

Poetic portrayal

Being a biographer is like being a travel writer, says **Charlotte Gray**. "You choose your subject, which is like a continent, and you keep exploring it by going up every road and climbing every mountain." Although Gray was born, raised and educated in England, her "continent" has always been pre-First World War Canada.

The Toronto-based writer is best known for her book *Sisters in the Wilderness*, which chronicled the lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Trail—both literary icons of 19th-century backwoods Ontario. Her latest, *Flint and Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake* (HarperFlamingo Canada) is definitely headed for the best-seller lists.

Gray says she became interested in Johnson because she kept "falling over" references to the 19th-century poet and performance artist while researching her earlier books. "She was this mountain in the middle of my continent, and I just knew that I had to climb it," says Gray.

Today Johnson is best known for her poem *The Song My Paddle Sings* and for *Legends of Vancouver*, her collection of Squamish myths. But in her day, she exerted the same kind of magnetism of such stars as Marilyn Monroe and Grace Kelly.

She was especially proud of the dual heritage she had inherited from her father, George Johnson, a Mohawk chief from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ont., and her mother, Emily Howells, a British immigrant and cousin of the American writer William Dean Howells. "Pauline was everywhere," says Gray, pointing out that she criss-crossed the country 17 times and had a mesmerizing effect on people who had seen her perform in person.



On stage, Johnson presented an image that was exotic, reassuring and erotic. "She began her performances," says Gray, "as an Indian maiden in her buckskin outfit reciting her own poetry about the murder of Huron warriors and brave Iroquois walking over burning coals." Then she would disappear and return in an elegant gown, often with a wide-brimmed and feathered hat, the epitome of a Victorian gentlewoman. "She played into a male fantasy that there was a wild woman underneath the lace and satin, if only they could unlace the bodice."

There was also a romantic mystery about Johnson, who died in Vancouver in 1913 at the age of 52. Although she had never married, she asked to be cremated wearing a locket with the photograph of a young man inside. It's clear that even in death, Johnson knew how to make a grand exit.