



Mary Harding (left) and Marcie Rendon (right)

The following is the transcript of an interview with Marcie Rendon, a member of the White Earth Nation (**MARCIE**). This interview took place at Perpich Center for Arts Education on November 19, 2024 as part of the Native Authors & Artists Series.

The interview is being conducted by Mary Harding (**MARY**), Dance Education Specialist at Perpich Center. The audience (**AUDIENCE**) included teachers, library media specialists, and fans of Marcie.

Words and phrases not important to the content of the conversation have been redacted.

MARY: Hello. Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the Perpich Center for Arts Education. Thank you so much for coming here tonight on our last warm day of the fall. My name is Mary Harding and I have two roles here. I teach in the dance department at the high school and I'm the Dance Education Specialist in the Professional Development and Resource Programs group. It's my extreme honor to introduce to you Marcie Rendon. She is a parent of an alumni here [at Perpich Arts High School]. Marcie, a member of the White Earth Nation, is an award-winning author, playwright, poet, and freelance writer. Also a community arts activist. She supports other Native artists, writers, creators to pursue their art and is a speaker for colleges and community groups on Native issues, leadership, and writing. Rendon is the creative mind behind Raving Native Theater and has curated community created performances including *Art Is...Creative Native Resilience* which premiered on TPT [Twin Cities Public Television] in June 2019. She has been recognized as a 50 over 50 change maker by Minnesota AARP and POLLEN [a media arts non-profit organization] and is a 2020 McKnight Distinguished Artist. Also in 2020, Marcie was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters by Adler University in recognition of her distinguished work as a social justice champion, author, and arts activist. So let's welcome Marcie Rendon.

AUDIENCE: (clapping)

MARY: Marcie, can you share more about your background and your experiences in school and how those influenced your journey as an author? Or, just talk about your journey as an author?

MARCIE: I grew up in northern Minnesota at a time when there were no expectations for me as a Native person. There was no expectation that I would go to college, do anything, even though I was pretty much a straight A student. I did go to college and I've been writing since I learned how to write. I learned how to actually write in cursive before kindergarten and then learned how to print and then I was a troublemaker in school so I sat at the back of the room and wrote little stories and illustrated them myself. So I've been writing my whole life since I learned how to write, but no one told me I could grow up and be a writer.

I got a college degree. The intention was to study law because at that time we were supposed to do something and go back and help our people. So I was going to do law and then after four years I decided I probably never wanted to sit in the classroom again. But then I did get a master's degree from St. Mary's in Human Development where I basically wrote my way through school, through the master's program. I think I took one class in a classroom.

I have this whole career working in prisons. When I came down to the cities I worked for Heart of the Earth Survival School prison program and I went into Stillwater or Park Heights, Lino Lakes, St. Cloud, and Shakopee [prisons] working with Native inmates pre-release. And after that I worked in an adolescent treatment program, outpatient and then after that in an adult addiction program. And meanwhile I was writing. I mean I've never not written. The hospital [I was working at] moved to Tucson or France. In fact, it might have moved to both places but I wasn't going to move. And so they gave me a year severance and I thought, "Oh wow! I can just write." I was getting paid to write.

And then that year was coming to an end and I had three kids and I thought maybe I should make some money at this if I'm going to do this, and that's when I started doing journalism and literally I was writing anything and everything that would pay me— newspaper articles, magazines, non-profit reports. Yeah, just anything that would pay and then I was writing crime novels. The first three were really, really, really... I knew they were bad. There was no hope those things would ever be published.

But then in the mid 90s, Cheryl Walsh Bellville, the photographer whose artwork, photographs are in the poetry book [*Anishinaabe Songs for a New Millenium*] came to me and she wanted to do a children's book about powwows. And so that was my first actual publication, *Powwow Summer*, a children's nonfiction for grades like three to five. And then we did another one, *Farmer's Market: Families Working Together*. So those were the first books that got published. And meanwhile, I had gone to Intermedia Arts when they existed and saw Margo Kane. She's the First Nations actress from Canada and she has a piece called *Moondance* which is her solo

performance and I went, and I'd never seen live theater but I went to Intermedia Arts and saw her and I said, "Damn, no one told me we could do this." You know I had never seen live theater let alone a Native woman on stage and within a year I had written a performance piece and performed it at Intermedia Arts and that's when I started writing for theater. So it was just like I was writing, writing, writing anything and everything.

MARY: You already answered the second question. How did you get into writing? Which is you always just wrote.

MARCIE: I think the bigger answer with that question is reading. I'm a compulsive reader. Soup cans, cereal boxes, you know. If there's written word I'm reading it. And yeah, I think when I was growing up and [living] up north, there was the bookmobile. And after a certain point in time the librarian would show up each week with a stack of books that she was pretty sure I'd want to read.

MARY: It's amazing, yes! I think I'm a compulsive reader, that's why I ask the dancers to not wear t-shirts with words because...

MARCIE: ...'cause you'll read them?

MARY: Yeah. So you've written several novels. What's your approach to the storytelling? What are the messages you're striving to convey?

MARCIE: I think it depends on what I'm writing. So with the crime novels... Has anybody read any of the Cash Blackbear [Mysteries]? So with the crime novels, if you're a compulsive reader of crime it's the kind of thing where you'll start at 3:00 in the afternoon and if it's really good you can't put it down until 3:00 in the morning. So that's what I'm trying to do. That's my goal with the crime novels. It just so happens that apparently there's a lot of information about Native Americans that's also in the books. But that's not what I'm thinking about when I'm writing. I'm thinking about Cash and the crime and how do we get it solved. And then, how to keep anybody's attention [who is stuck] in the book?

But the children's books, I think that, like I said, growing up there were no Native books. There weren't and so there was no mirror, no reflection, and so with my books, what I'm trying to do is give Native kids a picture that they exist. We exist. But then also to say to non-Native kids, we still exist, we're here. So my books aren't set in the past. They are contemporary; people who are alive right now. They're doing things that... what did somebody ask me? Oh, with the children book, *Stitches of Tradition*, someone asked me how come she doesn't have a treadle

machine and I said because we have electricity. So that's what I'm trying to say with the children's books.

MARY: 'Cause that's why we have [American Indian education for all students] in the [Minnesota K-12 Academic] standards. One of the reasons that we have it in the standards is this romanticized historical image of I guess treadle sewing machines instead of electricity.

MARCIE: That somehow we are living in a hut or teepee out in the woods and you know I live in a house with electricity and I got three laptops that I switch off and on and do my writing on.

MARY: If educators are just beginning to explore the work of Native authors, are there general cultural and aesthetic concepts you can share to help them develop a respectful lens for understanding and engaging with the words? I think we already started talking about that. That you're here.

MARCIE: I think you said part of it—it is that we exist today in this modern world. I think the other thing is that there are two major tribes in Minnesota, the Ojibwe and the Dakota. And the Dakota since 1862, they were exiled and there was the hanging down in Mankato. The largest mass hanging in the United States and that was three months after Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. So the discordant that happens around Native people is still on the law books—in the state of Minnesota the Dakota are not supposed to be here and so there's a legal status.

There's all kinds of things that teachers should know. That there are different tribes. Dakota and Ojibwe, those are the two major tribes and then there's Ho-Chunk, Navajo, Denai, Pueblo, Lakota. You know just about any tribe that exists in the United States lives in Minneapolis. Minneapolis has one of the largest Native populations in the country.

The other thing that's cool about Minneapolis is that this is the birthplace of the American Indian Movement and so there are all kinds of Native programs here that exist because of the American Indian Movement, even though there are questions about their tactics or whatever. So that's something that doesn't get taught. The other thing that doesn't get taught is that we exist in a different legal status. Most schools teach that you have local, state, and federal governments, and the tribal government is never talked about. And tribal government does exist, is real, there's a sovereign status. There were treaties that were made that give Native tribes different rights and different responsibilities within the context of being a tribe.

There's always a question about how come Natives get casinos? It's because we operate as sovereign nations. People don't get mad that Monaco, it's a city that's set up for nothing but gambling, and it's a nation, and nobody gets mad about that. But you talk about Shakopee and

people go *upset sound*. There's a different legal status and there's much confusion about that because it's not taught in schools.

MARY: Good points. That will help us in the classroom. How can educators navigate potential challenges or sensitivities when teaching about Native American arts and culture? I think that we sometimes, we're worried. White teachers are worried we are going to do it wrong and we are going to say some wrong things. I think we have a lot of worry.

MARCIE: And you will do it wrong. Because there has been such a lack of education about Native people and who we are. You will do it wrong and so the experts actually are the kids and so if you were going to teach Native dance, you would have to have the kids teach you. Because if they've been on the powwow trail they're the ones that are the experts about it.

MARY: How can educators navigate potential challenges or sensitivities when teaching about Native American arts and culture?

MARCIE: Well, don't be afraid to make mistakes. All kids, I think, are way more forgiving than what we give them credit for. And I mean, I have a 16-year-old granddaughter living with me now and she is in a constant fight with the history teacher. And this kid has a way better critical analysis. I mean I listen to her talk and I'm [thinking] where did you learn all this, but she thinks and she's trying to say to her teacher... I can't even think of some of the stuff that she said, but about history. How come you're not teaching about the Iroquois Confederacy that you know helped build the Constitution of the United States? How come you're not talking about the genocide that occurred during or after the American Revolution? She's asking these questions and the teacher doesn't want to talk to her. If she raises her hand the teacher just kind of goes over her and that's not helpful. I guess the adult feels like they're being questioned.

MARY: Well it's about power and it's about silencing kids and there's a lot of stuff going on in that.

MARCIE: But you know to listen to kids. To give them credit for what they do know.

MARY: So we have to look at the kids, they will need us. In what ways can literature and other arts be used to amplify Indigenous voices and narratives? Can we send some books to that history teacher?

MARCIE: If you're using contemporary Native artists' work that's key. There's the All My Relations Arts Gallery on Franklin Avenue where there's always an art exhibit up. Rosie Seamus

is and she's probably been here. She's an amazing dancer doing modern dance so there's not just powwow dance but there's modern dancers. Sequoia Hauck, Sara Pillatzki-Warzeha, [and Adrienne Zimiga] just started a new Native theater company [focused on Dakota and Ojibwe stories]. So you know there are things that are happening again—back to there's a huge Native population here who are doing all kinds of things. You talk any kind of art that you're thinking of—it's happening here. And then some of the history again back to whether it's Minneapolis being a relocation city or the American Indian Movement starting here and plus all of the Native organizations that are literally the first in the country, they exist here. So that it's not for a lack of resource. It's just that people kind of never step out of their own comfort zone to find these things.

AUDIENCE: Jonathan Thunder.

MARY: Jonathan Thunder, we had him last year [as a guest]. And I'll tell you about who's coming here next time, too, everybody. So can you talk a little bit about *Stitches of Tradition* and what was your inspiration? I want to hear this.

MARCIE: I wish I had brilliant things to say. So, I have my newest crime novel, and both *Where They Last Saw Her* and that [*Stitches in Tradition*] came out in September of this year. I was working on that novel and I was fighting with the editor and I was like I'm not going to write anymore on this book. To heck with you. And so I fell asleep and I woke up and this little song was running through my head about measuring from belly button to belly button, from waist to ankle, and then Grandma's sewing machine going whirr, whirr, whirr, and the kid falling asleep. So I woke up, wrote it down, the whole story. And then I woke up the next morning and read it and thought well this isn't so bad. And I did a little bit of editing and sent it to my agent and she said, "Oh this is really good!" and sent it to Heartdrum [Publishing] and I said sure go ahead. She sent it to them, that same day they sent back they wanted to give me a contract. We went back and forth over about two days and that's what's there. So that's how the story happened.

MARY: Dreaming, dreaming is the ...

MARCIE: Yeah probably, but also I'm a sewer [seamstress]. If I wasn't writing, I think that my first dream was to be a fashion designer. And then that didn't happen for various reasons but I've always done sewing and so I think that that's where the whole thing came from.

MARY: So can you also talk a little bit about *Anishinaabe Songs for a New Millennium*? That's the poetry book we had out there.

MARCIE: I feel like I've been anthologized to death with poetry. I've been writing poetry again my whole life and if you pick up an anthology with Native poets, Native women poets, chances are I've got something in there. But I've never had my own book of poetry and most of my poetry is kind of "in-your-face" poetry. I'm known as a spoken word poet and my most published poem is one called "What's an Indian Woman To Do?," "...when the white girls act more Indian than the Indian women do?" My tongue has tripped over [Ojibwe words and I've] been corrected by a blond U of M undergraduate that goes on and on and on. So that's what I'm known for.

But this book is a collection of what I call dream songs and they're very short. They're almost like Haiku but they're not. They're not Haiku but when you listen to Ojibwe music in the song that you hear there are words in Ojibwe and then there's what's called vocables. There's just a lot of sounds that repeat around that little string of words. And so the first half of this book are what I call dream songs and they're just really short songs that if I could sing I'd sing but I can't. And what I wanted to say with this is that as Ojibwe people we can still dream our songs. We exist, we're here, nothing was ever lost. You know there's this whole thing that somehow we disappeared or the culture is gone or the language is gone and here in Minneapolis you can take an Ojibwe language class any day of the week. And people kept songs alive—people kept the ceremonies alive, and we just have to get quiet enough or slow down enough to participate. And so the first half really was my intention to say to Native people you can do this. Nothing's been lost. That if you get quiet enough you'll hear these dreams songs because everybody gets a song.

And then the second half of the book is performance songs and these are actually songs that I've written that are set to Western musical notation. So you can find piano music or a full orchestra to play and sing these songs, too. Some of them were written for theater. Some of them have been written for choral groups. Some are commissioned by an individual for them to just sing. There's a composer over in St Paul, Ann Milliken, and she has an opera called *Swede Hollow* and it's about Swede Hollow [one of the oldest areas in St Paul, originally home to Dakota people]. I wrote the very last song of her opera. And if you go online you can Google and hear the Opera. I never went to an opera in my life until August of this year. Again back to that thing we were told there's no expectation, that we can't do anything but if somebody tells me I can do something chances are I can. And I think that's true for kids. Just give them the opportunity and say of course you can, they will rise to it.

MARY: We talked about two things when you and I first met tonight. I absorbed one of your books last Thursday night. It was a murder book and my librarian made me start at the beginning. So at the end is the author's note which talks about the history of that time and what was happening and not just about the residential schools but also what was happening

with taking the children before the 1978 Indian Child Welfare Act. And so my question after reading [the book] and seeing the [history], as a teacher, I just was wondering how should we approach that with students? Do you let them explore the story and then hit that? Do you give them context? I don't know. Of course it's teacher's choice but I was just wondering your thoughts on how to introduce that. I know, is there an answer? I don't know.

MARCIE: So the Cash Blackbear books are set in 1970 so that's like the background of the question because yeah it was right after the boarding school era and it was at a time in history when Native kids were being taken and placed in white foster homes. We know that 60% of the kids from Red Lake were taken and placed in foster homes, and we know that between 40% and 60% of the kids from White Earth were taken and placed in white foster homes. This is all part of the acculturation assimilation policy. I do think that if you write to Soho Press, the publisher, we put together a study guide or a question list. Okay, if I'm reading something I would rather read it and then have the discussion, but that's me. Maybe it depends on what works best for the teacher and how the teacher teaches best.

MARY: Yeah. I go back and forth on it because sometimes when students are looking at dance from different times they are looking at it with TikTok eyes so sometimes I want to frame it a little bit and then sometimes I'm like let's just explore. Let's just watch it, so I go all over the place. But it's a question we can talk about, I don't think there is an answer for everybody but we can continue to talk about it. The other question we were talking about... I was reading on Thursday night about Cash seeing spirits of the man who was murdered and his wife, and then on Sunday I went to New Native Theater and saw a play by our friend Oogie_Push.

AUDIENCE: Full Circle Theater.

MARY: Full Circle Theater. Thanks! So... Full Circle Theater and *The Adventures of a Traveling Meskwaki*. I saw it on Sunday and I was sitting there and Marcie was called out in the play. "And Marcie Rendon..." and I was like, "Oh my god, I'm going to interview her Tuesday."

MARCIE: I worked with her [Oogie_Push] when she was a freshman or sophomore at Haskell [Indian Nations] University.

MARY: Yes. So in that play there are these moments that she's talking about herself, and moments of kind of like transcending or leaving her body. So, I just was really interested in this idea that I saw you in two things in three days. I have talked to my friend Stephanie about it, as well, and we talked about it a little bit before—it is not magical realism.

MARCIE: It is not magical realism.

MARY: That is what I learned.

MARCIE: I fight with my editors about that. It's like if somebody's writing a book and they talk about the Holy Ghost or the Virgin Mary they don't call that magic realism. There's just the expectation of oh, somebody might just have a vision of God. That's not called magic realism. So you know the reality that we live as Native people. And I believe this is true of everybody. Everybody is born with the ability, intuitive abilities, but the way our educational system is set up it's educated out of people. Like you're just supposed to think and you're just supposed to input information and if a kid comes along and says... My daughter, when she was three or four, we were over in St Paul and she says Leo's house is on fire. We got to go, Leo's house is on fire and we got in the car, [and went] over to Leo's house here in Minneapolis. His house was on fire. You know but that gets educated out of kids. And I think that art in particular can reignite that for people and I think that many people who are artists, in any form of art, get into that space and you're not in this world. You're like drawing in all other kinds of things.

MARY: I feel smarter now. Okay, so here's the last question and then if you [in the audience] have questions we'll be out there soon. What brings you joy in your work as a writer?

MARCIE: You know I love writing. I do. I hear people say, "Oh, writing is so hard." Hmm, I like it. I think it is fun. I think it is great to put things together in a way that makes people laugh or makes them cry or... so that brings me joy. There are so many things that I know nothing about like reviews and things that other people seem to place value on. I just didn't grow up knowing about, but I do read *People* magazine and *Where They Last Saw Her* was reviewed in *People* magazine. The one that has Snoop Dogg on the cover and I was like, "Oh, I know I made it!" I don't know even 10 to 20 years ago if I got a review in *People* magazine if I'd known I made it. Apparently that's not everybody's criteria.

MARY: And Snoop Dogg, I'm going to have to look at that. I'll check with our librarian. Are there any questions from the house?

AUDIENCE: So how many of your written stories are from actual events?

MARCIE: With the crime novels I try not to write anything that's fact because of my work in the prisons and my work as a counselor. I try to never write anything that can come back to me with somebody saying you're violating my confidence.

The *Powwow Summer* is a nonfiction book and *Farmer's Market: Families Working Together* is nonfiction. I have a book coming out in about a year, a children's book called *Renegade* that's about the little Buffalo at Red Lake that escaped and was running around up in Clearwater County. I mean that's based on fact but it's a buffalo. I don't think he's going to get mad at me.

And I try when I'm writing the crime novels, the Cash Blackbear ones, they're set in the Red River Valley so it's a lot of Scandinavian people. And what I do is I go online and then look up Scandinavian names from Norway and Sweden and then I look at newspapers in Fargo-Moorhead to make sure that I'm not, I'm trying really hard not to use anybody's name. But the places are real in both Cash and in *Where They Last Saw Her* except I made a fictitious reservation.

AUDIENCE: So is it based on your personal experiences growing up?

MARCIE: They are not autobiographical. The only thing in the Cash Blackbear mysteries that's autobiographical mostly would be that she shoots pool and I was in a pool league up until just before COVID. So I haven't played in a while.

MARY: Other questions?

AUDIENCE: I wondered about growing up, were you able to continue to learn or speak Ojibwe language?

MARCIE: No, I started relearning it when I was I think 18, 17 or 18.

AUDIENCE: Do you feel like relearning it now or going back to it? Do you feel the vocabulary or the grammar structure impacts your own writing in English?

MARCIE: What I've been told is that the way that I write... so are you familiar with Angeline Boulley *Firekeeper's Daughter*? So her dad loves my books and one of the things he says is that I write in the way that we tell stories. Which that's not something that I thought about. I just write that way and then my mentor was Jim Northrop. He was an author from Fond du Lac [Band of Lake Superior] who's since passed and he told me that whenever I could, I should put Ojibwe into what I'm writing. So then I mean even if you just say one or two words every day that's worth it and even for as many years as I've been learning I still talk like a baby. I think that in order to really learn it you have to do an immersion—you would have to live someplace for a month so that's all that you're hearing.

AUDIENCE: Thank you. My other question: Were there early authors or poets that really spoke to you, and then also who are you into lately?

MARCIE: I think that E. E. Cummings was one of the first poets that I read and I just patterned my writing after him. You know, no punctuation, no capitalization. What was the other?

AUDIENCE: Who do you read right now?

MARCIE: Ramona Emerson, she is a Denai tribe writer. She has two novels out—*Exposure* is her recent one and then *Shutter* was her first one. Angeline Boulley has two books out. But I read crime by John Sandford and Lee Child. I know Stephen King really isn't crime, but Stephen King—anything by Stephen King I'll read. I don't even know if it's out yet but *Perfect Home* is excellent, another crime novel.

AUDIENCE: So just as a writer, someone who writes crime mystery kind of stuff, do you think it's easier or better to come up with the perfect crime first? Something that someone could realistically get away with and then later figure out who did it? Or, do you think you know this person's doctor is going to be a really cool twist I'm going to make them the killer and then do the crime after? Which one would you say is easier writing, mechanics wise?

MARCIE: Are you a writer? I think you have to write in the way that makes sense for you. You know that for me with the Cash Blackbear novels, I know what the crime is and I know that Cash is going to solve it. And then I just write to the end of the book and by the time I've gotten to the end of that book I know what the next crime is and that Cash is going to solve it.

With *Where They Last Saw Her*, I was working with an editor who wanted a specific MMIW [Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women] story and so it was creating an outline, creating a storyline, and writing that in response... I mean it's my writing and it's my story but it was what, as an editor, she would find as marketable. And I'm working on a second stand-alone now with another marketable idea, you know. But I'm also writing book 5, so book 4 of Cash will come out March 4, 2025. But I think that as a writer you have to... like in one of those really, really bad novels that I have, one of the crimes is perfect but I can't figure out how to include it in the Cash novel yet. So you have to find your voice. Your way of doing it. Once you get it you'll know.

AUDIENCE: Thank you.

AUDIENCE: I saw you in *People* magazine and I said, "Oh, Marcie's made it!" I ran into you at some event, I don't know a year and a half ago, and I asked when's the next Cash Blackbear coming out and you said you were working on something else first and I'll tell you I was

devastated. But I'm very happy to see number 4 and then hear that there is a number 5. Do you have a million more Cash Blackbear in you and how do you know when a series is done? How do you know? I don't want it to be done.

MARCIE: I actually don't know. If you saw me back then book 4 was already written. The publishing industry controls things that I can't control. So they wanted *Where They Last Saw Her* to come out before book 4, so I was just sitting on that thing. And yeah, anyways it's out and book 5 will show up, too. And I don't know when I'll be done with it. I'll keep writing Cash as long as Cash keeps coming up with the story.

AUDIENCE: I was part of the boarding school people and so I was taken from the reserve and sent there. But I grew up with reading Tony Hillerman and then William Kent Kruger and found myself confused by how do we allow people from other cultures to write about our people.

MARCIE: It's not our choice. The publishing industry is composed of white men who run the publishing board. That's changing slowly now. My editor with *Where They Last Saw Her* is a young Asian woman. There are no Native American editors here in the United States. It sounds like you're from Canada. Yeah, Canada has a much wider Native population in the publishing industry. Penguin Random in Canada right now has a Native editor who's seeking Native writers and building a group of Native writers. It pisses me off, you know. When you go to Amazon and pull up American Indian stories, my book would be number four best seller if it wasn't for a couple of those people. And it is confusing. My granddaughter was in high school and they had one of those authors talk about the boarding school era. And she was like sending me picture texts from school and she was in tears. And I ended up going to the school and said you know the state mandates here in Minnesota say that you're supposed to teach Native American information and you're supposed to include Native American authors not just the Native American story.

MARY: I just want to say thank you so much Marcie. So much to dream about. We're continuing this series that we started last year and of course it's November so we won't be back until February everyone. Tuesday, February 4, 2025, Sam Zimmerman the illustrator of this beautiful book, *How the Birds Got Their Songs*, will be here to speak about his art and this book. I hope that you all come for that. So friends, you'll be able to speak to Marcie down in the library and some lovely colleagues of mine will show you how to get there. Thank you, again, Marcie and thank you so much everyone for being here.