

An Interview with James Reaney

Catherine Ross

James Reaney, poet, dramatist, critic, short-story writer, is also author of books and plays for children, including The Boy with an A in his Hand, Names and Nicknames, and Apple Butter. This interview with James Reaney took place on November 17, 1982, at his home in London, Ontario.

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ROSS: Since this interview is for *CCL*, the focus is on children's literature. I thought I would start with the very first thing — that is, you as a child. Could you talk about the books that were important to you very early on?

REANEY: They're not so much children's books. They are the Bible and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, although I had the usual kinds of children's books given to me — picture books, alphabets. Those were the days before "Black Power," so you had things like "Ten little niggers," including the tenth little nigger who went to Chancery — which I always thought was pretty mysterious — and never came back. There were some old Victorian children's books around, like *Alice in Wonderland*.

ROSS: Did you like those?

REANEY: Oh, I really loved *Alice in Wonderland*. Frightening, but extremely interesting. Tarzan books could be counted as children's books, I suppose. Also we had an encyclopedia called the *World Book*. From reading that, you could get yourself an education. The library in the farmhouse I was born in was a strange library. It had my grandmother's books — things like *A Sentimental Journey*. It had a whole host of adult things, including old school texts. I read the readers that my mother and father had had at school, which was quite an education in itself. They are quite different from the readers nowadays, although not so different from the reader I had at school in the thirties. But then they got progressive and went downhill rapidly.

ROSS: These were the Irish readers, were they?

REANEY: No, they're slightly after that. With my father, it was Gage, called the First, Second, and Third Readers. They are heavy on Wordsworth — the "Lyrical Ballads" — and beautifully illustrated by C.W. Jefferys. They are steel engravings, and they are very effective. You remember them forever, in a way that you don't remember the *art nouveau* stuff in the Eaton readers. You remember that too, but there is not as much going on per square inch. And then the teacher went in to town and bought books from the local bookstores for our public school library. She had a lot of British books — *A Child's Garden of Verses*, heavily illustrated, a tremendous Mother Goose, Walter de la Mare, *Shagganappi* by Pauline Johnson — that sort of thing. *Cry Havoc* by Beverly Nichols which was a big anti-war thing. So there were lots of books around. But it was very difficult to belong to the public library uptown because it cost a dollar to anyone out of town. You really didn't have access to the public libraries.

ROSS: This was a dollar a year, you mean?

REANEY: Yes, a dollar a year. And that was a big deal in those days. Be like fifty dollars now. So that's about it. *Grimms' Fairy Tales* and *Andersen's Fairy Tales* were given to me when I was young. They were great treats. And you heard a lot of fairy tales on the radio because of a program called *Let's Pretend*, emanating from CBS San Francisco — a really beautiful Saturday morning program that everyone listened to. There were a lot of children's programs — *Orphan Annie*, *Singing Lady*. *Singing Lady* was a really special lady from WJR who did poetry, singing, biographies of artists and all sorts of things, about 5:30 in the afternoon. You raced home from school not to miss that and other things. But that's about it. But the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress* loom a lot larger than I'm sure they do in many a child's life now.

ROSS: One of the things mentioned by people who have written about your work is Rider Haggard's *Dawn*.

REANEY: Right, right, right. I've forgotten to mention that. Yes, that was from my step-grandmother's library. I had just barely learned to read when I read that. I can't get over the scene in which the son denies the father the medicine — the father

dies — because the father refuses to give him the estate. I thought that was incredible.

ROSS: Which of course you have taken over . . .

REANEY: Yes, I used that later on [in *Listen to the Wind*].

ROSS: Thinking of you there on the farm reminds me of your comment that the world of Canadian poetry is like some lonely farmhouse in the centre of a remarkably large and bleak farm. But there you were with the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. Rather like Crawford with her Dante.

REANEY: Once you are in touch with the tradition, there's not much you are missing, in a way. As long as you get to high school and get to a larger library later on, when you are about twelve.

ROSS: What about Canadian books? Were there Canadian books that were important to you growing up?

REANEY: Yes, There were Canadian things in those readers. Archibald Lampman — for example, his "Hepaticus." And Charles Roberts' animal stories. You got a sprinkling of poems and so on. I think there was a book around the house about the RCMP, for children. My father had to have books when he was a child that were true. He couldn't read things that weren't true. So his mother got him this story about the RCMP. And then Nelly McClung was in the background. My mother had huge reading lists and read an awful lot when she was younger. So I heard about people like Nelly McClung and Agnes Macphail. Charles Roberts was important. His "They Seek Their Meat From God" was in the readers. One of his stories had had its ending cut off by the editors of the reader because it was so sad. The story was about a deer that got killed. Our teacher, of course, yanked out the other edition of the reader in which the deer got killed. We all burst into tears. It was terrible — I hated it. The *Star Weekly* published Greg Clark and Jim Frise every week in a terrific sort of cartoon-story combination — that was where you got your Canadian literature. The CBC radio was just barely starting. You could hardly get the signal, which has been a perennial problem in Southern Ontario. We finally did get it and our family certainly listened to the CBC a lot. And they had fairy tales and historical programs and so on. But

there was certainly no push for Canadian lit. on any level. And to my memory Wilson MacDonald never came to our school. But if you looked at the old readers, they did have Canadian things. In other words, whoever the educational forces were, they managed to get some things.

ROSS: So you did feel that it was possible for someone living here in Canada to write?

REANEY: Yes.

ROSS: Had you decided early on that writing was a possibility for you?

REANEY: Oh yes. My mother was very interested in writing. People in the neighbourhood had a little play society and put on plays and so on.

ROSS: One time when you came to talk to a Canadian culture and literature class about the Donnelly plays, you said that you had been to see a three-ring circus as a child. And you suggested that seeing this circus may perhaps have influenced the structure of the Donnelly plays, where several things are happening on the stage at once.

REANEY: Circuses came to Stratford — Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Bros. They were still in great big tents and they were wonderful. I only saw the one, but it was absolutely beautiful. You saw trained seals, balancing balls on their noses in front of you, while off in the distance you could see torch dancers. I think we had cheaper seats, so we didn't get all the things that the people who sat in the centre seats did. They would see a big centre thing plus two side things: the seals on one side and the torch dancers on the other and some big thing going on in front of them — like a tiger. It was quite breath-taking. I didn't see many movies — again the expense problem came in. I did see classics like the Selznick *David Copperfield* and I think I saw one Orphan Annie film and *Tale of Two Cities* and a British picture about Queen Victoria — I think these were the only films I saw.

ROSS: I remember your talking about your Children's Literature class, which you taught the first year that Children's Literature was offered at Western. One of the exam questions that you were going to give your students was this:

if the child could create his world picture only from a selection of books, which books would you choose for him? I wonder what you would choose?

REANEY: It is difficult to say. I think I would cut the knot by getting a bit beyond what we teach in Children's Literature. Start off with things like Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. And then all the things that you read to infants like nursery rhymes and fairy tales and selected stories from the Bible and *Pilgrim's Progress*. And then the basic adventure things like *Treasure Island* and *Kidnapped*. In other words, what I would do is what Hope and Alvin Lee did in that series of readers called *Wish and Nightmare*. It's in a series edited by Frye called *Uses of the Imagination*.¹ It introduces the child to a carefully spread out version of all the modes. This may shock people, but it can be done. Evidently the children have a lot of fun seeing the differences between something like a really scary fairy tale that is nightmarish and horrifying or something like St. John's Apocalypse in a cut down version as compared with things like *Little Women*, in which life is more or less as they live it. The answer — without going into long lists of things — I think is to look at that *Wish and Nightmare* series which starts at about grade six. What happens, of course, is that you get lots of ironic visions if you have gone to a Sunday School of the period when I did and have been introduced to Hell-fire. We had religious books set in the Gibson Girl era with Satan peeping in every window and under beds and around the corner.

ROSS: This would be *Satan or Christ*?²

REANEY: Yes. Even at the bathing beach, he was there in a bathing costume, luring people into the whirlpool of social despair. That *Wish and Nightmare* book is the best thing I can think of. The world picture is more or less the complete Renaissance one. I think if a child is allowed to go on his own with TV and reading and comic books and so on he arrives at the same thing anyhow. It's just that it could be a bit more organized.

ROSS: Turning to your own writing for children, I was considering your work and I found it difficult to decide which things I should include as children's. There is *The Boy With an 9 in his Hand* and *Apple Butter and Other Plays* and the Little Red Riding Hood play that you did with

Greg Curnoe. But then I thought, what about *Listen to the Wind* and perhaps some others? What do you think? Which ones do you consider children's works?

REANEY: Oh, I think that children get a lot out of my plays that are for grown-ups (or for people who are older than age twelve) because of the method the plays use. But I think that to include *Apple Butter and Other Plays* and *The Boy With an \mathcal{A} in his Hand* is probably the best bet. You get furthest that way. The plays in *Apple Butter* were written with the idea of a graded approach to drama in which you start out with a puppet play, which could be appreciated by the under fives, and then go on to more difficult things until you reach the high school level with *Ignoramus*. *Apple Butter* was commissioned for the Western Fair, at which you were always going to have a lot of little kids in this tent theatre. (As a matter of fact, some of the kids slid down the top of the tent before we got into it and they ruined it, and so we had to have another tent.) *Names and Nicknames* seems to fit — it still works for the under-five age group and they get lots out of it — but it really appeals to slightly older kids. And then *Geography Match* is about grade seven and eight, and *Ignoramus* was premiered in York Mills Collegiate with the entire school putting it on; it has more difficult concepts. I was modeling it on Carl Orff's *Schulwerk*, in which you go from less difficult pieces to more difficult. There were big patriotic, cultural aims behind it. I was sick of there being no Canadian marionette plays and no Canadian marionette tradition, as there is in other countries. It is very hard to get the necessity of Canadian marionettes across to people. You get marionette people putting on Punch and Judy still, and anything from abroad; but they will never do their own traditions, if they have any. *Geography Match* was written for the Centennial that we had in '67 and was intended to teach kids all that you needed to know about the geography of the country and its history.

ROSS: And its heroes. People like Tecumseh.

REANEY: Right. *Ignoramus* was intended to handle the whole problem of how you should be educated. People said, "That won't be interesting to kids." It may not be, but the side effects are. *Names and Nicknames* was based on an older speller of my father's and is literally about words, in lots of ways. So without specifically intending to educate, when

the collection is put together it is a complete school. Queer as that may sound, there it is.

ROSS: And a complete growing up process.

REANEY: Right. It has been used that way by some people. And *Boy with an A in his Hand* — again there is a didactic impulse behind it — to teach kids about the problems of society and the unfairness of things under certain systems. I wanted it to be a bit more serious than the usual kind of kid's book, although with an adventure story and lots of funny things to deal with. And again the idea was to give them a piece of their history about Ontario. It was also written in order to get some money for *Alphabet*; it was written for a contest. It didn't place, but there was evidently someone on the committee who fought like a tiger for it. When I read the ones that won the prizes, my eyes were opened to the horror of it all. They were the dullest things you ever saw in your life. They are now out of print, thank God. My publishers said, "Why don't you rewrite this?" — so I did. But I had the terriblest time with the editors. There is a sequence at the beginning in which one of the kids falls into the lake from the boat and then he falls in again at the end. And they said, "Why do you have *that*?" I said, "Well, it's design; it's story; you repeat; kids like that." They said, "But it's not very *real*. It's coincidental." I realized that there was something the matter with the children's department at that publishing house. Later on I met a whole bunch of bossy ladies in connection with the children's contest, again for some blessed centennial. They had it just a couple of years ago, a big contest in which children were to write a short story about Canada. Most of the kids sent in essays. But there was a little Jewish girl in Toronto who wrote a terrific story about her grandmother — about going to the store to get her some paprika. I said, "This has got to win first prize." They said, "No. It doesn't even mention Canada." It probably was set on Spadina or Dundas. I said, "You know what it's like down there. There are no maple trees." They wanted to give the prize to an essay. If they had been the children's department of my publishers during the period of *Boy With an A in his Hand*, I can see why they would run into difficulties.

ROSS: In Canada, a problem is that we have so few children's editors.

- REANEY: These were they. They were just lining up for the guillotine. But I could see what the editors could not see, which was that you had to tell a *story*. This was an historical novel contest, but it wasn't enough just to have the old history in there and the strange costumes. It had to be a *story*. They had never thought of that really, that the story had to be exciting and it had to go in and out.
- ROSS: Yes. the children had to have some reason to want to read it.
- REANEY: And they are not going to want to read it for the history. They are not going to read it because you want them to learn about Mackenzie. It has to attract them in its own right. You have to focus on the children in the story and the children have to do things and things have to be done to them.
- ROSS: Have you ever had the response that surely Strachan couldn't have been *that* bad?
- REANEY: Yes. Oh yes. His biographer was in an absolute rage and said that Strachan loved cats and all the rest. You can have two thoughts about Mackenzie, too, I must say. I think my reply was that you had to have villains in the children's lit. The kind of view that I was taking of history is that it is a convention of blacks and whites. If you don't have the blacks and whites — if you say that everyone is half good and half bad, then the children are going to get bored. You've *got* to take one side or the other. Period. Later on they'll begin to see that there are good things about Strachan.
- ROSS: Later on they can have the grays.
- REANEY: Or, I told Strachan's biographer to write a children's story about Strachan, with Mackenzie as the villain. It would be a Tory kids' book.
- ROSS: Are there other Canadians whose stories ought to be told by storytellers who know how to tell stories?
- REANEY: Let me see. There has been a new movement, of course, to do the works of Canada, by James Lorimer. They have done the lumbermen and so on using quite a different way of going at it than my method. They're more realist. Macmillan has already done all that in a series called the

Buckskin Series. So just select some of them and try again. Tecumseh has been handled — very, very well as a matter of fact. I learned more from the children's biography of Tecumseh than I've learned from grown-up biographies because the Macmillan author put it all together and got the high spots and really polished them. I think that what writers find difficult to do is to handle the city, and that's begun to be a thing in children's books — to get away from the pastoral. I feel that it is possible to give children some idea of the complexities of modern life and the horrors of it. For example, I've never seen a kid's book on a rock star which went into the Eeyore problems involved in being a rock star. I wouldn't mind a children's book on David Willson or Isabella Crawford. There should be a child's history of Canada — I think that would settle the question.

ROSS: In *Boy with an A in his Hand*, instead of picking 1837, you picked the type riot of '26. Can you talk about how you focussed on this episode?

REANEY: Well, I knew an awful lot about type-setting, because I was doing Alphabet press at the time. The type riot seemed the thing in which I could really spread out with the details about technology that I knew: an old-fashioned technology at that, since I am a hand-setting-type-person. The whole idea was to keep it very tiny and very miniature and not to get into the big historical scenes. Which had been done — there were quite a few books from the child's point of view on the Rebellion! I wanted just to take a tiny little slice, and then show all the problems raised by the Rebellion "in little," with the girl with the brand on her hand, for example, and the stupefying rigidity of the Family Compact society; to do that "in little," and just take a very little piece of time and work at that and find out as much as you could about it. Also I was fascinated by the technology of the way they let the ships into the harbour. I realize there should have been a lot more Indians on the street than I had. The street scenes were set up like little movies. You researched and found out just who did go down the street and so on. I could have done more there. The basic thing is that I did know a lot about type, and I knew that type-setting is fascinating to kids if you describe it the right way. So I thought I would fan out from that.

ROSS: So there was first the connection with the Alphabet press

that you yourself were using. And then you went off and did research?

REANEY: Yes. I didn't do half enough research in lots of ways. I kept finding out things when it was almost too late. I was just starting to understand how you did research for history. But you never get quite to the bottom of it. I think Mackenzie was awfully lucky to get such a good settlement. He did say things that were rather breathtaking for the pro-Tories, about some of them being bastards and all the rest of it. However, you had to decide whom to side with, and I decided that Mackenzie was the person. There was something the matter with that world.

ROSS: Yes. In the book a flaw appears, not just with Dr. Strachan, but also with Lady Catherine and with Jarvis's boots.

REANEY: It's a colonial society that hasn't enough people in its middle class yet to get it righted.

ROSS: Oh, and the bear!

REANEY: Again, the editors complained about that as being too fairy tale like. But this is the way you tell *stories*. There are lots of bears about. It could have happened. You have got to handle your historical level on one hand, which gives the kids the feeling of a different world. Which they can resist — they don't want too much of that. But then you have got to give them a story. That is the way the Grimms' fairy tales work. But you could not tell editors that.

ROSS: Yet *Boy with a A in his Hand* is probably the closest to being realism of any of your works, isn't it — except for that bear? And except for the replication of things — boy with an A, girl with an R; the falling into the water twice?

REANEY: Yes, lots of patterns.

ROSS: The patterns are there, but the person reading the book would also get the sense of the historical representation.

REANEY: I thought that was worth doing because it leads to a firmer feeling of what tradition you are in — for Toronto kids. The book is still in print. It has been reprinted several times and is quite popular. I get a lot of letters about it.

ROSS: Do these works sell outside of Canada?

REANEY: I don't think they have tried to sell *Boy with an A* outside of Canada. There are problems about whether people would be interested in it — I don't know.

ROSS: How about the plays?

REANEY: The plays do, yes. *Names and Nicknames* in particular was taken up by a New York firm and has been done all over the States. But they find difficulties, you see, with *Geography Match*, because it looks too much of a local thing.

ROSS: In *14 Barrels*, you mention that someone wanted you to write an article on the connection between children's drama and adult drama.³ I don't know if you ever did write it. Have you any thoughts fermenting on this question?

REANEY: Basically they are the same. That is, children's drama is scaled down to sock the story at the kids because they are at a level in which they are not so interested in *dianoia* and in people yattering on. And they are not interested in realism and naturalism, so far as I can see. You can tell that from the kinds of things they watch on TV and in movies. *Star Wars*, in other words. You're into plots like that — fairy tale plots. Then as you inch up the scale towards adulthood you get changes; people want more realism. They want more complex characters. Less romance and more satire. But I think basically the problems in children's drama and adult drama are the same: you've got to have an underlying legend or myth or pattern that makes the whole thing work dynamically. I am not the kind of person who is writing for the up-New York crowd that like David Mammet, for example. I don't like anything like that at all.

ROSS: *American Buffalo*?

REANEY: Ugh! The thing that really turned me off was *Duck Variations*. The kind of adult who that is for — that's existentialist, and I'm not existentialist. The emphasis on story is probably fairly startling for lots of adults who are not too interested in stories any more.

They are interested in something more brooding, and I can't provide it. I'm afraid that there's a big connection for me between the children's stuff and the adult stuff. This comes out in the way things happen, and quite often in the techniques they are done in.

ROSS: Certainly that is true in your plays. All sorts of things associated with children are used in the adult plays — like the tops, for example, in *Handcuffs*. And in *Sticks and Stones*, two sticks equals a fiddle, and there are cat's cradles and so on.

REANEY: Yes.

ROSS: If one were to design a course for children, it would start with alphabet books and counting books and would go on through animal stories and bestiaries and nursery rhymes and fairy tales to hero stories. It seemed to me rereading your plays that what you are doing is taking these genres back from the nursery and giving them to adults.

REANEY: Yes, that's true. It is a technique for doing plays that is naive and primitive in lots of ways, but it is not unlike primitive drama. My plays aren't like that all the time. *Gyroscope*, for example, is more like an adult romantic comedy, though with a lot of poetry in it. However I have a feeling that there should be a connection between children's plays and adult plays. You can see it in popular culture. *Star Wars* is really a children's film. And then it can work the other way: the children's way of looking at things can add a sophistication. Realism and naturalism are sort of played out, unless you really push into existentialism. But I'm not convinced that that works.

ROSS: Urjo Kareda has remarked that unlike some playwrights Reaney doesn't readjust his mind when he writes for children.

REANEY: People have complained about that. They look at the scripts, and they are appalled. My plays are very dense and rich with a lot of images and metaphors. "No child will take to that." Not true. It's been tested with kids. It's just that the average writer, when he writes children's stuff, feels that it has got to be thinned out. That is not necessarily true, as long as you keep a powerful story going. They get a lot of it subliminally.

ROSS: So long as the powerful story holds it together, they can then absorb all the rest of the levels.

You said that you had tested this out, and of course this testing has been in your children's workshops. I was asking Hilary Neary how the Listeners Workshop got going. She said that it came out of *Listen to the Wind*.

REANEY: Yes. It was the chorus of *Listen to the Wind*. I decided to keep those children together, since they had learned to do a lot of poetry and choral speaking. It grew into a thing where people met every Saturday morning — not just kids, but parents and older kids as well.

ROSS: And then that went on for two years?

REANEY: Yes. It went on for two years. A lot of things came out of it. *Colours in the Dark* and *The Donnellys*, as a matter of fact. We did the Bible. We did Greek culture. You could do all sorts of things in it with interesting results for kids. And for myself as well. It was great fun. It was like a little school.

ROSS: Where you were testing out techniques for getting things to work on the stage as well?

REANEY: Yes.

ROSS: You told my Canadiana class at the Library School that you were doing workshops using the alphabet. I found that interesting.

REANEY: Yes, just a basic thing from nursery rhymes — “A is an Archer who shot at a frog,” which you find is a form that the children know, because they know their alphabet and they can use it to devour any of the reality around them. You can have a London alphabet, an Ontario one, a modern one, an old-fashioned one and so on. We worked it with the Hebrew alphabet and also with the Greek alphabet. This is a very easy opening to another culture. Children are fascinated by the fact that these letters don't have the names we have for them and that they are different. You work out from that. We worked on this in Halifax in connection with the Donnelly workshops there. We had a children's workshop in the morning to liven up the actors and loosen them up. We did Greek culture one summer

and Hebrew culture the other. The parents were in ecstasies: "Why is school not like this?"

ROSS: Could you say how it worked — say, with the Greek alphabet?

REANEY: First of all, run through the Greek alphabet, slowly, so that each session you were introducing them to three more letters plus words that begin with those letters. Plus a myth that begins with those letters. You ended up with songs and dances based on Greek words in an alphabetical sequence and then stitched into that the Ariadne myth and the twelve labours of Hercules. They had a view of Greek culture and they actually knew some Greek when they were through. It had a satisfying form because it went from the beginning to the end — alpha to omega. That took a whole summer to do — well, it took four weeks with them coming every day. At the end we had a big presentation for the parents in which we dressed it up and had a lot of fun.

ROSS: Are you involved in workshops with children now?

REANEY: I was involved in workshops with young people — not kids — this past summer 1982 in Waterloo, because we were doing a play about Waterloo called *I, The Parade*. This was somewhat different because the kids are either college kids or young teenagers from Waterloo. But it's still there — the kind of things that we were doing and the techniques learnt in the other kind of workshop. And they, if you give them twenty sheets of bristol board, can make an accordion out of it in about two seconds. It's not the same — we weren't working with the little kids. As you get older, there is only so much noise you can stand.

ROSS: One of the things that struck me reading through *14 Barrels* was how much stamina those workshops must have taken.

REANEY: The workshop with the 400 public school children could easily have been the disaster of the century.⁴ It was all a mistake evidently. The kids were brought down to the gym under the impression that they were to watch a show that we put on. We hadn't meant that at all. We thought we were going to get about forty kids for a workshop. So this whole school had been shut down, you see, and we had to do something with them. But the techniques work if you have a lot of help, although it's not necessary to do it with

400. The kids all said, "Gee, this would be good for birthday parties."

ROSS: Of course you had the actors there to help.

REANEY: Yes. This was supposed to soften up the community and get them to come and see the Donnelly plays. I don't think it ever did that at all. I never saw any of the kids at a Donnelly performance. However, it was interesting, because you got to know the schools and the people in the town a bit that way.

ROSS: I get the feeling that you felt that you had to create your audience.

REANEY: Yes, that was what it was all about. I felt something could be done locally. You could have a whole series of these workshops, which could occur every Saturday morning. The PUC could put them on. I think you would increase people's understanding about poetry. We found in *Listen to the Wind* that a lot of workshop people's marks went up in school in English. That was the direct result of being exposed to poetry orally in ways that they had never thought of before. It was too late to get bored; they had already swallowed it before they could think.

ROSS: You were saying that on the local level we could have workshops and then regional theatre.

REANEY: Yes. All the regional theatres should have great big workshops attached to them. I've tried to persuade them to do that, and I think they do have classes for kids. But it doesn't seem to work the way the workshops did. It's partly that people are scared of poetry. They don't really understand it. But if school did teach poetry properly, you would find it a lot easier to put on exciting plays. You wouldn't have to put on all that Neil Simon, who is the most textureless dramatist I can think of. In his plays there is not that much going on.

ROSS: So it's back to the business of centralized culture and imported culture on the one hand and on the other hand people looking at their own roots and creating their own culture.

REANEY: Yes, and if they knew their roots they would be much more

ready for the imported culture and able to do it better too.

ROSS: It seems to me that really you are working toward a new theatre in Canada. What would this theatre be like?

REANEY: It would be like Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*. It would be a big four level building. It would be a place where the whole community came to have workshops, I guess, as well as to watch plays. We had ideas for doing the workshops on TV as part of an Ontario TV series. We almost sold it to them, but a couple of old mugwumps at the top couldn't understand it. But I got very fascinated by a book by Frances Yates called *The Art of Memory*. She pointed out that the Globe theatre was specifically designed so that the actors could remember their lines under certain areas of the theatre, which were dedicated to Mars, Venus — the planets, you see. That was much argued about by other people, who didn't like her book. But I thought that that kind of theatre is fairly rare. Mind you, there is a ghost of it at Stratford Festival in which the trap-door is Hell and there is a Heaven up above that balcony thing they've got. This is faintly based on the Globe theatre, you see. But the kind of theatre which would tie all the symbolism of our world together and reach out into the community as an educative and training force — mainly teaching people symbols from our history — I would like to see it tried. But you have no idea — when you say all this to people who are in charge of theatres! They are all Noel Coward types, I think. "Have another glass of wine." Not a person like John Hirsh, though. He is the person, after all, that premiered *Names and Nicknames*. There's hope there. He is a children's theatre guy himself and started off with puppets, you see. So he knows how you educate people. He is very interested in reaching out into the community with his theatre.

ROSS: This is speculation on my part, but it seems to me that perhaps it is this interest in getting a sense of community and of home that turned you from poetry to theatre.

REANEY: Oh yes. I think so. It seems that theatre is the next step after poetry. Poetry is very private, and you go from that to the community. And having a family — raising a family makes a difference.

ROSS: It is really the established pattern of starting out as a lyric

poet and moving eventually toward the epic.

REANEY: Yes. And Drama.

ROSS: If one thinks of your work as a whole, there is a kind of epic impulse — telling the stories of the nation.

REANEY: Yes. That is what it is. Yes.

ROSS: One of the things that I have been thinking about recently is realism. Something that helped me was a remark that you made about Gombrich in *14 Barrels*. In *Art and Illusion*, Gombrich discusses schema. In one chapter he calls it “Formula and experience” and later talks of “schema and correction.”⁵

REANEY: Yes, that’s right. If you are overcorrected, the world around you is pretty uninteresting. But you continually make patterns out of it, don’t you, in order to survive.

ROSS: And that is what these fairy tale patterns are.

REANEY: Right. Yes.

ROSS: Another remark you made, in “A Search for an Undiscovered Alphabet,” was that an interest in symbolism led you to a fascination with the diagram. There is the suggestion here that myths and patterns and diagrams and alphabets are aligned, that they are the same.

REANEY: I think that is the way a little kid thinks. Nursery rhymes are extremely abstract really. They are about nothing at all. They are just patterns. Piaget says the same thing. There is no use telling the kids about this, because they won’t understand what you are talking about. Quite often they are interested in getting away as fast as possible into the world of real trucks and driving real cars and all the rest of it. Nevertheless, we’ve got to catch them while they are still very young and give them some patterns, because later on they are going to need them — very, very badly. You get a lot of people who are tremendously bored when they are about eighteen, nineteen, twenty.

ROSS: Can you say how these patterns would help?

REANEY: Well, I think it begins to be a religious problem then. They

see no meaning in the world at all, and the stuff that is coming out of the modern culture is not giving them very much help either. But by that time the problem has turned religious. They've got to see these structures that you get in the fairy tale myths as perhaps more real than the thing that is "real" — the awful world of the street culture, this being in fact rather unreal.

ROSS: The Gombrich book seemed helpful because it suggested that those schema which teach beginning artists how to draw faces and so on were rather like myths. After you've got the schema, you can correct it by filling it in with these realistic details. And put in the grays. But first you must get the patterns.

REANEY: Rhoda Kellogg's book, too, on children's art opens your eyes. Everyone is drawing mandalas whether they know it or not, in their sandbox and so on.

ROSS: Yes, all those circles drawn by the children in her book. Stewart Reaney, in his book, talks about the one big play that you keep writing.⁶ I thought one of my last questions could be how do children and plays for children fit into this one big play?

REANEY: I think the children's plays are at the beginning. And they set up a pattern — some sort of death and resurrection pattern which repeats itself in larger and larger terms until you are into adult society. I think that the first six or seven years are crucial. They say the first two years are crucial. My whole business is to catch children with the most sophisticated pattern they can handle. Then they will be ready with lots of schemata for the great big world — which has got to be corrected. And is there ever a lot to correct! The same plea appears in *Uses of the Imagination*. As early as possible, get everybody introduced to as much as possible. Then onwards.

ROSS: Then do the same things over and over, deepening the patterns.

REANEY: Yes. More of the same. The Frye thing goes on right to college level. After a while people say, "But you are just doing what you did in the reader for grade six, only it's Horace and Dante this time." "Well, what did you expect?" is the answer.

- ROSS: This is Bruner too, isn't it? You teach the same structures, but you teach them on increasing levels of difficulty.
- REANEY: But I am fascinated by the problem that everything can be lost in those first two years. Either lost or won. So education of the mother and the father is extremely important, and you can't start too soon. On the other hand, I also think, "Leave the kids alone." Quite often they do get all the patterns; they get them from TV. If you watch TV enough, even the horrible cartoons do give the patterns. In sheer lack of anything to inspire them, cartoonists quite often go back to fairy tales and nursery rhymes to get their patterns.
- ROSS: Is there something that we have left out in our conversation that is important to you?
- REANEY: Keeping diaries — I thoroughly approve of that. I've kept one since I was twelve.
- ROSS: Can you see, now looking back, connections between the early diaries and the work that you are doing now — or hints of it?
- REANEY: I discover that I really learned to write a lot better through reading *Wuthering Heights*, for example. My sentences expand after that. That's very important. No one can teach you that. You suddenly get interested in a book, very very much — beyond what a teacher can help you with.
- ROSS: For you the Brontës did that — not just *Wuthering Heights*, I take it, but Branwell...
- REANEY: The whole thing. The Brontë children, of course, are the arch demonstrations of a parent leaving the kids be with some books. Given lots and lots of books to read, they became a sort of a little novel factory on their own, with disastrous results *re* their relationships with the rest of the world. That is, they went to birthday parties and didn't know how to play Blind Man's Buff. They could put on plays, but they just couldn't put on the kind of plays that the kids knew — little games. You can see that they needed a mother to help them. On the other hand, it sure had results *re* their imaginations.
- ROSS: That world of the Brontës all goes into *Listen to the Wind*.

REANEY: Yes, the play was originally about the Brontës.

ROSS: If a kid thought, "I'd like to be a writer," would there be any advice that you could give him about how to become one?

REANEY: It's the reading, I think. I started writing far too soon. I should have waited until I was about thirty. Just keep reading away, and read what you want to read. If you are at college, of course, do what you have to do there. But quite often following through an enthusiasm is important. And I can see that there are going to be people who don't read. Okay, look at TV — really go for it. Follow that through and eventually it will educate you, I'm pretty sure. But I'm more doubtful about the TV than I am about reading. I think reading is the best way of transferring culture. But I can see that when computers come in we're going to have to fight for people to read at all. The electronic stuff will have to sort itself out. I've just recently done a videotape on cat's cradles with little kids. I think that shows I'm moving towards film before it is too late!

ROSS: Do you have any last comments?

REANEY: What depresses me about the children's literature racket — and it is a racket — is that adults write down to kids. Quite often if adults would just leave kids alone, they would find their way to books. On the other hand, you don't want to leave them alone too much. It's a fight for people's souls.

NOTES

¹*Literature: The Uses of the Imagination* is a thirteen volume series for grades seven to twelve edited by Northrop Frye and published by Jovanovich.

²For a description of *Satan or Christ?* see Ross Woodman, *James Reaney* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1971), pp. 9-10.

³In fact what is really mentioned in *14 Barrels* is a "possible article for *Canadian Theatre Review* on the Halifax workshops to show the connection between children and adult drama" (Erin, Ont.: Press Porcepic, 1977), p. 90.

⁴For an account of this workshop in Calgary with the 400 school children, see *14 Barrels*, pp. 90-92.

⁵E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press, 1960), pp. 146-178.

⁶J. Stewart Reaney, *James Reaney* (Gage Educational Publishing Ltd., 1977), p. 89.

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