

**On the Occasion
Of conferring the degree
Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*
upon
Jeanette Christine Armstrong**

Chancellor Buller, today I have the honour of introducing Jeanette Christine Armstrong.

Jeanette Armstrong is a traditional knowledge keeper of the Okanagan nation, and has proudly carried those invaluable gifts. She is a writer, visual artist, researcher, educator, leader, and activist.

She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in creative writing (from UVic), a PhD in Indigenous environmental ethics, and held the post of Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Studies at the University of British Columbia Okanagan.

Her academic and creative work emphasizes the interconnectedness of the individual, the community, history, and the environment.

She was a founding member of the En'owkin Centre in Penticton, and served as its director, executive director and vice-president. Through the Centre she has had immense impact on education in the arts. The Centre houses the International School of Writing (in partnership with UVic), as well as programs for the visual arts which have nurtured both emergent and professional artists. Theytus Publications, the first Indigenous-owned publishing house in Canada, has helped many Indigenous authors' dreams become reality.

Influential Stó:lo Nation author Lee Maracle wrote, “I think the arts has great potential to create citizens....Community is an imagined thing. And if your imagination isn’t working – and, of course, in oppressed people that’s the first thing that goes – you can’t imagine anything better. Once you can imagine something different, something better, then you’re on your way.”

Jeannette Armstrong certainly imagined something different. Her dedication and hard work brought imagination to life. Her commitment to local artists and writers has been a driving force in helping to foster cultural reclamation.

Celebrated Cherokee author Thomas King said, “Once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world.”

To tell a story one needs a voice; one needs words. Dr. Armstrong has guided many on the path to find literary and linguistic voices. To bring ideas out from the internal realm of the mind they need to be articulated in writing or in speech.

As David Hare wrote in his play *a Map of the World*, “the act of writing is the act of discovering what you believe.”

Indigenous language revitalization is also central to the mission of the En’owkin Centre. Armstrong co-founded the Certificate in Indigenous Language Revitalization there (in partnership with UVic). Nurturing new speakers celebrates the past, the present and the future of the Nsyilxcn language. The work of Dr. Armstrong has helped countless community members find their voices, and imagine their futures.

Jeanette Armstrong's academic voice has explored Indigenous perspectives on creativity, and the environmental ethics encoded in Okanagan Syilx oral literature. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and an Officer of the Order of Canada. She connects the knowledge embedded in storytelling to identity, the relationship of the people to the land, and ecological sustainability.

Her own artistic voice has been loud and clear in novels such as *Slash* and *Whispering in Shadows*, as well as poetry in *Breath Tracks* and children's literature in *Dancing With Cranes*. To quote from one of her own poems:

*Words are memory
A window in the present
A coming to terms with meaning
History made into now
A surge in reclaiming
The enormity of the past
A piece in the collective experience of time
A sleep in which I try to awaken
The whispered echoes of voices*

Dr. Armstrong, courageous leader, clarion voice for the arts, has worked tirelessly for the environment and the Indigenous peoples of Canada and internationally.

Chancellor Buller, I have the honour to present to you Jeanette Christine Armstrong, advocate for Indigenous rights, and relentless force for positive change, for the degree Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.

12 November 2024