

# Peter Gzowski Interviews Thomas King on *Green Grass, Running Water*\*

PG Over the past couple of years Thomas King has popped up on *Morningside* from time to time, usually along with a couple of other people, to talk about what's new in fiction by Native authors. This morning he's here to talk about a book of his own. The book is *Green Grass, Running Water*. I've already raved about it today. Thomas King is in our Calgary studio. Morning.

TK Morning.

PG Now, you wouldn't have heard my opening remarks because it's still too—we haven't crossed into Alberta yet, but boy, I felt like I was talking cover-blurb stuff. I love this book.

TK Oh, wonderful!

PG Well, who doesn't? I've never seen such reviews, either!

TK Well, they've been okay so far. I tend to be pragmatic about those things and just sort of hold my breath, but so far the reviews have been good.

PG I have to confess it took me a little while to slide into it, you know, I was warmed up and I said, "Oh no, this is another one—it'll be too complicated for me—too abstruse and too magical"—and then all of a sudden I sort of glided in and I found myself laughing and having a wonderful time.

TK Good, well, that's partly what the book is supposed to do, I suppose, is to . . . All novels, I think, are supposed to be entertaining to begin with, and I was trying to make mine that way.

PG One of the reviews I read—Sarah Shear, I think, in the *Globe and Mail*—talked about the complexity, the trick you bring off—the Coyote trick—it's keeping all those plates spinning in the air all at the same time. She says it's like juggling chainsaws, and you catch them all at the

\* Originally broadcast on "Morningside," CBC Radio, 5 April 1993

end with the rattling side out. Is it hard to write like that, to keep all that stuff in your head all the time?

TK Well, I don't think I'll do another novel like that. I wanted to do a novel, I suppose, a kind of pan-Indian novel, something that looks at something larger than just the specifics of a local area, something that talks about Native people in general, in North America, in Canada and the U.S. And, yeah, it was, as a matter of fact—I don't do much research for my novels and I never keep notes or cards to tell myself where I am, but on this particular one, when I got halfway through, I discovered that I didn't know where I was, either, and I had to keep a set of cards just to know who had spoken last and who was supposed to speak next. It did drive me a little bit crazy at times.

PG A lot of the scenes are short, and sometimes it's very filmic, it cuts back and forth: one scene will be going on, and you'll bounce over here, and come back over here. Did you write it that way, or did you do it all and break it up later?

TK Yeah, no, I wrote it that way. What happened was, I got into the novel a little ways and I discovered that if I had long chapters I was going to lose the reader between the people who were talking. I was afraid the reader was going to sort of get bored, or, you know, would go off and do something else—like make some toast—and then come back to it and not know where they were, and so what I tried to do was—if you have a deck of cards, you know, you can see each individual card, but if you take that deck and you flip it really quickly it gives you the illusion of movement. Each individual card is a rather short section, but if you snap 'em fast enough then you wind up with this sense of movement, and that's what I wanted to do in the novel.

PG If I talked like a Tom King character I would respond to that by, by—

TK (laughing) Don't do it.

PG No, but I'd ask you something about the university you teach at, or something. I don't know how to characterize the magic touch you have with dialogue, which makes it so real, but people bounce back and forth—*non sequitur* after *non sequitur*.

TK The people that I know best, I suppose—the people around, out in Lethbridge, and many of the people off the reserve, and just my own family—that's the way conversations go a lot of times: you have two people who are talking about the same thing, but you'd never know it to

listen to them, but in the end it all comes out all right.

PG Well, let's start with, now—we've got to figure out something—who— which of the characters is real, which one you made up and where the resonance is in some of the names. Let's start with the four old Indians, okay—

TK Oh, the four old Indians, yeah—the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and—

PG Hawkeye.

TK Hawkeye, right. Well, I wanted to create archetypal Indian characters. I wanted to create the universe again, and those characters—

PG Tom?

TK Yes?

PG The Lone Ranger's not an archetypal Indian character.

TK Well, actually, he sort of is, in some kind of a strange way, within North American popular culture, you know, you've got the Lone Ranger and Tonto, and you've got Ishmael and Queequeg, and you have Hawkeye and Chingachgook, and you have Robinson Crusoe and Friday, and these are all kind of—they're not archetypal characters in literature, but they're Indian and white *buddies*, I suppose. They're kind of, not buddy movies, but buddy books, I suppose. But those are just the names that the old Indians have at the time that we meet them. In actual fact, these are four archetypal Indian women who come right out of oral creation stories, and who have been more or less—

PG Ahhh!

TK So each one of the women who open up the various sections that come out of the oral stories are really those old Indians as they come along, but they've just been forced to assume these *guises*—by history, by literature, by just the general run of the world—and so that's what they call themselves now.

PG So when Babo tells the sergeant who's looking for them that they're women—

TK Yeah, Babo's right. I mean, Babo's always right. The sergeant's always wrong.

PG See, sometimes—I want to read it all again, 'cause I'm never sure when I get all the resonance of the names, and I'm not sure when you're *Coyote-ing* me, you know, when you're just *twiggin'* me.

TK Well, that's always a problem. Coyote's there from the get-go, from the

very beginning, and you always have to look over your shoulder when you're dealing with Coyote.

PG Or Tom King, I think.

TK Well, (laughs) Coyote in particular.

PG Can I just run through a few characters who pop up—

TK Sure.

PG —and see where the reson— I want to know whether the resonance is intended or whether you're just playing.

TK Hmmmm.

PG But I also—I'm just blurbing on here, and I want to make sure that people get a sense of how this book works. I don't know how on Earth to do that. Let me follow my own curiosity. Dr. Joe Hovaugh—say his name.

TK Joseph Hovaugh, or Joe Hovaugh, as—

PG Jehovah?

TK —as Jehovah is properly called, yes.

PG So that's a God resonance?

TK That's a God resonance, absolutely. I've used Joseph Hovaugh in a couple of stories, now. I just happen to like the name, and what it conjures up, but in this case, of course, Joseph Hovaugh or Joe Hovaugh is the head doctor at a mental institution which—

PG Makes him God.

TK Which makes him God, yeah, sure.

PG Now there's a guy who's building a dam—his name is Clifford Sifton—what are we doing here?

TK Well, this is the nice thing about the book, for me, at least: there are a number of Canadian allusions, and there are a number of U.S. allusions, and not everybody's going to get all of them, but if you get 'em, the book's a lot more fun, and if you don't I don't think it hurts it at all. But Clifford Sifton—who do you think Sifton is?

PG Well, I think Sifton is (laughing) a *bad guy*—

TK Well, he is—

PG —a colonizer, of the Canadian West.

TK Yeah, he is, he is. And he was involved in dams at one time, sort of helped with that Western flood of migration, I think, produced—I'm not sure about this—produced pamphlets, I think, lauding the West and getting people to move out there. So he appears in the book. I thought he should be there. As well as a great many *other* characters.

PG Well, and they just come and they flicker across the screen. There's a whole bunch of tourists—I won't blow the way to figure out that they're Canadian—who show up at the Dead Dog Café.

TK Yes.

PG But they don't serve dog meat there, do they?

TK Well, you know, I'm not sure, uh, you know—maybe it *is* Black Lab.

PG Black Lab. I had a Black Lab. I loved that damn Black Lab. We used to sing—it wasn't singing—and that Black Lab lived to be fourteen.

They're no good for eating, after (laughing)—after three or four years old, eh?

TK That's right. You gotta stew 'em after that—it's no good for general consumption.

PG They don't serve dog!

TK That's right. You're right. They serve . . . well . . . um . . . *beef*, maybe . . .

PG Or maybe Black Lab (laughing).

TK Or maybe Black Lab (laughing).

PG Now these tourists show up, on the bus. One of them's *S. Moody*, called *Sue* by her friends.

TK That's right, that's Sue Moody—

PG And at one point she says she's roughing it.

TK That's right (laughing).

PG And one's *P. Johnson*.

TK Right, right.

PG Called *Polly* by her friends.

TK Polly Johnson. That's right.

PG That's Pauline.

TK Yep, Pauline Johnson.

PG Well, who's *Belany* who's there with them?

TK Archie Belany.

PG Oh, that's—oh, yeah—that's Grey Owl.

TK Grey Owl, right. Right. Grey Owl's along for the tour, looking to find Indians.

PG Right.

TK And of course the last one's John Richardson, the nineteenth-century novelist who was part Ottawa.

PG Was he?

TK Yeah, at least according to the couple of biographies written on

Richardson. Yeah, he was. He didn't make a big deal out of it, particularly, but I thought, you know, with the rest of the group there, I might as well put him on the tour, too—to see the Canadian West.

PG If I keep all this playful talk going, people won't understand that there is real stuff in there—I mean there's a real commentary on the relationship between the Indian people and the people who came later.

TK Yeah, the novel does deal with some of the primary attitudes that Canadians, and, in fact, North Americans have towards Indians, and it also deals with the fact that that line that we think is so firm between reality and fantasy is not that firm at all, that there's a great deal of play in it, and that the line itself is an imaginary line, and that you can have these—that's one of the reasons why you have these historical and literary characters who sort of float across time, in and out of this novel, to affect the present, or at least be a part of the present.

PG Now, there's a Creation myth, or creation—the *theme* of creation—echoes all the way through—

TK Yeah.

PG —in fact, I suppose you could—it's funny: all the reviews, all admiring, all seem to see it through a different lens—

TK Yeah.

PG —but the creation part keeps coming back to you. In my non-Ph.D. view, there was a lot in here about people grabbing hold of other people's myths and distorting them and changing them to fit their own vocabulary, but at the same time about the *universality* of myth. Is that. . . ?

TK Yeah. What I wanted to do when I started writing the novel . . . I started off, not *knowing* this, of course, but working on the assumption that Christian myth was the one that informed the world that I was working with. And the more I got into the novel I discovered that I couldn't work with that: it didn't give me enough freedom to work with my fiction, so all of a sudden one day I thought, my god, why don't I just recreate the world along more Native lines, and use Native oral stories—oral Creation stories—rather than the story that you find in Genesis. So I went back, and I began to use that as my basis for the fiction, and then all I had to, well, not *all* I had to do, but one of the things I wanted to do, was to sort of drag that myth through Christianity, through Western literature and Western history, and see what I came up with—sort of push it through that, that *grinder*, if you will, as Native culture's been

pushed through that sort of North American grinder. And so that's partly what happens, is that you get this movement in each one of the sections, you get this movement through an oral Creation story, through a biblical story, through a literary story, through a historical story, and that repeats itself each of the times in the four sections.

PG So—I'm sorry—the name of the mythic Indian figure—is it Falling Woman?

TK It's First Woman—

PG First Woman, sorry—

TK First Woman—

PG She's—

TK Go ahead.

PG Well, she's *falling* into a lake, but there's a white canoe there which turns out to be the Ark, or some version of the Ark.

TK Possibly more Timothy Findley's version of the Ark.

PG Yeah.

TK Yeah. There are kind of two kinds of stories that exist in oral Creation stories—they're not the only two, but there's what they call an "Earth Diver Story" where the main characters in the drama of Creation come out of the sky and land in the ocean and start things from there. Yet there's another set called "Emergent Stories" in which we have the characters come out of the ground, through tubes and whatnot, onto the surface of the Earth. And I decided I'd work with the "Earth Diver Stories," and so in each of those sections you have this archetypal woman who does come out of the sky, winds up, you know, somehow, in a body of water, and the whole process begins from there. It was kind of nice, too, because it gave me a chance to talk about a more Native sense of the creation of the world within the novel.

PG Now, what's your access to all that Native or that Indian lore? You weren't raised amid it, were you?

TK No, no I wasn't raised, uh . . .

PG Father's Cherokee . . .

TK Father's Cherokee—mother's Greek and a little bit of German. I was raised in a small town in, actually in Northern California, up in the foothills. And, really it began with just being around other Native people when I was in my teenage years. And then I began to sort of make that my field of study, and I did quite a bit of work on oral Creation sto-

ries when I was at university and then, of course, you know, just listening to oral story tellers, and simply hanging out. I spent ten years out at Lethbridge—at the University of Lethbridge—and it’s very close to the largest reserve in Canada. I got to listen to Blackfoot storytellers, and Cree storytellers, for that matter, too, so it’s just a, kind of a culmination of years of just—just *listening*—and having a good time listening to those stories, too.

PG Where does Harry Robinson fit in?

TK Harry Robinson is a wonderful storyteller, and, as far as I’m concerned, Robinson really is a person who . . . set me going. I’d finished *Medicine River* before I’d read any of Robinson’s stuff, and I was working on what I like to call some “voice pieces,” where I was trying to recreate the sense of an oral storytelling voice in a written form. And I was having some success, but not much, to be honest. I was working on an anthology at the time and Wendy Wickwire, who worked with Robinson, sent me out some of Robinson’s stories, and when I saw those things I was just blown away. I couldn’t believe the power and the skill with which Robinson could work up a story—in English: they weren’t translated, they were simply transcribed—and how well he understood the power of the oral voice in a written piece. I read those stories and they just sort of turned things around for me. I could see what he had done and how he worked it and I began to try to adapt it to my own fiction. It was *inspirational*—I don’t use that word very often, because I think it’s so badly misused—but I remember sitting in my office, just sort of sweating, reading this stuff: it was so *good*.

PG What’s your own linguistic breadth? There’s some Cherokee in here.

TK There is. I wanted to . . . I had a choice of putting in a Native language, or I had the choice of making it up myself. I’ve got a couple of stories where I simply made it up. I wasn’t about to be bothered with people saying, “Is this authentic, or is this not authentic?” I figured if I made it up myself it had to be authentic. But this time around I wanted to pay some attention and some respect to that part of me that was my father’s life. So I used Cherokee in there to separate the chapters, and a little Cherokee for a little section that begins the story itself. After the Lone Ranger is done fooling around with how to start a story, then he gets serious, and he breaks into Cherokee at that point.

PG Tell me a bit about the—what do you say—the typography? What’s that



alphabet? When we tend to think of Native languages written, we often— or aboriginal languages written—we tend to think of *syllabics* or something, but is this thing an alphabet of its own? Or did you make it up?

TK No, no (laughs) that's a good question to ask—

PG I don't trust you, you know!

TK I know—and you shouldn't. No, it's the Cherokee syllabary. I promise it's that. And my Cherokee is so poor that I had to be very careful to get it right. I'm not even sure that I *did* get it right, but I had a colleague of mine, who's also Cherokee, who speaks and writes and reads it, and he gave me a hand with it, so I'm hoping that it's okay.

PG Did it ever occur to you that another book that opens with the theme of falling has got itself in trouble over playing with deeply felt religious . . .

TK Oh! Oh, yes—yes, no, when I was writing this book—

PG I'm talking about your *Satanic Verses*—

TK I *know* what you're talking about, yeah, actually there's a little bump to Rushdie at the end of the book, when the old Indians are complaining about Coyote not apologizing, and they say, "Remember what happened last time you rushed into a story, and—"

PG Oh, *rushed in*—

TK "—and didn't apologize." (Laughs).

PG I've got to read this whole damn thing again!

TK Yeah, no, I *was* worried about that, and *remain* a little bit worried about that, because I don't know just how much offence you give—in fiction—I mean, obviously you can give *great* offence in fiction—I mean Rushdie's proved that. And it is bothersome, and maybe it's because of the power of fiction—that it can have that effect on people—drive them to the heights of ecstasy, I suppose, and drive them to do all sorts of terrible things.

PG Surely not here. I mean, surely no offence from this book—

TK Well, I would hope not, but I would—

PG Bigots might—

TK Well, yes (laughs) there are enough of those in the world, too.

PG Okay, here's another question about real or not real.

TK Okay.

PG Sally Jo Weyha, Frankie Drake, Polly Hantas, Sammy Hearne, Johnny Cabot, Henry Cortez, C. B. Cologne, Barry Zannos.

TK (Laughing)

PG Are they all *real* actors?

- TK Well, they're real characters, I mean, John Cabot, and Sacajawea, and—you know, these people haven't had any time to be on stage, for the most part—they reside just within our history, and it seemed only natural that you might want to take 'em to Hollywood. I mean, Samuel Hearne probably would have liked to have done a bit part in a movie.
- PG Oh! *Sammy Hearne!* There was no *actor* called Sammy Hearne! That's *Samuel Hearne!*
- TK That's Samuel Hearne. These are all historical characters, for the most part, who wind up there. C. B. Cologne is, of course, Cristobal Colon, the famous mariner who is now running extras in Hollywood—people aren't going to have any clue what this book is about, you know that? (laughs)
- PG (laughing) Okay, you tell 'em—you've got a minute and a half—describe this indescribable book.
- TK I don't know how to describe it. They asked me when they did the dust jacket. They said, "Tom, Tom—please help us out. Could you please tell us what the book is about?" I said, "Jeez, I don't know." And so they did a fairly decent job on the dust jacket. I can't complain.
- PG Well, when you've got your Tony Hillerman and your Leon Rooke and your Margaret Atwood all raving about the book on the dustjacket, you're not doing too bad.
- TK No, it's nice. That's always helpful, too. Although, on my first book Tony Hillerman gave me a nice bump and somebody wrote me a letter and said that they were halfway through the book, after buying it on Tony Hillerman's recommendation, before they realized that no one was going to get shot, and that it was not a murder mystery.
- PG Are you going to move back to Canada?
- TK Yeah—soon as I can. Jobs at universities are tough to come by right now, but we're looking around. I may be in Toronto for the next year. Helen and I are trying to get back . . . we will, we will. It's just a matter of time.
- PG Did you really not start writing seriously until you met Helen?
- TK That's right. That's right, I wrote a short story just to impress her. I had nothing else to impress her with.
- PG She was teaching literature?
- TK She was teaching literature at the University of Lethbridge. We both had gotten there at the same time, and I was desperate to impress her. (laughs) So I showed her a piece of my poetry one night, and she said,

“Uh huh, that’s okay,” and I thought, “watch this, I’ll write a short story!” And so I did and she said, “that one’s okay, too,” and then I just got, I got dead serious, I mean, I’d been writing before, but not seriously—and away it went. I’m still trying to impress her.

PG Is it working?

TK Yeah, we have two kids and a very nice life. I think I’ve impressed her.

PG Now, there’s a film coming of *Medicine River*?

TK There is a film that’s going to be aired either in October or November on CBC Television.

PG Did you write it?

TK I wrote the script for it, yeah. I even had a small part in it.

PG Really? Who do you think you are, Tom Jackson?

TK Well, no, no, I’m not *that!* I wrote a part in for myself and then auditioned for it. It wasn’t in the book, but I thought, “I’ll write this part in, and I’ll write it in in such a way that they can’t cut it, and then I’ll audition for it.” So I did, and Stuart Margolin, who directed the film, either liked my audition, or was laughing so hard he couldn’t say no—one of the two—but I got to be in the film. That was fun.

PG Is Graham Greene in it?

TK Graham Greene’s in it, Tom Jackson’s in it, Sheila Tootoosis, Ben Cardinal—just a whole bunch of people—some really fine Native actors are in the piece. It was a lot of fun to do.

PG I was just thinking—*Green Grass, Running Water*—you couldn’t conceivably film it, could you? Because you’d have to throw out forty-two levels of meaning and half the jokes!

TK That’s what happens when you do a film script, anyway. Films are never as complex as novels, and I thought when I wrote *Green Grass, Running Water*—I said to myself, “Ah ha! Here’s a book that they can’t make into a movie!” But actually there’s a lot of interest in it, and so I don’t know what’s going to happen. My great fear is that they’re going to come back to me and say, “Would you script it?” and then I’ll be in *deep* trouble.

PG I’m just trying to . . . wait a minute . . . who’d do the Lone Ranger? Who’d do Ishmael?

TK You want to do Ishmael?

PG No! (laughs)

TK I’ll play the Lone Ranger. (laughs)

PG What’s the name of that guy—‘cause you use it—the guy who was

always the Indian? . . . Jeff whatsit—what is that guy's name?

TK The guy who was always the Indian?

PG The actor guy.

TK Oh, Portland Looking Bear—

PG No, no, this is in real-life—in the movies. Jeff Chandler.

TK Oh! Jeff Chandler, yeah, Jeff Chandler. Oh yes, there were a number of people who played Indians over and over again. Jeff Chandler, Sal Mineo, uh—

PG (Laughing) Great! I forgot Sal Mineo.

TK Victor Mature, I think, played Indians. Anthony Quinn played Indians. Everybody gets to play Indians except Indians. For good reason—like the book points out, a lot of Indians don't have Indian noses.

PG Well you have your guy get the false nose. He gets a false nose so he can play an Indian—

TK That's right.

PG —and then he nails it to the wall.

TK Yeah, and then he takes it down again because he realizes that he's going to have to wear the stupid thing if he's going to get parts. And that's the way life is, I s'pose.

PG Well, this little fifteen-minute interview's lasted for twenty-five minutes! And I still . . . I just hope we've done justice to the . . . I stole your elk joke—stole the elk substituting for artichokes joke—at the opening of this morning's program.

TK Oh, great, yeah—it's a wonderful dish. You should try it.

PG What, substituting elk for artichoke?

TK You bet! Try it sometime. It's great.

PG At the Dead Dog Café.

TK At the Dead Dog Café.

PG Blossom, Alberta.

TK Yep, yep—I keep hoping that somebody out there is going to open a thing called the "Dead Dog Café" with that menu—I'd go there and eat.

PG (Laughing) Don't hold your breath. Thank you, sir.

TK Thank you.

PG Thomas King, the author, first of all, of *Medicine River*, and *A Coyote Columbus Story*—we haven't talked about that, either—and, most recently—the book we *have* been talking about this morning: *Green Grass, Running Water*.