

Second interview with Katherena Vermette, Athabasca U's writer-in-residence (questions posed by Evelyne Gagnon and Mark A. McCutcheon)

Katherena Vermette – the Governor General's Award-winning author of River Woman (2018) and The Break (2016), among other works – served as Athabasca University's Writer-in-Residence from November 2018 to October 2019. As her term as AU's resident writer wrapped up, Writer-in-Residence committee members Evelyne Gagnon and Mark A. McCutcheon talked with Katherena about writing – and about the teaching of writing at an open university like AU.

Gagnon: In your recent poetry collection, *River Woman* (2018), you address violence and trauma, historical scars, environmental challenges, but you also express the importance of solidarity, compassion, the strength and resilience of women (and of nature), and the necessity to listen with an open heart to those who have been silenced. How do these values inform your creative process?

Vermette: The strength of those around me, the love I get to be a part of everyday, the amazingness of Indigenous nations to thrive in spite of extraordinary opposition, these things inspire me everyday. They fill me up. It's pretty easy to write about what inspires, what you love. *river woman* in particular is all about love.

Gagnon: In this poetry collection, the speaker welcomes a multiplicity of voices (ancestors, ghosts, loved ones, the many beings of the natural world, etc.). Can you explain how these voices inspired you? How did they become the creative energy of the poems?

Vermette: I can only ever write from my own perspective. We are all of us condemned to only one voice in this life, but there are so many stories to tell. I really get bored of myself and like to think and consider other perspectives. It still of course is just me, but an attempt to honour, I think.

Gagnon: In one of the two poems titled "an other story," you address the need to rewrite history and listen to "those buried voices" (*River Woman*, p. 62). Can you speak a little more about how you approach history (personal and collective history) in your creative work? Furthermore, how do you see the political dimensions of poetry (or of literature)?

Vermette: I've been doing a bit of a deep dive into Métis history, in particular, for the past couple years. I've always been blessed with knowing much of our history, my uncles and father have always taught us to be proud of what came before us, but there were still plenty of holes in that knowledge for me to fill. It's been fascinating. I've been rather obsessive, actually, at sifting through all the colonial bullshit that still dominates it all. I love how history turns and moves depending on who is doing the telling, how you can sift through genuine lies that have been told about us to find the nuggets of truth.

Gagnon: Some of the topics present in *The Break* seems to resurge in your poetry as well. What does poetry allow you to explore that is different from fiction, and vice versa?

Vermette: Poetry has different demands. Poetry needs a beat, a rhythm that might be unique to each poem but often overwhelms the narrative. For good reason, in poetry, the beat and the image are the most important things. I find fiction to be the opposite – poetry is still in there but the story is driver. Poetry though, lets me linger on smaller things, lets me look closer. I can meditate longer on the image, the feeling, the being-ness, rather than needing to move with the story. That’s how I approach it anyway.

McCutcheon: Your novel *The Break* displays, on its title page, something we haven’t yet seen in other published literary books: a trigger warning that advises readers of the tough and traumatic subjects tackled in the novel. Can you talk a bit about how the warning came about? Was it your idea, or the publisher’s? (Or perhaps something related to Greg Younging’s fifteenth principle of Indigenous style, concerning the editing and publishing of Indigenous trauma?)

Vermette: I’m glad you mentioned Greg’s book – I think it’s indispensable to any discussion on Indigenous Lit these days. The Trigger Warning was a last minute addition and something I fought for. Before it was published, I had several readers of the novel, most of them survivors, and one of the questions I asked was their opinion of how to set up the novel, if it needed something of a warning. Most told me they appreciate Trigger Warnings, that these can be comforting or at least, allow them to prepare. That was all the answer I needed. I was met with a bit of resistance, was told “we don’t do that it Can Lit” to which I replied, 1) this isn’t (just) Can Lit, it’s Indigenous Lit, and 2) who the f* cares. To their credit, Anansi was great about it, and honoured my wishes.

McCutcheon: *The Break*’s narrative structure takes shape as a series of accounts by different characters involved in the story. Can you tell us a bit about how you decided on and developed that polyvocal plot structure?

Vermette: I love polyvocal novels and always knew I wanted *The Break* to be like that. I didn’t anticipate quite so many characters but that was mostly ’cause I didn’t know what I was doing. I had never written a novel before, and it was such heavy material. I ended up circling all the hard stuff for a long time, and whenever I got to a tough part I wanted to avoid, I would just make up a new character and start the process all over again. It was a lot! and I wouldn’t recommend it as a way to write a book – it was incredibly messy for a long time. But really, the method did become the meaning. It became about how everyone is affected, how these things don’t happen in vacuums, whole families, communities, are traumatized. Everyone in their own way.

McCutcheon: What writers or other artists have been particularly influential to or inspiring for you and your writing?

Vermette: I've been reading several of these brave memoirists lately. I am thinking of Theresa Mailhot, Jesse Thistle, Jenny Heijun Willis, Alicia Elliott. I love these books. I always say I hate the word brave, but it's more that I hate that people have to be brave to tell their hard stories. It shouldn't be so hard. We should all be so real all the time. I admire these writers for leading the way.

McCutcheon: A question we've asked of other AU writers in residence: AU students comprise a distinctive, "mature student" body: many of our students juggle families and full-time work and careers with their studies. But our students are also distinguished by their ambition and drive to achieve, academically, intellectually, and creatively. What might be one piece of advice you'd share with the AU student who's a parent, who works full-time, and who aspires to produce and publish literary work?

Vermette: I can relate to this so much. I was a single parent /full time distance student / full time worker / sideline writer for years. I got really, really good at switching gears, making the most of my time, living without sleep or much of a social life. For me, it was about prioritizing, knowing what was most important (to me) and working my arse off for those goals. Making the time I needed to get writing done. Writers always complain we have no time for writing, and we're right, we have no time. Even as a full time writer, I am still busy doing the business of writing and not the actual writing – planning trips, teaching, answering interview questions ☺ take up so much space. You don't get time, you have to make time. I made my life so that I had time to write. For me, for years, that was weekend mornings, lunch breaks, scribbling in journals on buses, whatever I got. That, and visualizing, day dreaming about what I wanted my life to look like. I dreamed of being a writer. I dreamed of being able to spend my days in writing, of making a life for writing. And, it took a very long time but I did get there. It can happen. If it can happen to me, it can happen for anyone.

McCutcheon: A related question: Because of AU's "mature and multitasking" student body, students are always interested in work process, in how to get things done, how to keep up with studies. What does your work day look like?

Vermette: Nowadays, I get to work at home and make books. Most days, the good days, my first focus is getting everyone out of the house so I can spread out and hopefully make something worth reading. Being self employed like that does mean a lot of other stuff too though, as I said. I often visit classes, teach classes, travel to events, and spend way too much time trying to get all the accounting and business stuff in order. But a good day for me is quiet and efficient, sat on my comfy chair by the window with my dogs at my feet. They are the best workmates and wait ever so patiently to go to the dog park at the end of the day. That's the best part of the day, especially if I have been in one of my heavy novels or poetry all day, I end the day by going to the dog park. They get to be happy, and I get to trudge along and get my mind back to where it needs to be.

McCutcheon: What have you read recently that you'd recommend to anyone?

Vermette: *The Northwest is Our Mother* by Jean Teillet. I am telling everyone about this! It is an overview of Métis history, written by Indigenous Rights lawyer Teillet. It's essential. And not hyperbole to say I think I have been waiting for this book my whole life!