Photo credit: Nancy Crampton

Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko

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number three on the college best-seller list. The number four book was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* and it had Spike Lee's movie to thank. The number two book was Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses,* which has a prestigious book prize to thank for much publicity. The number one book was Norman MacLean's *A River Runs Through It,* which of course had the hit movie to thank. So *Almanac of the Dead* made it to the number three position despite or maybe because of the reviews it received, and despite or because of its enemies who rallied *Almanac*'s fierce defenders.

As for the outcries against *Almanac*'s portrayal of white society as attracted to and aroused by violence, I think the spectacle of Desert Storm, a giant nation attacking a tiny nation, and then the madness and genocide that devour Serbia and Bosnia easily rebut the charges that *Almanac* portrays white society too violently. Yugoslavia was really quite well off, a country that was in the "first world." Now look. They have bombed themselves clear into the "third world."

During Desert Storm, the U.S. was swept by excitement and festivity generated by the bombing of Iraq. People in the U.S. loved the notion of U.S. tanks burying Iraqui troops alive. Nothing in *Almanac* approximates the depravity of the white men leading the U.S. today; nothing in *Almanac* reveals the "lynch mob" mentality of the ruling class in the U.S. today. I finished writing *Almanac* a few weeks before Operation Desert Storm; I could tell that Bush, and the other white men and toadies to the white men, were aroused and were determined to do some killing, so I included references to Desert Storm veterans in *Almanac* anyway. And I was correct.

A hundred or even fifty years from now, *Almanac* will be judged to be too mild, too soft on Western European culture's compulsion for violence.

Notes

1. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Sacred Water* (Tucson: Flood Plain Press, 1993).
2. Joy Harjo, "The World Is Round: Some Notes on Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead,*" *Blue Mesa Review* 4 (Spring 1992): 207–10.
3. John Skow, "People of the Monkey Wrench," *Time* (Dec. 9, 1991): 60.
4. Harjo, 209.

An Interview with Leslie Marmon Silko

Florence Boos / 1994

From *Speaking of the Short Story: Interviews with Contemporary Writers,* edited by Farhat Iftekharuddin, Mary Rohrberger, and Maurice Lee (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), pp. 237–47. Reprinted by permission.

Boos: Do you consider yourself primarily a writer of stories or a novelist?

Silko: I've never tried to categorize what I do according to generic lablels. I'm a writer, and I love language and story. I started out loving stories that were told to me. Growing up at Laguna Pueblo, one is immersed in storytelling, because the Laguna people did not use written language to keep track of history and philosophy and other aspects of their lives.

Imagine an entire culture that is passed down for thousands and thousands of years through the spoken word and narrative, so the whole of experience is put into narrative form—this is how the people know who they are as a people, and how individuals learn who they are. They hear stories about "the family," about grandma and grandpa and others.

When I started out at the University of New Mexico, I took a folklore class, and began to think about the differences between the story that's told and the literary short story. I started writing the "literary" short story, and tried to write it as closely as I could according to the "classical" rules which seemed to manifest themselves in my reading. I wanted to show that I could do it. But I've turned away from this since and haven't really written a short story in the usual sense since 1981. From 1981 to 1989, I worked on *Almanac of the Dead,* and so I don't think of myself as a short story writer. Yet stories are at the basis of everything I do, even non-fiction, because a lot of non-fiction reminiscences or memories come to me in the form of narrative, since that's the way people at home organize all experience and information.

I found the rules of the "classical" short story confining. I think you can see why the post-modernist narrative and the contemporary short story went off in another direction. They're trying to escape the strictures of the formal story form.

I've now tasted the freedom one has with a novel, so I wonder if I'll turn

back to more structured forms. I've written one short story, ''Personal Property," which I'm going to read tonight, and which purposely breaks some of the rules of the classical short story. Maybe I'm not done with making trouble with the short story form!

Boos: How are your poems related to your stories?

Silko: For me a poem is a very mysterious event . . . my poems came to me mysteriously. I started out to write a narrative, fiction or non-fiction, and something would happen so that the story would organize itself in the form of a narrative poem rather than a short story.

In fact, that happened with "A Story from Bear Country," in *Storyteller.* I intended to make a note about a conversation I had had with Benjamin Barney, a Navajo friend, about the different ways our respective Navajo and Pueblo cultures viewed bears. I started a narrative of our converstion, but something shifted abruptly, and before I knew it, I was writing something that looked more like a poem. At the very end of that poem a voice comes in and says "Whose voice is this? You may wonder, for after all you were here alone, but you have been listening to me for some time now." That voice is the seductive voice of the bears. Benjamin Barney and I had been discussing the notion that if humans venture too close to the bear people and their territory, the people are somehow seduced or enchanted. They're not mauled or killed, but they are seduced and taken away to live with the bears forever.

So I don't have control [over whether my tale becomes a tale or a poem]. I set out to narrate something—either something which actually happened or a story I was told—and after I begin the piece sorts itself into whether it will be a poem or a short story. I find a mixing of the two in *Sacred Water,* a piece that I wrote a couple of years ago—a wanting to have the two together—so that there's really no distinct genre. This story also contained a bit of "nonfiction." I wanted to blend fiction and non-fiction together in one narrative voice.

So I am never far away from oral narrative, storytelling and narration, and the use of narrative to order experience. The people at home believe that there is one big story going on and made up of many little stories, and the story goes on and on. The stories are alive and they outlive us, and storytellers are only caretakers of the story. Storytellers can be anonymous. Their names don't matter because the stories live on. I think that's what people mean when they say that there are no new stories under the sun. It's true—the old stories live on, but with new caretakers.

Boos: You present yourself as a narrative writer, but it struck me as I read *Storyteller* that you also think visually. How do you decide where to put the words on the page?

Silko: I'm a very aural person. On the other hand, my father was a photographer, and when I was a child, I would go in the darkroom, sit quietly on the stool, and watch as the images of the photographs would develop. As I've written in *Storyteller,* there was this old Hopi basket full of snapshots. One of us kids would pull a photograph and say, "Grandma, who's this?" or "what's this?" A photograph would be tied to narration. And when I was a child walking in the countryside, I'd see a certain sandstone formation of a certain shape, or a certain mesa, and someone would say, "Look, see that hill over there? Well, let me tell you . . ."

Through the years I've done a lot of thinking about the similarities and differences between the "literary" story and the story that's told. I began to realize that landscape could not be separated from narration and storytelling. One of the features of the written or old-fashioned short story was the careful, detailed description of its setting. By contrast, in Laguna oral stories, tellers and audience shared the same assumptions, a collective knowledge of the terrain and landscape which didn't need to be retold. That's why something an anthropologist or folklorist has collected may seem sparser than a literary short story; sometimes the oral short story can seem "too sparse." I realized that all communities have shared knowledge, and that the "literary" short story resulted when all over Europe—and all over the world—human populations started to move. People didn't have this common shared ground anymore.

Boos: *Storyteller* seemed to evoke a whole context related to your deep kinship with your family. Even the shapes of the stories seemed to arise from your identification with those telling the stories.

Silko: Right. One of the reasons that *Storyteller* contains photographs was my desire to convey that kinship and the whole context or field on which these episodes of my writing occurred. The photographs include not only those of my family, but of the old folks in the village and places in the village. I started to think of translation [from Laguna]. I realized that if one just works with the word on the page or the word in the air, something's left out. That's why I insisted on having photographs in *Storyteller.* I wanted to give the reader a sense of place, because here place is a character. For example, in the title story, "Storyteller," the main character is the weather and the

free, frozen land itself. Or in the story I'm going to read tonight, "Private Property," the community itself is a character—although places and communities are not ordinarily characters in the "classical" literary short story. I felt a need to add in these other [visual] components which before were supposed to be extraneous to the narrative, but which existed at Laguna Pueblo as visual cues—a mountain or a tree or a photograph.

Boos: When you advise your creative writing students, what suggestions do you give about choosing topics or about technique?

Silko: Usually I tell them just to think about a good story, not to think consciously about topic or theme. I tell them that their stories should contain something that they don't know, something mysterious. It's better not to know too much, but to have just the bare bones of an idea, and let the writing be a process of enlightenment for them.

I often say, "Well, you can tell me the idea for the story, so why can't you write it down?" There's a large difference between speaking and writing. But when I'm writing, it's as natural to me as if I were speaking, though the results are different. The most difficult element of writing to teach the student is that ease—writing as if you were talking to yourself or to the wall.

Students are traumatized by the writing process. I've noticed the traumatization begins right from the first grade. Usually kids withstand it till around the seventh or eighth grade, and then they experience a real terror of failure and scolding. People who can talk, who can tell you things, freeze when they sit down in front of a blank piece and a pencil. It shouldn't be difficult to make the transition from speaking to writing, and I blame the United States educational system for the fact that it is.

Boos: Though you speak of an oral narrative tradition, you also remark that you speak and write differently. What's different about the writing process for you, and why do you value that?

Silko: I was conscious that I wasn't as good a storyteller as the storytellers at home, for the people at home are so good at this. An oral performance is just that, so I needed to go off in a room by myself to evoke that same sense of wholeness and excitement and perfection that I seemed to hear all around me [during their performances].

Also, when I'm writing I'm alone. When I'm speaking to an audience, by contrast, I'm very sensitive to what people want from me or expect from me, whether the audience are becoming restless or whatever, and I'm anxious to please and to serve, putting the comfort of others ahead of my own. When I

write I'm alone with the voices . . . with the people in my memory. Some of the voices that I'm alone with might even be those of people still living, so that I could go and talk to them outside that door, but when I'm alone in the room writing, a connection with the older voices occurs, which cannot happen for me when I'm storytelling.

Boos: Writing isn't just inscription of stories, then, but something that requires solitude as well?

Silko: Being alone allows me to hear those voices. I think it's aloneness to be able to hear Aunt Susie's voice, for example. If I were in a room with her I would only listen, not write or speak, but solitude enables me to hear [and transcribe] her very distinctive voice. I think it was meant to be distinctive so that I could never forget it.

I've thought a lot about this distinction between oral narration and writing. Storytelling was done in a group so that the audience and teller would respond to each other, and be grounded in the present. As I said, I'm not as good at that, but I learned that it's also dangerous to go into the room alone and hear the voices alone, because those voices from spirit beings who have real presence . . . and bring dangers . . . There's a real danger of being seduced by them, of wanting to join them and remain with them. I'm forty-six, and things are becoming clearer to me, things that before I had only heard about and hadn't experienced, so I couldn't judge.

But now I'm beginning to understand. Old Aunt Susie used to say that when she and her siblings were children, her grandmother started storytelling by bidding the youngest child to go open the door "so that our esteemed ancestors may bring in their gifts for us." But when we tell the stories of those past folks telling stories, they are actually here again in the room. It's therefore dangerous for a storyteller to write in a room alone without others, because those old ancestors are really coming in.

In writing *Almanac of the Dead,* I was forced to listen . . . I was visited by so many ancestors . . . it was very hard. It changed me as a human being. I came to love solitude almost too much, and it was very frightening.

Boos: Don't you ever fear that the presences of the dead might view critically something you wrote?

Silko: No, I've never been afraid. I know the voices of the storytellers, and I know that if you tell their truth and don't try to be self-serving, they aren't dangerous—in fact, they bring great protective power—*great protective power.*

Boos: How do you know what is true rather than self-serving?

Silko: I can tell. One method to avoid self-serving is to use a male protagonist, as in *Ceremony.* I wrote two stillborn versions of *Ceremony* now in the [Beinecke] Library at Yale—though I suspect that the rest of the university may have thought I was the Anti-Christ, so maybe they're not even catalogued! If anyone is interested, they can read the two stillborn drafts—each about sixty pages long—that lead up to *Ceremony.* "Stillborn" is of course such a grim term, but before I sold them to Yale University I looked at them again and saw that they're not really "stillborns" at all, but a necessary part of writing the novel. This gave me new confidence in the process of writing, and all young writers should understand that even those things that we throw in the trash can are necessary to get us to where we want to be. The first two stillborns had *female* protagonists.

Boos: Why would changing to a male protagonist have enabled you to transcend yourself?

Silko: When the characters were females, I identified too closely with them and wouldn't let them do things that I hadn't done or wouldn't do. It's not good to identify too closely with [one's own characters]. All this happened when I was very young; I started writing the "stillborn" versions of *Ceremony* when I was twenty-three.

Boos: Did you start to write short stories before you published poems? You published the poems of *Laguna Woman* quite early.

Silko: I wrote stories before I wrote poems, but the poems were easier to get out. That was because in writing stories I found myself too connected to the main character. Even though I wanted [her] to be a separate character, [she] wouldn't be. When on the third draft of *Ceremony,* I created Tayo, and I was so liberated by working with a male protagonist.

Also, in a matriarchy the young *man* symbolizes purity and virginity—and also the intellectual, the sterile, and the orderly. The female principle was the chaotic, the creative, the fertile, the powerful.

Boos: *Ceremony* struck me as a book about the bonds between men, very deep bonds. Why would it be liberating for you to deal with male bonding and the recovery of a man's sense of himself?

Silko: When I was a little girl, I hung around adults. I was always the kid who wouldn't go off and play with the other kids, but liked to watch and eavesdrop on adults. I come from a culture in which men and women are not

segregated, and so I had a great deal of opportunity to listen to the men talking. When I was really small, I listened to World War II and Korean War veterans. They had drinking problems and lacked regular jobs, but they had good souls and good spirits. Perhaps tragedy and anguish and trouble attracted me right away as a little girl, more than the easier parts of life.

Also, the Laguna people lived in a matriarchy, and in a matriarchy one is more afraid of what women may say and think about oneself. Children feel less powerful than their mothers, and men seemed more interesting to them because they too had less power and were more like themselves.

Needless to say, women are a lot happier in a matriarchy than in patriarchal society. Also those elements that had given women their strength and continuity were not nearly as shaken by outside pressures as were those reserved for men. I think this was mainly because when outsiders came in they didn't realize the women's power, and so they left them alone. They stopped more of the things that men did traditionally than those that women did. So you see the men were more broken apart by the invasion. The government imprisoned men for practicing the Pueblo religion. Then of course war came, and the Second World War and the Korean War were devastating for men.

The Pueblo world is the reverse of Anglo-American and mainstream culture, where the final word is the man's word. In the Pueblo world, women have the final word in practical matters. This is a simplification, but women own all the property, children belong to their mother's clan, and all the mundane business—quarrels, problems—are handled by women. The female deity is the main deity, and in the Kiva ceremonies, men dress as women. But formerly the matriarchy was more evenly balanced, for the men were responsible for the hunting and religious ceremonies.

Boos: On the other hand, I've heard the theory that because the Euro-American legal system was so patriarchal, it destroyed certain aspects of Indian life that favored or protected women (by enforcing nineteenth-century laws, for example, which gave a married woman's property to her husband). If so, imposition of foreign laws sometimes diminished women's authority.

Silko: Well, we're only seeing that starting with my generation. It's taken that long for western European misogyny to arrive in the Pueblo. It's true that the conquerors negotiated only with Pueblo men, ignoring the clan mothers, but in the long run, when they destroyed what they thought was important, they left behind the authority of women.

Yet it's true that women are sometimes disadvantaged. A lot of tribal coun-

cils were established which didn't give women the right to vote, even though tribal organization was matriarchal. But that's a superficial level of damage, when you think that if the Conquistadors had really understood how important women were, they might have tried to [undermine their power]. Patriarchal attitudes have touched the Pueblo people only in a superficial way.

Boos: Does your identification with Tayo perhaps suggest that an author should try to identify with someone of the opposite sex as a way of moving towards a full presentation of reality?

Silko: Totally. When I was growing up, for a long time I felt that I was "just me." That was easy to be in a matriarchal culture, where women have access to the wide world. Women are everywhere and men are everywhere women are. There isn't this awful segregation that you find even now in the Anglo-American world . . .

Boos: In university life!

Silko: Yes, in university life. In the Pueblo, women crack dirty jokes to men who aren't their husbands or close relatives. There's a lot of banter, and a real feeling of equality and strength within the community. There weren't places where a little girl was told, "Oh, you can't go there!," or things of which a little boy was told, "Oh, you shouldn't do that!" I wasn't told that because I was a little girl, I had to dress or act a certain way. So for a long time, although I didn't think I was *really* a boy, I kind of . . .

Boos: . . . didn't learn *not* to identify with men.

Silko: Yes, I didn't learn not to identify with men. I had a horse and was kind of a tomboy, and I was glad of it. Although I was intensely attracted to men and males, I saw that as a part of being interested in them and watching their activities.

I finished writing *Ceremony* in 1977, when it was still not politically correct for a woman novelist to write from a man's point of view. Feminism in America was still so new that feminists wanted women to write of their own experiences, not those of men. Perhaps too, because my name is Leslie, which is kind of androgynous, they may not have realized that I was a woman author. For awhile I didn't hear anything from the feminists. I felt I was punished for using a male protagonist, but that was the only way I could write.

Boos: I'd like to ask you about some of your fellow contemporary women writers who have written novels about their own cultures—Michelle Cliff,

Toni Morrison, and Maxine Hong Kingston among them. Are there conter porary women writers whose works you've read a great deal, or whose wo you believe resemble yours in any way?

Silko: Of course Toni Morrison's work has been important to me, and t of Maxine Hong Kingston. Both women have encouraged me to believe t I'm on the right track, and that we share something—that it's not so lonel for there are other women and other people thinking and writing about the same sorts of things.

Boos: It seemed to me that you portrayed discrimination profoundly fr within, not preaching about it, but analyzing its different layers and guise Might I ask you to comment on contemporary Native American political issues and conflicts?

Silko: I'll tell you what's happening in terms of history. The largest cit in the world is Mexico City, and officials don't really know its population The uncounted ones are the *Indios,* the Indian people. A huge, huge chang is on the horizon, indeed it's already underway—and there's nothing you c do.

A couple months ago at sundown, a freight train came up from Nogales through Tucson, covered, crawling with human beings. People were sitting on top, people were hanging on the side—and so the great return to Aztla which the Chicano people talk about is coming to pass in a big way. The Zapatista uprising on January 1, 1994, was one of the most important sign ings of what is to come. After that, small demonstrations were held all ov Mexico and the United States and Canada, showing the solidarity of Nativ American people throughout the Americas. We sense that the rising on Ja ary first was a sign of this awakening.

The most important thing right now which people must watch out for is jingoism and hysteria about immigrants and immigration. [The U.S. gover ment] is building an iron curtain, a steel wall—Rudolfo Ortiz calls it the Tortilla Curtain—but it's ugly. They're trying to seal off Mexico from the United States. But [those they are sealing off] are Indians, Native America American Indians, original possessors of this continent, and [those who h them] want to create a hysteria here so that it will justify U.S. troops openi fire and shooting and killing. The future could be a horrendous blood bath and upheaval not seen since the Civil War.

Right now the border patrol stops [Indian] people. I've been stopped th or four times and have had dogs put on me.

Boos: Oh!?

Silko: This happened to me on my way from Albuquerque to Tucson. Many peopqle in the rest of the United States don't understand that the U.S. government is destroying the civil rights of *all* citizens living near the border. Something terrible is developing, and it's being sold to the American people, or shoved down their throats through this hysteria over immigrants and the fear that their jobs will be taken. But I see a frightening collision on the horizon! I'll tell you something—the powers that be, those greedy corrupt white men like Rostenkowski and all those criminals in the United States Congress—their time is running out very soon! The forces from the south have spiritual power and legitimacy that'll blast those thieves and murderers right out of Washington, D.C.

Boos: Are there particular Native American groups that you see working effectively against government wrongs?

Silko: Ah, ah, this change that's coming will not have leaders. People will wake up and know in their hearts that it's beginning. It's already happening across the United States. The change isn't just limited to Native Americans. It can come to Anglo-Americans, Chicanos, African-Americans as well. Every day people wake up to the inhumanity and violence this government perpetrates on its own citizens, and on citizens all over the world. That's why the change will not be stopped, for it will be a change of consciousness, a change of heart.

We don't need leaders. They can't stop [this revolution.] They can shoot some, they can kill some—like they have already—but this is a change that rises out of the earth's very being—a Hurricane Andrew, a Hurricane Hugo, an earthquake of consciousness. This earth itself is rebelling against what's been done to it in the name of greed and capitalism. No, there are no groups which bring change. They aren't needed. This change that's coming is much deeper and much larger. Think of it as a natural force—human beings massed into a natural force like a hurricane or a tidal wave. It will happen when the people come from the South, and when the people here [in the North and Midwest] understand.

One morning people will just wake up, and we'll all be different. That's why the greedy powerful white men will not be able to stop what happens, because there will be nothing to grab onto. There are no Martin Luther Kings to shoot, so the FBI can give up on that!

There's no one that can stop us, because [the return to Aztlan] will be a

change inside of *you!* It will happen without your knowing it. And this won't happen because someone preached at you, threatened you with prison, put a gun to your head. No, you'll wake up [yourself]. It will come to you through dreams!

Boos: No Martin Luther King will have helped bring about change, but what about Leslie Marmon Silko? How do you see yourself contributing to this movement?

Silko: Just by telling people—"Look, this is happening!" As I tried to make clear in *Almanac of the Dead,* you don't have to do anything, for the great change is already happening. But you maybe might want to be aware of what was coming, and you might want to think about the future choices that you might have to make. Though as I said, in your heart, you will already know.

Boos: Amen, and thank you.