An Interview with John Houston

JON C. STOTT

Three times winner of the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians' Bronze Medal, James Houston is one of the foremost interpreters of the Canadian Arctic. In twelve years in the North, he not only served as Civil Administrator for the Government of Canada, but also taught the Inuit the art of print making and played a large role in introducing their art to the "Southern World." He left the Arctic in 1962, moving to the United States where, shortly after, he wrote his first children's book, Tikta'liktak. *Since then he has written nine more books for children, three adult novels, and several screen plays. Mr. Houston now divides his time between a farm near Escoheag, Rhode Island, and a cabin on the Queen Charlotte Islands. He frequently returns to the Arctic. The following interview was taped on November 14, 1980, when Houston visited Edmonton.*

STOTT: You wrote your first children's book, *Tikta'liktak*, in 1964 after moving to New York City in 1962. But obviously the many years before, your childhood, the twelve years in the North, led to the creation of that first children's book. Can we talk about your childhood first, especially your association with the Ojibwa? That, I think, must have introduced you to cultural relativity.

HOUSTON: Well, that is true. I don't usually begin there but that is where one should begin. I grew up in Toronto and I was telling my own two children recently that I remember little of my life in Toronto as a young child – Toronto wasn't overwhelming to me. But we had a summer house up on Lake Simcoe about seventy miles north of Toronto and we used to go up for long weekends and all of Easter and Christmas and all of the summer holidays. I went there first when I was two weeks old. We had Ojibwa Indians all around us – Chippewa you can say; you know all you have to do is take away the "O" and it sounds like Chippewa. My grandmother, who had been born in and grew up in that part of the country, called them the snake people: there was a snake society within the Ojibwa. She either meant that or she may have meant that they came from Snake Island. She really thought well of them and when she was an old lady, they used to bring her big lake trout, a kind that no white people we knew could catch. She said that when the Scottish settlers first came there, they didn't know how to live, they hadn't prepared any fields and they couldn't do anything, and that when the children were crying or hungry, the Ojibwa would sneak up to the house and leave venison and wild rice for them to live on. My sister and

I were hearing a story that was quite different from the usual story tale you hear about settlers who are beset by Indians and having trouble with them. I was brought up on stories where the Indians in fact helped people to survive. Indeed, where I now live in New England, precisely the same stories are properly told of those first early settlers who couldn't have made it at all without the help of Indians. Yes, I did grow up in an atmosphere of respect for Native People and I could never lose that now.

STOTT: Did you like to tell stories when you were a child?

HOUSTON: Yes, and I'll tell you how that all started. Once, when I had scarlet fever, my relatives sent me some wonderful books. But when I was well again, my mother told me it was the law that they would have to be burned because they had germs on them. I was really unhappy – they were such beautiful books. But she said, "Well, Jimmy, you'll have to tell your own stories and make your own books. So I started to imagine all sorts of adventures – shipwrecks, desert islands, those kinds of things. When I was nine or ten, my aunt showed me a poem a girl had written. I did an illustration for it and she sent it off to a magazine. I won a prize. It was three dollars and when I took the cheque to the bank, I thought I was really rich. I didn't want to be a banker like my grandfather and uncle; I wanted to draw and tell stories for the rest of my life – and I guess I have. I think that what I'm basically about is story telling. I love stories, I have an ear for them, I know when they're good when I hear them from my friends. I love stories – that's why the Eskimo world is such a thrill. They have stories and some of them I think go back 10,000 years. They're part of the fabric of the Arctic and of Canada. Nowadays, I usually get up at 5:30 and start writing. I even think about what I'll write before I get up. I have a crack in the ceiling above the bed in my eighteenth century house in Rhode Island and I stare at it. The ceiling is a gorgeous historical wreck and that reminds me of the St. Lawrence River! I stare at it and plan my stories. Sometimes I feel driven out of bed by the excitement of what I'm going to do. I'm very fond of coffee; but some mornings I'm too busy even to make coffee – I'm so eager to get on with the story.

When I think of them now they were quite simple and direct adventure stuff. I was mad for all that kind of thing.

STOTT: The reason I ask is that you use words like "a tale of adventure" and "hardship" in your titles, words that make one think of the traditional boy's adventures. Even though your books are about the Eskimos, the style of telling is often the style of the boy's adventure story, such as you might have read when you grew up.

HOUSTON: Yes, I would think that there is a lot of truth in that. I have not had any kind of training in English literature and I feel that I probably started to tell myself the story of Tikta'liktak, for example, while I was in the Arctic and making my drawings, using that kind of format.

STOTT: You've mentioned that you took art classes as a boy and your art training has taken you to Paris and Japan, and basically all around the world. Did your formal art training help or stand in the way of your responding to the Eskimo arts and crafts?

HOUSTON: Oh no, I think it helped me very much. Doctor Arthur Lismer, one of the Group of Seven, was by a piece of luck my teacher when I was a boy. There was some special grant given to the Toronto Art Gallery for about fifty children from all over the city to come as special students to learn from him and some other talented teachers whom he had chosen. We children were all about ten years old and we used to hit each other over the head with rulers and have a lot of fun there. One year he was away in Africa, in the Congo, doing some special kind of study. We were vaguely aware of that. When he came back from the Congo, the other teachers said "Be quiet! stop that bashing and stuff. Here he comes, here he comes!" Then through the halls of the Toronto Art Gallery we heard this wonderful African drumming of the Ashanti. Lismer was very tall and angular, about six foot five, and he came in wearing an enormous mask and dancing to this music in a wonderful way. I looked at him and I thought, "Boy! Where did that mask come from, where did that marvelous music, of a kind I'd never heard before, come from?" I thought that wherever it came from, I was certainly going to try to have something to do with that life, to live in that way and understand that sort of thing. I was only ten, but I was determined to do that. In fact, I did go off into Africa and to northern Japan and the Soviet Union, and other distant places. And I think it was because of Lismer and his mask.

STOTT: Why did you decide to go up North?

HOUSTON: Ever since those classes with Arthur Lismer, I'd always wanted to see different cultures, and so when the chance came, I decided to

take advantage of it. At first I thought I'd only go to James Bay with the Swampy Cree Indians for a few weeks and sketch those interesting people. On my last day there, a doctor flew into a remote settlement to treat a little girl who had been badly mauled by dogs. I was allowed to go along for the ride. We were going to be there a couple of days, but when he saw the girl's condition, he decided they'd have to take her out immediately. Right then, I decided I wanted to stay. I guess the doctor thought I was crazy – winter was coming and I didn't know any of the language. It took me over four years to learn it. But I stayed and was there in the Arctic for a dozen years.

STOTT: When you came up to the North for the first time it must have been a culture shock. What struck you as most different when you first when up North?

HOUSTON: I was struck with the idea that people were not families in precisely the same way that we are families. There would be a village with six families. But they didn't think of themselves only as families. That village was a unit of a kind we do not have and scarcely understand. If a mother died, the child would certainly cry, but at the same time that child was completely and perfectly certain that he belonged to that village, that everybody was prepared to be his mother, his father, his brother. Everybody in the village had real obligations to him, and or his sister, and he had real obligations to the village. He would hunt for them and care for them and share with them as they grew older. We have really lost that idea and I think we're the poorer for losing it.

STOTT: Why did you decide to leave the Arctic?

HOUSTON: Well, it was something like Henry Thoreau said at the end of his book *Walden*. He said he left Walden Pond because he had other lives to live. I came to feel that way. So I left. One day I was in the Arctic on West Baffin Island and the next day I was in New York, in the heart of Manhattan, working for the Steuben Glass. But I have not forgotten that those twelve Arctic years were the very best ever. I don't think I'll ever live as fully and richly again. It was real life! Travelling, hunting, dancing, singing, staying alive! Everything I've done since is pale by comparison, and everything I did before was simply getting ready for the North.

STOTT: You didn't write until you got to New York. Did you feel that there was a need to distance yourself from the North before you could write about it?

HOUSTON: Definitely. I think it would have been hard to write things in the Arctic at that time. I did a few minor articles about Eskimo art and culture, but when I read them now I think they are rather cold and stiff. I

didn't really feel them; I felt inadequate, absolutely inadequate to do them. But I felt adequate when it came to do *Tikta'liktak*. That was my kind of story. I must say that now, fifteen years later, I wouldn't wish to do that book in a different way. I wouldn't wish to do *The White Dawn* in a different way. I like story telling in its raw form. I like talking in a simplistic form. I learned something in a so-called primitive culture and I express it in a primitive way.

STOTT: Could you tell us how you came to write your first story, *Tikta'liktak*?

HOUSTON: Well, it grew out of something I heard about in the Arctic. I was out on the island of Sakkiak with some Eskimos gathering eiderdown from the nests the ducks had abandoned. I noticed an arrangement of stones in the distance and asked the people whom I was with if anyone lived on the island. When they said no one, I pointed to the man-arranged stones. "Oh, that's Tikta'liktak's grave," they replied, "Don't you know about him?" And they told me about a young man who had been marooned there, had decided to die and then had decided to live. After I'd heard about him, I said, "This must have happened long ago." But they said "No" and pointed to one of the girls. It was Tikta'liktak's granddaughter.

STOTT: Can you tell us how, in *Tikta'liktak*, you moved from facts into story?

HOUSTON: Here's an example. I understood that Tikta'liktak found the shoulder blades of a bear. But, I didn't intend to do anything about the bear because when I first heard the story the bear didn't play any part except that the boy tied two bear's shoulder blades to the ends of his harpoon and paddled back to the mainland. Now I thought that I should be able to explain in this book where he got the shoulder blades. It occurred to me that he should have killed that bear; it would be quite helpful to the story. Most Inuit have an encounter with a bear, there are lots of bears. I agree with what you said yesterday about the bear attack being a staple of Canadian Children's Literature about the North. I usually have some kind of a bear attack. The weather isn't quite enough to express the danger that is present in the Arctic, whereas a bear can symbolize that in a wonderful way. He's white and he's big; he's like a terrible storm; he's an allegorical kind of thing sometimes. And I think I've often used bears in an allegorical way. I think that a rattlesnake often appears in Southwestern literature, and he acts like the bear; he's a visible sign of terror. Also, when you're writing a book for children you want a lot of stuff to happen. But if we're dealing with facts, I can tell you something perhaps that you don't know about Tikta'liktak. My Eskimo friends told me that the year after Tikta'liktak returned he and his wife starved to death; he was gone. I never used that in

the book because I think it sounds depressing that, after having fough through all that to save himself, he should have died in such an ordinar way as starvation the following year. But it does show how hard life was i that place at that time. Also, I might add, having Tikta'liktak die at the en would be a typically Inuit way to end a story.

STOTT: Is this the usual way your stories grow, developing from core, or germ of facts?

HOUSTON: Yes. And I'll give you a couple more examples. One day was travelling with Oshaweetok, an Eskimo friend, and we stayed overnigh with a family. Now it's usual that everyone lies on the sleeping platform with their heads toward the door. That way they can quickly get up and ou if there's danger or trouble with the dogs. But my friend, Oshaweetok, wh was right beside me, put his head to the wall, and his feet were in my face al night. The next day, after we were on our way, I asked him why. Well, i turned out that, years before, when he was little, he'd sometimes slept tha way in this very camp. He wanted to remind the people, in a quiet way, o this. Long ago an Inuit village had been attacked by some people seekin revenge because they'd been robbed of their meat. They stabbed and killed those on either side of a boy who had lived there; he was not struck where they thought his heart was, but stabbed instead in the leg. This incident was the basis of *The White Archer.*

The story of *The White Dawn* I first heard when I was visiting an igloo, too. One day in March, I was sitting in a very foggy igloo – they can get that way, you can't even see across the dome. A girl said to me, "Lefthanded (that is my Inuit name), would you like to have a new pair of mitts?" When she was putting them on me, an old man sitting at the end of the sleeping platform said, "Be careful, Lefthanded, it could be for a killing." I was surprised to hear that said because Eskimos are such peaceable people. The old man then told me that about three white sailors who had been executed there. Note he didn't say murdered. I didn't know whether it was true or not. They showed me an old lady who used to sleep with the sailors, and she said, "It was wrong to kill those boys, I cried all winter."

When as a Canadian I moved to the United States, I immediately went to the whaling museum in New Bedford and asked to look at the logs of whaling ships. The very first one the librarian showed me was from the Abby Bradford. It had entries that told of some missing whalers. I knew they were the ones the Eskimos had rescued, so for the first time I knew what had happened to them in the beginning.

Of course, I had never laid my eyes on Pilee, or the Portugee, or Daggett. So I had to recreate them from Eskimo thoughts, from my own feelings

about them, and from everything I could reconstruct about sailing people of that time. When *The White Dawn* was made into a movie, I wrote the screenplay. That was very interesting to me. When I saw Warren Oates coming back at me off of the Paramount screen, I thought: "My Warren Oates – I've created him – he's mine – I wrote the lines that come out of his mouth!" It's really something to sit in a dark theatre, after all the endless waiting and the rough cutting and final cutting, and experience a person of your own creation whom no one, in a sense, ever saw. That's thrilling!

STOTT: There's a lot more of the supernatural in *Spirit Wrestler.* Did that book come from fact as well?

HOUSTON: Yes. Several Inuit from the north camp came to me one day in summer after the ice had gone, to ask who the strange white man was whom they'd seen. As Civil Administrator, I was supposed to know all about white outsiders. I had no information about him. We searched up north for a long time and couldn't find a trace of any one. But when you read *Spirit Wrestler* you'll find out, not who I thought he was, but who the Inuit thought he was and how he came to be there. He wasn't a shaman himself, but he was the problem. According to them he was the thing a shaman would have to fight against. That is why you have a shaman, to go against such ghostly, terrifying presences. That's the thrust of the book.

STOTT: You've illustrated all of your own books. Do you use art as an aid to your storytelling?

HOUSTON: I've always used drawing as a jumping off point. Whenever I'd hear a story, I'd start drawing things about it. I plot out distances between everything; I draw the people; I know exactly what they're wearing, precisely, from the front and back. I see their igloos; I know whether they're the best of igloos or not so good. I have to give myself a rich visual thing to talk about. In fact, if I couldn't see things visually, I'd have to go back to sketching to make things visual. Once, in a talk, a man said to me, "You should not only know your character, what he looks like, where he is, what he is wearing, you should also know what is in his pockets." Well, you should know that; and I try to come close. I think sometimes that I have failed in that. Sometimes I will be so preoccupied with two or three characters that I will fail with another character. Some say that's what happened in *Frozen Fire* with Matthew. I made Kayak strong; I made Matthew's father strong; I made Charlie the Australian helicopter pilor strong; and the wild man very strong. Yet somehow I didn't do enough with Matthew. Well I think that is quite a valid criticism. If I had that book to write again, I would do more with Matthew; I would strengthen him, reveal him more in my descriptions.

STOTT: In *The Republic of Childhood*, Sheila Egoff, said that you have "clothed [your stories] in the dignified style that befits a legend." How did you develop your style?

HOUSTON: A great thing happened to me in literature that I have never mentioned before. This is it. I am of Scottish extraction, and we have a rather frugal strain in our family. Well, when I went up North, I was given a list of how much it would cost to send messages out. For eight hundred words, it was astronomical. I thought about those prices of sending something thousands of miles in the South. I'd have something really exciting like a ship aground, and or an aircraft lost in some remote part, or some harrowing Eskimo event. I would write that out and then I would say "Well now, how can I condense this down into a really tight form? They have got to understand exactly what this means or they will ask back and forth and it will cost far more. So it's got to be concise and it's got to be real and it's got to be interesting and it's got to contain everything." I would start on a telegram: I would originally have eight hundred words, then I'd get it down to three hundred, then to a hundred and fifty, and when I had it down to seventy-five, I would take those seventy-five critical words and send it off. And I think that some of my telegrams were masterpieces in condensation: they were as condensed as you could be condensed and still convey an idea. And that helped me a lot, when I wrote *Tikta' liktak* especially. You look at the sparseness of that book; its every limb is clipped away; I just give it to you like a telegram. And it's notable for that. Later on I become more verbose as I get further and further away from the telegram. Now, with *The Fourth Eagle* and also with *Black Diamonds*, my latest books, you see me getting much wordier about things. Whether you will approve of that or not I don't know, and whether I approve of it or not I don't know.

STOTT: In writing your stories, how do you deal with the problems of translating an unfamiliar culture and bringing in background that would be totally unfamiliar to readers in say New York, Toronto, or Seattle? What things do you have to do extra, and what things do you have to leave out, so that the non-Inuit readers will understand your stories?

HOUSTON: Well, Markoosie in his book *The Harpoon of the Hunter* was writing for his own people. When he says, they cut something with an ulu, he assumes the reader knows what an ulu is. So his book would be perfect in Inuit translation, because every Eskimo child reading it would know perfectly what an ulu and the other things he mentions are. But it presents a big problem among southern Canadian children, and even more for readers outside of Canada. In a way, in writing about the Eskimo, I feel that I had the advantage of coming from another culture. I saw that readers might not know what certain objects were, so I had to be very careful to

describe them fully. So it is true, I am writing for a certain audience. Now an Inuit would have this same advantage over me if he came down South and was writing for the Inuit about his experiences. In fact, I've read some children's descriptions in *Nord* of the city of Toronto and they describe Toronto for other Inuit in a way I would never dream of. Their view of Toronto was a view that I could never hold. It was a totally different view of Toronto.

STOTT: I understand that some of Inuit stories just ramble on and on; they don't come to a point. Would this be something you would have to watch out for when you were adapting traditional stories?

HOUSTON: I would say that after listening to one hundred traditional Inuit stories you'd be really lucky if five of them, – I don't think even five – three of them would work for a non-Inuit writer if he attempted to use them in their present form. *Kiviok* was a notable exception; it seemed to have our kind of form to it in some sort of way. It makes you wonder why. There is another legend, I won't even mention its name, it's a treasure, and I hope to bring it out because I adore it as a story. It is for very young children and it's like *Kiviok's Magic Journey*. I don't usually work in that field, but I would like to do at least one more of those before I die.

STOTT: When you decide to write a story, how do you decide whether you'll tell it for adults or children?

HOUSTON: I'd like to answer that in a roundabout way. The Eskimos never told anything to a select audience. They spoke to three year old children and to old grandmothers of ninety and to every age group in between, all crowded into a small igloo or dance house at the time of winter feasting. They were always trying to make the smallest child comprehend what the most intellectual person in the group could perhaps easily understand. So for that reason, I think that they tried to give the stories shapes that could be understood and enjoyed by everyone. In some way, I hope my stories are the same. The shorter legends can be enjoyed by the grownups and I think that high school children can respond to my "adult" books. The stories can really go either way. I was almost going to try to write *The White Dawn* as a children's book. I also seriously considered writing *The White Archer* as an adult book. It was told to me in a very adult mood and it has sex and violence up to here. *Ghost Fox* could be a prime children's book, almost perfect as a children's book. Sometimes adult books are nothing much more than over expanded children's books, dealing with sexuality in a different way.

STOTT: Knowing that some of the books would reach a wide audience of younger readers, is there anything you left out of them in

addition to an adult treatment of sexuality? I notice that the religious beliefs don't appear in them.

HOUSTON: I don't think religion is truly an appropriate theme. I think it is a religious subject, and religious, I mean, in the sense of Christianity. I don't think that children should read *Moby-Dick*, because *Moby-Dick* is too wonderful for little children. It should be held like a treasure for them until they are ready for the wonders of Melville. Shakespeare is undoubtedly another treasure, of the same order, and young children shouldn't believe that they can deal with Shakespeare easily. Save it! I would say that with religious matters, somewhat complex religious matters, I would like children to be a bit older; I don't want to deal with religious matters in a superficial way. Religion is a rich, heady subject that requires careful explanation. Perhaps Christianity, like shamanism, is really almost beyond explaining. Maybe it cannot be explained. Is that why I ended *Spirit Wrestler* so mysteriously?

STOTT: What about the Sedna myth, which a lot of people have tried to retell for children. You've stayed right away from it. Would the Inuit child be told, "Be careful or Sedna will get you?"

HOUSTON: Yes. I've seen that enacted; I've seen an old woman at Kingmerok run down behind a rough ice where children were playing and call "Woo-ee, woo-ee, woo-ee" and then hide. When the children came screaming up and said that they heard something calling in the ice, she said, "You children should be careful. That must be Taluliuk or Sedna." These powerful female spirits were used as a kind of boogie-man. The Inuit didn't mind doing that to their children. After all, we did that kind of thing about a hundred years ago. We have just stopped that recently. Maurice Sendak still does it successfully and so, of course, does American TV.

STOTT: In your children's books, in the legends particularly, you deal with the rite of passage. Are you consciously looking for or attracted to stories that deal with youth's growth to maturity through a perilous journey of some kind?

HOUSTON: I guess I do, because when I look at the things I've written, a lot of them deal with exactly that. Even the adult books often deal with that same theme, notably *Ghost Fox*. So I am very drawn to that changing condition of human awareness. I like young people, and I like to think about them growing and changing. I was recently reading in the *Courrant*, a newspaper in Montreal in 1851, an account that caught my eye. It read "*One penny reward*. Help me catch a bonded boy, sullen or mean, with his clothes full of mahogany dust who has run away from my establishment and I wish to apprehend him. Anyone who can help me to do this will

receive one penny reward." First of all, as William Blake says, "One thought fills immensity." I thought, who is that boy? Is that your great grandfather or mine, or one of our greatgrand-uncles? Where did he run – to Edmonton, or did he go south to the whaling fleets of New Bedford, or north, or did he make his way back to Scotland? He's real, that boy! I see him in the newspaper and he's a real boy, a runaway boy. That's just what I want. I know, further, a little wee bit about him; I know the character of the man who chased him. Now the story is by no means done. I will have to dig into Canadian history of that period. I will have to go to Montreal again to find out about bondage and payments for boys and about how they were sent from Scotland, where he would likely have gone, and if they were good at making furniture. Did he make it out to Western Canada? Was anybody making furniture there about the time? Could he have been the one in Winnipeg? That's what I care about: real research that I can weave into a lively novel that might make you care.

STOTT: The children in your stories are truly heroic. In fact, in many ways they're the hope for the future in your stories.

HOUSTON: Oh yes. Well thank you. I think you said that very nicely. I haven't thought that much about it; but in the Eskimo world the children are everything. That's the difference between ourselves and them. With us children aren't so much, and we are often not too important to our children. After people are over twenty, they may become sort of symbols; a lot of children look upon their parents as mere symbols of something nice or not so nice. In the Eskimo world it was not like that at all. Families have to fight and struggle every day to bring up a child. Just to put food into its mouth, your wife's mouth, your grandfather's mouth is hard work. Thirty years ago, if I said to man, "Have you been out here on this seal hole for forty-eight hours?" he would say, "Well, where else should I be? Would you think it honourable of me to sit and starve with the women in the igloo? I'd rather be out here trying to get food than sitting in there doing nothing." It was hard finding food for the family. There was no limit to what a man would do for them. Beyond the hunter and his companion there was no insurance. When a person reached sixty-five, which was old in the Eskimo world, he would be sitting huddled ina cold tent or igloo and unless his sons and daughters cared about him, would sew for him or hunt caribou or seals for him, he would die. That may always have had something to do with everybody being so nice to each other in the old days in the Eskimo world; they were good to each other, each performing in his time to save the other. That is quite different from our world. In this century we have largely changed all that.

STOTT: You moved in *Frozen Fire* and then in *River Runners* from traditional themes to one of the major themes of the Seventies: the confrontation between cultures. What led you to move into that area?

HOUSTON: Do you suppose because I reviewed *Julie of the Wolves*? When I read Jean George's book, I was quite shocked. Shocked is a good word; it's always good to be shocked by reading. I felt that she was awfully right about some things and awfully wrong about some other things. I could see that she was a good writer and had the courage to tackle modern sociological problems in the real and present Inuit world. I had always written about the past. I had never written about the present. But as soon as I did start to write about the present, I too had to deal with modern sociological problems. So I had drunken uncles coming in and a number of semi-unpleasant uneskimo-like things happening. Believe me, I did that with some intrepidation! I tell you, it is not my style to talk about the failure of my friends. If I write a book about white people, I'll say anything about them. I'll give them a terribly hard time without a qualm. But I'm rather reluctant to reach into the Eskimo or Indian world and say unpleasant things about them. I really am. You'll easily see that. You'll see me hedging around as nervous as a fox. I really feel a great loyalty towards them. I think of them as exceptionally interesting, kindly people who have been often badly put upon by us. I don't like to be one more put-uponer. They need our help not more hard knocks.

STOTT: You mentioned that you don't like to deal with religious themes in your books for children. However, you have looked at the subject extensively in your longer novels, especially *Spirit Wrestler*. Can you tell us a little about your interest in the subject?

HOUSTON: I myself am greatly drawn to shamanism, on two levels. One as chicanery. I sometimes describe shamans, as in *Spirit Wrestler*, as a strange troop of wandering magicians, perhaps as – in Bergman's movie *The Seven Seals* – people performing questionable magic for their own profit. Even if these people are only doing a pure act of trickery, I would still be very interested in it. But I do happen to think that shamanism is more than that. First of all it has as solid a basis, I think, as Christianity. All its trappings and ramifications are very much in place, and there is good evidence that they have been in place for thousands of years. Also, I have myself seen two very magical events that I could not explain to you, and I'd be a great liar if I said that I knew that I had been simply hypnotized or caught up in the rhythmic pounding of a drum or all the wild excitement in a snowhouse. I believe I have seen several things that just couldn't happen in our rational world, and so I would be less than truthful if I just explained it away as chicanery of trickery.

STOTT: One of the things you deal with in *The White Dawn* and in many of the other books is the power and the strength and the importance of women, even if they do seem to take the back seat many times.

HOUSTON: I don't think that women in many societies on earth have ever really taken the back seat. Now from time to time in history women have been put down, many societies demand that women be discreet in wielding power. Inuit women are usually very discreet and don't make a show of power when visitors are sitting around. Usually they don't, but occasionally they do. Nevertheless I am convinced from my contact with them and other women such as the Haida of the North West Coast that they are very powerful. I was reading a journal from 1792 and it said that a Haida man would not dare to trade an otter without his wife near him because she would not hesitate to strike him physically if he traded in some way in which she did not approve. And so the idea that all the Indian ladies were squaws towing along behind their husbands with heavy packs on their backs is a white man's myth. Sure they carried heavy packs but who knows what that husband had to do to support his family. They believed in the family; one and all. Everybody did what he could. When, in 1806 a young carrier woman died, her husband hanged himself. No one was surprised by that. He loved her very much.

STOTT: The power of the women in Inuit culture might explain why Sedna is so dominant a force, although an evil, terrifying force.

HOUSTON: Certainly. Absolutely. The Inuit have a very interesting legend about women. For people in the Eastern Arctic, there are two spirits that live in the sun and moon; the sun is a women; the moon, a man. The greatest danger for a family is that the moon will pass across a snow house in the evening. The Inuit used to make a clear ice window up above the igloo entrance so that the women could see to sew. When the light of the moon entered through the ice window and struck the seamstress in the lap it could easily make her pregnant. That's what Inuit ladies told me. And I said, "You're kidding. I can hardly believe that tale!" And they said "Oh, it is so! it's so! You ask our husbands." So I asked their husbands, and they said "Well, it could be so, we don't know much about how it happens then because we are always away hunting." I laughed and said, "We have stories like that in our society." John Updike would love that story.

STOTT: One final question. For which one of your children's books did you say when you were finished, "This is the one in which I've really been able to do what I wanted to do?"

HOUSTON: *The White Archer* and I want to tell you why. When I write a book, the events often come to me as a surprise. There are many twists and turns that characters take that surprise me. I like it when I don't know what they're going to do. When I start writing about how somebody is going to act or respond I often do not know the words, they just appear before me. Just wriggling like live things off the end of my pen. Does that

sound utterly irresponsible? In *The White Archer* when I saw the relationship between Kungo and his sister and her Indian husband Natawa I wept for what had happened to them. I didn't know it was going to happen; it happened to me by surprise. Then I took those ten pages that I had written, early in the morning and I put them on my wife's typewriter in the most ordinary way for her to type. I secretly watched her while she was typing and when she got to about page seven she started blowing her nose and crying. I mean the tears were falling on her typewriter and I thought, "Oh my God! I've made it." Because she says that usually when she's typing, she doesn't try to absorb the material. She might be emotionally affected at some other time but not then. Nevertheless, this time she was weeping terribly. That gave me one of the greatest thrills of my life because I thought, not only did that strange writing out of nowhere get through to me, but I was able to move her when she shouldn't have been moved. That's probably why I like that story best.

STOTT: Thank you very much.

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