

20 questions for Arbutus Cunningham

Interview by Richard Perez Photography by Ben Weller

A One-of-a-Kind Bloomington Treasure



The many faces of Arbutus
Cunningham, poet, actress,
writer, storyteller.

For those who listen to her Saturday mornings on WFHB with cohost Michael Kelsey (10 am-noon), or have seen her perform live, it is easy to understand why so many people consider Arbutus Cunningham (a.k.a. Hester Hemmerling) a one-of-a-kind Bloomington treasure. She is outrageous, sensitive, boisterous, brilliant, funny, wise, child-like, and bombastic. She is Ethel Merman and Maya Angelou with a laugh that can fill a concert hall or rattle the airwaves.

Born in Austin, Texas, 50-something years ago, Arbutus has been a Bloomington resident for the last 20, entralling audiences with her tales of growing up in the town of Tuckerville (name changed to protect the innocent) and with the exploits of her eccentric and colorful Bloomington neighbors.

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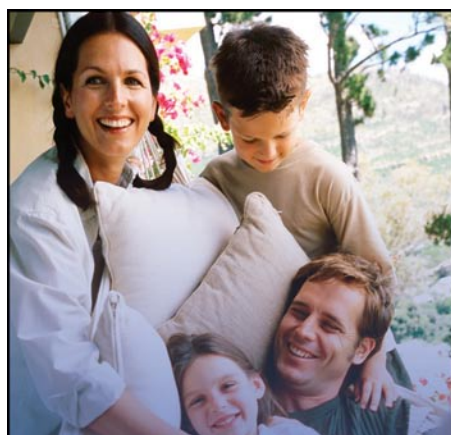
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Arbutus believes that honesty really is the best policy, except when asked “Do you like my new haircut?” Her musical tastes are purely classic: she listens to Bach, B. B. King, and Burl Ives. She dislikes television, processed cheese, and the government, though she does vote, even in the primaries. She also claims to make the best hot pepper sauce in Monroe County.

After graduating from IU’s School of Education, she taught in New York City and on Navajo and Apache reservations in the Southwest. She currently works with abused women at Middle Way House.

Even though she has legions of fans, she continues to remain somewhat of a secret to many in town. Recently she sat down with interviewer Richard Perez to answer 20 questions—and tell a few stories—for *Bloom* readers.

BLOOM: How do you define what you do? Do you consider yourself a poet, actress, storyteller, writer?

ARBUTUS: Why don’t you tell me what it is you think I do, and I will argue with you.

BLOOM: First and foremost, you’re an extraordinary storyteller. But all those other components of your talent come into play when you perform. I mean, you’re an actress, certainly. You write your own material, so you’re a writer, and...

ARBUTUS: I have trouble with that word, ruh-ruh-ruh-ruh-writer...even though I know I am, because what I do is write. I mean, that’s one of the things I do. Partly it seems pretentious of me to claim that, even though I write a lot. And partly because, it’s like when you ask, “What is it that you do?” there’s a whole long list of things. And if there was one thing that you didn’t do in there, the other things wouldn’t be possible too, even if it’s just sitting on the back porch and watching the bumblebees get drunk on the morning glories. That’s important, it’s necessary.

What I do in this context—we’re talking about those stories—what I do is—and this is going to sound really pretentious, you may whack me—I have a responsibility in this community. I am one of a number of real good storytellers, and so I have to go on out there and catch stories, and tell them.

And you’re right, I am an actress. So even when there’s no story to be caught, I know enough about craft, now having done it for a bare ten years, that I can create something that has a semblance to a story....I know how to make my voice approximate a melodic arc. Emphasis and stuff like that. Everything,

You get up on a stage and make words on a page come to life.

BLOOM: Tell us about the origins of your pen name, Arbutus Cunningham, and why you use it.

ARBUTUS: In 1998, everybody at the radio station [WFHB] had a radio name. Michael Kelsey was “Mechanic Mike,” there was “Dynaflow Deb” and “Gus and The Old Professor.” When I called up on Wednesday mornings to say, “I am not hearing enough Flaco Jimenez!” I’d call myself Arbutus Cunningham. She was a friend of my grandmother’s and it’s a lovely euphonious name, so I appropriated it.

I have a responsibility in this community. I am one of a number of real good storytellers, and so I have to go on out there and catch stories, and tell them.

BLOOM: Ten years later you’re cohosting that very show with Michael Kelsey. Talk about how that relationship came about?

ARBUTUS: Kelsey had taken over the *Old Time Train 45* show in the summer of ’98, and he got tired of me bugging him about what to play, so he said, “Look, why don’t you come in and do the damn show with me. You can come in and be Arbutus Cunningham for the fund drive because we need to make some money.” And I said, “All right.” And I had just written a story about an elephant in my writers group, and it made me fall out of the chair laughing. So I thought, well okay, I’ll just take this story in there and if I can’t think of anything to say, I’ll just tell it. Well, we were funny! We had a great time. People called in, they pledged money! I swear, it was the most money we—it wasn’t even “we” then—it was the most money the show had had pledged before. We got \$300. And people called in and they’d talk, Ladda-ladda-ladda-ladda, you know? And then Kelsey looked at me and he said, “Well, you can come back.” And I was working at the time. I was cooking for Carmela’s [a local restaurant], so I said I’d come in every other Saturday. That’s the way it started.

I cannot say enough times how much fun I’ve had and how generous it was of Kelsey to

say, “Come on down to the radio station and be crazy on the radio,” because I’m a big fan of his. And he has been not only patient and generous but has become such a good friend. So, it’s nice. The radio is fun. I like the radio. I’m a radio girl. And I’ve got a face made for radio, too—Whooh!

BLOOM: You grew up in Texas. Talk about its influence on your writing.

ARBUTUS: Well, there was the light, and there was the enormous field of stars at night, and there was quite a lot of heat, which when

to it, and then you get in there and mess around, and some of ‘em are still buzzin’.

BLOOM: And what continues to influence you today?

ARBUTUS: I find that everything, everywhere you go, the angle of the light, the quality of the air, the color of the sky, it’s not just blue, in the mountains, and particularly in Mexico, for instance, it’s much bluer. You can get something of that effect if you go to *La California*. And you’ve been to, I’m sure, San Francisco?

the experience of seeing your father perish in a swimming accident when you were a child. Can you talk about the impact that has had on your life and work?

ARBUTUS: It taught me very young that you can be in the middle of enormous happiness and this astonishing thing can happen, and the certitude that you felt about the way the world was organized and how it ought to work was forever disrupted. Also you have to probably understand that I’m a fifth-generation widow. So there was the expectation of catastrophe or death, but also in the middle of the last century in southern agrarian Texas people were not as defended against death and dead bodies and missing limbs and that kind of stuff that I think currently the commercial culture insulates people from. And so, I mean, that’s healthy, I think. It gave me an early understanding—no, not an understanding—an early experience of the territory of grief.

BLOOM: Your characters are often very funny and yet regularly possess a deep longing or sadness. Would you say your early insight into grief explains their emotional complexity?

ARBUTUS: This is an enormously complicated world. Our lives are enormously complicated. And while in this culture, things tend to be described in straight lines and they tend to be a series of binary operatives—this not this, that not that, sadness not happiness—it’s a lot messier than that. They interpenetrate. I’m certain that it goes back to early experience. In the middle of something absolutely sad, something hilarious can happen, and you’re thinking, “My heart is being torn out by vultures and I should not be laughing,” and yet you’re rolling on the floor!

BLOOM: So, who were your biggest influences growing up?

ARBUTUS: Oh, wow. Certainly my grandmother. Certainly my mother. My siblings. The biggest influence, and I’ll lay this at my mother’s door with gratitude, was the absence of television. Uncle John gave us one and it didn’t last too long. I think my mother sabotaged it. She thought it was a pernicious influence, and she did not like the expression we developed watching *Howdy Doody*. And we didn’t grieve when it was gone because there was always stuff to do. I think of my generation as maybe the last that had a childhood that had a lot of responsibility but also had vast oceans of unstructured time and lots of raw materials for adventures.



Hester (a.k.a. Arbutus) at age 7 with cat Yelli on her lap, between little sister Laura, 4, and brother Henry, 8, in small town Texas. “That was a great front porch,” she recalls.

you’re little seems unremarkable because you can shed garments and be out there until somebody calls your mother, and says, “Your children are out there with not a damn thing on. You better get out there!”

We used to go down and get tortillas, hot, from the tortilleria, and a little tiny twist of salt, and eat them on the way home. Oh my goodness, the taste of fresh tortillas!

There’s language, intonation—not just language but vocabulary, emphasis. Smells. All of these things I’m talking about become images, and they get laid down so early that it’s only when I’m telling a story that they all come up. I’m not really conscious of pulling them up, but my theory of the brain is that it’s much like a mess of fly paper, you know, stuff sticks

BLOOM: Yes, I was born in Oakland.

ARBUTUS: Oh my God! I don’t know what it is about the California light, but it makes everything sort of luminous, and there’s that kind of apricot quality to it late in the day, and the colors are so intensified, and you get that, of course, in mountainous areas too. When I lived in Montana, everything had that illuminated quality. So that’s an enormous influence, not just on writing but on every perception you have because even though people don’t often remark on it, they notice it, they can’t help it. For me, [influences] all have their root in sensual experience.

BLOOM: One of my favorite stories of yours is called “La Barca de Oro.” It was inspired by

BLOOM: Do you come from a family of writers or storytellers?

ARBUTUS: Well, I come from a culture of storytellers. I come from a community of storytellers, and of highly literate people, although I don't think many of those people would consider themselves well educated. Language was used to describe, to evoke, to be as precise as possible, and it was effortless, it seemed to me, and everybody read.

BLOOM: Who are your favorite writers or storytellers, and would you say they've influenced your work?

ARBUTUS: That's touchy. Partly because if you asked me tomorrow I would probably give you an entirely different set of names, and partly because some of these writers may not want to know that they influenced me [laughing]. Kipling was a great storyteller, and not only the *Just So Stories*, although they're wonderful. I always heard Kipling with a southern accent [recites with a Southern drawl]: "In the High and Far-Off Times of long ago the Elephant, O Best Beloved, had no nose, no trunk, but only a blackish bulgy nose as big as a boot." My God, I mean, how can you resist that? "Then

the Bi-Coloured-Python-Rock-Snake...." He evoked these splendid, totally realized worlds, and he did it with language.

Songs. Songs have had an enormous influence on me. We heard a lot of Burl Ives when I was growing up, a lot of Bob Wills. Some of those images are real, they'll stay with you, but anything you hear will when you're little. Reading. Oh, Katherine Anne Porter, Ursula Le Guin. More recently ... [tries to remember the writer's name]. Now I knew this was going to happen. She just died and I wept and wept and wept and wept. She was a poet and a short story writer. And it will come to me in about 15 minutes. And it's not Marge Piercy—shut up in there [knocks on her head].... Poets, poetry, you know ... Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

BLOOM: So when did you know you wanted to be a writer, a storyteller?

ARBUTUS: I didn't, it was just something I fell into. I was trying to get better at writing because it was something I liked to do and I had all these things percolating in my mind. I was in graduate school—and you know that kind of prose they write there and what they think of as a good writer—and I could not, I

never, to save my life, I cannot write a flat paragraph. I cannot begin with what I'm going to end up with, because how do you know until you get there? And it's not right and it's not fair and it's all boring, it's so boring. But I was getting into trouble for telling stories in graduate school.

...My theory of the brain is that it's much like a mess of fly paper, you know, stuff sticks to it, and then you get in there and mess around, and some of 'em are still buzzin'.

BLOOM: On the air sometimes it seems like things just spring forth from your mouth without your thinking about them. Have you ever gotten into trouble for that?

ARBUTUS: Oh my God, oh yes, oh yes, yes!

BLOOM: Talk about one of those times.

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A portrait of Hester at age 8 taken at an Olan Mills photo studio. "They were cheap and good," says Arbutus.

ARBUTUS: Well, I did refer somewhat obliquely to our glorious leader as a barnyard animal after 9/11, shortly after he decided he was going to invade the known world. And people did call in and say, "You can't talk about him, he's our president!" Early, I had to learn to censor myself, because, as you've probably noticed, you will have to censor me too! But I had no idea of what was appropriate.

BLOOM: What do you like about Bloomington? What keeps you here?

ARBUTUS: What keeps me in Bloomington is that I'm no longer physically able to live on my own and haul water and chop wood. But southern Indiana has always had a tremendous pull. First of all, physically it's so beautiful. I first came to Indiana in 1964, to Greencastle, which is where my stepfather's mother lived. And I could not believe it. It was in June, and there were all these deciduous trees and you know how they get this voluptuous shape to them. And they're green—there are so many different colors of green. They're these wonderful shapes, all these big trees. And the clouds, the cumulus clouds, how they mound up in front, and that shape is replicated over and over.

We walked down to this little dribbling creek and sat there over the culvert. It was nothing special, but to me it was magic. A family of raccoons came out of the culvert and didn't pay any attention to us. There was a mother and three babies, and they carried on, and she fussed at them and then she went about her business and they argued and squabbled and made a big mess, and she turned around and went pow! [slapping motion] And they went wub-wub-wub. I thought, whoa, I have died and gone to heaven.

We've lived in so many counties in southern Indiana. Pike County and Clay County and Brown County and Greene County and Dubois County and Jackson County. It was an easy, relatively speaking, an easy place to get a rural scene together.

BLOOM: You run with a close-knit circle of Bloomington women: strong, talented artists who are very supportive of each other. Talk about this group and how you influence one another.

ARBUTUS: Whoa. Well, okay, I'll try. First of all, I have to remind myself that it's just me talking. Krista [singer/songwriter Krista Detor] would probably give me an entirely different set of perceptions. It's a community.

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There is this idea, the image of the artist as a person removed who writes from a lofty and Aristotelian solitude. My experience is just totally different.

Everything you do comes out of your experience as a member of a community, as a member of a choir, if you want to think about it that way. And sometimes the melody line is in the bass, and sometimes it's in the treble, and you just really have to pay attention. This particular choir has a set of sort of rotating directors, which is nice because everyone's experiences are necessarily different. But there's enough similarity so that when you share them through what you write or what you sing, what you play or whatever, it gets bigger rather than smaller. It doesn't feel claustrophobic. And I feel like, well, damn, it's my responsibility to take care of my alto line here, and show up to choir practice and rehearse it on the weekend. But yeah, it's a real gift to be able to be a part of that kind of community, and it's also a lot of fun.

I would certainly like to make a little more money! Yes I would! Let me just say right now that I would like to make a little more money!

BLOOM: So what's the most gratifying thing about what you do?

ARBUTUS: Oh, there are so many gratifying parts. It's difficult to say which is the most. I don't imply any importance to this particular order. Most gratifying, in this category, falls: getting my teeth brushed and my pants on while the story is actually printing out, and making it to the radio station even if I have left off the last four lines because I had to quit writing because I was out of time, and then using the first song-set to scribble something down as fast as I can so that either there's room for it to continue or it at least comes to some kind of conclusion. That's really gratifying. It's really gratifying to then read the thing, and think, "That wasn't so bad." And it's really gratifying to read them over the radio because I've done it for so long and people call in and say "That was a good story," because a lot of them I don't think are very good.

But now we have this relationship, right? I go in there with a raunchy little raggedy story and I read it and it's like I've been fishing early



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Hester in Montana at age 36 with her son Balthazar, 8, holding "enormous" cat Rufus, and daughter Jean, 12, and cat Nyabingi. Jasmine, the pony, was a birthday gift for Jean. Balthazar is now a musician in Nashville, Tennessee. Jean lives in Bloomington with her husband and 3-year-old daughter Delilah ("The delight of my life," says Arbutus).

in the morning. "Folks, look what I caught this morning!" Well, you know it might be a long, skinny gar with a lotta teeth and a pointy nose! He might bite your ass. It might be a pretty good fish. It might be one that, you know, could've gotten a little bigger if you'd thrown him back. But that's really gratifying—that whole catch-and-release aspect to it. It's really gratifying when people are moved. It's really so gratifying, because it's a way of deepening the connection that I have with members of my community.


BLOOM: Community is important to you?

ARBUTUS: Oh, and it's not just the people, you know, when you think about your community. It's a whole lot more than just people. The air that you breathe, the trees that are in your backyard, the raccoons that get into your garbage and make a big fat mess—but it was a cold night and we must be compassionate.


It's the old sea that used to live here, 40 million years ago, that used to stretch from what we call Nevada all the way to Pennsylvania. And that's where all that limestone comes from, and sometimes you can still know that that old sea is still there. All those old fossils, the way the water trickles down, we must never leave out water. That water has come down from up there, trickle, trickle, trickle, trickle down, and gone out and fed little tiny creeks and streams and catch basins, drip, drip, drip, and then it comes back up, and then, you know, all this water is going around, this world of water and sky. And we're fish, we swim in air. And we sometimes forget that, but all of that is part of our community.

BLOOM: I love how you so wonderfully personify an animal or piece of furniture or even the seasons for that matter. How do you do that?

ARBUTUS: Oh, the world is animate. The world is animate, and all I do is play in it. And what I hope when I do that is that people, the people that I'm writing about—winter and summer, and the raccoon that's marauding my garbage, the maple tree in my backyard and all the birds that come through and, God forgive me, the starlings who I compared to Dick Cheney at some point, they do, they look just like Dick Cheney, they're horrid—will forgive me my errors of perception and interpreta-

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tion, because the world is animate and everything in it. I just cannot arrogate to myself alone intentionality, consciousness, morality. Now I guarantee you that the morality of a round piece of granite that's rolling around in the creek is probably going to be somewhat different from mine, although I bet it tries to get laid. Better not put that in, my mother will be reading this. I don't animate, it's all there. Isn't it fun?

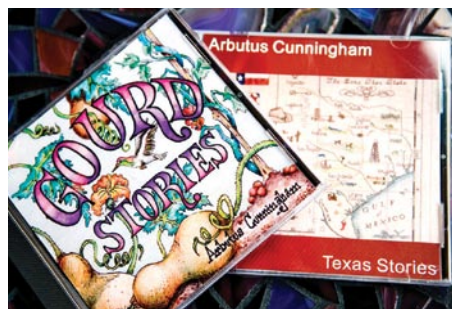
BLOOM: What is the hardest part of being an artist in this country?

ARBUTUS: I would certainly like to make a little more money! Yes I would! Let me just say right now that I would like to make a little more money! I do not want to be famous, I just want to make a little more money. I'd like to be able to afford a car with a motor that works. I'd like to be able to go to the dentist. You're familiar with this, yes?

You know that little catchphrase that people put on the public radio station, when they're talking about the National Endowment for the Arts: "Because a great nation needs great artists." Yeah, right, up your ass sideways, you moron! The place is crawling with great artists and do you support them? Oh no-no-no-no-no, uh-uh, no, because art is not something that can be defined or regulated or constrained or colonized. Art, all art, is political. It, of necessity, has to be.

BLOOM: So, as we close, any final thoughts you'd like our readers to know?

ARBUTUS: If they really want to know, they can listen on Saturday mornings. What I want to say always comes out in my stories. For those of you who do not care for the kind of wonderful music we play on that show, generally I read the story at quarter of eleven. But you ought to tune in anyway, because we almost always manage to talk bad about the government, which is everyone's responsibility! ✨



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