweaving of stories that resonate with universal

human experience. Boyden inserts a Native presence and Native voices into the cultural and literary spaces of the global community. In the process he imagines new spaces for the creation and reception of stories of ongoing Aboriginal experience.

I first saw Joseph Boyden in a darkened theatre at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa in December 2005. Several writers were gathered together on this midwinter's night for an evening of poetry, prose, and song. The proceedings opened with a hand drum song sung by Tamara Podemski, a young Ojibway/Israeli woman from Toronto. Later on, she sang Buffy Sainte-Marie's antiwar anthem *Universal Soldier*, the lyrics to which are as relevant today as they were when written four decades ago. They seemed especially poignant in that venerable setting.

Joseph Boyden cut a dashing figure in the podium spotlight that night, reading in a calm and measured voice several selections from his first novel *Three Day Road*. The story is a harrowing, epic tale of Xavier Bird and Elijah Whiskeyjack, two young Cree men from the northern Ontario bush who enlist in the Canadian army during the First World War and become celebrated snipers in the European conflict. The most riveting moment of the evening for me was Boyden's reading of the graphic and horrific description of the sniper's calculated art in which the face of a careless German soldier is reduced to a "red smearing explosion."[1] That singular image haunted my thoughts for days. The audience present was similarly moved by the author's compelling words. *Three Day Road* is unlike any other novel of the Great War, or any other narrative about Native Indians.

In conversation afterward, Joseph readily accepted my invitation to participate in a conference on Aboriginal arts that I was organizing at Carleton University in Ottawa in early March 2006. En route to the conference from his home in New Orleans, Joseph, along with his wife, fellow author Amanda Boyden, stopped off in Toronto, where *Three Day Road* was awarded the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize that came with a check for $15,000. That same week *Three Day Road* was issued in paperback by Penguin Books.

Joseph Boyden is a writer of Irish, Scottish, and Metis ancestry, born in 1966 to Raymond Wilford Boyden, the most highly decorated frontline doctor in the British Empire in World War II, and his wife Blanche, a former school teacher. One of eight children raised in north Toronto, Joseph spent his summers

in and around Georgian Bay on Lake Huron, where he gained a great appreciation for the outdoors and the natural world.

Growing up, he was a voracious reader, writing "angsty" poetry in his teenage years while imagining himself as a rock star musician. The latter proved impractical since he couldn't play an instrument and was shy onstage. But he soon began to pursue poetry and writing more seriously: "Being one of so many kids I think that it's hard for you to find your own space, or express yourself in a way that stands out, so I was pretty quiet as a kid, and the idea of writing down stories was much more appealing to me than fighting for attention."[2] This activity led him to seek a degree in humanities at York University in Toronto. Several poems from his undergraduate thesis were published as a chapbook and later adapted as song lyrics by an enterprising musician who released the songs on CD. The recording is a source of great pride for Joseph, perhaps allowing him to fulfill his dreams of a career in music, if only vicariously.

In his late twenties Boyden enrolled in the MFA program in creative writing at the University of New Orleans. It was here that he found his "writer's voice." Four stories from his MA thesis were written from a Native Ojibway perspective: "Those were by far the best stories out of my thesis and I knew that's where my voice lay." Following graduation, he taught in Moosonee/Moose Factory on the west coast of James Bay, where the local Native inhabitants further inspired his writing. His first collection of short stories, framed as narratives of the four directions, was published as *Born with a Tooth* (2001). The book included the four stories from his graduate thesis. In the piece "Bearwalker" from this collection, Boyden both demonstrates, and reflects on, the power of storytelling through the voice of a contemporary character who, like one of the main protagonists in *Three Day Road*, is named Xavier Bird:

> *I've had the ability to talk from the age of seven months. Full sentences in both English and Cree. I'd often, and still do, mix them up in the same sentence and not even realize it. My mother told me when I was still a young* geegesh *that I was on this earth to be the one to tell the* tipachimoowin, *the stories. This is because my mother is polite and could never get me to shut up. But her little announcement stuck with me, her saying to me, "Xavier Bird, I thought your father was a talker.*

> *But you! You I cannot make stop your foolish talk." She actually said this, "foolish talk." In Cree it's* pukwuntowuyumewin. *Maybe I remember my mother's words too fondly sometimes, more fondly than the reality. But it was her telling me that I was the talker, the storyteller, that made the biggest impression on me.*
>
> *It was Antoine Hookimaw who explained to me that the next logical step for the right storyteller is to become a shaman, a healer. "It is one thing to talk to entertain, Xavier," he told me. "But it is a more powerful* menewawin, *a more powerful gift, to talk in order to teach. If you become a good teacher, you are on your way to healing some of the things that have gone wrong."*[3]

The four stories in "North: Home," the final section of *Born With a Tooth*, are interconnected and center around the suicide of a young woman in a northern community and the suicide's effect on family and community members. This interlinking of stories led Joseph to embark on a much more ambitious project, a novel with two primary points of inspiration: "My dad, number one, being involved in the war, and my growing up hearing stories of his being a war hero. His older brother was in WWI, my great aunt was a nurse in WWI, and so, growing up, I always had these myths of the war swirling around me. And then, from a very young age, I'd always heard of Francis Pegahmagabow, the Ojibway sniper from Wasauksing, right near here, and that always fascinated me too—the idea of the Indian sneaking around in the trenches and being very good at what he did."

By the time Joseph began work on his novel, he had returned to New Orleans to teach at his alma mater along with Amanda, a fellow graduate of the creative writing program whom he had married in their final year. After four and a half years of meticulous research and writing, *Three Day Road* was released by Penguin Books in the spring of 2005 to instant critical acclaim. What followed was a dizzying carousel ride of festival readings, international travel, and book releases in a variety of translations. A Cree language edition is currently in the works, as is a feature film based on the book. Joseph was living every writer's dream. In the spring of 2006 Amanda Boyden's coming-of-age novel *Pretty Little Dirty* was published by Vintage Books. Since then, the couple has had very little time to call their own. For much of the past year, they

have been living out of a suitcase and longing for the time when they can return to their home in New Orleans to work on their next novels.

The geographic bedrock of sanity for Joseph and his siblings is Sandy Island, a rustic retreat the Boyden family has owned for over twenty-five years, located just off Parry Island in Georgian Bay. A popular destination for summer cottagers and tourists, Parry Island is home to the Wasauksing Ojibway First Nation and the resting place of Francis Pegahmagabow. It was to Sandy Island that Joseph invited me on the last weekend of August 2006 to interview him for this volume. That his life is now filled with people soliciting favors was not lost on me. Mine was one more request that he graciously fitted into his already busy life. As has been frequently noted by those who know him, both personally and through his writing, Joseph Boyden has a big heart.

Late on a Friday afternoon, Joseph, along with his nephew Mike met me at the Wasauksing marina and spirited me across the water to the family homestead in a small open boat. A generous gesture to be sure. Clad in a bush jacket and jeans and sporting a black T-shirt emblazoned with a bright yellow Sun Records Studio logo, Joseph seemed in his element. On the horizon an ominous band of dark blue stretched across the sky, separating the gray clouds from the gray waters, as Joseph speculated on the possibility of rain. Off to the right a group of small ducks huddled together and bobbed on the surface of the water as we passed.

The family home was a grand wooden structure with a wraparound porch that nestled in a space carved out of the bush. It was larger than a cabin but smaller and more modest than a chalet. The building was a project under constant modification and improvement, depending on which family members were around to supervise construction. The spacious main room was warm and inviting, dominated by an imposing stone fireplace that was built from local rocks and that was reminiscent of those found in medieval castles.

Upon arrival I was introduced to Joseph's fifteen-year-old son Jake, who was sharpening a brush-cutting machete by the porch; Joseph's editor, Nicole Winstanley, who was marking up a hefty manuscript she had brought with her from Toronto; and Joseph's wife, Amanda, author, photographer, and former trapeze artist, who welcomed me with a warm smile while overseeing preparations for a grilled barbecue dinner for an indeterminate number of guests.

Replacing the porch boards was the current family project, and all visitors were encouraged to pitch in and swing a hammer a few times. I willingly obliged.

Before dinner Joseph and Jake persuaded me to join them in climbing to the top of a nearby three-story wooden tower in order to savour the view before the sun set behind the trees. While unaccustomed to scaling such heights and feeling somewhat apprehensive, I must admit that the view was worth the climb. As a point of interest, I was informed that the platform at the top of this somewhat shaky tower, the tallest structure on the island, is the only place on the island that a cell phone will function.

Soon after our descent, other family members arrived, and we feasted by candlelight in the glow of a raging fire while the music of Johnny Cash, *Live at Folsom Prison*, emanated from a compact iPod console in the corner. It was a memorable evening. The threat of rain was just that, and the night passed uneventfully.

The following morning Joseph invited me to join him on the wooden dock to discuss whatever it was I had come to talk to him about. The sun shone brightly and glinted on the water, and the waves lapped at our feet. It was easy to appreciate the attraction of such a place. As we talked, Jake and a young cousin who'd arrived the night before headed off down the rocky shoreline with fishing poles across their shoulders. It was an idyllic scene some city dwellers might describe as a "Mayberry moment."

I began our conversation by asking Joseph about his father, Raymond Wilford Boyden.

JB: My dad was very much a family man. He was a family doctor, the last of the kind of doctors who would make house calls. He had a lot of Chinese immigrant patients in the '60s and '70s, and he'd take payment in chickens and animals if they didn't have the money. He passed away when I was eight, but his influence continues in everything I do. He was stern, strict, and very loving. One of my greatest memories of him is he was quite sick in the last couple of years of his life, but even when he was, this one time when we were driving back from Georgian Bay to Toronto, and the car in front of us went off the road, my dad bounded out like a young man with his doctor's bag to make sure the people in the car were okay.

AJ: Can you identify specific influences from your father in your own life?

JB: Definitely a work ethic, a passion for what you do well, the idea of how important family is, empathy for others, to always care for others, to always look after others.

AJ: Many of those qualities are present in *Three Day Road*. Tell me about writing that book.

JB: Much of *Three Day Road* I wrote out longhand in a coffee shop on Magazine Street in New Orleans. Much of it. I find that writing at home is almost too quiet. I guess part of this is being one of so many children. Complete quiet almost drives me crazy sometimes, and so I started years ago going to this coffee shop in the neighborhood, and I found it really worked. There's all this activity around me, which is what I grew up with, and so I'm in a very comfortable environment.

AJ: The narrative structure of the novel is somewhat unusual, with chapters alternating between the voices of Xavier Bird and his aunt Niska and with the story beginning at the end. In an earlier draft you told the story chronologically. Why did you change it?

JB: I realized that it was not finished, there was something missing, something was bothering me. And it wasn't that I was missing anything in terms of material—actually I had too much material—it was in the telling. I was giving it a very Western linear chronological telling, and I realized that it needed to be a Native telling of the story, and so I wrapped it back in on itself, began near the end, and told the circular telling.

AJ: And you feel comfortable writing in both male and female Native voices?

JB: I'm very comfortable, especially with a female voice. A lot of male writers can't write a female voice, but I grew up hearing a woman's voice, a strong woman's voice, so it's a part of me. As for the Native perspective, I feel comfortable writing that, absolutely. It might not be the Native voice of a Mohawk person or a Sioux or some other tribe or band, but I've lived

long enough to know not to worry about the idea of appropriation, although I am Metis . . . but my heart, my world view, lies squarely in the Native world, the urban Native world, as much as the Native bush world. I'm very comfortable writing in that voice.

When I was writing Niska's voice, it was as if I was being channeled. It was not my voice, and it was the easiest writing I've ever done. It just poured out of me.

I never will say that I'm a spokesperson for a group or a clan or a culture, but I certainly am a storyteller, and I want to always tell that story right; I want to tell that story with heart. When my heart's in it, I feel like I'm being successful at what I'm trying to do. I'm never going to speak for a people, but I certainly will speak for an individual that I create who might come from a community or a culture.

I think one of the greatest tools a writer has is the ability to create a character that a reader will read and a reader will become for a while or live the world through that character's eyes. And suddenly it's not "them" anymore, it's not "Indians"—a white person reading my novel, for example—they *are* the Native person, they get to see the world from a perspective that might have been very foreign to them before, and now it's very close. That's one of the great powers that you have as a writer that no other medium really captures.

AJ: One of your favourite narrative strategies is telling stories within stories.

JB: It's like that Matchoiska doll, you open it up and there's another one in it, and you open it up, and there's another, and another. But mine's almost like the inverse of the Matchoiska doll: it's a small story; you open it up, and there's a bigger story, and you open that up, and there's an even bigger story.

AJ: Despite the gravity of this novel, you still manage to find humor in unexpected places.

JB: There is humor there for sure because Elijah is a trickster; he likes to play. I wanted him to have at least some traits of

the trickster, a levity and an ability to tease and even the ability to teach. Even though Xavier teaches him everything he knows about the bush, he teaches Xavier both good and bad lessons about people and about relationships and about friendships. You can't escape it. If I'm going to give my character the last name Whiskeyjack, you know there's going to be a little bit of the trickster Weesakeejack in him. I wasn't writing him as just a trickster in human form, but I definitely wanted him to have aspects of the trickster in his personality because the trickster is a fascinating, multifaceted, multidimensional character.

I think that with humor—some of the best humor—there's a real sense of sadness just below the surface. . . . I think humor is the best way to teach too. And there's no denying how important humor is in the Native world view. I've watched friends up in northern communities who are in real bad situations be able to laugh, and it just breaks the tension.

AJ: There's also a sense of musicality in your writing, in the rhythm of the words. I'm thinking now of the Cree phrases that are interwoven throughout your novel.

JB: I love just sitting and listening to my Cree friends up in Moosonee or around James Bay talk. There's a singsong and a rhythm in the way they speak that I just love. I don't know how well I capture it on the page, but I certainly hear their voices when I am writing the way they talk.

AJ: How has the book been received by the Native community?

JB: So far, Native people have accepted it and actually liked it and appreciated it, and that's probably been the greatest part of all of this journey for me because the people I'm writing about have accepted it and are appreciative, and that's been the really, really satisfying thing.

AJ: When you were researching *Three Day Road*, did you visit any historic sites in Europe?

JB: I wasn't able to go over to the battlefields until I'd finished the first draft of my novel. I finally saved up enough money

so that Amanda and I could go overseas together to see what I was writing about. I was amazed at the similarities between that part of the world and Southern Ontario — the farm fields and the hills and the lush vegetation.

AJ: Did you fine tune the manuscript after you came back?

JB: I did fine tune things after I went over. I read a lot of diaries and memoirs written by average people that give a very good description of what it looked like at the time. So I was able to picture it through them. But then getting over there and actually getting to see how the land has kind of reclaimed itself was really neat, but there's still all the scars just under the surface. My son and I found a human bone. . . . You just scratch the surface, literally, and you end up coming across stuff.

And every year farmers still pull up hundreds of tons of unexploded shells and pieces of metal and old rifles. Farmers still die by running over unexploded land shells. It doesn't go away. The people in Belgium and northern France are living with that history. And all of them have stories. People would come up to us and start talking, and they'd tell about how, when they were kids in WWII, the Germans just rolled through that place really quickly. But in WWI they had grandfathers who were there. Whole original homes were destroyed but they came back afterwards.

One of the most powerful places I've been to is the battlefields in Belgium. There's a lot of entrepreneurs there. You'd be driving down the road and you'd come to a very small town and then you'd see a sign, WWI battle site, and you'd pull off and you'd go through this person's house and into his backyard, and there's old trenches there that are still existing from WWI and all of the detritus of war — the rifles and grenades and helmets — and it's quite amazing. It's like little living museums.

AJ: Do we need historic sites to help us remember? Do we need war museums?

JB: I think we do need these kinds of places because a lot of

people don't have a clue what happened in WWI or any war really. But even ninety years later, seeing the scars still in the ground leaves an impression that it must have been very intense. At Vimy Ridge you walk up to the memorial and the fields on either side are just pitted. They look like rolling hills at first but then you realize they're mine craters and shell holes and trenches and scars on the ground.

AJ: Besides honoring the dead, aren't war museums supposed to teach us lessons about peaceful coexistence to prevent atrocities from happening again?

JB: I don't know if war museums are only there for the honorable reason of teaching lessons. I think that we have an unhealthy fascination with absolute brutality. And it happens over and over again. Look at Lebanon just recently, and look what's going on in Afghanistan and Iraq. We want to make war because in a way it's easier, and in the short term it's satisfying to say "well, this guy did this to me, so let's just get him." It's very easy to say "this is the bad guy, let's go kill him" versus "this is a guy who doesn't see my way, let's figure it out by talking." War is easier, it seems.

AJ: What do you think of the Canadian War Museum?

JB: I think it's a good one. I brought my mum there not so long ago, and we walked through there. It's a very clean museum in all kinds of ways, but it doesn't capture the brutality like other museums that I've seen, especially in Europe. It's very "austere." It's very "Canadian" in its telling of our history with war. It's very well done, it's beautifully put together and run, but there was something very — I don't want to say "sterile" about it — but something very distant about it when I walked through it.

I've been to other museums. There's one in Ypres, the In Flanders Field Museum, and you walk through that, and they have the noise of the cannon, and you get a card at the beginning of a person — its either of a young soldier whose German or Belgian or English or a nurse — and there's different

stations as you go along and you put the card in and find out what happened to them, these real live people. Often times, by the end of the war they died. And it brings it to life in a way that's just fascinating, that's really interactive. That to me was much more powerful than seeing the machine guns and the helmets and the barbed wire that you could actually go up and handle.

AJ: What can you tell me about the new novel you are working on?

JB: It's about grandchildren, relations of characters in the first novel. It's contemporary. It's dealing with some of the same issues and themes that *Three Day Road* explored: the idea of family and of identity is a huge part of this novel, and how one identifies oneself—and that ability to very easily not know who you are, even though you come from a very strong place. These are all things that fascinate me because this is what I often question about myself, coming from a big family, coming from a mixed background. Who am I in this world? Where am I? It's very easy to lose your footing sometimes if you're not careful. People tie themselves up with their identities very strongly, to the point that it can become a negative thing. But at the same time a lot of people that I meet who are really lost don't really have a self-identity; they can't say of themselves, "I am from here, this is what grounds me." And I think the whole idea of grounding too is very important.

AJ: Your family seems to be the grounding in your own life.

JB: The one thing that you have in the world when everything else is gone is your siblings and your parents and your memories of who you are, and that began to come out more and more strongly in this new novel. And the idea of family—even if the family is dysfunctional, which I think every family is—that's what you have, and that's what you're given, and it's how you respond to your siblings that ultimately is going to make you happy or not. I've seen so many families disintegrate under pressure and sibling fights; people never talking to each other

again, and our family has always avoided that, even though we're a big family. I think it's because we know that the one great thing you have in this world is the people you come from. The idea of family is much more conscious in this new book than it was in the first one, and it's something that I feel the urge to write about.

AJ: You write about family in your nonfiction work as well; you and your son Jake at Vimy Ridge, you and Amanda in New Orleans.[4] I felt like I knew them both before I met them.

JB: To me my whole world view is defined by my family and where I fit in that family and the history of my family, and so it's something I can't really escape even if I wanted to.

AJ: You write both fiction and nonfiction. Do you have a preference?

JB: Fiction absolutely is my preference, although I do enjoy nonfiction very much. The only nonfiction I've written that's been published is almost memoir. It can never be claimed that I write thinly disguised nonfiction in my fiction. A lot of writers I know, especially younger writers, are basically writing a fictionalized version of their lives. That's something that I'm not able to do in fiction and don't have the desire to do in fiction.

AJ: Your nonfiction is written so visually with such vivid images of people in peril, people coping with traumatic situations. You describe them with great empathy. And I'm here thinking of the articles you wrote for *Maclean's* magazine about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

JB: I think that goes right back to my father. I've never consciously thought about this before, but when you mention the idea of people in trouble and trauma, that's exactly what my father had to deal with for so much of his life, and I think that there's a little bit of him in me, no question, this idea of wanting to help.

I have found myself more than once putting myself into a very dangerous situation but not thinking about doing it, jumping in to try to prevent fights, for example, or helping

this dying African American guy. The guy who shot him could have very easily come back and shot me, too. But I didn't think about it.[5] I guess it's wanting to live up to my father in some ways . . . especially in the war . . . the desire to help takes precedence over personal safety.

AJ: From your description of the second novel, *She Takes You Down*,* it would seem that survivance will be a prominent theme. What is your understanding of this term?

JB: I have a good friend who's an actor out in Vancouver, Tahmoh Penikett, and he's on a big TV series called *Battlestar Galactica*. His mother is from up in the Yukon and his father was actually the premier of that area for a long time. His father is from England and married a Native woman. And Tahmoh has found this balance where he lives in Vancouver and has this wonderful life as an actor and is getting very well known as an actor, but he says, "God, when I need my head cleared, I just go out in the bush and I'll walk for days." That's it in a nutshell. That's survivance, I think, if I'm reading Vizenor's term correctly. It's not just survival anymore, but it's the paradigm of a Native person suddenly living in the city, and how does he adjust? Sometimes it's poorly, sometimes it's great.

AJ: Survivance can take many forms. With new technologies and the internet, stories can be circulated and exchanged throughout the global community.

JB: You might not become a famous classic book-published writer, but you certainly have the ability to put your voice out in the world now. That's one of the things I love about northern reserves that I want to write about in this new book; all my friends are now internet aficionados. They're on chat rooms with people in the southern United States, and it's just wild. I love that kind of wonderful difference.

I'm very excited to be a writer in this global community. I really feel like I showed up at a very good time in writing.

Canadian historian Pierre Berton once said of his days working as the editor of the University of British Columbia student newspaper that "they were the best years of our lives, and what's more, we knew it." When told this statement, Joseph Boyden replied, "Since I've known Amanda, I've thought to myself, these are the best times of my life, and I know it, and they're continuing on."[6]

On August 28, 2006, the first anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, Joseph and Amanda headed back to New Orleans to work on their respective new novels, while I returned to Ottawa to transform this interview into an essay and to prepare for the upcoming school term.

Notes

1. Boyden, *Three Day Road*, 88.

2. Joseph Boyden, interview with author, August 26, 2006, Sandy Island, Ontario. All other excerpts are from this interview.

3. Boyden, *Three Day Road*, 92.

4. Boyden, "The ghosts of Vimy Ridge," 114; Boyden, "The drowning of New Orleans."

5. In "The drowning of New Orleans" Boyden describes the night he and Amanda stopped their car to assist a young black man who had just been shot by another youth, who moments earlier had pointed his gun at Joseph. The wounded young man died in Boyden's arms.

6. Similar sentiments are expressed in Berton, *Starting Out*, 152–53.

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*Just before the second novel was published the working title, *She Takes You Down* was changed to *Through Black Spruce*.