The background of the page is a painting of a desert landscape. It features a large, flat-topped mesa in the center, rendered in warm tones of orange, yellow, and brown. The foreground shows a sloping hillside with sparse green and brown vegetation. The sky is a deep, vibrant blue with some lighter, wispy clouds. The overall style is expressive and textured, with visible brushstrokes.

# I am from the Sleepy-Rock People clan, born for the Bitter Water clan.

Laura Tohe introduces herself in the traditional Diné (Navajo) way: first her maternal clan and then her paternal clan. It means she is born from her mother Laura Florence and for her father, Benson Tohe—an important distinction that not only is at the heart of Tohe's Native American heritage, but also at the heart of her academic research. She studies how contemporary Native people maintain the strength of traditional matrilineal cultures in their daily lives, their literature, and their oral storytelling.

ch'oli'i dinetah—where changing woman was found

WHY? WRITERS ARE A STRANGE BREED. MOST WILL TELL YOU THAT BEING A WRITER IS NOT THE GLAMOROUS LIFE OF FAME AND FORTUNE SO OFTEN DEPICTED IN THE MOVIES. WRITING IS DIFFICULT...AT LEAST, GOOD WRITING IS DIFFICULT. STILL, EVERYONE SEEMS TO WANT TO BE A WRITER. TWO ACCOMPLISHED ASU WRITERS TRY THEIR BEST TO ANSWER WHY?

## A WOMAN'S PLACE BY JESSICA MCCANN

In the early 1950s, a young Indian woman gathered up her five small children and fearlessly walked away from a failing marriage. They went to live near her mother on the Navajo reservation in northern Arizona. Their home—a traditional hogan of wood poles and bark and earth—had neither plumbing nor electricity.

“With less than a high school education, my mother took a job as a cook with the Bureau of Indian Affairs school. She cooked over institutional stoves, washed heavy steel pots, and served food to boarding school students,” recalls Tohe, the oldest daughter among those five wee children. “My mother with her trays and cumbersome pans and I with my word processor are just one generation apart.”

Today, Tohe is an associate professor of English at Arizona State University. She studies the role of Native American women in society.

Tohe was born and raised on the Navajo reservation in Arizona and New Mexico. Because her parents were divorced, she and her brothers were raised primarily by their mother, grandmothers, and aunts. A life so heavily influenced by women role models is common in the Navajo world. Traditional Navajo culture, in fact, takes its clan identity from the female, not the male.

Changing Woman is the principal deity in Navajo religion—she gave the tribe their first clans and guidelines for how they should live their lives. She represents woman's continual transformation through the many roles she takes on in her lifetime. Through Changing Woman, the matrilineal system of the Navajo was established.

For example, Navajo women historically owned family possessions such as the livestock, land, and house. Along with such ownership also came the responsibility to care for and maintain those possessions, Tohe explains in an article she wrote for *wicazo sa review: A Journal of Native American Studies*. In turn, women often would groom one of their daughters to someday inherit those possessions as well as to take on the role of caregiver.

“In the Navajo language, we don't have a word for feminism,” Tohe says. “The Navajo people believe in the influence, the knowledge, and the wisdom that women have. As a result, Navajo women did not have to fight for their place in society. They have always been respected as leaders of their families and community. It surrounded them constantly.”

Such traditions and beliefs heavily impact the written and oral stories of Native people. Tohe incorporates lessons on history and culture into the literature courses she teaches, such as “Navajo Literature and Cultural Studies” and “Native American Women's Literature.” She finds that her non-Indian women students, particularly, sit up and take notice when this bit of history is first introduced.

“They really enjoy learning about other cultures where women are valued and honored for who they are, rather than considered second class, not valued for the work they do, and thought of only as objects,” says Tohe. “They enjoy hearing about and reading those women's stories.”

The Navajo are just one of many Native American tribes whose traditional religion and philosophies center on female deities and role models. Yet, despite the importance of women in Native American

cultures, there are only a few books published that collect Native women's voices. Knowing this, Tohe jumped at the opportunity when she was invited to co-edit an anthology of Native American women's literature.

“I was raised among storytellers. I am very much influenced by hearing the stories of my family, of my ancestors, and of Navajo beliefs,” says Tohe, who draws upon such stories when writing her own poetry and prose.

“A story is our umbilical cord to the past. The experiences of our ancestors influence, in many ways, who we are and the choices we make. Those experiences, those stories, are always being repeated. So, if you don't know those stories, then you're at a loss. You're an empty person.”

With this belief as a guide, Tohe solicited poetry and prose from Native women writers that “celebrated, recorded, and explored aspects and traditions of Native American women's communities.” Her co-editor for the project was Heid Erdrich, a professor of Native American literature at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.

The anthology's theme of community was realized not only in the writings it published, but also in the process by which those works were obtained. Mailings, e-mails, phone calls and word-of-mouth were the tools Tohe and Erdrich used to spread the word of their project. They tapped into their personal networks of friends and colleagues, as well as the broader community of Native American writers and storytellers. In the end, more than 150 manuscripts poured in from emerging and established writers across the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

“We received so many wonderful manuscripts—women speaking about the complexities of their lives, their struggles, their joys, their tragedies, their loves, their relationships, their children,” says Tohe. “The hardest part of creating the anthology was deciding which stories to pick. In the end, we could only publish about 50.”

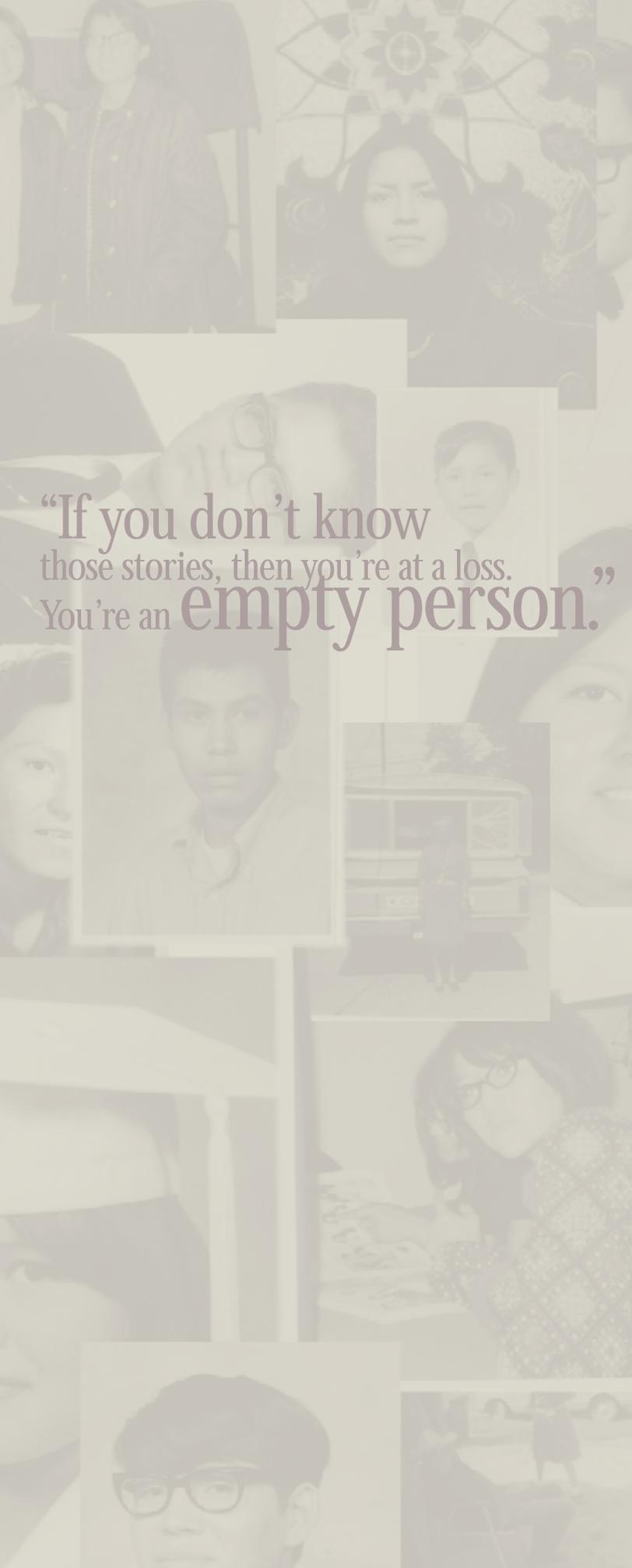
Leveraging off their theme of community, Tohe and Erdrich divided the final manuscripts into four categories for the anthology: Changing Woman, Strong Hearts, New Age Pocahontas, and In the Arms of the Skies. The categories represent the many roles a woman takes on in life, her inner strength, the stereotypes she faces, and the nuances of femininity, marriage, and romance in Native American culture.

In 2002, The Minnesota Historical Society Press published their final work, *Sister Nations: Native American Women Writers on Community*.

While the anthology is now complete, the stories do not end. In the tradition of her ancestors, Tohe continues to share the compelling tales of Native American women and their communities through her creative writing, literary teachings, and academic research. Her current work in progress is a collection of poetry and stories called *Talking Woman*.

“It is often the women who form the backbone of their communities,” says Tohe. “Their voices, as heard through their written and oral stories, represent the transformative abilities of being female, of being changing women.”

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HER WRITING, CONTACT LAURA TOHE, PH.D., DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, 480.965.5553. SEND E-MAIL TO L.TOHE@ASU.EDU.



“If you don’t know  
those stories, then you’re at a loss.  
You’re an **empty person.**”



“In the Navajo world, a young person grows up knowing that women are quite capable of being in charge. I grew up seeing their strength manifest itself in many ways. I grew up knowing my mother who divorced my father several years before would drive us through the 30 miles of muddy reservation road to get groceries. I never doubted that she would get us through the dizzying snowstorm that fell on the deserted dirt road alone with my brothers and me in the back seat. It meant knowing that when we needed financial help, we could go to one of our female relatives. It meant seeing my aunt put on her old cowboy boots and saddle up her horse to drive in the cattle that we later branded and vaccinated according to her instructions. The men in our family understood this, and we all worked together to get the work done—no resentment, no insecurity about male roles. The livestock mostly belonged to her, so it was only fair that she was responsible for their care. Years later this responsibility went to her fourth daughter, who, at branding time, called out her instructions to us just as her mother had done.”

FROM “THERE IS NO WORD FOR FEMINISM” BY LAURA TOHE

## SILENCING THE NATIVE TONGUE

IN THE LATE 1800s, federally-run Indian boarding schools emerged as a key element in the widespread effort to “civilize” this segment of the American population. Native American children across the country were abruptly separated from their families and thrust into an unfamiliar environment. Students received haircuts, their traditional garments replaced with Euro-American uniforms. Conversing in their native languages was strictly forbidden.

The official plan— full assimilation and eradication of Indian culture. The unofficial slogan— kill the Indian, save the man.

“Boarding schools greatly impacted Native people’s lives all over the country,” says Laura Tohe, an associate professor in department

of English at ASU. “There was a lot of disruption in family life, and one of the biggest impacts was probably the loss of our native languages. It was literally beaten out of us at these schools. We were prohibited from, and punished for, speaking our own language.”

The Bureau of Indian Affairs’ first school, Carlisle Indian School, was established in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. Tohe’s great-grandfather, Hoskie Thompson, was one of the first Navajo students to attend. Tohe herself later spent four years at an Indian school in Albuquerque, before moving on to a mainstream public school.

She likens the experience to having served a prison sentence in *NO PAROLE TODAY*, a collection of poetry

and prose memoir about attending Indian schools as a child in the 1950s. Though the boarding school phenomenon has had a deep and lasting impact on Native people’s education and culture, Tohe says her book is one of the few published that tell the stories of day-to-day life there.

Tohe wrote the majority of the manuscript as a graduate student at the University of Nebraska. It eventually became the basis for her creative dissertation.

“In college, I just started out writing poems about my experiences at boarding school as a creative writing exercise,” she explains. “But then I started thinking more about what those schools have meant not only to myself, but to my family and to other Indian people. And I thought maybe I could

write something that speaks for not just my experience, but for other Native people’s experiences.”

*NO PAROLE TODAY* tells of the boarding school experience through the eyes and voice of a young girl, though it is sprinkled with a bit of the wisdom that has come to Tohe in years of reflection as an adult. Her efforts in the book earned Tohe “Writer of the Year” honors from the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers in 1999.

While this particular work is based on her personal experiences, Tohe’s academic research and writings further explore the impact of boarding schools and colonialism on Native American culture, literature, and oral storytelling traditions.

Jessica McCann



“I’m not always sure that I can  
teach people to **write.**

But I am pretty sure I know how to teach people to **rewrite.”**

**EXPLORING THE WRITING LIFE** BY JESSICA MCCANN

**Like the anthropologist who weaves a basket** to better understand the native people he studies, Jay Boyer writes, in part, to better understand his students.

The anthropologist does it to experience the trials of bending the straw into submission, the sting as the material pokes the fingertips or slips under a nail. Ultimately, the scientist wants to experience the pride that comes with beholding the completed product. Boyer's experiences in writing are fundamentally the same.

"Finding the time to write. Finding the energy to write. Finding a place for that in your life and expecting your family to pay in a number of ways for the time you're taking away from them. It is not quite what the movies would make it out to be," says Boyer, a professor of English at Arizona State University.

Think of the familiar scene portrayed in the movies: a writer sits at a computer and begins typing furiously; the screen dissolves from one image to another; cigarettes build up in an ashtray; and, suddenly, a printer begins churning out a huge manuscript as the writer pops a bottle of champagne.

"As if it can happen in a matter of hours or days," says Boyer. "It just doesn't happen like that. The writing process is laborious. It is time-consuming. Not for everybody, but for most."

While there is a hint of authenticity to the movie scene, it's certainly a one-dimensional account of the writing life. So, too, is another familiar depiction, in which the writer is isolated, penniless, struggling for decades to befriend the muse.

Only through doing, perhaps, can one really understand the full scope of the writer's life—the trials and the sting, the pride in the finished work. Yet, to assert that Boyer writes only to strengthen his teaching skills, to more deeply connect with his students, would be a one-dimensional account of this writer's life, as well. For him, writing is also a joy, an exercise that buoys him against all the things that may go wrong in his life.

"It's just a wonderful time for me," he says. "To be alone with myself, to be able to write and think and imagine and play pretend in a way that most adults are never given the chance to do."

Boyer came to ASU in 1976, after earning his master's and doctorate degrees from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He teaches mainly introductory-level undergraduate courses such as American Literature, Introduction to Contemporary Literature, and American Cinema, which he considers his specialty. Boyer also teaches some graduate-level courses and occasionally works directly with graduate students in the creative writing program. "If I was on a baseball team I would be what's called a 'utility infielder.' I don't play any of the bases particularly well, but I do play a number of bases," Boyer explains in a self-deprecating manner that is as sincere as it is unwarranted.

Keeping to form, Boyer holds the same modest theory with regard to his writing endeavors, though his published credits include books and scholarly articles on film and filmmakers, mainstream nonfiction work, short stories, and even a bit of poetry in publications such as *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and *The Paris Review*. Boyer is also an accomplished playwright. His work has been produced and read in venues across the United States and around the world, including New York, Los Angeles, and London.

"I've dabbled with short stories and poetry and nonfiction—a little bit of this and a little bit of that," he says. "I don't like to talk much about my writing, because there are so many talented playwrights and novelists and poets in the program here, far more talented than I. I do it for the love of it, and I will continue to write plays, short stories, whatever it is that comes to me."

When Boyer speaks this way, it's easy to drift back to that ethereal scene in which manuscripts pour magically from the writer's fingertips. Despite the somewhat romantic tone with which Boyer discusses good writing, he stresses that a great deal of time and research often goes into a writer's work.

His play *Poaching Deer in Northern Arizona* is a case-in-point. Because he had never been deer hunting himself, Boyer set out to learn as much as he could about the subject to add authenticity to his storyline. He studied how to hand-load gunpowder into shotgun shell casings; he learned the proper way to field dress a deer so that the meat does not spoil. In the end, though, the vast majority of Boyer's research sat on the shelf.

"I used just a brush stroke or two in the play," Boyer says. "I wound up using a little bit about shell casings, and I wound up using a little bit about how you prepare a deer. But I was only comfortable doing that once I had learned probably enough about it to write a long and extensive article on each issue."

That process of researching, drafting, and throwing away is more the rule than the exception when it comes to solid writing, regardless of the length or genre of the piece. It also is one of the most difficult parts of the job. "For any book I've written, I'll bet I have thrown away as many pages as I finally sent off to the publisher. I had done all that work and had all these important things to say. But when I got to the final draft, I realized it wasn't all necessary after all," he says. "And it's anguish. You've taken all that time, all that effort. And you hate to throw anything away, particularly good writing."

But that's what writing is about, says Boyer, and it leads him to an interesting observation. Most people embrace an odd equation when it comes to writing—when they say writer, what they really mean is published writer; when they say writing, they really mean published writing. Publishing is one thing (or producing a play, for that matter), but writing is another.

In more than 25 years of teaching, Boyer has observed that many of his students—whether they are 20 years old or 80 years old—have less fondness for writing than they have for having written. Very often, they find the process of writing frustrating, tedious, and disheartening. Yet, they are very eager to have written the work; they want it somehow done.

"As I look out in the introductory classes I teach, I can almost tell you how many of those people will go on to write," says Boyer. "I can't much guess who's going to publish."

"So I try to explain in a way that gets through. If you're going to write, I tell them, you're going to write with or without me, without or without this class," he adds. "The writing will simply become part of your life and become important to you. And, insofar as you publish, God speed; but, insofar as you don't, don't think that somehow has kept you from being a writer."

BOYER HAS EARNED MANY TEACHING HONORS THROUGHOUT HIS ASU CAREER, INCLUDING THE CARNEGIE FOUNDATION'S ARIZONA PROFESSOR OF THE YEAR AWARD IN 1995. TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HIS WORK, CONTACT JAY BOYER, PH.D., DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, 480.965.7644. SEND E-MAIL TO J.BOYER@ASU.EDU.



JOHN C. PHILLIPS PHOTO

For every person who will tell you that he or she hates to write, there are at least 50 writers who will tell you that they hate to rewrite. Rewriting is perhaps that hardest part of a writer's job. It is time-consuming, complex, and a little bit painful. Rewriting requires cutting, tightening, and deleting one's beautifully woven prose. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most critical parts of a writer's success.

That's why professors like ASU's Jay Boyer are so important to budding new writers. Writing can be a calling or a talent that comes to people naturally. But rewriting is a skill that generally must be acquired and honed.

"I'm not always sure that I can teach people to write," Boyer says. "But I am pretty sure I know how to teach people to rewrite. I can help you cut down your story in ways that will help make it dazzle. I can show you how to move this around and turn this over. I can help you cut and shape and make it stronger."

Jessica McCann

## REWRITING THOSE AWKWARD PAUSES

English Professor Jay Boyer learned just how fascinating awkward pauses can be during the evolution of one of his latest plays. The idea had come to him while sipping tea in a small London café. He overheard a conversation between a woman and her young lover at a nearby table. "He was trying to get her to leave her husband and, at the time, I thought how different that situation must look from his perspective than it did from hers," Boyer recalls.

"And what of her husband? You would have three very different perspectives on the same situation, having to do with where each of those people were in their lives. I became curious how those

three people would interact at one key moment, the moment that she was walking out on her husband."

Boyer let his curiosity take shape in the form of a script, roughing out the first draft for a play within just a few days. He called it *AWKWARD PAUSES*.

After several rounds of revisions, the piece was ready for its first stage reading at the Edward Albee Theatre Festival in Anchorage, Alaska. It was nicely received, though Boyer reworked the piece further in response to some feedback, and he looked forward to its next reading in London.

Unfortunately, *AWKWARD PAUSES* was not as well-received the second time

around. The ASU professor took it in stride. He went back to work, revising, reshaping, and recasting the piece.

A developmental production of *AWKWARD PAUSES* was later performed at the Tempe Center for the Performing Arts in April 2002. Boyer's revisions continue.

"One of the great pleasures of playwriting—as opposed to writing print fiction—is you can keep playing with a play. You can keep toying with it, changing it. It's never quite done in that sense," he says.

Boyer is currently toying with a number of other pieces, as well. Three of his newer works received their first readings at the FirstStage/

Playwrights Express in Los Angeles in 2002.

About the same time, two of Boyer's more refined plays (*TIME GOES BY, BUT SLOWLY*; and *POACHING DEER IN NORTHERN ARIZONA*) were performed together at the Jewel Box Theater Center in Hollywood under the marquee *Rural/Urban*. The Comedy Channel's Carrie Quinn Dolin starred in the production.

"I'm not professing myself as one of the university's playwrights," he stresses. "I am an amateur in the most basic sense of that word. I look at it as an exercise, and I do it because I enjoy the work in progress."

Jessica McCann