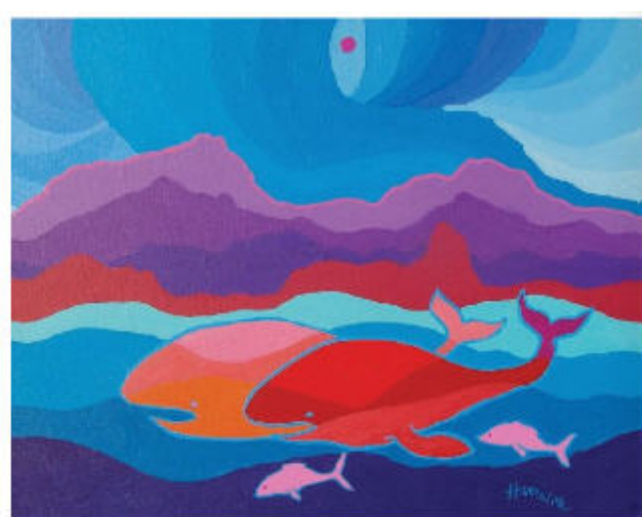


## My Voyage Around TED HARRISON

A biographer takes four years to find what inspires artistic genius and what makes all lives worth living

I COULD NOT HAVE PREDICTED the adventure ahead when Ted Harrison phoned one September evening in 2005. The great painter of the Yukon, whose exhibition I had recently reviewed in a magazine article, was inviting me to lunch. "I have more stories to tell," he said. "Would you like to hear them?" Would I? How could I resist such an invitation? The next day, Christmas-morning excitement flooded through me as I rang his front door bell. But no one answered. I followed a path through a back garden dizzy with dahlias, pansies, and roses. Sure enough, among the blossoms and birdsong, I spied a studio attached to the main house.

BY KATHERINE GIBSON PHOTO BY GARY MCKINSTRY



*Whales of Monterey School*, acrylic on canvas, 16 in x 20 in, 2003.

Inside sat Harrison on a simple folding chair, contemplating a painting before him. Sounds of Beethoven thundered from the room. Even from outside, I felt his concentration, his intensity. After I got his attention, he looked over the easel, smiled, and greeted me with an open, gentle grin. He ushered me inside a sunny space covered in bright, happy paintings.

During a lunch of pea soup (whipped up by Harrison, who is as passionate about cooking as painting), he asked me to write his biography. I was stunned. His whimsical, playful paintings had enchanted me since I discovered them in the 1980s. To write his life story was an immense privilege. And immensely daunting. This project would demand the commitment and stamina of a marathoner. The relationship between biographer and subject often becomes as complex as that between spouses.

Over the past 10 years, I have written feature articles for several publications and written two books. I have also ghost-written biographies and saw this as an opportunity to build on those experiences, but with a difference. Harrison, now 83, is an internationally acclaimed artist — a national treasure. This would be the first independent book about him (he wrote a memoir in 1980). The opportunity to work with this delightful man was irresistible and I happily accepted. And so my four-year relationship with artist, author and raconteur Ted Harrison began.

Within weeks, my obsession with Harrison was as firmly entrenched as the Yukon permafrost. If I wasn't with Harrison, I was researching, reading or thinking about him. What, or whom, were the pivotal influences that shaped his life? What inspired his artistic expression? Who was the man behind the public profile? But there were hurdles in my search to understand him.

Although those trips took me to the heart of the two lands that Harrison loves, I still struggled to fully understand the pivotal moments in his life. And then fate intervened. In June of 2008,

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Ronald Reagan) added to my growing arsenal of information. I had struck biographer-gold. Before long, my tidy writing studio was transformed into a jumble of Harrison memorabilia.

Collectors began to send images of sketches and paintings. I poured over hundreds of pictures of paintings and worked through decades of documents. When his twin sister died in July of 2008, more material surfaced from among her papers. As the

Harrison, a widower since 2000, moved into a retirement home. While making this transition, long-forgotten boxes surfaced from inside his closets and storage rooms. Decades old newspaper clippings, letters, diaries and photographs appeared. A draft of an abandoned memoir, speeches and letters from students, fans, friends (one from ex-president

Over the first two years, his health was precarious, making interviews sporadic. The stories he told me were often repeats of well-known narratives. And, as with many truly great people, Ted Harrison is self-effacing and does not easily talk about his accomplishments. I needed help.

As word of my project spread, little miracles happened. Garth Graham, responsible for "discovering" Harrison and mounting his first exhibition in the Yukon library in 1969, sent an e-mail, as did Walter Gray, who in 1972 introduced Harrison to Ontario's art establishment. Untold stories from them, and others who knew him, emerged, each leading to another contact, another piece in the puzzle that my research had become.

To unearth fresh, unknown details, especially of Harrison's early life, I flew to Wingate, a village in northeast England where he was born. I walked through the streets he had known as a child, imagining them 70 years ago, when the Wingate Grange Colliery defined the town. The coalmine is gone. Green rolling hills cover what remains of the black slagheaps and fresh North Sea breezes have

replaced the stench of the pit. I stood before the brick terraced home in which Harrison spent his youth. I then wandered along Front Street, imagining how it looked in his day. In the nearby village of Spennymoor, I met Norman Cornish, a life-long friend of Harrison and also a celebrated artist. During that visit, I learned about Harrison's art college days and that truly great people can be as ordinary as tea and biscuits.

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The Yukon was Ted Harrison's muse. So, during the cooling days of late summer in 2007, I went there to retrace a trip he'd made up the Yukon River to Dawson City in a riverboat 20 years earlier. I experienced that landscape, not as a forbidding wilderness, but as the symphony of colour that Harrison paints. I learned that silence is as nourishing as caribou stew and that nothing beats wild blueberry pie. I also learned that Yukoners measure people by who they are, not what they do. I found touchable history in abandoned trappers' cabins and deserted homesteads. Before I left, I discovered why Ted Harrison, who has dined with kings and princesses, is as home-grown as the monstrous tomatoes that ripen under the Yukon's long summer sun.

project took shape, I struggled over what to choose from among this embarrassment of riches. Layers of Harrison analysis yet to be completed smothered thoughts of vacations, holidays or even a weekend goof-off. Yet, each day was as exciting as when we first met.

After four years, I finished the book. I titled it *Ted Harrison: Painting Paradise*, inspired by the painting that was on his easel the day we met, and to reflect the man who 40 years earlier began to change how Yukoners see themselves and how others see the North.

This was a treasured time with a special person, one who taught me that however rich or how famous we may become or how ordinary we remain, joy lies in the courage to express our passion, be it painting, composing music or growing a garden. I came to understand that the essence of this man is reflected in what he paints: eternal optimism and joy in everyday life. I feel that his most significant legacy is the cheery innocence that leaps from his paintings straight into our hearts: a little dog surprising a gaggle of ravens, children tobogganing, friends sharing stories beneath a sky of dazzling stars: simple pleasures that, when hung together, make a life.

An exhibition of Harrison paintings is on at the Legacy Art Gallery and Café. For more information about the exhibit and Gibson's new book go to [www.tedharrisonbiography.com](http://www.tedharrisonbiography.com). **VB**