

# ENDING NOTES



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Q & A

## Why me?

### Pauline Johnson turns the table on biographer Charlotte Gray

*It's every historical biographer's dream: a dialogue with the long-dead celebrity they have studied. Here Ottawa author Charlotte Gray imagines an exchange with the star of her most recent biography, *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake*.*

**Pauline Johnson:** Why me?

**Charlotte Gray:** Because you bewitched so many of the people I have met in the past few years, during my explorations of 19th-century Canada. So many of the key figures I've read and written about — Isabel King (mother of Mackenzie King), Goldwin Smith, Charles G.D. Roberts, Sir Wilfrid Laurier — saw you perform, and admired you. They read your poetry avidly. Young men, such as Hector Charlesworth, who later became editor of *Saturday Night*, were mesmerized by you. I was curious about the source of your magic.

**Johnson:** Did you find it?

**Gray:** I'd like to think so. I think you combined eroticism and elegance in a way that was unique for your period. You performed the first half of your program in buckskin, reciting your ballads about bloodthirsty Iroquois warriors and ruthless Huron maidens. Sometimes you began the evening with a blood-curdling war whoop. Then you appeared for the second half in a glimmering satin gown, your body cinched into a wasp-waisted corset: As the epitome of a proper young lady, you whispered verses about sunsets and love. Nowadays, we often talk about the virgin/whore dichotomy of feminine appeal — animal instincts versus delicate vulnerability — but you enacted it decades before such language was invented.

**Johnson:** I certainly never used such language! I hope you didn't make me out to be some sort of avatar of the 20th century, anticipating trends that only erupted years after my death.

**Gray:** I tried not to. I knew that you yourself were wary of what you called "Woman's Righters" and "masculine Amazons."

But I could see you knew what was important. I love that letter to your banker friend Archie

Kains, in which you write, "I confess a (liking) for certain feminine conventionalities such as five o'clock teas or 'hen parties,' but I would everlastingly hate to dine on these things: They are but the peaches and cream that top the roast beef of life."

**Johnson:** Did you discover all my secrets?

**Gray:** I wish ... But you and your sister Eva were too discreet for a biographer's taste. During your lifetime, you were so busy preserving a lady-like reputation.

And after your death, Eva burnt any letters and papers that she thought might put you in a bad light. I could have wept when I realized what we had lost! What might have seemed scandalous to Eva in 1913 would seem tame to 2002 readers. But I think I discovered the identity of the "mystery man" whose photo you wore in a locket on your deathbed. And I think I know why you went to ground in 1900, then told a friend that you had been embroiled in "a network of tragedy."

**Johnson:** We'll see ... The past three years have been like a frustrating dialogue for you, hasn't it? You kept asking questions, and I smiled back at you from photographs.

**Gray:** It wasn't quite as one-sided as that: Over the months, I could feel myself getting closer and closer to you. I found clues to what had really happened, in various family memoirs, and in your own magazine articles. And as word spread that I was writing your biography, people produced anecdotes and letters from you that had been treasured over two or three generations. Your voice, speaking down the years, became clearer and clearer.

**Johnson:** One doesn't always tell the truth in letters and magazine articles.

**Gray:** The truth is never simple. And I know that you yourself sometimes refused to face things, didn't you? You romanticized your mother, and described her in a magazine article as a selfless angel in the house, who raised four well-mannered children and was always ready with "a welcome to our warrior husband and father when he returns from war."

I don't think it was so straightforward. I think

your mother was so scarred by her own traumatic childhood that she was a very neurotic woman. You were the only one of her four children who managed to escape her suffocating phobias.

**Johnson:** I know that is how it looks now. But in my day, there were plenty of women who suffered from "nerves," and rarely left home.

**Gray:** But Pauline, where do you think you got the spirit to break away? To defy so many conventions, to go on the stage, to travel by yourself across Canada and to England? How come you were so brave?

**Johnson:** Brave? Sometimes it felt more like foolhardy. But I knew I had talent. I refused to be trapped in Brantford for the rest of my life, like Eva (although she had a few jobs around New York). And because I really believed that someone had to give the Indian side of the story, and point out that native peoples had their own history, languages and traditions that were just as valuable as anything from Europe.

Sometimes I would feel my nerve failing, when some puffed-up hayseed in small-town Alberta referred to me as a "squaw," or when I was ice-bound for six days on the ferry from Prince Edward Island to Cape Tormentine.

Then I would close my eyes and remember my Mohawk grandmother, on the Six Nations Reserve. She stood up to all the hereditary chiefs of the Iroquois peoples to ensure her son, my father, was made a chief. Mohawk women are strong.

**Gray:** Your most famous poem today is *The Song My Paddle Sings*. But my favourite is your 1890 composition *The Idlers*, in which a young woman watches her lover sleeping in her canoe on a hot summer afternoon. I think it is one of the most passionate pieces of lyrical poetry I have ever read. It must have been a wonderful love affair.

**Johnson:** It was. But a lady never discusses these things, does she?

*Charlotte Gray is an Ottawa writer; *Flint & Feather* is her third biography. Gray will read at the Ottawa International Writers Festival on Sept. 26 at 7 p.m. For more information see [www.writersfest.com](http://www.writersfest.com)*