

Strong words

AMY REISWIG

First Nations writer Janet Rogers doesn't mean to be confrontational—just honest.



PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Janet Rogers

Amid tables of cables, cords and screens at Victoria's MediaNet office, multitasking Janet Rogers works on a radio commission for Toronto's imagineNATIVE film and media arts festival, pulling together sound clips of music and poetry into a nine-minute piece. As she plays it for me, I realize again—as I did reading her latest book, *Unearthed* (Leaf Press, Sept 2011)—that Rogers is an artist of dynamic, enterprising vision who revels in the creation of meaning and structure where others might see mess.

Rogers' life and art resist simplistic categorization. Born in Vancouver in the early 1960s, she is culturally Mohawk/Tuscarora, from the Six

Nations territory in southern Ontario, but now lives in Coast Salish territory here in Victoria and travels and performs across Canada and the world (including, most recently, New Mexico and New Zealand). Her creativity is like a roving spirit, taking shape in and inhabiting pretty much any genre she applies herself to: visual art, poetry, short fiction, playwriting, spoken word, performance poetry and video poetry. Recent work includes books of poetry—*Splitting the Heart* (Ekstasis 2007) and *Red Erotic* (Ojistah 2010)—as well as CDs *Got Your Back* (2011, with Mohawk poet Alex Jacobs) and *Firewater* (2009), the latter earning her nominations at the Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards and the Native American Music Awards. Rogers can also be heard hosting Native Waves Radio on CFUV, and a native music column called Tribal Clefs on CBC Radio One's All Points West each Tuesday.

Rogers' most recent book of poems, launched at UVic in early October, continues her personal and artistic journey of bridging borders and busting through perceived limitations. At just over 100 pages, *Unearthed* is a surprising pulling together of powerful order from the equally powerful chaos that is capital-L Life.

Thematically, the book is divided into three sections: love, politics and identity. But each section contains poems incorporating all three concepts. "When you're an indigenous person and aware of your political surroundings," the outgoing, intense Rogers explains to me, "you have to engage. It's tiring. It's exhausting, infuriating. That's the dance, man. And you're born into it." A good part of the book is Rogers showing us the difficulty—and the beauty—of this dance, as engaging with her surroundings provides meditations on land, love, loss, the age-old dialectic between body and spirit, notions of home, belonging, betrayal and culture clash.

Rogers admits that in this book "the process is a little bit raw. Editing makes great writing, but truth makes great writing too. My words are my truth. I wait for that feeling in the gut that says, 'That's my truth.'"

Therefore, the book's tone changes from page to page. Statements about nature range from sassy colloquialisms about how the "chill-filled winds bitch-slap my cheeks" to moments of lyrical description: "time takes on shapes/ripe fruit in the orchard." Instances of personal revelation vary from bold assertions like "get an eye/ful/try not to go blind/from my light!" to contrasting expressions of doubt and vulnerability such as "would rather fly than fight/but this skin weighs me down." Similarly, comments on Canadian culture are philosophical—"people can never be/illegal or illegitimate/the earth knows this"—yet also accusatory: "I have been cut/that's my blood/that stains your land/and flows thick in the rivers,/feeds the fish, you feed/your children. How does it taste?"

Rogers acknowledges the somewhat adversarial nature of the poems emanating from and reflecting what she calls a "split heart" relationship with Canada. For example, in a poem called "Love Your Country" she asks in the first line: "Do I offend you?" and adds "That's my ancestors' voice/ in your ears/...you know it/in your colonial bones" before stating: "I don't apologize/ if you're sick/ of hearing about us."

"That's just my truth," Rogers tells me, a mixture of defiance and humility. "I don't try to be controversial. I'm just trying—if I'm

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trying to do anything—to relate honest messages from an aboriginal perspective. Hopefully it won’t be off-putting.” While it might certainly make some readers uncomfortable, that’s not wholly a bad thing from

Rogers’ perspective. “It’s good that people don’t know what to expect. We shouldn’t know what to expect from one another if we’re all living authentic lives.”

If Rogers is authentically frustrated and angry, even divisive, she is also authentically reaching out inclusively with a spirit of pained but hopeful humanity. For instance, in another poem she writes: “sounds like complaints/but try it on—this truth/ maybe it fits you too.” The inclusive address forces readers of all backgrounds to ask themselves how they relate to Rogers’ messages, which in several instances she delivers with almost sermonic fervour to everyone: “steady on brothers and sisters/steady on/we’ll be

fine”; “spirit makes it all possible/we carry on as proud people/spinning so much love/from one split heart.”

“The message is for you too, Amy,” Rogers tells me, leaning across the table with a warm, embracing smile. “The essence of poetry is medicine—good things for the spirit and the mind.”

Throughout, the book communicates a sense of urgency: a driving need to share these diverse messages. “I’ve lost people,” she explains. “Even just in March this year: my niece. I see her as someone who didn’t make it. I want to honour those who didn’t make it by keeping my words strong.”

This is a book of strong words indeed: words that confront, words that question, that celebrate and exhort and try to make sense of our collective mess and mystery. “Life is the whole journey, from start to finish and beyond,” she tells me. And *Unearthed* is ultimately a reminder to us of the simple, unifying truth—and a kaleidoscopic search for a way to say—that “Life is People/Life is People/Life is People.”



As a transplanted central Canadian from Montreal, writer and editor Amy Reiswig is grateful for the ability to share life in these beautiful BC lands with the cultures and people who have loved them for millennia.



Janet Marie Rogers
Unearthed

The healing benefits of warmth

“To be interested in the changing seasons is a happier state of mind than to be hopelessly in love with Spring.” —George Santayana

As autumn fades into winter, it’s a good time to give some thought to how you stay happy—and healthy—until spring comes around again. “Increased indoor living, dampness and cold, and limited sunshine all bring their own challenges,” says Triangle Healing’s owner Diane Regan. She adds, “Triangle is chock-full of ideas and solutions for staying healthy, pain-free and active throughout the winter months.”

If the lack of sunshine plays havoc with your spirit, Triangle has several solutions for you. “They should really call them happy lamps,” says Regan, referring to her line of full-spectrum-light lamps for treating SAD (seasonal affective disorder). “Even if the lack of sunshine doesn’t stop you in your tracks, most people find benefit from additional sunlight. We no longer sleep through the long winter nights, so if you’re going to stay active like it’s summer, give your body the sunlight it craves.” Triangle carries the vitamin D-producing Dr. Mercola healthy tanning system. “Come in for a session and bask in the warmth of the sun again,” invites Regan.

We’re naturally less energetic in the winter months, so getting to the gym can be an extra challenge. Triangle has some great “joint sensitive” solutions. “We’ve just got in the new German-made bellicon [1] Mini Trampolines,” says an enthusiastic Regan. “This is one of the best ways to give your whole body a workout, without putting stress on your joints, or braving the weather.”

With the windows closed and the heat on, keeping your air clean and fresh is essential. “Our IQ Air systems are very popular at this time of the year. As the dampness sets in and ventilation is limited, we need to remember just how essential oxygen-rich clean air is for our well-being,” says Regan.

If your joints are your barometer, heat—wonderful, warm, body-drenching heat—is just what you need. Triangle carries a full line of Eden Infrared heaters from under-the-desk to full-floor models. They’re quiet, safe, can save you a substantial amount on your heating bill, and don’t reduce humidity.

And then there’s the ultimate warmer—a sauna. Come in on a particularly damp day and see just how soothing a sauna can be. Triangle has a full-line of quality, attractive saunas.

Now, after all that, if you find yourself hopelessly in love with Spring, stop in and enter Triangle’s Air Miles Give-away. The next chance to win tickets to anywhere in the world is December 15th! (It’s Spring in Argentina right now!)



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