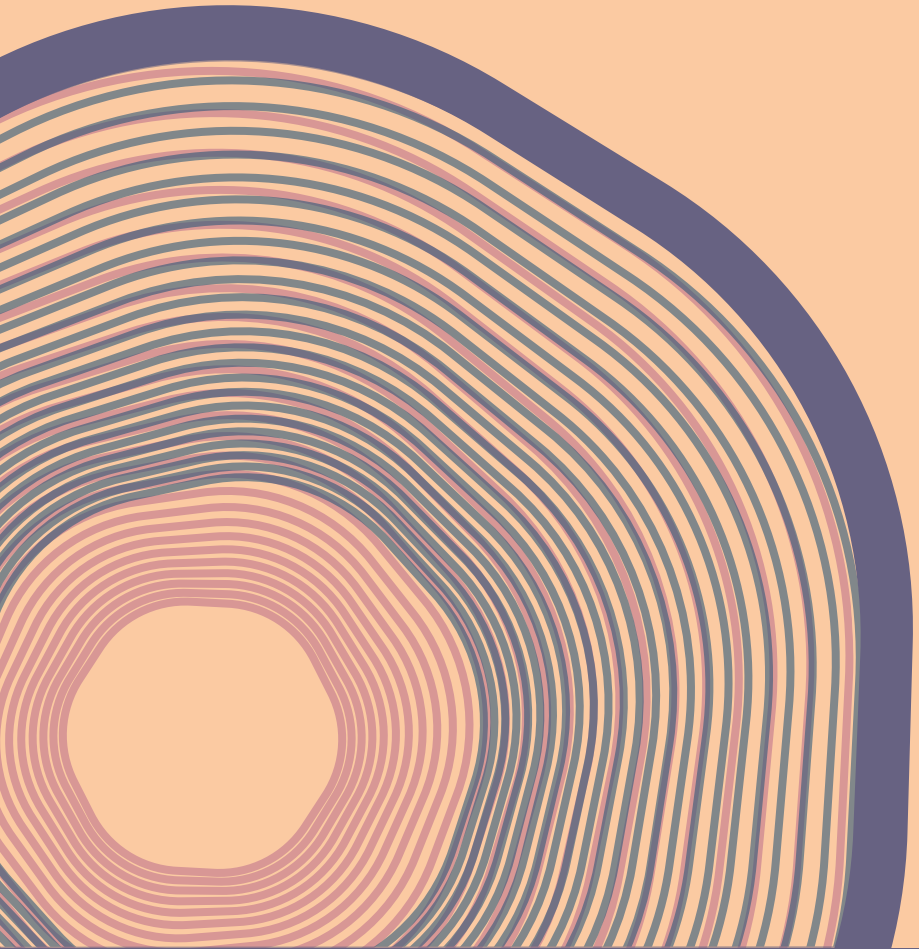
Craft Chaps

The Structure of Love: Anatomy of a Novel

By Susan Power



THE STRUCTURE OF LOVE: ANATOMY OF A NOVEL

SUSAN POWER

GENESIS

I'm nine years old in 1970, a Catholic school student wearing a plaid gray skirt and red sweater. Correction: I'm nine years old, a Yanktonai Dakota girl, wearing stories you can't yet see or hear. I carry their weight on my skin, in my heart, pressed against my lungs.

Unlike my fierce mother, I am a pacifist, wary of violence. Blank pieces of paper are my battleground. Our 4th grade teacher has assigned a history paper. We're to write about the "Battle of the Little Bighorn," where my people defeated General Custer and his 7th Cavalry in 1876. I write a paper using history books from my mother's extensive library, influenced by testimony she heard as a child from elderly warriors who survived the battle. I'm proud of my paper, each word spelled correctly, handwriting neat as the nun's who taught me cursive.

It is magic to me how I can transfer stories from my heart, to my pen, to the lined notebook paper, how I can send them into a world that might not be ready for them. I argue in my pages that Custer was a reckless egomaniac, searching for gold and glory, and I back up my conclusions with evidence cited from history texts. My teacher hands back my paper, strangely empty of comments, though she *has* marked a big, red A on the last page.

She calls on us to read our papers aloud, whether they're skillful or messy, each of the twenty-five students in her class. Except for me. I raise my hand, over and over, even though I'm shy. I'm the only Native student in this school. I'm the only person telling this particular story, so different from my classmates' versions which follow the accustomed line. A few of my friends even point at me, to get the teacher's attention, but I am her blind spot. It's as if I don't exist. When class is dismissed I carry my paper home with disappointment, despite the good grade. Realizing that my stories are not allowed in some places, even when they are true.

VISION

The idea for a new novel came to me in early May of 2003 as I was brushing my teeth. I looked into the mirror and rather than seeing my face I was shown a vision of Cochran Park, a small wedge of grass and trees located less than a mile from where I stood. I blinked the vision away and finished my morning ablutions. But couldn't shake an inner film that was playing out in my mind, so I surrendered to it, dropping into a chair to take note of everything my imagination brought forward. I was in a bit of a rush since I needed to

teach my final class of the semester, a course in Native American Literature at the University of Minnesota.

My notes reveal the following information: I see a woman sitting on a bench in Cochran Park, laptop computer perched on her knees. She's focused on a document she's typing, oblivious to the sights and sounds of the little park. Something about what she's typing embarrasses her. She's in her fifties, though very well-maintained, probably wealthy, and appears to be a white woman. No, she's part Mohawk. A gust of wind scatters leaves and catches her attention. She looks up. I look up with her. We stare at a dark fleck high above the clouds, like a blot of ink staining the sky. The mark is moving toward us, getting larger, until I recognize it's the figure of a young woman. She looks indigenous, with gold-brown skin and black eyes, dressed in a linen shift and sandals. A silver scar slashes through one eyebrow. I write down: *Our Lady of Guadalupe, the Virgin Mary,* though this young woman looks familiar to me, like another cousin. Her descent is so smooth she could be riding an escalator. She lands gently on the ground and approaches the woman on the bench. She removes a belt wrapped around her waist and holds it out to the stunned woman. It's a wampum belt, depicting either an important moment in history or a contract of some kind. The woman with the computer is pretending that nothing has happened, she looks through the sky woman as if she isn't there. The vision ends and I leave to teach my class.

Later I pore over my notes and shake my head at the bizarre scenario that came to me in a jumble of pieces, like a puzzle I'm meant to solve. I'm as surprised by this unexpected offering as the lady in the park must have felt to see a woman glide to earth from the sky. But unlike the typing woman who refused to acknowledge the gift being proffered, I accept the mystery as a worthy challenge, perhaps even a sacred one. I proceed to jot down questions: What is a Mohawk doing in Minnesota? I think she lives in one of the mansions surrounding Cochran Park. What brought her here? How did she acquire her wealth? What is she typing so obsessively on her computer? Why does she act like nothing is happening? Does the sky woman frighten her? Why is the Virgin Mary holding out a wampum belt to a rich lady in a Saint Paul park? Oh, she's here to help this woman connect with her Kanien'kehá: ka (Mohawk) roots. Wait a minute, why can't ancestors do this? How does the Virgin Mary know anything about what it is to be Kanien'kehá: ka? Don't tell me this is another white savior story?

To be honest, the strange scenario delights me because it is so improbable and irreverent. After all, I was the little girl who finally left Catholicism at the age of ten, dropping out of Catholic School halfway through my 5th grade

year. I figure I'll leap headfirst into this story, summon the nerve to follow it wherever it takes me. Hasn't it been given to me–an unsolicited submission? I don't want to be an ingrate. What gives me the courage to discover answers to the questions I listed and craft them into a piece of literary fiction, is the idea that this project is nothing more than a short story. A strange little manuscript I'll be lucky to place in a literary journal few will ever read. It's easy to give myself permission to offend under these circumstances. Mind you, I'm not nervous about offending religious followers, rather Native people like me, tired of narratives featuring non-Natives swooping in to play hero as if we aren't capable of saving ourselves.

However, once I'm months into my work on the piece, I realize what I thought was an odd little story is actually the full-blown commitment of a novel I'll eventually title, *Sacred Wilderness*. By this time I'm invested in the project. There is no going back.

DISCOVERY

After years of practice, I've learned that when searching for answers to questions of plot and character in fiction, one of the best strategies is to head outside for a long walk, and if that's not possible, try to find a place outdoors where I can install myself for a time. I'm not sure if it's the exercise that stimulates my imagination, or the inspiration of open sky as a reminder of infinite possibility.

The sky dominates here in Minnesota, even in the Cities. Beneath this sky there is nothing separating me from the wisdom of those who have come before me, and all the stories sky has witnessed. Voices, memories, joys, sorrows, love, betrayal, swirl around me on these walks. I see the switch of an albino squirrel's white tail, the red crest of a woodpecker, the loopy grin of a passing dog. Trees gossip with one another in raspy whispers and music blasts from passing cars. Moment by moment my own story merges with this astonishment of life, and in opening to the abundant sky and surrounding community I find answers to questions, hear fragments of dialogue, receive further clues and hints about what new trails to follow. I'm a detective on the hunt for the truth of my fiction; the *real* story.

Early on in writing *Sacred Wilderness*, an Ojibwe character shows up in my imagination, an elder named Gladys. She's suddenly there one day, walking with me it seems, friendly and encouraging, eager to tell me everything she knows. She's so talkative I make a dash for my local bank so I can write down what Gladys is telling me, using large deposit envelopes as writing paper. She's

suffered many tragedies but is one of those indomitable people, someone who never fails to face the sun upon waking, rather than morning shadows. I admire her and realize I have a great deal to learn from her. I want her to be Dakota, a member of my own tribal nation, but she shakes her head at this suggestion, hands firmly on hips. She is Ojibwe, and I just have to deal with it!

Gladys is such a force, I grant her a chapter where she tells the story of her life in her own voice. She isn't one to keep secrets from me; she seems to trust me from the very beginning. She reminds me of an elder I met in Sitka several years ago, who invited me over for tea. We sat together in plush recliners, facing the stunning view of Crescent Harbor on a rare day of bright sunshine in rainforest territory. She mentioned a book she'd published on language theory, but didn't go into details though the subject sounded intriguing. When I let her know I wanted to hear as much of the story as she cared to tell, that I wasn't in any rush, she wriggled in the chair with great excitement to settle herself more comfortably. She was overjoyed to have an attentive audience. This is the gift I offer my Ojibwe character, Gladys: full and loving attention.

She tells me:

I have lived my life with open hands. When you live like that you will lose things, people and money and pretty objects, which you would probably lose anyway, according to the Creator's plan. But when they're open like that, new things come and fill them up, too. The world sees your need and so the next thing comes, and then the next. When I was little my Grandpa noticed this quality in me and he said, "Noozis, look at how fearless you are, even though you can't make a fist. That is good. That is good." (Power 94.)

I find this a helpful introduction to Gladys, but can't seem to move the chapter forward from these lines. I write and cross out, write and cross out. Nothing I produce sounds authentic. After hours of frustration it suddenly occurs to me that Gladys might have shared her conclusion first. She isn't required to follow any rules to make my job simpler. I talk to her then, maybe in my head, maybe aloud: "This was your way of letting me know who you are at your core? Okay. Thank you. Where would you like to *begin* your story?"

And as if she's been patiently waiting for me to finally ask the right question, she answers without hesitation:

I was born in Minigizis, when the blueberries are ripe, the month you know as July. It was 1935, the big Depression when everybody was scared and hungry. My grandfather said I came along to cheer people up, put the smile back on their faces. I got my name because of the way I came into the world. I was early you know, I took my mother by surprise. She was all alone in our shack doing quillwork when her water broke. And then, so soon after that, I came tumbling

out. She said it felt like I did all the work, swam and pushed and tore away from her because I was ready to get started. I didn't cry. I sighed with satisfaction the way Creator must have when He set this world in motion. I approved of my birth and was pleased. So they called me Ogimangeezhigikwe–Chief Woman of the Sky–because I was bossy from the first minute. (Power 84.)

Long ago I learned that my best writing features characters who seem to exist outside my plots and designs, who won't conform to the roles I've dreamed up for them. They love someone other than the person I'd intended, they are more or less political than I'd hoped, they will or won't give birth to a child I want them to have, they give up their secrets at once, or hide them from me for years, until I've passed some hidden test. I can write them however I like, of course, move their arms and legs, put my own words into their mouths and leave them there. I can assume the role of puppet-master and bid them dance to my music, but when I read back these over-controlled narratives I'm embarrassed by the result. There is no truth in these drafts. They show evidence of ego, thinking that as the writer I am god of my work, god of my creativity. They show evidence of impatience, when I'm unwilling to put in hours of research and musing, hours of producing experimental drafts that might not work out. But when I accept that my fictional characters are beings sparked to life in ways I don't understand, in ways I must honor, I'm always rewarded for this choice. My characters not only tell stories I know are true on the deepest level, they breathe more life into me, as if we are co-creators in this mysterious process.

I've acquired a certain flexibility when it comes to working with fictional characters. Some of them speak best with a pen in my hand, some of them need the quickness of typing. And one of them doesn't want me to use my hands at all in the transmission of her message. The sky woman I watched descend from blue heavens above the city of Saint Paul, the one I realize is the Virgin Mary though in my novel she uses her real name, Maryam, shows up some nights when I'm about to fall asleep. I don't mean I actually see her when I turn off the light, rather her voice is there in my head, dictating thoughts and memories as if I'm her secretary. When I turn on the light and grab a small notebook, her voice leaves abruptly. I fall asleep feeling dissatisfied, unable to recreate in my mind what she was saying. As an experiment I place a small tape recorder on my bedside table. The next time Maryam's voice appears as I'm in that open vulnerable state between sleep and consciousness, I click on the tape recorder and speak the words running through my brain. I click off the machine when she's finished, and allow myself to slide into the world of

dreams. In the morning when I type up the sentences I spoke into the recorder I'm amazed by Maryam's prose; it's smoother than my usual first drafts, I don't change a single word. Over several nights she tells me her story through short vignettes in no discernible order. It's as if she says whatever's on her mind, then leaves it to me to organize her random thoughts, which I do, collecting them all in a chapter titled, "The Gospel of Maryam":

Some say I was conceived and born without sin, a stainless vessel made perfect by God. And yet I remember hiding from my mother when I was little, peeking from my sanctuary as she called and searched: "Maryam, where are you?" Her voice eventually threaded with fear and worry. I returned to her before her tears fell because I didn't want to cause her pain, merely exult in this show of love, to see how she missed me. And I remember the small cruelties of childhood, envy, impatience, selfishness, rebellion. Were these not sins?

I tell those scholars who would make my soul unblemished that they underestimate me and God's love for me. How easy it would have been if I were perfect, a saint from the first seed. I would never struggle, never doubt, never test my powerful faith. How unworthy a vessel is she who never suffers, never does battle with the weak snake of fear that coils in the gut. I believe God chose me for sacred duties because He trusted I would overcome my human frailties. I would never stop fighting the lower demon self that rides us all, twins us like a shadow.

God triumphs when we accept hard work and apply ourselves to the yoke. When we toil out of love and pinch our lazy hatreds to a speck–a bitter crystal. To become a pure vessel is salty work, why else is that substance found in our blood and tears and sweat? We are not given sweetness from the start, but work it in, bit by bit, until we brim with honey and love becomes our skin... (Power 228.)

Eventually I'll learn how Maryam became friends with an ancestor of the woman she appears to in Cochran Park. How in 1626 Maryam is called to visit a Kanien'kehá: ka woman grieving in the woods, and over a period of five days the two become sisters. And while I know I'm the writer of these sessions, I can't help but feel I've been allowed to eavesdrop on sacred conversations between women I consider to be Clan Mothers.

JUDGMENT

I've been known to judge my fictional characters on first acquaintance. Humans are apparently hardwired to make snap judgments; on the basest level we instantly decide: friend or foe? So why should our imagined beings escape this prejudiced suspicion? Back in 1991 I attended a talk given by author, Allan

Gurganus, and remember how he challenged us to abandon this practice, to beware judging our characters. He said we should love all of them, even the "bad ones," allowing them to live on the page just as they are, without broadcasting an opinion one way or the other. He didn't tell us this explicitly, but what he was really suggesting is that we apply some unconditional love to the beings who populate our pages. I was inspired by Gurganus's presentation, determined to follow his advice, and still I often judge. I can't seem to help myself.

The first *Sacred Wilderness* character I judge is the woman who initially appeared in my vision, the woman typing furiously on a laptop computer, desperately ignoring the arrival of the woman from the sky. Her name is Candace, and I learn that she grew up in New Jersey, meeting her future husband when she was in college and he was in law school. Her wealth comes from her husband, a successful corporate attorney. Candace knows she's part Kanien'kehá: ka, but she has no idea what that means. Somewhere in the family chain her heritage was lost or abandoned. She's sweet but immature, an extraordinarily clueless woman whose life revolves around home décor, workouts, and her appointments at the Juut Salon Spa that make her look ten years younger than her actual age. Yet some part of her is longing for connection, for meaning, for *more*. She reaches out to Native organizations in the Twin Cities, in search of a live-in Native housekeeper. Utterly oblivious to how problematic this arrangement is, striking many as ignorant, even racist. But Gladys feels called to this position, despite a relative's outrage at the idea, and she and her cat move into Candace's carriage house. On her second day in the Summit Hill mansion Gladys is shown the "Indian Art Room" where Candace proudly collects and displays the work of her favorite Native artists. Gladys is bemused by this strange segregation–as if Candace has collected pieces of her lost heritage and locked them all up in a room that is seldom visited. But she tactfully keeps her thoughts to herself.

I'm right there with Gladys, shaking my head at this pitiful woman who doesn't know how to behave. Though where Gladys is patient, I am annoyed, wanting to punt kick Candace from the novel and find someone else to rescue. I even try a few times to replace her, acting as if I'm a studio chief storming a film set, demanding the leading lady be fired. In the end it can't be done, not the way I work. Candace was there from the start, the first figure to appear in my vision. She's my problem, my responsibility. I have to figure this out. It takes me a while, but I do. Years into work on the novel, when I'm weeks from completing it, Candace shares a memory from her childhood that explains everything to me, and breaks my heart:

The red swirled before Candace's eyes and she covered them, but couldn't

banish that final image, when she'd awakened in the night, frightened, and gone to the bathroom in the upstairs hall, the only one on that floor, for a drink of water. Finding her lovely, mysterious mother neck deep in cold water that looked to the seven-year-old like Kool-Aid–red as it was, sticky. She'd touched her mother, shaken her, and some of the red water had lapped over the rim of the tub and fallen on Candace's bare toes. She tried to pull her mother by the arm, and that's when she saw the slices, her mother had extra mouths where she shouldn't. Candace screamed and screamed, and then her father was there, howling beside her. (Power 216.)

No wonder she is immature and emotionally shut down. I have compassion for her at long last, nearly apologize to her as if she's a friend who warrants the effort of amends. Those who require help aren't always convenient choices, don't always fit the dimensions we'd prefer. And sometimes even privileged beings are lost, needing someone to walk them out of the woods.

Another character in the novel I dislike immensely is the Jesuit missionary, Father Bartholomew, who seeks to convert Kanien'kehá: ka people to Christianity. His story takes place in 1626, and when a Mohawk warrior dispatches him with an axe to the heart after Bartholomew masterminds a terrible betrayal, I describe the scene with satisfaction. He'll get no sympathy from me! Justice has been served.

But Bartholomew is not finished though I've canceled his imaginary life. When I close my eyes and try to sleep that night, his sorrowful face looms in my mind like an anguished ghost. He doesn't speak, seems incapable of any noise. But his eyes are pleading, sad and brown, pitiful as a dog's when he's done a bad thing and fears you will hate him. I turn onto my side and ignore him. I'm tired. He's dead. I tell him to shoo! His eyes seek me out, trembling with tears. I try to fall asleep but the Jesuit will not let me. Fine! I get out of bed and grab my notebook. Settle on the couch with pen in hand. "Speak," I command, and grateful tears flow into his beard. I soften a little. "Go ahead, I'm listening." He shocks me then, and I will never forget that revelation, or is it really a reminder of something I already knew but wanted to forget? That we have complicated hearts, bitter with hatred, clumsy with arrogance, blazing with love. We have stupid hearts that every now and then show genius. The missionary shares a confession he whispers in my head once he is allowed a voice, once I'm willing to listen. He writes it on a piece of parchment in a private clearing in the woods. I write it in a spiral-bound notebook. We write together. Each of us has something to confess:

My Lord, I have loved You all my life, and yet I know You not at all. I split hairs. I split hairs. I look for You and find only the beast. I search for the beast

to root him out and destroy him, and find only You in all Your strange glory. Truly I am in the New World. I cannot break Your trail. This land resists. I have maps, but they will not lie down and conform. Are You here? Or did Your story drown in the crossing? Were You here already, in this Eden before the Fall, disgusted that I bring the stink of an Old World that has spilled the blood of saints?

I am confounded by the man they call Ayowantha. Is he sent me in this wilderness to knock me from the true path of righteousness? Does he wear the horns? Or is he Thy most gracious servant speaking Thy words in another tongue, and I am Pontius Pilate, I am Caiaphas? I am just a man, the dust that rises up into form, the dust that
disseminates. What perfect knowledge can belong to dust to justify his judgment, his condemnation of another?

I am humbled by this journey. It torments. I breathe for You. Yes, I offer my breath. It is all I have. My heart and mind have been pierced by the one I sought to replace, and he has compromised my faith. And he has built it up. I cannot replace him. That is certain.

I was a boy once who climbed the trees. My favorite was a beech that was quite old and as I arranged myself in its branches I considered all it had lived through that I had not. That boy comes back to me here, I know not why. He dangles from my dreams. He laughs when I am quiet. He interrupts me when I seek to pray. God help me. I am no more than that boy.

I think what I have done is blasphemy. May You, the good Lord, have mercy on my soul. (Power 175.)

And because this Jesuit regrets the tragedy he set in motion, bringing about the death of a beloved Kanien'kehá: ka spiritual leader, Ayowantha, I revise his death in my pages, allow him a moment of grace:

When he emerged from the trail into the clearing he saw the reason for the uproar.

Shawiskara had returned, and he stood, surrounded by his people, telling them an urgent tale.

Bartholomew caught his breath when he noted the young man's countenance–how exhausted he was, yet scalded with blistering remorse.

I can help this man, Bartholomew thought. I know what he feels.

A surge of love for this suffering brother, and for all the others gathered there, exploded within the Jesuit's heart. Such love and connection he had never felt before in his life. The ecstasy of epiphany held him and washed through him, wave upon wave–he bobbed in its ocean.

He opened his arms when Shawiskara ran towards him. Yes, he thought. Yes,

come to me, my brother. Separation is useless. Yes.

Joy prevented him from feeling the axe when it tore through his heart. Love spilled everywhere, and continued to fall even after he ceased to live. (Power 176.)

TIME

Each of my novels is differently structured, reflecting the way my conception of time differs from that of mainstream America. I was raised to believe that we embody several timestreams at once in that I'm not a person walking alone through her life, rather a link in a long chain that extends into my past and far into my future. I'm impacted by choices made thousands of years before I was born, and the steps I take in this life will affect those who come after me. Because of this mindset I'm never interested in a contemporary set of characters disconnected from other generations. Their story is set within other stories, and I have to make sense of the swirl through time, have to organize it in a way a reader can follow. One novel makes a circle in time, going back, back, back, until returning to the beginning, another is a braid of three voices, A, B, C, A, B, C, where characters past and present alternate the narration. My present novel-in-progress is structured like a rolling spiral which mirrors the structure of our galaxy. A fitting design given that one of the main characters is a brilliant student of theoretical physics. Discovering the correct sequence of the chapters in my novel, the order in which I tell a story, is of utmost importance and requires experimentation.

Sometimes characters tell their story completely out of sequence when it comes to time chronology. Yet if I examine the order I realize that it's because they reserved the most painful revelation for last. They can't tell their story any other way because they have to sneak up on the truth, give it up only at the end when they're psychologically and emotionally ready. So I grant them a heart chronology.

LOVE

In one sense my novel is just a book. But *Sacred Wilderness* is also a journey that lasted seven years. I'm sure I learned a great deal about writing as I wrestled with its pages, but more than that I grew in my capacity to love.

We are all stronger writers when we learn to

Love our characters

Love our experience

Love our voice

Love our vision

Love our intuition

Love our sense of time

Love our process.

The four Clan Mothers of this story are wiser women than I am. They doled out their memories as I was ready to receive them. I won them over with dedication to the task, with the humility of a person who knows she doesn't know. And in return they shared some of their truth, which is what I'm always searching for in writing fiction.

PRACTICE

There is one writing exercise I often rely upon when I'm stuck in terms of understanding a character who is standoffish and won't readily share their history, their motivations. I interview them. I interviewed Candace's ancestor, Jigonsaseh, and her grandmother, Ruby Two-Axe, who was the broken link of the family chain – the person who walked away from her community, her family, her Kanien'kehá: ka roots. Sometimes I have to do this more than once with a character who is a reluctant witness. I don't always get the full response I'm hoping for in the first round, but still discover something significant, useful.

These interviews help me coax withdrawn characters out of their shells. They may be fictional beings, but in many ways they're just like us–shy or resentful, remorseful about past mistakes, suspicious of our interest in them. Sometimes I can practically hear them asking me, "Why are you so nosy? Get out of my business!" And so I have to wear them down with devoted curiosity.

First I come up with a list of questions, beginning with easy ones and finishing with the ones that are most important. It's best to come up with questions that will require the sharing of a story, for example: Have you ever had a recurring dream? What was it? What is your earliest memory? Do you have a favorite hideaway, somewhere that feels like a sanctuary? Who do you love most in the world? What are you most afraid of? Do you have children? What are their names? Is there anywhere in the world you've wanted to travel? Have you ever seen a ghost? And on and on. I come up with ten to fifteen

questions. Then I freewrite a response, trying not to plan what I'm going to write or type. A former student of mine said she does this using white text color on white background so she can't see what she's typing until she's finished the exercise and changes the text color. You're trying to engage the intuitive, creative part of the brain so it reveals answers that feel organically true.

I treat my fictional characters as if they are alive since they're certainly alive in my imagination. I work hard to gain their trust. In *Sacred Wilderness* the character who took the longest to open up about private matters was Candace's grandmother, Ruby Two-Axe. I think she took her time because I'd judged her from the beginning, believing she abandoned her Native heritage because she was ashamed of her background. This turned out to be wholly untrue, and she no doubt found my assumptions insulting. At long last she was ready to tell her story. She summoned me to her deathbed, just as she summons a young graduate student in the novel. He records her final words and I learn that she walked away from her community after a second major tragedy in her life which left her bitter, half-crazed with grief. But now at the age of 105, spirits are visiting her in the nursing home, speaking to her in Mohawk. Her inner walls collapse and she can be honest with herself, and with me. She can make a good death:

You see, it's forgiveness time, and if I don't forgive myself, all that love and generosity is just wasted. Hearts open and love pours at you, but you gotta let it in. Forgiveness is a door. All these spirits have been picking my locks, trying to get in, trying to reach my angry heart, my lonesome, ridiculous heart. (Power 213.)

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