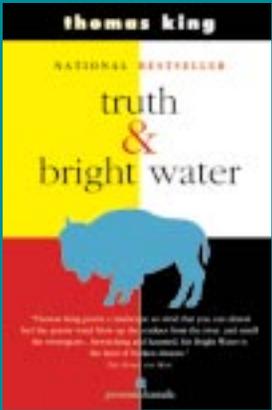
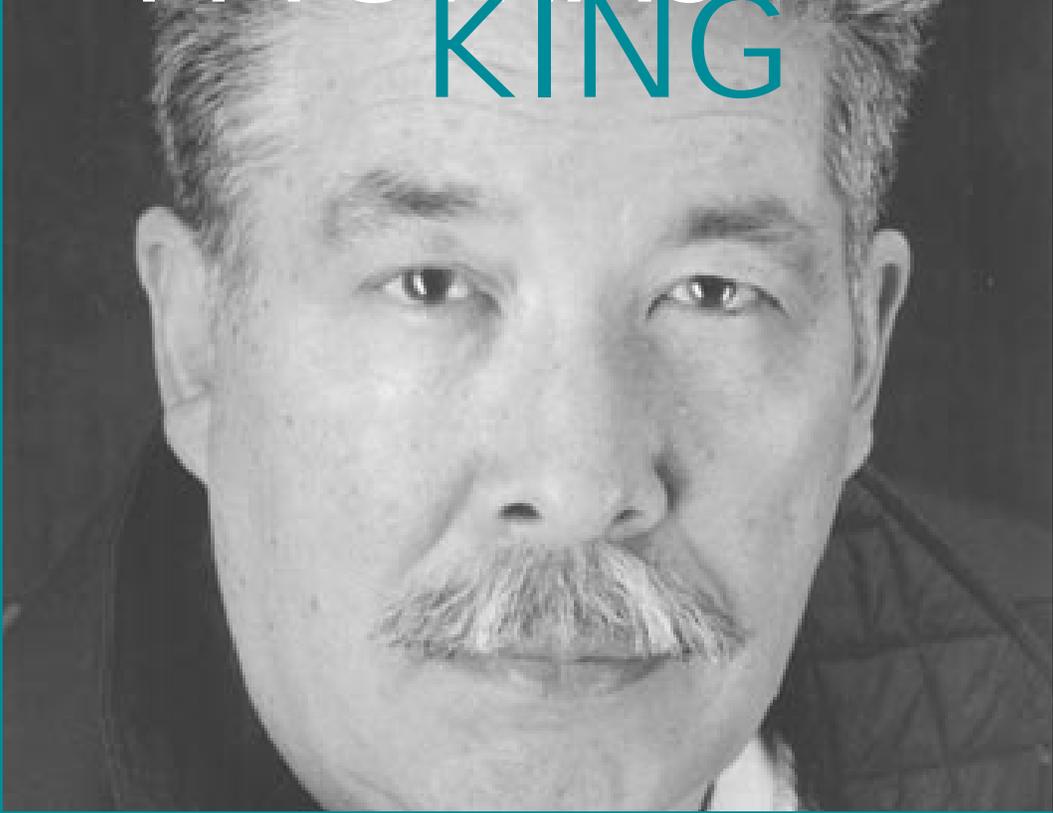


Truth and Bright Water

THOMAS
KING



© Copyright 2001 by HarperCollinsPublishersLtd

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without prior written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

For information address HarperCollinsPublishersLtd,
Suite 2900, Hazelton Lanes, 55 Avenue Road, Toronto,
ON, Canada, M5R 3L2.

This author guide has been written by Samarra Hyde.

Excerpts taken from the *University of Minnesota Alumni Association Magazine* 1993, and *Quill & Quire*,
September 1993.

CONTENTS

Bibliography

About the Author

An Interview with Thomas King

Thomas King on *Green Grass, Running Water*

Truth & Bright Water

Questions for Discussion

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Green Grass, Running Water

0-00-648513-8; \$18.95 tpb, September 1999
Harper *Perennial* paperback edition

One Good Story, That One

0-00-648525-1; \$16.95 tpb, December 1999
Harper *Perennial* paperback edition

Truth & Bright Water

0-00-648196-5; \$19.95 tpb, September 2000
Harper *Perennial* paperback edition

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

His stories “ambush the reader... They get the knife in not by whacking you over the head with their own moral righteousness, but by being funny.”

—Margaret Atwood

Of Cherokee and Greek descent, Thomas King has become one of Canada's most beloved and critically acclaimed writers. He is an award-winning novelist, short story writer, scriptwriter, and photographer.

After studying at Chico State in California, Thomas King worked as a photojournalist in Australia and New Zealand. King began writing while working overseas. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly* he recounted his first novel attempts as “penny-dreadful things about American astronauts hidden away on college campuses pursued by Russian agents—real pukey stuff,” while his first short stories “were blithering messes, romantic slop.”

Having received a doctorate in literature from the University of Utah, he taught English literature and American Indian literature at the University of Lethbridge for ten years. He was also the chair of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota.

In 1980, after accepting a teaching position at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Thomas King began writing again.

“There isn't much to do in Lethbridge. It's a small town, and I was divorced and up there alone with my first son, and I started writing again.” King took his writing more seriously when he met Helen Hoy. “I had nothing else to impress her with, so I thought maybe I could impress her with my writing.” It worked. Thomas King and Helen Hoy have been together ever since.

In 1989, Thomas King received a one-month writer's residency at the Ucross Foundation in Wyoming. During that month he both completed his first novel, *Medicine River*, and wrote a 300-page draft of *Green Grass, Running Water*.

Medicine River was published to critical acclaim. *The New York Times* described it as “precise, elegant...a most satisfying novel.” It won the Alberta Writers Guild Best First Novel award in 1990, the PEN/Josephine Miles Award and was shortlisted for the 1991 Commonwealth Writers Prize. *Medicine River* was made into a CBC television movie starring Graham Greene and it was also made into a three-part radio play which aired on CBC Stereo in January 1993. *Green Grass, Running Water*, his second novel, was short-listed for the Governor General's Award in 1993 and won the Canadian Authors Award for Fiction. A national bestseller, it was also named to *Quill & Quire's* Best Canadian Fiction of the Century list. In 1993, *Publishers Weekly* described Thomas King as “one of the first rank of contemporary Native American Writers—a gifted storyteller of universal relevance.” During 1993 and 1994 he worked as a story editor for a CBC TV dramatic series called “The Four Directions” that was made by and about Native people.

King has also written two acclaimed children's books—*A Coyote Columbus Story*, which was nominated for a Governor General's Award in 1992, and *Coyote Sings to the Moon*. In 1990, King edited an anthology of short stories by Canadian Native writers in *All My Relations*. The highly praised short story collection *One Good Story, That One* was published in 1993 and became a Canadian bestseller. *Truth & Bright Water* was published by Harper *Flamingo* Canada in the fall of 1999.

Thomas King is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Guelph. He is currently working on a photography exhibition, a radio comedy show, “The Dead Dog

Café Comedy Hour,” which airs on CBC Radio, and a screenplay of *Green Grass, Running Water*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS KING

Q. Was becoming a writer a conscious decision, or did it just happen?

A. *I always wrote or told stories in one way or another. Even lies. Lies are forms of stories—good liars are reasonably good storytellers. I also wrote poetry. But since I was a guy, I had to hide it. What would my he-man friends think of me writing poetry? I was also a voracious reader. I spent a lot of time at the library. I was a journalist for a while. All of these things played into it. But it was like plucking at the strings of a guitar. I just played here and there—until 1980 when I started writing seriously. There was nothing organized about it, I was just thinking—how can I make a living?*

Q. Are there any writers who inspired your work?

A. *I can't say that any writers inspired me. As a kid I read dog and horse books and the entire Oz series by Frank L. Baum. I would go down to the library in the summer, especially on hot days. The basement of the library was cool and I would just work my way along the shelves. I'd choose the "f" section and choose a book. You could tell where I was [in the alphabet] by where I was seated. There were reading programs at the library and you could earn stars. I was one of the top kids in reading.*

*When I was older, there were writers who came along and demonstrated that literature is available by other peoples. Although there was damn little, they didn't teach literature by other peoples at school. I was living in California when N. Scott Momaday won the Pulitzer Prize for *House Made of Dawn*. I enjoyed his book and was encouraged by his success.*

But there wasn't one writer or book that inspired me; it's not that cut and dried. It's rockier and more disjointed than that.

Q. After studying at Chico State in California, you worked in Australia and New Zealand as a photojournalist. What

was that like? And was there any particular reason why you went to the South Pacific?

A. *I was bored. I didn't have a career going at the time, it was 1964 to 1967. I had some university credits and had gotten mediocre results. I had worked odd jobs in San Francisco and at Lake Tahoe, which is a gambling community. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I felt adventurous and so I got on a steamer and went to New Zealand. From there I went to Australia.*

I went for no better reason than that it was there. I didn't have a family; I wasn't responsible for taking care of anyone except myself. Which at the time I could barely do. Travelling was a way to lose myself.

Q. Your work draws upon a wealth of traditions—Native, Christian, literary, pop culture. Can you speak a bit about the traditions that you were raised in?

A. *I was raised in all of those traditions. No one tradition was dominant. My mom was Greek-Orthodox and she was part of a community who were Orthodox, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Catholic. I went to Greek-Orthodox services, I went to Methodist Sunday school, and I spent two years at a Catholic boarding school. It was kind of schizophrenic.*

What it taught me is that there is a certain meanness and arrogance in religion and in society in general that prevails. The questions that we ask are not the kind of questions that we should ask. We ask how will this profit me? How will this increase my prestige? Will this give me more power?

Religion is this way because it is run by humans, created by humans, and inhabited by humans. In my early training, what I saw were the underbellies, but I tend to look for those imperfections. I am not a person who is full of faith.

Q. Your stories are a hybrid of styles and traditions. You weave in pop culture, aspects of Native and Judeo-Christian traditions and imaginary or fantastic landscapes. How did writing in this manner come about? Was it a conscious decision, or do your stories unfold this way?

A. *Satire has always been a tool that comes from distrust. I am happier and stronger as a writer when I'm pointing out imper-*

fections. I wouldn't write a piece that is laudatory. Calling attention to those things that are problematic, that mark us as human, is what I do.

Q. You weave together humour with issues such as the plight of contemporary Natives. How would you describe the role of satire in your work?

A. Satire is sharp. It is supposed to hurt, it is never supposed to make you feel comfortable. I hope that when readers laugh, deep in their hearts they are uncomfortable, uneasy, and looking over their shoulder, watching. That if they read something that they too have done, they feel like someone watched them do it. Maybe me.

There is a lot of writing that is complacent and soothing and there are a lot of good writers out there—but that's not of much interest to me.

Q. How did the CBC show “Dead Dog Café” come about? Did the CBC approach you or did you send in a proposal?

A. I have no idea. I can't remember how it started. There are probably four or five versions of the story floating around out there. A producer that I've done some other work with called me and asked me about doing it. But why I came up with what I did is lost in the mists of time. Sometimes I have to look at old scripts to remember what I've written and to make sure future episodes make sense.

Q. A movie was made of *Medicine River* and I read that you are working on the script for *Green Grass, Running Water*. Is it difficult to translate your work from literature into film?

A. No. It's easier than writing a novel. Film is always easier. It is much shorter, the plot is simpler and you can't spend as much time with the structure. It's not as complex as a novel. Even a good film is not as complex as a good novel. A lot of writers can't do it or don't want to do it. But I don't find it as difficult as other writing. It takes me five years to write a novel. I can write two film scripts in a year. That's ten scripts for every one novel.

Q. You have also been teaching at universities for about thirty years. When did you decide to teach? How does it influence your writing?

A. Being around other academics and a body of information provides some of my material. But teaching doesn't improve or hurt my writing. If I wasn't teaching, I'd miss the incisive kinds of discussions about various things and the bizarre things that happen at universities. It's a lot of fun. But I think of writing and teaching as two different activities.

Q. Reserve life plays a role in your novels, yet you weren't raised on a reserve. You taught at the University of Lethbridge near the Blood Reserve. Is that where you draw your understanding of reserve life?

A. I have worked on reserves all over the place. I worked with Natives in northern California and at the University of Utah, although Lethbridge was the primary place of inspiration. I have met a fair number of people on reserves and in and around reserves, kind of on the edges of those places. It's true, though, that I wasn't raised on a reserve.

Q. Even when you're drawing the past into your stories, they are still set in contemporary North America—is there any particular reason for that?

A. I hate historical novels. History is a dead issue. One version of it is told and is taught and that's the version that everybody knows and the version that everybody is expecting. But it's only one of the stories told of an event. And I hate doing research for novels. I like contemporary stuff and that's what I write.

Q. In a 1993 interview about *Green Grass, Running Water*, you mentioned that you felt free to ask questions such as, “Who is an Indian? How do we get this idea of Indians?” Are you still exploring these questions?

A. These are questions that still need exploring. Treaty rights in Canada, Native tax status and who decides how Native communities are organized and run—these are still live questions. I engage them in my novels because it is an ongoing debate. It's a dangerous debate. People out there might not like it. But I try to present sticky issues from all sides.

These questions still plague us. They are important issues. The Canadian government has no interest in Native rights. It doesn't matter who is in power. There is a lethargy. No—that's too kind a word—there is a turning of the political back to Native people. It will be interesting to see what Mathew Coon Come, Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, does. He is more of a firebrand than other Grand Chiefs have been. It will be interesting to see if he has more success with the lump of dough called Ottawa. Ottawa can turn a blind eye to almost anything.

I engage in these kinds of debates, like a nasty little black fly buzzing around. In person I am sweet and shy, but if you put a computer in front of me, I become a bit of a radical.

Q. Your characters often speak along separate tangents. They end up talking around subjects instead of talking to one another—what is the intended impact of this kind of dialogue?

A. *It's the way people talk to each other. Take a political forum. When a politician is asked a question, they answer with something else:*

"Mr. Day, do you think your stand on homosexuality is going to affect your chances of being elected?"

"When I'm elected... blah blah blah."

People don't answer questions. Much of what I hear is people speaking off on different tangents. Literary conversations like "How are you?" "I am fine" are boring.

Q. What are you currently working on?

A. *A film script for Green Grass, Running Water and a detective novel with a Native detective. This new novel moves away from literary novels. It's a bit of grease, something to stuff in your overnight bag on the way to the cottage in the summertime. It will be straight genre fiction.*

TRUTH & BRIGHT WATER



Truth & Bright Water is a coming of age story set on the border between Montana and Alberta. Truth is a railroad town on the American side, and Bright Water is a Canadian reserve on the opposite shore. The murky, garbage-bloated Shield River runs between them. The banks are almost joined by a half-constructed, weather-beaten rotting bridge, and so, to cross the river, the residents are forced to drive forty minutes to a town where there is a bridge or take the “toilet,” which is a large bucket that channels the river on pulleys.

Tecumseh and his cousin Lum are down by the shores of the Shield River, shooting at the bridge and practising for the upcoming Indian Days tribal festival, when they see a woman dump a suitcase from a cliff above the river. Moments later she too disappears over the edge. When the boys go to investigate, all they find is a small skull with a red ribbon looped between the eyes. The unravelling of this mystery and the revelation of other family and community secrets run throughout *Truth & Bright Water*.

Tecumseh narrates the lives of the characters in *Truth & Bright Water*. There is the humourous trickster and wise visionary Monroe Swimmer, who returns to Truth as a “big-time Indian artist” and paints the side of the old church that he’s living in into the landscape of the prairies. Lum still carries bruises from his father’s beatings and spends his time with Tecumseh training on the prairies for the upcoming big foot race in the Indian Days tribal festival. There is Aunt Cassie, who returns to Truth from her travels abroad with her own bag of secrets. And Tecumseh’s separated parents oscillate between reuniting and moving further apart.

As the tourists arrive for the Indian Days tribal festival, the mysteries and tensions of the summer collide in love, betrayal, and reconciliation. Tecumseh takes us into the heart of

Truth & Bright Water as he asks unanswerable questions and naively sketches the lives of the characters of both Truth and Bright Water during one long, hot summer.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1) Monroe Swimmer tells Tecumseh that in the olden days it was easier to be a hero, “all you had to do was slay a dragon” and that the only monsters left in the world are human beings. Is Monroe Swimmer a hero of sorts? Do we still have heroes in our culture?
- 2) The Indian Days tribal festival is a tacky Indian heritage event designed to attract free-spending tourists. In one of the events, the Buffalo Run, the tourists don beaded buckskins and shoot paint pellets at buffalo as they chase them on their motorbikes. What does this satiric modern imitation of being an Indian say about how Indian culture is viewed?
- 3) The characters often duck probing and painful questions by speaking along separate trains of thought, like this conversation between Tecumseh and his mother:
*Lum and me found a skull up on the Horns.
I hope you left it there, she says.
Lum says it’s human.
I hope you didn’t let Soldier (Tecumseh’s dog) chew on it.
We saw a woman too, I say.
Guess what she did.
I hope you weren’t spying.
She jumped off the Horns into the river.*
Does the characters’ manner of speaking affect your understanding of them?
- 4) The local paper is called the *Truth Free Press*. What does this title imply about the relationship between truth and the official channels of relaying information?
- 5) Lucy Rabbit thinks that you can learn a lot about Natives and life in general by looking at the lives of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley. Back in their day, all the women wanted to be like Marilyn and all the men wanted to be like Elvis. Lucy Rabbit thinks that

Marilyn's life was like that of a Native: she was ashamed of her identity and "she died young, of drugs." But now that times have changed, everybody wants to be an Indian. What does Lucy Rabbit's story suggest about the relationship between our sense of self and how our culture is portrayed?