

Award-winning poet sheds light on Indigenous relationship with water through unique lens

By Brock Weir

No matter where we come from, no matter our background, we each have a relationship with our ancestors and history, according to poet Gwen Benaway.

For Benaway, a writer of Anishnaabe and Metis descent, it is fertile ground to explore and that is just what she does in her latest collection of poetry, *What I Want is Not What I Hope For*.

Benaway will read from the collection at the Aurora Cultural Centre next Wednesday, October 11 as part of LIT on Tour, presented by the International Festival of Authors Ontario.

This free ticketed event, hosted by the Centre in conjunction with the Aurora Public Library, will get underway at 7.30 p.m.

Benaway is an award-winning Two Spirited Trans poet who has been described as 'the spiritual lovechild of Tomson Highway and Anne Sexton'.

Her most recent collection of poems sheds a unique light on the unique relationship between Indigenous Peoples and water.

'I was thinking about the Indigenous connection to water and the link in our culture between water and women, women as water keepers, life-givers, and a lot of that imagery came through for me in writing that collection,' she explains. 'My Metis and Anishnaabe ancestors relied on water as a way of travelling across the country as a connection point.'

'I think all of us, no matter where we come from, have a relationship with our ancestors and history. I don't think a lot of people in Canada think about that and are disconnected from that. I hope people are reminded of their own ancestral connections through my work and see themselves in that notion of travel, voyage and where you come from.'

There is always a pressure on Indigenous artists, and indeed artists from any background 'different from the mainstream Canadian culture' to write work that is accessible to everyone, says Gwen, but she adds she doesn't think that should be the goal.

'It is okay to write work that is accessible differently to people,' she says, 'not to exclude anyone but to actually understand that people from different backgrounds and different audiences are going to see things in the work and be able to connect with it in different ways. It is important to preserve that difference rather than erase it. It is nice to have work that is personal, that has a connection.'

The majority of Gwen's work is personal. A self-described 'confessional writer,' she says her starting point is always focused through the prism of her own culture and worldview and everything flows from there.

And her own personal prism is a unique one.

While Two-Spirited Indigenous authors are finding their voice and increasingly finding a wider audience, it is tougher going for Two-Spirited Trans writers. Although her latest collection of poetry is called *What I Want Is Not What I Hope For*, what Gwen does hope for are more voices to emerge and join her in the public forum.

'I think we have a long way to come,' she shares. 'Indigenous communities, like other communities in Canada, have a lot of transphobia and that has to be overcome. I don't want to be the only one for very long. My effort is to try and specifically get other Indigenous trans women published and in the world because I don't want to be the only one. I want to see more of our voices represented.'

For more on the International Festival of Authors Ontario's presentation of Gwen Benaway: Reading and Q&A, visit www.auroraculturalcentre.ca or call 905-713-1818. Books will be available for purchase at the event courtesy of Blue Heron Books.