

Joy Harjo (1951--)

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Joy Harjo (1951--)

Joy Foster was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma on May 9th, 1951 to Wynema Baker and Allen W. Foster. She is an enrolled member of the Creek tribe, and is also of Cherokee, French, and Irish descent. Descended from a long line of tribal leaders on her father's side, including Monahwee, leader of the Red Stick War against Andrew Jackson, she often incorporates into her poetry themes of Indian survival amidst contemporary American life. In 1970, at the age of 19, with the blessings of her parents, Foster took the last name of her maternal grandmother, [Naomi](#) Harjo. As she often credits her great aunt, Lois Harjo, with teaching her about her Indian identity, this name change may have helped her to solidify her public link with this heritage.

Although primarily known as a poet, Harjo conceives of herself as a visual artist. She left Oklahoma at age 16 to attend the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, originally studying painting. After attending a reading by poet Simon Ortiz, she changed her major to poetry. At 17, she returned to Oklahoma to give birth to her son, Phil Dayn, walking four blocks while in labor to the Indian hospital in Talequah. Her daughter, Rainy Dawn, was born four years later in Albuquerque. For years, Harjo supported herself

and her children with a variety of jobs: [waitress](#), service-station attendant, hospital janitor, nurse's assistant, dance teacher. She then went on to earn a B.A. in English from the University of New Mexico in 1976 and an M.F.A. in poetry from the University of [Iowa's](#) famed Iowa Writer's Workshop in 1978. She then went on to an impressive list of teaching positions beginning with the Institute of American Indian Arts and ending with her current position with the American Indian Studies Program at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Harjo is an award-winning poet many times over. She has won the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, the Oklahoma Book Award in 1995 for *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky* and in 2003 for *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems*, the William Carlos Williams Award from the Poetry Society of America for and the American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation for *In Mad Love and War* (1991), among other awards.

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