Life Stories
Individual Lives. Collective Impact.

JOY HARJO INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON TWO

Joy Harjo, Poet Laureate
January 22, 2024
Interviewed by: George Kunhardt
Total Running Time: 27 min and 19 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

JOY HARJO:
We're here for a reason. And in the Muskogee way, it is not because all the resources were given to us by God. It's like we are here as citizens of a larger incredible — of a diverse place of beings and ideas and thoughts and so on. So, storytelling is what we do.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
The Thread
Joy Harjo
Poet Laureate

00:00:45:00

INTERVIEWER:
Can you tell me about how you learned that you became the 23rd U.S. Poet Laureate?

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JOY HARJO:
Yeah, so I was living downtown, we had an apartment given to us by the — I was a Tulsa artist fellow, and, Rob Casper, who was head of the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress....well, I knew Rob. We all did. I remember I had a book, An American Sunrise, coming out. So I got a call from him and he says, you're on speaker phone. He says, "I have the Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden, here, who wants to speak with you." And then she said — asked me if I would do the 23rd U.S. Poet Laureate. It was like lightning. I mean, I didn't...in my thinking mind — I'm very analytical, even as I'm very intuitive — my thinking mind started thinking, "You're so busy. How could you do this right now? You're already too busy." I had just told my agent to please don't book me any more interviews. I don't like doing these — please don't do me any more interviews, you know, and then...and I'm thinking — so that's what went through my mind first. I was like how...but then I knew I had to. Because, you know, I'm very service — or I think we're all in service positions. And I knew it was important. It was important for native people. And I said yes. I mean, I couldn't say no.

00:02:12:00

INTERVIEWER:

I'm going to jump around a little bit. I want to go back to 1975. When you publish your first book, The Last Song. Can you tell me about that experience?

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JOY HARJO:

Yes, I wound up in creative writing classes, which I — it was different for me, but there was something that took hold in that first little book, which is called the Chapbook, which is a book of small book of poems. And I illustrated it, but that was exciting to have something like that. By then I was a creative writing major. That surprised me. But there I was, writing poetry, and I remember we were all thinking about graduation and people were concerned like, why are you taking poetry as a major? You should be taking education. You can write poetry any time. But something in me, something larger than myself or like it was knew that there was something in me that I knew I had to follow it. It's like knowing the truth of something — and you may not — it may be a hard road to follow it. You don't know and it's not usual, but something...that wiser self knows. And if you go against it, you always suffer. I mean, I didn't go into poetry because I didn't want to suffer. I went into poetry because it became using words, which is something I was never that good at in regular life. But using words in what I would call a sacred and powerful manner overtook me. And to use them, even in situations that seemed impossible or dire, became important to me.

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INTERVIEWER:

How did your family settle in Oklahoma? Can you tell me the origin story of coming to Oklahoma back with your great great grandfather?

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JOY HARJO:
Yes, that's one story I know pretty well. There's other family lines that I don't know as well. But from the time I was conscious in this place, you know, I've always been. You know, I was close to my father. A lot of daughters are, you know, that, I was really close to him. And he was so proud of being Muskogee Creek, and that was important to him. And it was also important to me. One of my Muskogee Creek lines was through Menahwee. He fought against Andrew Jackson in the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, along with many others. He lost one of his wives at that battle and children, but he made it to Oklahoma. My aunt, Lois Harjo, tell me a story of how once he got here, they were in the town of Okmulgee, and he saw a white man beating his wife in the middle of the street, and he went and took the whip away from the man and beat him with it. He had to go into hiding because they were looking for him to kill him. And I know where his grave is. When I wrote Poet Warrior, I left out particulars to finding out exactly because I didn't want people over there or desecrating or....but it's in a small family Muskogee family cemetery, not far from Eufaula. And, there he's buried where he's buried, there are seven cedar trees around his grave.

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INTERVIEWER:
Have you visited?

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JOY HARJO:
I visited it. Yeah, I've been over there.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you tell me some of your earliest memories of the Muskogee gatherings and rituals?

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JOY HARJO:
Well, if I think of Muskogee gatherings and rituals, I just think of my dad. You know, my dad, because we weren't really social. I think the social thing came with parties at the house and the bootlegger lived next door. You know, I think Oklahoma was dry because of the evangelicals or the church, the power that the church has over the state and still does — and — although it's not drying anymore. And, so yeah, most of that was just family, you know, most — it was just family.

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INTERVIEWER:
Can you paint a picture of what it would be like to experience joining one of these parties?

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JOY HARJO:

Well, it could be fun. It's like any party. It could be really fun. And then it could get out of hand. You know where people are drinking because of the bootlegger. But having a good time. I remember the twist. Remember that, it was Fats Domino and-and the song Blueberry Hill and all of that. You know, I just I remember those songs. Most of the music we got then was radio. Was from the radio or LPs were 33, 33 and seven, a few 78s. I'm not — I'm kind of not the 78 generation. And, so there was a lot of music, and I like that. My mom wrote songs. She often had some of the well known country swing players. I mean, Tulsa is very known for its music and country swing and, the movers and shakers, so to speak, of country swing. They often came to our house and played music, and so that was cool. So when I think of those parties, I think of music and I think of dancing. My parents are really good dancers, and I remember years ago being at some friends house at Tal's Pueblo and their grandfather, at that age, he was pretty, pretty old. He was probably in his 80s with white hair. And I remember I met him for the first time and he says, "You know, those creeks are — you guys are really good dancers." Because that's crucial to that origin story and it has everything to do with Muskogee Creek people with Menahwee, with, you know — that music is all embedded in the history.

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INTERVIEWER:

Absolutely. Can you tell me what it means to belong to Hickory Ground? Can you tell me about that?

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JOY HARJO:

Yeah, that's my family's ceremonial ground, especially on that-that line and our — the people are on the rolls at removal for Hickory ground. And I didn't come there. I was at another — you know, sometimes people move around the grounds. Often they might belong to another ground and go to their wife's or, you know, partner's ground. And, I had been at another one, and I — it was really powerful to go back because so much of the stories are there. So many of the stories are that connection and there are connections that are without words. And so it was like coming home for me to family because we're all related, ultimately, everybody is. But, you know, there's an old, old relationship and stories that — it was finding a connector point. You know, it was sort of like finding the right connection. And there it was.

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INTERVIEWER:

In your family, was-was race ever discussed? Did you ever just openly talk about race?

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JOY HARJO:

Not really. The word [race] — people didn't. It was everywhere, though. I mean, this is, this is the South. I lived in neighborhoods with native and whites. I remember I went to one year of high school here, then I went to Indian boarding school and art school, and that saved my life. But it was not a topic. I didn't know about the Tulsa Race Massacre until probably much,

much later, long after I left Oklahoma. And that was the poet Adrienne Rich. Adrienne Rich, who turned me on to the story of the Tulsa Race massacre, which happened, you know, just miles from where I grew up. I was talking with — I get into a lot of conversations with taxi drivers and drivers and-and this was during the, you know, that anniversary of the race massacre that happened a couple of years ago. And I asked him, I said, "So growing up, did you know about it?" They said they wouldn't talk about it. I knew about it, but they said, don't talk about it. It's dangerous to talk about it because it might happen again. Yeah. And of course, with natives, I saw my father go through, you know, things would happen. You could see things happen. I'm a lighter skinned native. I didn't get it the way that some of my darker relatives, you know, some of — what other relatives and people went through, you know, the darker you are, the more, there is discrimination. I remember people calling my dad chief, you know, he's not a chief. And, you know, those [are] kind of subtle. There was a lot of subtleties that...a lot of subtleties and not so subtle.

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INTERVIEWER:
I want to start at your beginning, Joy. I'd love to just hear your story about your birth, what that means to you, and just a little bit of context and to that story, if you don't mind.

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JOY HARJO:

Well, I was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at Saint John's Hospital. I came early, according to my mother. I was supposed to come in at seven, nine months, and she went into labor when I was seven months, and that was 1951. And, she said, she'd always tell me, "Well, you almost didn't make it...you almost." She would say, "You almost killed me." And that always strikes you, you know? You almost killed your mother — and — but we both survived. That's the next part, is that we both survived. And I always remember her saying, the doctor said, well, I guess they were taking me off the ventilator. And he said, "Well, if she does okay, she'll make it, you know?" And I made it. But I think I was still back and forth about whether I wanted to take this story on or not. I think every story has brokenness in it. Every family has a theme, and I'm not sure exactly what I came here to do, except that I know that I knew when I was really young that there was something given to me to do, and it was not going to be easy. But I made it. And, grew up here in in Tulsa. I grew up in Tulsa until I left for Indian school. But even early on, very, very early on — I mean, I think I always experienced this place as part of the spiritual realms. It's not the — it's not one of the upper colleges. You might say it's, you know, Earth is, you know, down and out, slugging out, you know, kind of, you know, you want to really learn, then you'll get dirty. And you'll, you know, the earth is that kind of place. But it was in my, I think, my dream life, too, even as — even before words was incredible and intense and I could walk into story fields of places far away and, like my grandmother, my mother's mother, my mother said that she used to dream novels, and that's how she would entertain the children. So early on, that place, you can call it the place of imagination, was immense to me. And it also became my hiding place, you know. It became my place because I could go and I could know the truth,

whether I could confront it or say anything, that's another thing given, you know, situations. But, you know, it was, you know, in that field, in that immense field, there were other people there. There are other stories, and they all connect in some way. Some of them are difficult, some not, but it was — that's always been at the root, I think, of all my creativity. It always has that it's that place or which is us. I mean, it is us. It always. It was so ultra present. So what I used to do with it, I used to spend a lot of time alone when I could. I mean, a little house with four children. So my hiding place was outside, far away from everyone. I could go out into just a little yard anywhere I went and could find horn toads, snakes, all kinds of creatures. And those were my friends. When...or the closet, which, you know, or the garage. I had art drawn all over the walls and in the closet. I didn't start writing until I was much older.

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INTERVIEWER:
I want to talk a bit about your mother. You describe her as being a fire. But I'd love to understand who she is and what she meant to you. And kind of paint a picture for me of your mother, if you can.

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JOY HARJO:
Yes. In that passage I say that my mother was fire and my father was water. And what do you get? I was wondering, what do you get when you put fire and water together? It's not — it's not like earth and water, more like fire in air. Or there's a whole different configuration. But fire in the sense is that they

burn, they're out there, they're alive. They're fire is burning inside and they're alive. And I think about that with her. She was outgoing. She was very perceptive. And you can be perceptive and still make mistakes. She did not have a good track record with men, but she connected to everyone. She was — had a great compassion in her. One of the things I remember she was working in the kitchen, running the kitchen in a restaurant in town...there was a man working washing dishes who just died one day. Nobody — they didn't know his family and she had a funeral for him. She bought him clothes and made sure that he had, you know, she took care of him in his passing. And that's the kind of person that — that's how I remember my mother...was that kind of person. And, you know, there were difficulties I mean, with her choice of men. I love my father. But he wasn't the most supportive type for her. You know, he was young, he was incredibly attractive and charismatic. And women, they couldn't contain themselves. It seemed like, of course, he gave them encouragement. But yeah, he had really movie star good looks. Just a beautiful man. I think he had a very deep knowing — my mother did too. But he didn't really quite know how to access it. And I think for him...he would drink, I don't know. I don't really — when I think back, I don't know that he was an alcoholic per se. But, I think, and this isn't my original thought. I cannot remember the man who first said that when we were in a circle of, probably with some, some native wisdom keepers, and he said, you know, that people, you know, alcoholics are just looking for a vision. And that's always made a lot of sense to me. You know, with any kind of addiction is that you need some kind of vision to save yourself. But he was difficult. I mean, if he came in and he was drinking, he could be violent. I remember reaching up...if I held my arms straight up, I could put my hands — I remember putting

my hands in his pockets, trying to pull him off my mother while he was hitting her. And I wonder what he thought about after that. I think he would do make up — probably make up gifts or chocolate covered cherries. But, you just had to be careful because you didn't know when it might happen. And so I remember that. I remember hiding under the kitchen table so he wouldn't find me. And yet, you know, people are complicated. We're full of contradictions. All of us are. And then there was the father who I knew loved me. They had four children, one right after the other. And I don't know that he was up for that. I don't know that my mother was, too. Sometimes I think people follow scripts they were given, you know, from my mother, it was four children. Two boys, two girls. That's what she got. But it was complicated. I don't know that he wanted children, or certainly not that many all at once. He didn't know how to maneuver that kind of life because he didn't have it. He didn't come up with a sense of a family in the sense of being surrounded by this, you know, a warm community and people looking out after you. But there is — there is so much about him I didn't know. I knew the history. I mean, I know a lot more now than I did. I was compelled because what I saw in him was...someone who also...had a connection, a deep connection to the story field. And can enter it the way that I did. But he-he did not know — he didn't have the means or the....he...I think there was too much hurt for him to go there. He left us when I was about nine and that means my sister....my brother was seven. He was 18 months younger. My sister was five and my little brother was three. And I was the one that had to take care of them.

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INTERVIEWER:

Can you paint a picture — were you a rich child growing up?

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JOY HARJO:

That's another story I want to go into, because I've discovered that my great grandfather had Harjo oil company. And was one of the wealthiest people in the area. I think he had the first car, the first car in Okmulgee and educated. My grandmother and my aunt both got BFAs in art. You know, early 1900s. My father was raised in a 21 room house where, the Oklahoma State University is now in, in Okmulgee. You know, that's from from oil money. My father had oil money. That's what he bought his really cool cars with. You know, he always had Cadillac, you know, truck. He was a Ford person. And then it dwindled so that when he passed, my brothers and sister and I were getting oil royalty checks, but they were like $36 a piece. And then we got a letter saying that he had sold his mineral rights. I always thought we were like middle class, but now that I've been out in the world, I think we were lower middle class. And, you know, my mother came from sharecroppers. So some of that, you know, some of that was part of my experience.

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INTERVIEWER:

I want to talk about creativity a little bit more with you. You discussed how you would draw on the walls as a child, talked about being outside and inside in the closet and all these different places. And when you would imagine things, what kind of things do you recall? What kind of things would you

paint, would you draw as a child? Where did this passion and creativity come from and how did you express it?

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JOY HARJO:

That's interesting to — it's interesting to think about what I drew. I was thinking about that image I drew — it kind of a design — but of people holding hands in a circle...but it was in a way that made a kind of just this cool design. And, I was always interested in houses and architecture then, too. I had a whole cartoon series I drew, with a hippopotamus, I think. I would just — I got into trouble. I would do caricatures of teachers, you know, I would do drawings for hire from, you know, the kids in my class in one class. I probably wrote some little, a little, line to go with it. Not with all of them. Most of teachers are pretty nice. But, yeah I didn't — that one, you know, I don't remember much happening with that, but when I was in sixth grade, that's when I had a piece of art in the Philbrook — The Philbrook Art Center here used to have a yearly art show of, from art, from the public schools. And I was in that. And I remember going to that show and seeing my art up, and that was cool. And then my grandfather, my mother's father, saw a piece of mine in a traveling show of students that came to his town, and there was my piece. It was an illustration for a book. You had to make an illustration for a book, and I don't remember the name of the book, but the girl was washing her horse.

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INTERVIEWER:

You once wrote, Joy, that "I often feel more awake in my dreaming life than I do in this corporeal reality. And I still do." Do you still feel this way?

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JOY HARJO:
Yes, I do, I think I mean, I feel absolutely awake right now, but, that reality is where we're going, it's where we come from, you know? And you've been at birth. I've been at several births and deaths. That's — that's who we are. We're here for a while to tend to the story and to make sure that we add to the story and that we take care of it. But we're only here for a little while.

00:24:19:00

INTERVIEWER:
Joy, you are one of the oldest relatives in your family, and you've said, this is why I am remembering. Can you please tell me why storytelling is so important?

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JOY HARJO:
Well, storytelling is who we are. We're storytellers. I mean, think about it. All of us are. What do we do when we get up? We usually, you know, we start talking. We answer. When I was growing up, it was the telephone. You know, answering the telephone and checking in. And now the younger kids don't even want to talk to you. It's texting, but it's all about story gathering. "Where are you?" "What's the weather?" "Oh, today it's icy." "I'm glad you made it." And, anyway, that's what — that's what we humans do. But, I think about a

system. The difference between stories at a kitchen table or going over to see my cousin, who I miss dearly, George Coser Jr., and sitting at the table or sitting with people, I always get stories and hear things. And even going into history, especially if you're here at home in the Creek Nation and about — there's always history, and and genealogy is history versus kids sitting far away from any of the story keepers in their family, instead watching, you know, TikTok and these short videos, which, you know, there's merit to everything. But on the other hand, it cuts into your ability to concentrate or to think deeply. And what does that do to the story field and what is that — how does that shift story gathering?

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INTERVIEWER:
If you're in a classroom joined with a bunch of young students, what story would you want to tell them?

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JOY HARJO:
I would want...I am not sure. It would depend on the classroom, the time, the age. But I would want to give them a story in which they would see themselves as included — that we plant something in them that says, you know that you're a human being. You are made of contradictions. You were made of beauty. You were made by a creator who loved you. And, that I would want to plant opportunity in them. I would want them to see that no matter what is going on in the world, or if things are being bombed, or, you know, if they were refugees or having a hard time or even coming from the best

families, I would want them to see that they were given gifts that are valuable and, that when you have these gifts, it's important to take care of them, even as it's important to share them. That that's essentially what we all came in to do. And there's a lot of stories to get there.

END TC: 00:27:19:00