

Anne Carrière-Acco Interview with Darren Préfontaine, August 27, 2010
Transcribed by Amaranta Sokol-Como

D: Hello Anne. How are you doing?

A: Pretty good.

D: I'm glad. I'm glad you and Franklin made it to the Gabriel Dumont Institute to be interviewed for *New Nation Magazine* and other projects. Could you please tell us a bit about yourself and where you were raised?

A: I was raised in Cumberland House and born 1940, September 2. At the start of the war... in earnest.

D: Who were your folks?

A: Pierre Carrière and Agnes McKenzie.

D: And they were both Cumberland House residents?

A: Yes they are. They were and are.

D: Could you tell me a little bit about the culture of Cumberland House?

A: It's a mixed culture. It's very northern. A northern parkland. Swampy. Swampy Cree because we're right on, within twenty miles in any direction. You're in from the rocks, which is the Pre-Cambrian and then we have this ridge that we live on. And that's the swamp, the delta. And if you could go thirty miles up and you will hit the prairie, the start of the parkland prairie.

D: And the language in Cumberland House?

A: It's a Cree. A Cree first language, English mix. We speak a kind of English. And when my sisters and I talk together, my children don't understand us even though we are talking English. They want to know which language we're talking. That's how strange it can get.

D: Would you call it a Cumberland House English Cree?

A: Yes, a Cumberland House English Cree. Because there's a lot of words that are, are not in the English language. But we've Anglicized them. One of them is mahssesly.

D: Mamasis?

A: Mahssesly. Mahsses is doing something kind of any old way. And if you put "L-Y" to it. Doing it. It works. It just works. But you have to say it that way— mahssesly.

D: Any linguist...

A: Say what's that?

D: Have any linguists studied this Cree English of Cumberland House?

A: Yes they have.

D: So it's been documented?

A: Yes, it's documented and there's more studies coming out of it because it is interesting.

D: Sounds interesting.

A: Yah.

D: And Cumberland House is also known for its famous beading.

A: Yes. I, we just saw my Auntie Josephine Carrière yesterday morning. We went at nine. Nine-thirty, nine o'clock? And she was, already had all her sewing out, et cetera. So it's a beautiful art form and, they're very good at it and very fast.

D: It's a well known style.

A: Yah.

D: And also boatmen too come from Cumberland House.

A: Yes. Famous canoe people. We're known for our endurance. Some of the families are known as tough people. Not tough and rough, just immensely tough people. Travelling miles running behind a dog team. That kind of thing.

D: So those would be, for an outsider to go to Cumberland House, which you just described to me, the Swampy Cree language, the English Cree, the beading tradition. I guess the continuance of the voyageur lifestyle. Those are sort of the touchstones.

A: Celebrated.

D: Celebrated.

A: Yes, celebrated. It's not just like oh we do that. It's really celebrated in competition, in pageantry, and of course in poetry, dramatizations, et cetera.

D: And were you raised in Cumberland House your whole life?

A: Well I was there until I was fifteen.

D: Okay.

A: Hadn't turned fifteen yet and I had to go away to school.

D: And where did you go?

A: I went to Flin Flon for one year.

D: Was that a residential school?

A: No it wasn't. This was a regular school in Flin Flon, but I couldn't live there because the smelter smoke got to me.

D: It was too much.

A: And I couldn't breath.

D: Okay.

A: So I had to leave there and I went to Lorette Centre in Winnipeg. In southern, well not Winnipeg itself. Lorette Centre was in Lorette, Manitoba.

D: Okay.

A: Seventeen miles from Winnipeg.

D: How did you get raised, or pardon me. How did you get interested in writing, what were some of your informative influences related to your writing?

A: The informative influences would be like Soeur St. David. She'd tell us, "Well if you do all your homework, I'll read a story to you." And she'd read a story and we would like, work like beavers and get our work done. And then we would listen to her tell a story for about an hour. So we got interested in story from the written word but already knew stories from the oral tradition.

D: So you had a humanist education, a classical Catholic humanist education. Were there sisters?

A: Yes. A real classical Roman-Greco education, but at the same time we had issues. We had issues of light. We had coal oil lamps and candles. We had no electricity. So no running water, et cetera. So we adjusted that. The teachers adjusted to that. We had homework. You had to adjust your home life to it. And we did go away for two months at a time, or six weeks at a time from school. And we had to get caught up when we got back. But we read constantly. That's another feature of our community,

reading all the time.

D: Always reading.

A: Yah.

D: So classics, world literature, histories, you name it.

A: It just happened that James Brady left books in our, in our... My father's warehouse because it was dry. And because he did that, he had also told us we could read his books and we all did. Consequently, I read *Ramona*, Marie Currie. I read all the French classics. He had all of them. All the important books of that time; in the 1950s. Everything you had to read and it was a self-education. At the same time, it opened the world to us in a totally different way. When you read about Paris, you start wondering? Is it true you know, or is this a fantasy? Is it one of those things?

D: Then you get books like Albert Camus. You know where I'm going, about colonization in Algeria and all that.

A: Yah, Albert Camus was very interesting to me. Because James Brady had discussed him. While I was sleeping beside the box wood stove, I'd have my bed. It would be made by there. And he would be talking to my father at the kitchen table. And I'd hear this and that's how I know all of it. No lullaby. They were discussing these heavy subjects about what was happening in Algeria.

D: And how it related to Aboriginal people in Canada.

A: Well James; that's what James Brady was all about. He was all about economic development, self-realization, self-actualization and self-determination. And we understood that language because you can say it in Cree. My parents also were the kind of people when they wrote a letter. I have to write about this. When they wrote a letter, they would have a dictionary and they would have these debates about the right word to use in a letter. And that was very interesting for me because they really couldn't speak English and my father would ask me "does this sound okay?" So that's the phonology because we don't stop at the same ... When we speak Cree, we don't stop at the same place that you would.

D: No.

A: Like we have a thought, you might continue—we don't. It's like we ponder it for two seconds and so we stop. But it might be the wrong place in English. In Cree it sounds okay. So those are the differences I noticed, so I really got interested in that.

D: So your interest in writing would come from oral tradition, from the classical education, James Brady's library...

A: Yah.

D And the discussions that followed from his library. Who were the writers that influenced you? As a little girl, as a young woman, and now as an elder?

A: I so love François Mauriac, French philosopher and essayist ...He was the first one to...When Elie Wiesel came to him to tell him about his dilemma with the Holocaust, which, [was] "what can I do with this memory?" He listened to him when nobody else would. That's why they called; well he sort of called it creative intuition. Like you have to have an intuition about what is important. It looks mundane but it really could very important. It could be the key to help you understand another person. That would be one person. Biography is written...One biography written by...about Marie Currie by her daughter. That biography told me a woman of science has to have, she has to have endurance. She has to be tough-minded and in order to make any headway as a professional person you have to be extremely uncompromising in your principles. That was ... I thought ... spoke to me about everybody that had to. It's not a question of getting ahead in this world but making a difference in the world. And I read an awful lot of Mark Twain. Just to get the southern rhythm. Rhythm is very important to me. How you speak, how you deliver. And even a writer has to be able to deliver what he has written in a way that's really interesting and entertaining.

D: And you saw the parallels between northern and southern speakers in Canada, northern Aboriginal speakers and speakers of English in the US south.

A: Yes.

D: That's what drew you to Twain as well?

A: Yes that's what brought me to Twain. The other thing about Twain was he was describing the effects of slavery, but you weren't overwhelmed by it. Because while it was truly awful, he was able to make it entertaining. I said how did he, boy that's interesting because how do you make an awful situation entertaining? And apparently you can. And the southern writers, the really good ones, were able to do it like William Faulkner, et cetera.

D: And they are some of the best writers of America and Canada.

A: Yes.

D: In terms of an adult, later in life, I know you've admired Chomsky. You spoke a lot about Noam Chomsky. Have there been other writers, say prose writers, and philosophers that have influenced you?

A: All the Aboriginal writers. All of them.

D: Maria Campbell...

A: All of them.

D: Harold Cardinal, everyone.

A: Everyone has influenced me because I'm going to hear what they have to say because it's so interesting. They really have ... they help you understand the continent. When I went to Oklahoma for a writers' conference for all of the writers of the time in 1992, I met as many as I could. We had a fifteen-year old writer describe his grandmother and her room and how she was working with yarn in different colours, et cetera. We were all crying.

D: A Native American?

A: A Native American. Scott Momaday. N. Scott Momaday, when he talks about his Kiowa ancestors—wow. It's another world. That world you want to know. And they describe it so well because they still have that oral tradition, they haven't forgotten it. And they bring so much vibrancy to the word.

D: Do you think that's why a lot of Aboriginal writers are considered, like not only good Aboriginal writers but very good Canadian writers? Like some of the best Canadian writers are some of the best writers in Canada because they had that sense that ... of that orality that's been lost to non-Aboriginal writers? Because at one time all our ancestors had the oral tradition?

A: They all had it but we paid real attention to it, and I hope we never lose it. Because again, going back to my parents, you know, debating the merits of one word in one letter.

D: The power of language.

A: The power of language, and taking forty minutes to decide which is the best word in a sentence.

D: There wouldn't have been many of their contemporaries, say in the southern prairie who wouldn't have even given that a moment's thought. Just goes to show how much language meant to people.

A: Oh, it meant...I think it meant everything because we had two languages in Cree: its diplomatic language and negotiation. Because we negotiate everything. If we could negotiate the time of day we would. But because we are very interested in what you think and what you can bring into this discussion. There's no cutting you off. The discourse is open so with that you bring the many colours of human thought. Because it is coloured. And that's...I just happen to think of it this way.

D: Okay. Who do you think are some of the best Aboriginal writers right now?

A: You can't beat Maria Campbell for writing the very first definitive autobiography, but it's the way she wrote it. It's the lyrical content. You can put any, take any sentence of hers and you will find the music in it. That's the one thing I have. Some of the writers, I would say the thirty-year olds they are beginning to bring all these things together into prose, poetry, et cetera. They are literally dancing with words. I find that very exciting because they are really getting into the psychology of things. And again, some of our psychology, I'm talking about Native psychology and what we've been through in terms of oppression, et cetera. We have to say we have a sad song to sing. Yah we do have a sad song to sing, but we also have what we call songs of resistance and then we have the songs of freedom. And they are extraordinarily beautiful when they start talking about things like that. They are also going into another area that I find very interesting, and that is one of mystery. Like Harold Johnson has written two books that are highly entertaining.

D: Yes.

A: And I looked at the craft of it. And Joseph Boyden. They crafted really good stories. I appreciate the level of intensity they bring and the detail. They're really tutorial in many ways.

D: Do you think this is the direction for Aboriginal writing, not to be pigeon-holed into resistance narratives but to just ... I'm a good writer, I'll write any story I want. Science fiction, whatever?

A: Go for it. That's my, that's the way I feel about it.

D: So that would be your main bit of advice that you would have for an emerging Aboriginal writer is just...

A: Explore everything you can explore. It's only in exploring that you begin to recognize what the terrain is. And it's huge.

D: And that's helped you because you are a very eclectic reader. You have a very eclectic mind. I know of few people that can quote the things you can quote. And I think to be a good writer you need to be eclectic. No matter what you are, whether you are a historian or you write poetry. Because you see that common diversity in humanity. That whole experience you need to draw upon.

A: You really have to do that because one of the things I tell students is "I'm gonna learn something from you. I don't care who you are. I don't care if you have been poor. I don't care if you have been abused, I don't care. I'm going to learn something from you. You're going to tell me something that is so unique that I'm going to remember it forever."

D: That, doing that no matter who the person, it also humanizes other cultures, you understand them better.

A: Yah.

D: Because once you can listen to an articulation of a story like that then maybe you can understand their point of view better.

A: Well that's what you're trying to do. What is interesting about you and somebody said well I'm not very interesting. Oh yah? Well I'll ask you a few questions. And underneath it comes out this really interesting person. They just don't know how interesting they are.

D: So you think for any, say young Aboriginal person, northern person that they should work to document their stories because they have an interesting story to tell, do you think that's something?

A: Any time that you are a writer, you will write. It's how seriously do you take your own writing. For a long time I didn't. I wrote because I had lost my English abilities, my ability to write an English sentence. And I wanted it back so I said "okay, I'll just read and I'll write. Read and write." So I accumulated boxes and boxes of books or rather paper and I'd throw the whole thing out. Then my brother Kenny told me, he said, "don't throw these things out because you're recording things that only you know and they are very good." And I looked at a bunch of writing I had done, and I said you "know maybe he's right." But I had never really thought of it from that point of view. I'm going to be this great writer and I'm going to write the greatest thing, never. I'm writing because I got something to scribble.

D: And now when you write, you write Anne, you write prose, poetry and non-fiction. That's correct?

A: Yes.

D: What's your favourite genre of the three if you had to chose? Which do you enjoy the best?

A: Poetry just comes. Poetry is a gift. Prose you gotta really work at it because you think you've written the worlds greatest sentence and that's all you got. A sentence. You still have to go and ...

D: Flush it out.

A: Start connecting and making connections, et cetera. You got to work at it a lot. You got to think it through. Poems arrive packaged. I don't know how it happens but it will come in like that. Technical writing, I like it because when you have to explain something with real clarity you have no room to be fussy and you have no room to

be, to do any kind of histrionics. You've got to say what you've got to say. I utilize that kind of writing.

D: What's your favourite piece of writing that you've done and has it been published?

A: The most favourite pieces of writing I've done are I wrote one called Athapapscow is the place and it's like a ridge of land and I was there one morning and from both sides came up this mist. And I thought I heard voices. Not one, hundreds of voices, just voices. Walking, there were people marching, carrying things over this land ridge. Like a bridge. You couldn't see further than a hundred feet. And there's this mist rising up. And I thought they had to cross here. This is where the old people, ancients, had to cross. That's the one thought that came to me and I put it into about eight lines. It's not published yet. The other one is "Boys in the Corral." And that comes from an old fragmented memory, and I can't really remember if it was my mother who told it to me or somebody, some other woman who said "you gave the...When the soldiers came we always put the little boys...We always had the little boys, the twelve-year olds by the tipi door and when they...and when we heard the soldiers they had to run out to the corrals and let the horses go. And then they had to stay with the horses until the danger was gone. And I could just see this so those are two; those again are fragments of stories that I got. And that one is not published yet either. But I have, I have presented it.

D: So you'd like to see them published?

A: Yes, I think so.

D: The first story, did that relate to people of the continent or just the...

A: People of the continent because to me they just pass, they kept coming, coming and coming. But you have to be there in that moment to have this ... to see this mist rising.

D: Coming to Turtle Island.

A: Yes.

D: What are you currently writing about?

A: Well currently, I'm trying to finish what I like to call "Kokum's Historical Novel." I've...well of course I got for the last six years but before that I had started working on it because what I wanted to write was what were we doing while the Portuguese, the Spanish, the English and the French were running amuck. What were we thinking? How were we trying to survive? So I've written about people who have survived and make them live, and make them overcome.

D: So this would be for the whole Americas?

A: For all of America. And so, in it I describe what the Portuguese were doing, which was they turned to slavery. I describe what the Spaniards are doing, they turned to total mayhem. They destroyed cities. They destroyed everything in their path. And this is what they bought and et cetera so I describe that. And more than that I described the craziness they came from. Same with the French, same with the English. The English were pirates.

D: So each European colonizer was a variation of a theme. Say the Spanish and Portuguese were the most extreme but each group had the same hate, but they used it to different purposes.

A: Yes, and then they got greedy. And you have to see, well okay, what does that do to a continent and the people. What are you capable of? But I don't spend too much time with them I just put ... bring in the historical part, say what happened. And World War II was the definitive impact on Native people because they went away to war. They chose to go to war.

D: For the countries that oppressed them.

A: Yes, that there, they understood Hitler better than anybody else, in my mind.

D: You think that's why so many of them went?

A: That's why they went to war. It's not because they had nothing better to do. They went because it was a real problem and we had to take care of it.

D: What do you think the future of Aboriginal people, say in Canada and the United States is going to be if you look at our dismal history of colonization? I guess your themes about the Americas, do you think there's going to be a time, maybe its fifty years where everybody in America will celebrate the continent's Indigenous heritage or do you think there's going to be lots of resistance?

A: John Paul Rauls ... I want to call him John Paul, John Ralston Saul, I think, he has written *A Fair Country*, sorta gets it. What Canada can be if it takes in the Indigenous philosophies, Indigenous mind, Indigenous way of thinking about the continent. He sorta gets it. He really has gotten far into it. He's got to develop it a bit more, his philosophy et cetera. We have something to tell the world. When they got here we had worked out our regions. What each region can do, what it can give, how it can sustain the people. We had already worked it out. And of course everything turned, turned really for the worst. But always keep this in mind, only fifty people came to Plymouth Rock. Fifty white people. That was five hundred years ago. Things can change in human history.

D: Only a few French men, a handful of Spaniards and a few Portuguese.

A: Yes.

D: Do you think Canada should model itself more on Mexico where Mexico really is an Indigenous nation. You have your Mestizo or Indian. Do you think that's the way we should be developing, where we aren't an entirely Aboriginal nation but like Saul says, the foyer, like the foundation was Aboriginal. Then French Canada built on that then English Canada then the new Canadians built on that. You think that's the model we should embrace?

A: We haven't built the model yet.

D: But we should.

A: We've got to work on it and it's the philosophers that will have to do that. They helped explain it because we're talking about very deep philosophical subjects. They have to be developed from the ground up. You can't get it. You can't order it. You can't model it. The Mexican's have their own problems.

D: For sure.

A: Huge problems. Americans have huge problems but different problems. Canada wants problems. Guess what, we're going to buy it if it keeps going on like this. We will create problems. Yes, we do need an Indigenous way of thinking.

D: You think as well, every Canadian has to be decolonized a little bit before we accept one another?

A: Well it's not a question of accepting, it's a question of opening the discourse. In order for us to be decolonized, we really have to understand what happened to this country. In order for the discourse to happen, you have to be able to listen to what I have to say. Back to Jaques Maritain. I have to have creative intuition about what it is you have to say.

D: Were there any other things you would like to write about Anne?

A: Right now, no. I'm stepping back a little bit. I have to finish writing that piece on the Second World War from the point of view of prisoner of war. What he had to think about, how he had to survive while he was in a prisoner of war. And that should bring in all the different themes that I have. So it's a tough...because I have to be...I have to be brief. I have to be concise. And I have to be clear with what I have to say. But those are really challenging aspects of what I'm writing about right now.

D: Okay. So is there anything else in store?

A: I think...I think I'm good for a while. That will keep me busy.

D: Is there anything else you would like to add to our discussion?

A: No, I don't think so. I think I have to get onto my brother's thing. Do my brother's interview. He has a very interesting story to tell.

D: I look forward to hearing it, and I thank you very much for sharing. It's always a great pleasure to talk to you. I really find that you have a really keen mind and I learn a lot every time I talk to you, so thank you.

A: Well I appreciate that thought.