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In Her Own Words: An Interview with Author Sue Harrison

Susan Steffel

Sue Harrison was born in Lansing, Michigan but grew up and still resides in the tiny town of Pickford in Michigan's Upper Peninsula with her husband, two children, and two dogs. She graduated summa cum laude from Lake Superior State with a B.A. in English Language and Literature, and was named Distinguished Alumna in 1992. She is the best-selling author of The Ivory Carvers Trilogy including Mother Earth, Father Sky (1990), My Sister the Moon (1992), and Brother Wind (1994), which tell the stories of ancient Native American tribes. Sue Harrison's writing is the culmination of over seventeen years of intensive research on all aspects of prehistoric Native American life. Her novels have received numerous awards including being selected as American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults in 1991, nominated for Michigan's 1993 Reader's Choice Award, and as Main Selections of the Literary Guild Book Club. Additionally, Harrison's books have been translated into over a dozen languages and published all over the world. Currently, she is working on her second trilogy, The Storytellers Trilogy, which continues the saga.

Sue Harrison graciously welcomed me into her home which sits at the end of the road, surrounded by woods. Her soft-spoken voice easily slipped into laughter and her enthusiasm for her writing was infectious. Curled up on the couch and joined by the family dogs, we drank coffee as she spoke of her craft. The passion she feels for her stories, her writing, and her life came alive. I was enchanted as this master storyteller candidly told her own story and disappointed when it was time to leave.

I knew I wanted to be a writer when I was ten years old. My grandmother had lent me a Laura Ingalls Wilder *Little House in the Big Woods* book. Reading that book made me very aware of words and the power of words and the beauty of words and it was kind of like love at first sight. It's hard to describe but that's what it was. I just loved what I read, and I wanted to be a writer.

Laura Ingalls Wilder was an author who definitely influenced me. Morris West was an author that I read in high school. I took notes on what I read, knowing I wanted to be a writer, thinking what did I like about this book or this story. I think that was a real good thing to be doing, and I was like sixteen and seventeen those summers.

I begin a book with the characters, and I try to figure out who this person is. Not just outside, but inside. What evokes an emotional response from them and what their ego is centered on, what their self-image is centered on because the really interesting thing to do to a character is threaten their self-image. If you know what will threaten that self-image and then see them grow or ungrow as a person as a result of that threat to their self-image, you've got the center of your plot. And so I always start with the character and getting to know them, and then I weave my plot around what will make a difference for them in their life. What conflict is going to come in that's going to hit right at the core of their being. When you can do that, then you can get your reader to relate to the

character and that's what you want, for your reader to relate to the character, to get into the story that way. I'm really at a disadvantage because my characters are so far removed from my readers in space, time, culture, so I have to really hit hard on the emotional thing, the emotions and feelings of my characters that allow my readers to relate.

The more I write, the more I know where I'm going as far as plot is concerned. With *Mother Earth, Father Sky* it was just a very vague, general idea, and I just kind of flowed with it. The book I'm working on right now, I've got a sixty to seventy page outline finished for it. I realize I do a better job if I do a better job of outlining, but that doesn't mean I don't in the middle of it take a different direction if I feel myself going that way. I just feel more secure with an outline.

The hardest part of writing is the first draft. And I think that is probably true for most writers, and I love about the third draft. It's starting to really take shape and it's exciting. There are very few problems and glitches and you can actually see it. "Wow, this is good. It's coming together the way I wanted it." But the first draft is about the toughest.

Some days the writing flows so well it doesn't need much revision except spelling which I'm really bad at, but other days it's so bad, it really needs work. I'd say generally, I average six revisions. One of those is just a typo, spelling check that I do on the second to the final paper draft that I print out. The first revision is really quite horrendous because a lot of times I just type what I'm thinking, and it's pretty bad.

I work a chapter at a time. I write the chapter, and then I do about two or three rewrites on it. Then I go on to the next chapter, and eventually I have the whole book done with about three rewrites under my belt. Then I go back and do the final three rewrites, reading the whole thing because I find sometimes I have to switch chapters around. Sometimes I have a time gap or glitch if I'm putting two or three characters' lives together. Sometimes something's happened and I have a month's space here and a week's space here, but that's not hard. I just have to write up a chart. So that's what I do, and I know I'm finished when I

start changing little words that the next time I change back to what I originally had. I know, "OK, you're done!"

I think I selected the topics for my novels because I have always lived in the Upper Peninsula (of Michigan). There are so many Native Americans here. Our population, I would guess, is about fifty percent Native American, either mixed heritage or pure. I just realized that a lot of times the families that were looked down on in the general area had no reason to be looked down on. They earned their living just like everyone else. They were intelligent people and their homes were nice and everything, but they were looked down on because they were or had a great-grandmother who was Native American. I started feeling bad about that. I guess I was in high school when I first realized that was going on. I didn't know it at the time, but my own family was part Native American but not from this area. My great, great grandmother is Native American, and she was from Indiana so it was kind of fun to find out after I finished *Mother Earth, Father Sky* to have one of my great aunts say, "You know, my grandmother was Native American." What?! I had been after my grandfather about it because my grandfather looked very Native American and we have a lot of physical attributes, and the more I studied it, I kept thinking, "We seem like we're Native American." I knew we were French, and I'd asked about it, but one of his sisters finally spilled the beans. So now I'm also researching my own heritage which part of this is for me, but I hesitate to write about modern times of Native Americans because I was raised white. I don't know what it's like to be "on the Rez" as everybody around here says and to have to deal with some of those prejudices I write about, but I feel I can have a pride in the culture and the heritage and work with that. Even if I didn't have Native American ancestry, I still think the culture was fantastic, and that's what I really like.

I went to Lake State because that's what I could afford, and I could commute there. My husband and I were married one year after we started college so we worked our way through, and we really had a rough time. It was hard to go through, but we both had scholarships, too,

which was another reason we chose to go to Lake State. We both had jobs, and it was not an easy few years there. It was in the midst of Viet Nam, and my husband had a low draft number, and we thought he'd have to go. So I finished college in three years because I thought, if he goes to Viet Nam, I want his baby before he goes. I hurried up and took my junior and senior year together and took a real overload, and I was allowed to do that, and got pregnant at the end of the year, like the last month. Our first daughter was born the next winter and, unfortunately, she died of meningitis, so it was a real horrendous time. My husband was going through his last year of college, and it was such a nightmare, it really was, and we thought he was going to get drafted. Oh, it was awful. But I got pregnant for my son a few months later, and then a couple of months after that they stopped the draft just a few numbers ahead of my husband's, and so he didn't have to go. I had a very healthy baby so it was better. But I think that shows up in my fiction, the loss of the child and all of this. That was a catharsis for me. Actually, when you consider I wrote *Mother Earth, Father Sky* about that first part of it about eight to ten years after our baby died, that gave me a nice space because I couldn't have done it right away. It just wiped me out. It was kind of a rough time in our lives.

I think my young female protagonists have so much appeal because they have very serious problems and have such horrendous things to overcome, and they do overcome them. And it doesn't kill their spirit. I think that almost every human being on earth wishes they are like that. Now, I look at those characters and think, I probably wouldn't have survived, but I wish I would have reacted as they react. My characters are almost all based on Native American legend characters, and so I start out with that kernel of that legend and then weave my characterizations around that. That's always hard to do and it's a challenge. So that's been exciting.

Also, my characters are based, of course, on people I know. For example, although there is a Shuganan in Aleut legend, my character Shuganan is based on my grandfather. He's totally my grandfather, that wisdom, and that gentleness

with people was my paternal grandfather to a tee. But my grandfather never carved anything in his life. However, my brother-in-law is a carver, so I talked to him, "How do you feel when you carve? What is it like to create?" That was a lot of help, so I've pulled from a lot of people. Also from my life is the part of Chagak losing her baby brother, Pup, and the threat to life of Amgigh when she was trying to take this deathly ill child and save his life. That feeling of helplessness, of watching a sick child is totally autobiographical.

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The love of the outdoors and the wilderness is also autobiographical. It's possible that the first inkling that I wanted to write about Native Americans was when I was standing in this house, in the kitchen window looking outside and there were no leaves on the trees and I thought, "There are no leaves on the trees, but I can tell by the bark what the trees are." And I thought, "I didn't know that I knew that!" I realized that you accumulate knowledge painlessly a lot of times wherever you're growing up. I had always heard that you should write about what you know, and I kept thinking, what do I know about? I don't really know anything. I grew up in this little tiny town, and I've not been anywhere in my life, and I don't know about much now. I thought, "I know about the outdoors, and I know about animals," and so I started getting interested in the Native cultures. That's autobiographical, but a lot of the rest of it is just based on research and, aside from the emotions my characters have, it's projecting. It's almost like acting where you have to project yourself into this person you're creating, and I love that. I don't think I'd be a very good actress, but I love doing it in my head. I don't have to do it in front of somebody.

I probably feel closest to Chagak, the main character of *Mother Earth, Father Sky* in that she remains throughout the series. And I think it is just because she was my first person that I really

got to know. Just like *Mother Earth* is my favorite book of the three, but I think probably *Brother Wind* is much better as far as crafting. There's that sentimental thing of it's the first thing I did.

One of the most fun parts for me of these books was working with the language and its rhythms. I found because I had a great interest in languages that I enjoyed studying languages. I found a wonderful way to relate to a culture is to study a language because language is the slowest part of any culture to change. Religious beliefs are next. But language, bits and pieces of language, can hold for up to 20,000 years before they just leave. So I can study the Aleut language now, and even though we have no absolute proof that the people who lived on the Aleutian Islands nine thousand years ago spoke Aleut, there's still a possibility there, so I thought, well, you might as well study the Aleut language, and you learn a lot about the environment, you know, just like the Eskimos and the Inuit have so many words for snow and that kind of thing. Also the rhythm of the Native American languages I have studied is an anapestic rhythm, and that's a soft-soft-loud, soft-soft-loud, so I tried to get that rhythm in my books, rather than the English rhythm which is a loud-soft, loud-soft. It is actually a harsher rhythm than what most Native American languages have. The ones that I have heard spoken have a very gentle, flowing rhythm. Even if they have very guttural words, the rhythm is still flowing. And so I've tried to put that in my books, which means I have to work hard to vary the voice because the rhythm is throughout, but there is a different storyteller in each book. Chagak is the unknown storyteller in the first book, and Kiin tells the second, and the third book is told by a variety of characters. But the rhythm, I hope, is sustained throughout the stories.

I was very surprised by the ending of *My Sister the Moon*. If someone has read it, they know that it ends kind of up in the air, and *Brother Wind* continues the story. I had intended for that to all happen in *My Sister the Moon* and then realized that I can't put out a 1500 page book and make my publisher happy. So, that really caught me by surprise. I was pleased with the ending, and it got very good reviews from the critics, so overall, I think it worked. The one thing was, I didn't know

what I was going to do with Waxtal until the end of *Brother Wind* and what was going to exactly happen to him. So I was very pleasantly surprised with how that all came together. After I wrote it, I said, "All right!" But up till then it was, "What am I going to do with this guy?"

**. . . she gave me a big hug and said,
"Thank you for making me proud
to be Aleut."**

When I write, I like to think of the whole series, and I wrote a letter to this effect to someone who had written a review. This whole series is a "tuqyutik," which is a rope that Caribou Eskimos use and weave. First you twist the strands and then you weave strands, and then you rope the strands together, and so *Mother Earth*, *Father Sky* is the twisted strand, and *My Sister the Moon* is weaving the separate strands, and *Brother Wind* takes the separate strands together and puts them all together into one big rope. Actually, I had that concept with *Mother Earth*, *Father Sky*. I did know that the books were going to get more complex. I just didn't know exactly how it was going to work out between them until I wrote them. *Brother Wind* follows three or four lives, and each little problem and each little plot group is then all woven into this bigger plot that you don't see until the end of the book. That was fun to do, but it was scary, too. I got in the middle of it and had all my separate little plots going real well and then thought, "How am I going to get them into this one thing that I visualize?" I didn't exactly know how I was going to put it all together. When I finished *Brother Wind*, I was very happy with how it came out, but I vowed I would NEVER leave myself in that position again. Next time I was going to do a much better outline so that I didn't have so many blank spaces. I've done that with this next book, so we'll see if it works.

I'd definitely choose to be a writer again. It's wonderful! There are two areas that are most satisfactory. One is just the personal aspect. I set this goal, I was able to reach it, and I have people who enjoy reading it. That's so satisfying, and it

makes me feel good about myself. It's really helped ego-wise almost more than anything else I've done, except in personal relationships in my life. My relationships with my husband and my children are more satisfying, but that's the next thing. The other part is that the lifestyle is so wonderful. I can travel, and I'm being paid for something I love to do. I also have had such wonderful feedback from Native people who have written. I had one woman come up to me when we were visiting the Pribilof Islands, and she gave me a big hug and said, "Thank you for making me proud to be Aleut." Being able to make other people feel proud of their heritage and even myself feel proud of that heritage has been very rewarding.

My current project, *The Storyteller Trilogy*, is very much in the beginning stages. I have the outline done for the first book, and that's a sixty to seventy page outline, so it's quite clear to me. And my characters are set in the first book; I know them very well. I need to even know them better. I've written a couple of chapters for that book, one this week and another one that I had written parts of. So I'm just really getting started. The second book I know my main character and I know the problem, and that's all. But the third book is just totally vague yet, and I have to have a brief outline for that book by December.

It is intimidating to commit to a trilogy up front, and I'm saying to myself at this point, "I can do it. I'm going to be able to do it. Just one step, one step." But I've never committed to a whole thing like that before and signed a contract and said I would do a book every two years. It's always been three years between books once I got all the research taken care of. So I really have to be self-disciplined to get it done. And so far, it's OK. I'm doing it, it's working. It's fine, but it's a little intimidating. I always have a little voice that tells me, "You can't do it," sing songing, "Na-na-na, na-na, you can't do it." And I think everyone that I've talked to has that self-doubt and you just have to say, "I can too!"

My advice for young writers, novice writers, or any writers is to do as much as you can with the time. You know, a paragraph is enough if you're a writer. Even a sentence would be enough. I think the secret is to allow yourself that. Say, "OK, now I'm really worried about this and I'm not sure that I can do it. So I'm going to sit down and think about it and see where I want to go with it." Maybe jot down a few things as to where I want to go, so you've kind of got a framework. Then I'm going to sit down and I'm going to write one paragraph because I'm comfortable with that and when I'm done with that paragraph, maybe I'll rewrite it, maybe not, but whatever, allow yourself that. When I'm done here, I'm going to get up and say, "Good for you! You wrote a paragraph and you did a good job and you sat down and you did it," and not think I should have written three pages. I should have done more. Say, "good for you, you wrote a paragraph," and the next day sit down and say, "good for me, I wrote another paragraph." That way you're not whipping yourself. There are people that whip themselves all the time and tell themselves that they aren't good because they didn't do more. You can paralyze yourself, and I know because I've done it. You just totally paralyze yourself, so you do only what you can handle. It's like a little kid learning to walk. You don't expect him to get up and walk across the room. We're too rough on ourselves sometimes. I think it's a part of being human. Part of being a creature on the Earth is that you just have self-doubts because you have failed, and failure isn't fun. I think it's important to allow yourself to fail. One time a friend of mine told me that she went to a counselor to get some help because she was starting to paralyze herself with self-doubt. And the counselor said, "For you, if something is worth doing, it's worth doing imperfectly." In other words, don't **never** do it. If something's worth doing, it's worth doing imperfectly. And I thought, boy, I needed to hear that, too. This book I want to write so badly, but I'm no Joyce Carole Oates, there's no doubt about it. But I can do the best I can do and it will be imperfect, but it is worth doing. To allow ourselves some space is good for all of us.