

Autobiographical Writing as a Healing Process

Interview with Alice Masak French

Introduction

Alice Masak French is an Inuk woman from the Western Arctic region. She was born in 1930 on Baillie Island. At the age of six, her mother died and she was sent to live at an Anglican boarding school in Aklavik. She remained there—with only sporadic visits with her family—until she was fourteen. The first volume of her autobiography, *My Name is Masak* (1977), covers these first fourteen years of her life, recording the stark differences between the warm protection of her close-knit family and the cold institutional life at the boarding school. The final scene of the book describes her joyous feelings when her father arrives to pick her up from the boarding school and take her home permanently. Her second volume, *The Restless Nomad* (1991), continues where *My Name is Masak* leaves off. It encompasses the experience of returning to her family, re-learning and learning skills expected of a young Inuk woman, years of travelling around the Western Arctic region as they followed seasonal food sources, her first marriage, the birth of her children, the meeting of her second husband, Dominick French, and their travels with the RCMP throughout various small towns in Northern Ontario and Manitoba. *The Restless Nomad* finishes as Dominick and Alice are about to leave for Ireland to take over Dominick's family farm. After living in Ireland for several years, Alice and Dominick returned to Canada and have recently settled in Medicine Hat, Alberta. This interview was conducted at Alice's home in Medicine Hat on 13 January 1999.

The two volumes of Alice's autobiography document the changes and transitions that took place in the Western Arctic from the 1930s to the late 1980s. Alice describes the various ways in which she and her family were

affected by the introduction of Christian boarding schools, government programs and policies, declining sources of food, and changing social values. Alice's stories of growing up in a period of cultural upheaval are poignant, poetic and often humorous as she grapples with new and frightening experiences such as adapting to the rigid rules of boarding school, learning to drive a dog-team or riding a public transit bus in Vancouver for the first time. Both *My Name is Masak* and *The Restless Nomad* have been valued as historical and cultural records by her family, her community, and by schools in Northern Manitoba which have often placed them on their curricula. But these books are not just mere historical artefacts. They also have significant literary merit as a result of the complex development of personal and community stories side by side and on top of one another, so that Alice's personal narrative cannot be understood outside the context of her community's experiences and traditions. In this interview, Alice explores the ways in which writing her autobiography has helped her to overcome the legacy of anger and frustration left by her years in boarding school. She discusses the reasons for initially starting to write and describes the journey that led to the publication of her books.

Interview

CW Maybe you can tell me how you got the idea to start writing your life story. You said that your children were coming home from school and asking you questions?

AMF They were. They'd come home and they'd say, "Is it true that you lived in an igloo all year round?" or "Is it true that this was your diet all year round?" They thought Mommy lived in an igloo all her life, and I hadn't. I've lived in igloos but not as much as I've lived in houses. The houses are only 15x26. Men built them from logs coming down the Mackenzie River during spring break-up. They'd haul all this driftwood coming down the Mackenzie and they'd build the houses. They were lovely colours, lovely silvery-grey colours. And they'd caulk them with mud and moss in the cracks and put windows in—probably just two windows—and a sod roof.

There were a lot of questions about Eskimo children playing, what did they play at? What games did we play and how did we amuse ourselves and that sort of thing. My children would come home and ask, "Mom, did you have swings or slides?" We played games, just hand games, played juggling with stones and little hand games. It's kind of hard to describe them. And as they grew older, they'd ask about wife-swapping and that sort of thing.

They'd pick it up I don't know where, but they'd come home and say "I heard that there was a lot of wife-swapping among the Eskimo." I'd try and think back and when I was growing up, maybe it did happen, I don't know. But when I was growing up, it wasn't in our particular area. In fact, if it was, maybe there was one or two, like any other place, there were one or two women that had different boyfriends, but that wasn't condoned among the elders.

So, it was those kind of questions they'd come home with. What did we eat, did we eat all our meat raw? And I suppose before the white men came with all their metal things, maybe they did. But I don't think so. I think what they did was just heat up stones and throw them into a sealskin bag of water or some container and heat up the water and semi-boil things. And did we eat whales all year around? Well, we didn't because we only went whaling in the summer and had enough to do until the spring when all the birds came north to nest. So we had a lot of fresh birds. In the falltime, then we went fishing. We got all our fish for the winter and stored that. Froze it in underground icehouses. We had big underground ice houses in the permafrost, so you could put a lot of caribou in there. You could fit maybe 15 or 20 caribou in there and fish and ducks and geese and berries. In the summertime we went berry picking. So, it was kind of nice to be able to tell them about that sort of thing. I'd tell them snippets about what it was like. We lived in tents in the summer, and houses in the winter, either snow houses or log houses. And whole families lived in a house. We had three generations in our house. But I was just thinking, gosh, what a difference between my grandchildren's and my upbringing. It really makes you think. So, I thought I'll write these pages. I thought it was just going to be a little wee thing and my first book was a little wee thing. In it, I tried to tell the kids what it was like when you are from an intimate family group to suddenly be thrown into a boarding school situation. It's really frightening. You've never seen so many kids in your life. Suddenly you are being told what you can and can't do. They told us when to get up, when to go to bed, when to eat, all those kind of things. You are suddenly—it's not quite a non-person person—but you are no longer a part of a family. You are part of a group and it's very hard on children. I wanted them to know what boarding school meant for a lot of kids. When I first went to boarding school, there were just families that had no mother or families that thought that maybe it would be advantageous for them to have an English-speaking person in the family that put their children in boarding school. But after awhile, it became so that everybody went, the churches collected children and brought them to school, that kind of thing.

It kind of disrupted family life for years, for a couple of generations. When I think of it, sometimes it makes me sad because it really disrupted a people I knew who were really self-sufficient and looked after each other. They were outgoing and happy people, suddenly becoming people who didn't know what to do, their way of life was suddenly disrupted. They were building the DEW-line (Distant Early Warning Line) at the time, and a lot of the men went out to work and left their families at home. They were earning money, but the family life suddenly became unhinged, they lost a closeness there. It got so that instead of my people going out to different camps, because you need to keep moving to find the different food, follow the food chain, they suddenly had to stay in one place. And that was a really disruptive part of their lives because they didn't know how to do that. They were pulled in two directions. When I look back, I don't look back too often, it's kind of painful and sort of hard.

They went through like that from the late 50s to the 90s, there was that thirty years where they were neither geared for a good job and they weren't really geared any more to go out to hunt and fish because they had lost something in between because they weren't doing it on a regular basis. They got used to this town life. They weren't used to it, but they had to do it because the kids were going to school and they didn't know any other kind of life anymore, which is sad.

But, we are starting to see the benefits now, of the kids that have been in school for most of their lives and their parents have stayed put and made sure that they have gone to school. A few are going to universities and coming out as teachers, and lawyers, and doctors which is really, really promising. For a while there, there were really a lot of problems. There was a lot of drinking, like any other society that suddenly has no direction. There was a lot of alcohol and drug abuse, but I think we're on the upturn, thank-goodness! It's been a long time coming. Well, probably not, it's probably taken as long as any other society to turn around.

CW How have you dealt with the transition in your own life?

AMF Well, I guess I've had problems. Not great big problems, but little problems like adjusting to life down south. When I came down, there were a lot of things I didn't know. I didn't know how to walk down the streets and go across streets. I didn't know what stoplights were, crosswalks I didn't know. I used to think how clever the people were, they knew exactly when to go across. And it was many months before I learned that there were lights! And the food I found strange. Like grocery shopping—in the north you have the Bay. You go there and you get biscuits, and lard, and flour, and sugar, and

tea and some canned bacon and some canned fruit and canned tomatoes and that's it. Your meat comes from the land. But down south, boy, they had everything! All prepared for you! And I'm not used to vegetables. I still don't eat much of vegetables, because I didn't grow up with them. We had apples and oranges, but that's about it.

Another difference was living in an apartment where there were all kinds of other people living in the building, families living in the same building and yet not knowing one another. At home, you go out of the house and you see people and you know them. And you walk and you see them everyday and you talk to them and you smile and say hi. But in Ottawa, you say hi to somebody, and they just kind of look at you and keep walking. Or you smile at them—no response. And after a while, you don't smile or say hi anymore, but it takes you a little while, because you just can't think that people don't say hi or smile. There were a few, but not many who did. Also, living in an apartment, you had houses in between, you couldn't see the hills. You couldn't see the rivers or the bush, and I kind of missed those.

CW How have you shared your culture with your children?

AMF The Inuit way of life? It's kind of been sporadic. It's hard to teach your children the Inuit way of life in the south. We'd teach them how to make cooking fires and how to set up camps and Dominick is good at snaring, so they'd snare rabbits.

Before I go on I just want to say another thing. You know, when we went to Ottawa, it was in the 60s and there was this great threat of this atomic thing. Oh, I used to think, why am I down here, what happens if the whole world blows up. They were talking about shelters and we didn't have a shelter, what do we do? How do we live in the city? We can't go in the bush and we can't go out and find food. What do we do if the whole world blows up and there's no store next door, how do we eat? And that used to worry me. I used to get really quite anxious for all of us. So when we moved from Ottawa to Deep River and we could go out into the bush to camp, I used to encourage the kids to learn from Dominick how to snare rabbits, to go fishing, to hunt. He'd teach them how to use a .22 and they'd go out and shoot partridges and birds. And I'd teach them how to cook them over fires so that they didn't need pots and pans. So, I knew that if anything happened, if the whole world blew up, we could go into the bush and we could survive. In the city, there was no place to run. So, we taught them to survive in the woods and as they grew up, they took their own children out to teach them these things. So, that's good.

They are just starting to get interested in their Inuit part of them. It's taken them a long time. Now they are starting to think about who they are and where they've come from. So, writing the book at the time didn't do much for them, because life was too full and too happy for them. But as they are getting older, they are getting more interested in their family in the north. The children are becoming more aware of their Inuit ancestry and what their Inuit ancestors were like when I was young and what life was like for me. That part I share. I've tried to teach them a few words except that it takes me a long time because I have to get it back. When I go back home, I can understand when people talk to me but because I've been speaking English all this time, I can't wrap my tongue around some of the words and they come out stiff and funny. And sometimes, with words that are very close together, unless you pronounce them right, they mean the opposite. So, it's very interesting and funny and sometimes very sad and frustrating.

CW What is the language called?

AMF Our language is called the Inuvialuit language. The Eastern Arctic is Inuktitun, so there's a few sets of language. But then there's a lot of little dialects in between, such as Siglit, Ummarmiut, and Kangiryournuit dialects. Any little settlement has its own dialect so it's very hard to say that everybody has the same language, because they don't. The Western Arctic is Inuvialuit. Inuktitun means "the language of the people" and Inuit means "the true people."

CW Are there many language speakers left?

AMF Yes, there are quite a lot. Especially in the Eastern Arctic. They have kept their language alive through all these years. I don't know how they did it, but they've kept it alive much more than we have in the Western Arctic. We have lost a lot. But we've got a lot of good Inuvialuit teachers coming into the schools to teach the language which is good. But, somehow, we just didn't keep our language like the Eastern Arctic has.

CW I noticed in your books that you don't use any Inuvialuit language at all, whereas other authors use language and then translate it or use glossaries. Is there a reason why you did not put your language into the books?

AMF Well, I stuck to English mainly because it was easier for me to keep it flowing. If I used Inuvialuit terms, I would have to stop and explain all the time and so it would get disjointed. And the other reason was that my children didn't know their language and they would have to forever come to me and say, "What does this mean?" or "Does this really explain what that is?" So it was mainly easier for my own work to use English. I tried in one chapter to

use Inuvait terms, but I got so muddled because I'd have to explain what it was and then try to get back my train of thought when I was there and to get back to it. So, that's the reason.

cw I noticed in your first book especially that you do a lot of naming. Was that a deliberate thing to do?

AMF Yes, it was. I needed to get the names down so that the kids would know who their grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins were. And for them to see that we lived in a very close community, family community that was close-knit unlike what it is now. Parents and then their children and the children grow up and go away and just the parents are left and the children have their own home. When I was growing up, there was my grandparents, my parents, my aunts and uncles and we all lived in the same house and would always live together during the winter; this was the way Inuit people had done it for thousands of years in the wintertime. So, they needed to know that. That was why I put names down so that they would know who their grandparents were.

cw Going back to why you wrote the book, you also mentioned that it was sort of a healing process. (AMF Yes, it was.) How was it a healing process?

AMF I think it got a lot of anger out of the way in my life. When I started writing, and I went through my boarding school years, I was still so angry and so frustrated that each chapter and each step I took was hard. When I'd start a chapter, I'd have to go through a real anger period and then through a softening and then a healing. When you think of some bad memory and you get so angry—like taking walks [at boarding school] for instance. Like I said, I'm not an outdoorsy type of person and I hated those walks. Oh, I hated them. I used to get so cold! So, I'd run back to the school and therefore get into trouble because I was supposed to be on the walk, which to me made no sense.

And so you kind of shove everything down, and when you start bringing memories up, it is like opening up a really bad something, it's like opening a bag of things that have gone rotten and dirty and horrid because you've shoved it down so long, and now you are opening it up. And you can only do it in snatches, so it takes you a long time.

It's like opening this bag that you tied up and you keep piling things on top of because you don't want it to burst and open. It brings out all the anger for all the unfair things that happened when you were young, that you didn't think were right that happened to you. As you write, everything that you've kept down and held down for so many years comes out and you have so many problems because of it, mainly because you weren't able to and

weren't willing to deal with them. But, now you suddenly have to deal with them, because you are writing this book. And that's where the healing comes in. You let it out, you cry about it, you get mad about it, you get angry, frustrated, and then you look at it in pieces until it all comes out.

Sometimes there is someone to blame and sometimes there isn't. You get an understanding. So, that's why it was a healing process, especially when I wrote my second book. That really was a healing process.

cw Why the second book more so than the first?

AMF I think because when I came out of school, I thought, well, I'm back with my own people, I'm going to be part of them, I'm going to be one of them. And that didn't happen. Because I came out, as my grandmother put it, a white child. She said, "You came out as a white person. We don't know you. You don't know how to do things. You're not Inuk anymore." And that hurt more than being put into school and being left there for years, because it was my own people telling me that I didn't fit any longer, that I wasn't who I was supposed to be. And then she started teaching me. Oh, she was a hard taskmaster. I think I'm a stubborn person, because I made up my mind that I was going to learn what she was teaching me and I was going to learn it so well and so much better than the Inuit! And basically, I did, except for my language, because my tongue was not used to the little curls and wavers, it just doesn't wrap around the words like they should. But I learned how to sew and I learned how to scrape skins and I learned how to shoot, although I didn't learn how to shoot very well because I hated killing anything, that was my one sore spot.

My grandmother was just bound and determined that she was going to make an Inuk woman out of me. And I'm glad she did, because now I can do all these things. It's a part of my culture and I'm glad I learned that. My children are not interested in sewing and stuff and in a way you can't really blame them, because it doesn't really make much sense. Nowadays, they've got all these nylon parkas and anoraks that are much better, they don't shed, they don't fall apart.

cw What about driving the dog teams? You seemed to have some trouble with that in *The Restless Nomad*.

AMF (laughing) Oh, I did. I was so clumsy. They always called me clumsy. I did learn how to drive dogs after a fashion, but they just didn't listen to me. I don't know how other people got them to obey, I never could do that, I think because I was afraid of them. I used to get bitten, I don't know how many times, trying to harness and unharness them and trying to get the

dogs up the stupid gangplank on the boat. Every summer, I knew we were going to Aklavik, and I would be filled with dread. I had sleepless nights, I was so worried about that gangplank, I knew I had to pull the dogs up it and they always ended up pushing me off, either fighting me, or pushing me off the gangplank into the water. I used to get so frustrated with those dogs. Like I said, I'm sure they must've been lying there every morning, on their chains, and say, "Whoo-hoo, girl is coming, what are we going to do to her this morning? Have fun!"

cw Did you start writing your books with an intention to publish them? What was the process you went through in order to get it published?

AMF When I started writing *My Name is Masak*, I hadn't thought of publishing it. I'd written it just for my kids. When I got it done, I did something that no author should do: I sent it to two publishers. I looked in the phone book and there was Mary Scorer in Winnipeg and there was Mel Hurtig in Edmonton so I sent a manuscript to each of them. Mary Scorer answered within two weeks. She'd read the book and she said she was interested and could I come down so we could talk. And so I went down to Winnipeg and talked to her and she said, "Yes, we'll publish it. I'll send you a contract within ten days." So, I went back home and she sent me one. Just before the contract came back, Mel Hurtig answered and said, "Yes, we're interested." And I thought, "Oh, what do I do now?" Well, Mary Scorer was good enough to say she liked it and would publish it so I said okay to Mary Scorer. So, I had to write a letter to explain to Mel Hurtig that I already had a publisher. See, I didn't know anything about these things until much later, that you only send to one publisher at a time. I was very lucky, Mel Hurtig was very nice about it, and I got out of that one. And that's how the first one was done. It took me a long time before I thought of writing the second book, because I knew that it was going to go into some of the more painful memories that I had. I started writing in Churchill and it took me ten years to get through it. I would write and then I would put it away because it was just too much. Then we went to Ireland, and I did most of it there, I wrote a lot there. We were there almost seven years and then we came back to Canada. I thought well, I can go back to Mary Scorer and she can publish the second one. In the meantime, she'd gone into more school curricula books so I ended up at Pemmican.

cw Did you have a book launch for either of the books, and was either of them reviewed?

AMF I had a book launch with *Masak*, but not with *Restless*. For *Masak*, I

travelled quite a bit through the Territories. I went to Edmonton, and Lethbridge and Regina, and Yellowknife and to Toronto and a couple of towns in Ontario. And the reviews were fairly good, so that was good. I think maybe because the Native people were just starting to write then. I did a library circuit a couple of years ago for *Restless*, so that was good. And I go into schools. When the kids take Social Studies and have read about the Inuit, I come in and explain and talk to them about what Inuit people are like.

cw Can you tell me more about the Baffin Island writers' group?

AMF How did I get involved in that? Somebody mentioned my name to the writers' group and said that I had written a book. I got a letter from the group in Ikaluit, the school for it, and they asked me if I'd be interested in travelling and helping people to write or learn about writing because they didn't know how to start writing. They knew they wanted to, but didn't quite know how to begin. That was very interesting because there are a lot of Native women in that area that do a lot of storytelling and they teach their young girls how to sew and scrape and that sort of thing. And they wanted to put it in books. A lot of them were older women that didn't really want to write, but wanted to tell a story. We tried to encourage them to put it down, even on tape, so that somebody could transcribe it for them and type it out and set it out in books. I think a lot of them did, because quite a lot of books came out in the next few years through the school system in different communities.

cw And what about the Oklahoma Conference? How did you get invited to that?

AMF That was in '93. I think the University of Oklahoma got in touch with different publishers to see which Natives had published books. And when they got the list, they sent letters inviting us down. That was another great thing, because when I got down there, there must have been two or three thousand people gathered. And it wasn't just for the book thing. It was a great gathering, with pow-wows and that sort of thing. There must have been a thousand authors meeting and you had workshops and different things there. We spent about ten days in Oklahoma, just sort of visiting with each other and getting to know who was writing what. It was really interesting for me, because I didn't realise that there were so many Native authors out there. It was exciting and inspirational.

cw What about your family? How did they react to your books being published?

AMF You know something, I don't think it really sunk in. Mom was just doing whatever Mom does, she goes on with these strange things she does. I don't think they ever thought that I would publish anything. But they are very

proud of me. They are all very pleased and very proud. And I have their support, which I really need, because it is a very personal thing.

cw Some critics suggest that when you write an autobiography, in a way, you are reconstructing your life and reconstructing an image of yourself. Is that what you felt you were doing?

AMF Well, I think what you are doing, you are not so much reconstructing yourself and reconstructing your image, but instead you are letting the person that you truly are out rather than trying to build something up. If you build something or someone up, it's bound to fall over. It's sort of finally saying, okay, it really matters to me what people think, and I know when I'm finished this book, they are going to think oddly of me, or they are going to say this, that or the other. And that's why it took me a long time to say, "Right, I'm going to publish this." Because you're intimidated by it—you are telling the whole world who you are and what you are and it's intimidating. But when all is said and done, people are very good, they finally accept who you are and they know you, as they didn't before. You are finally saying to other people, this is who I really am, this is what I was, now I'm telling you who I am.

cw So, if you had to do it all over again, would you change anything?

AMF I really don't think so. Maybe gone a little faster, but there needed to be a long gap. No, I don't think I would change anything. I'd like to see more people write. Not just the native people but a lot of other people. They have interesting people around every community who have interesting life stories. Because we've had so many books that don't really relate to real life. There's a lot of older generation people that have such interesting lives, but we don't hear them and those are all gone. We've lost that maybe because we don't think it is interesting enough. But it is. Later in life, people will ask, "What happened in that era?" and there won't have been any books written on it. It's a shame.

cw Did you learn something about yourself as you were writing your books?

AMF I did, in a sense. I learned that I had a whole lot of unnecessary baggage in my life, things that had gone on in my childhood, in my young womanhood, that I didn't really need to carry and could let go. So, it was good. It was hard, but it was good. It is a relief. Even now though, when people want to buy my book, you kind of think the next time you see them, you wonder what they are going to say. But they've always been kind and have found it interesting. I have been blessed.