

Good, Evil, Knowledge, Power: A Conversation between Carol Matas and Perry Nodelman



Perry Nodelman



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Résumé: Dans cette entrevue qu'elle a accordée à son ancien collaborateur et coauteur Perry Nodelman, l'écrivain Carol Matas discute de son oeuvre. Elle précise, entre autres sujets, les raisons pour lesquelles elle compose des récits pour les jeunes, présente sa conception du bien et du mal, et explique son intérêt marqué pour la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, époque tragique où elle situe la plupart de ses romans.

Summary: In this interview conducted originally by fax, Perry Nodelman, who has collaborated with Carol Matas on two young adult fantasies, discusses with Carol the children's fiction she has written on her own. The conversation focuses on a variety of topics: Carol's reason's for choosing to write for children and her convictions about the kind of fiction children deserve to read; her ideas about the nature of good and of evil; and her special interest in writing fiction about children who find themselves involved in the upheaval and tragedy of World War II.

PERRY: Carol, we've had some interesting but random conversations about various aspects of children's literature over the years, in the course of my reading early drafts of your work, and particularly in the process of collaborating on the two children's novels we've written together. But most of these have been in the context of hasty phone calls in the midst of other matters, and we've never actually sat down and had a formal, organized conversation about the subject. Nor are we ever likely to, as we pursue our two different careers and separate lives across town from each other. Hence this discussion-by-fax, devoted specifically to exploring your views about children's literature and, therefore, I hope, uninterrupted by any of the following:

a): questions about what colour Lenora's dress was in the last chapter, and whatever happened to the rip in her hem, which seems to have disappeared in this chapter;

- b): disagreements about just how wimpy Coren ought to be;
- c): emotional crises triggered by the shenanigans of various of our individual and mutual literary agents and/or editors;
- d): emergencies caused by or involving our real-life spouses, children, dogs, parents, students, and parliamentary representatives;
- e): anxieties about whether or not it's actually going to be possible for us to meet the deadline we agreed to finish copy-editing by; and, above all,
- f): random calls-waiting on our two different other lines, which usually turn out to be fantastic offers from carpet cleaning services.

I'd like to talk to you particularly about the darker aspects of life as depicted in your work — simply because they tend to be darker than a lot of people seem ready to see as appropriate in the context of literature for children. As you and I both know, many people like to believe that children are, or ought to be, innocent — that they aren't capable either of doing much evil themselves or of understanding the evil others do. Many other people aren't sure that children can't understand evil, but would still prefer that they didn't; as many parents and teachers often say to me, "They'll find out soon enough — why bother them with all that awful stuff when they're so young?" Your books do often bother children with all that stuff — and therefore distress the many adults who might prefer that they didn't. So I'll start with the BIG question: considering your obvious interest as a writer in depicting the darker aspect of existence, and considering the boundaries that writing for children seems to put on authentic and complete descriptions of those darker aspects, what led you to choose specifically to become a children's writer?

CAROL: When I read your question, my first reaction was — uh oh, he's asked me the wrong question, because I never "intended" to become a children's writer. I sort of stumbled into it, writing stories at the beginning with children as the central characters, which I assumed people of all ages would read. It wasn't until I wrote my first novel that I specifically focused on children as an audience. And here, I'd like to take back my question over your question, although it puts me in a nasty spot. I have to admit I wrote those books with children in mind and with their minds in mind, specifically. In fact, dare I admit this, I wanted to change them (oh, how politically incorrect, does this have to be public knowledge?) I wanted to make them into young people who would think for themselves. So I challenged them to see how the future might turn out if pollution is allowed to go unchecked (*Zanu*), if a nuclear war should happen (*It's Up to Us*). I wanted them to have the fun adults were having in reading a time travel book (*Me Myself and I*) and I wanted them not ever to completely trust those in charge (*The D.N.A. Dimension*). Of course reviewers immediately accused me of preaching. Funnily enough, that never occurred to the young people reading the books. They liked them as straightforward action/adventure — and sometimes they did make them think, as evidenced by the many letters I received, one from a group in Ontario that literally revolutionized the entire county recycling program after reading *Zanu* and forming an organization called the Zanu group.

As I progressed in my writing I settled into children's writing because I felt that it was an area in which I could make a difference. You know, catch them when they're young and before they've solidified their views, become rigid. I also, and this is of equal importance, wanted to give them a wonderful reading experience. I *loved* to read when I was young for the sheer pleasure of it — and is there anything wrong with trying to deliver a pleasurable experience to children? I hope not.

PERRY: Me either. But I'm interested in the two different goals you suggest here — and the ways in which the two might be seen to be contradictory, perhaps even opposite to each other. You want to entertain children, AND you want to challenge them or even change them. Are you assuming that children find it entertaining to be changed, or at least to have someone or some book try to change them? Or do you see these as two separate things your books are doing, offering entertainment in order to sneak the message across? I guess I'm asking, what do you see as the pleasure your books, or reading in general, offer? And does it have anything to do with the challenge to think, or is that something separate from reading pleasure?

CAROL: Perry, you fiend, that's a hard question.

PERRY: I know. That's why I asked it. (*Imagine fiendish laughter.*)

CAROL: And it's a question that has many different answers, I think. Let me start with a basic response: I can only write if I have a reason to do so. This was apparent when we worked on *Of Two Minds* together. I felt it was about women, and power, and imagination, and how women would deal with power — you refused to consciously think about anything but the story.

PERRY: There *is* something else beside the story in *Of Two Minds*?

CAROL: Of course there is, you dolt. And I need both. Equally, I have to have a reason for writing, and I desperately want to tell a story that is unputdownable! What I hope for is that the reader will have 1), a good read (yes, that is number 1) and 2), *if* they want to, will be also be challenged by the material. If both happen, wonderful. The disaster would be that it was only a book *about* something — a dull, pedantic, unimaginative text.

Which brings me to the pleasure of reading. For me, the greatest pleasure is to read a book that is compelling *and* substantive. Doris Lessing, for instance, is the epitome of this kind of writing. I guess that's what I aim to do. I don't try to sneak a message in — that's not at all how I'd describe it. (In fact I hate that description). I have themes I want to explore, characters I want to explore, ideas I want to challenge. Naturally it comes from my own point of view, that's a given. But I'm not trying to preach a message — quite the opposite. I'm trying to open a question, a dialogue, give my reader food for thought, challenge assumptions. And for me as a reader, as I've said, that *is* part of the pleasure of reading.

I like to read for pure entertainment too. And sometimes, as a pure challenge. So I think there's a place for all kinds of books — young people should be no more confined in their choices than us old guys.

Let me talk about my motivation more specifically. *The Burning Time* describes the witch burnings of Europe in the 1600s, France. So often these days I hear young girls distressed by my kind of feminism, determined to be apolitical. I felt I had to acquaint young women with their history — show them how women's power was systematically taken away, bring up issues of power and sex and how the male establishment, ruled by fear, used sexual repression to demonize women. After all, these mindsets are still operational today — if a woman dresses a certain way, she is “asking” for it, if she behaves aggressively she's accused of being a witch etc. We can't understand our present if we don't understand our past.

Interestingly, some reviewers in the U.S. (the book got raves in Canada) were horrified, one reviewer calling it feverish, which I take to be another word for hysterical. And yet I had to leave the worst out — it was far too horrible. Other reviewers, fortunately, saw what I was trying to do and were very appreciative, but more importantly, young women who write me now list it as one of their favourite books (my reward).

PERRY: Well, Carol, I'm not surprised they like it. “Intense” and “exciting” are also other possible words for “feverish,” and I think *Burning Time* is an intense and exciting book — and pretty scary, even if you did leave the worst stuff out. That's what I like about it — and what I admire about a number of your books. They tell exciting, suspenseful, involving stories — and as you said, that's *all* I like to think about myself when I'm writing fiction (I think it's because I'm always conscious of the other hat I wear as, not only a literary critic, but a specialist specifically in children's literature: I'm afraid that if I start thinking about the meanings of my novels as I write them, I'll end up overloading them with all the complex theoretical stuff I think I know, and as a result they'll just collapse under the weight, and be dead on arrival. Instead, I'd rather trust that if the characters say the right things and the plot takes the right turns, then the meanings or morals, whatever they are, will be there without my having to consciously worry about it.) But that takes me back to my original question, about how the serious concerns in your books relate to the pleasure they offer. I have a sense that you're right in suggesting the two go together, and that *Burning Time* would be much less involving if the issues weren't as serious as they are. But at the same time, I get a little worried when you tell me that you want to show your readers how women's power was systematically taken away, or to bring up issues of power and sex and so on. I worry, because that *does* sound to me like preaching a message. And yet when I read the novel it doesn't feel that way to me. I don't sense preaching going on at all. Not that there aren't moral and intellectual issues in the air — there are lots of those. But I get the sense when I read your books that the characters are being placed in moral or ethical dilemmas that they have hard times solving, if they actually ever do solve them at all — and that you're careful not to make the solutions to those dilemmas clear or obvious. I take this to mean that if you're preaching, you're always preaching

the same message: that when it comes to defining human values there are no easy answers, that there are always at least two sides to every question, that only a fool would leap at one of the sides and be content with a total commitment to it. Is that a fair reading of the books? Is your concern with meanings perhaps a matter of raising questions rather than providing answers?

CAROL: You've said it so well that I'm not sure what I can add — but I won't let that stop me! Your question has forced me to actually consider what it is I do. Of course, thanks to you, I'll probably never write another word, now that I have to examine my writing process.

PERRY: The unexamined life is not worth living. Proceed.

CAROL: I will. Most books put forth a point of view, don't they? The question is, *how* is that point of view expressed — as a simple message, which does end up preaching, or in a context where the character is placed in a situation which challenges the character's assumptions and hopefully the readers assumptions as well? I hope I do the latter — and you're right, I don't like pat answers.

For example, in *Sworn Enemies* I wanted to explore the issues of faith, idealism and religion. Zev and Aaron are both religious, and at the beginning of the book, neither questions their faith. But as the story develops we see that Zev uses his religion to justify anything, even kidnapping. Aaron is forced to question his faith, God, anything he ever believed in. Both boys must convert or die. Zev refuses to convert, Aaron gives in. Does that mean Zev is a better person? Or just a fanatic? In a way, the book itself is a reflection of my attitude, my point of view. Zev is the character who represents the simple message; Aaron is the character who challenges all assumptions, who questions everything, who in the end is the moral one because he goes into the unknown with no fixed rules of right and wrong, only his own conscience to guide.

To complicate matters further, I ask a larger question: how does one live morally in an immoral world? Zev is also a victim — forced to be a kidnapper by the leaders of the Jewish community, who in turn are forced by the Tsar to send a quota of boys every year to the army. The reader must question the choices all these characters make, yet view them in the context of the greater world they live in. A modern parallel, of course, is the war in Vietnam.

Often I place my characters in a situation where their assumptions are challenged, or where they are forced to challenge others. I hope their dilemma will challenge the reader in a similar way. And if my point of view does come through then I hope it's one the reader at least finds interesting — maybe it's something that they hadn't considered before, a new, different way of seeing the world.

PERRY: Let me pick up on that "different way of seeing." What you've said about *Sworn Enemies* suggests some themes or interests — or obsessions? — that seem to me to appear in a number of your books. One is a concern with the ways in which people use or misuse their authority over others — particularly people who claim to represent the will of God. In *Burning Time*, in *Sworn Enemies*, in *Primrose Path*, religious, theoretically good people act badly in ways that

seriously harm others. And meanwhile, theoretically good characters like Aaron or like Lisa herself in *Lisa* find themselves having to do theoretically evil things, things they themselves find morally obnoxious, in order to survive or to defend what they believe to be right. I find this particularly fascinating since it implies a way of seeing good and evil quite different from the simplistic opposition often present in children's books. Could you talk a bit about your way of seeing or understanding good and evil—particularly evil? What is evil? And what draws you to focus on this kind of a problem so often? What leads you to be so interested in the evil potential of good people and the good potential of evil ones?

CAROL: Perry, the questions get tougher and tougher, you evil fellow! No, I don't mean that. Because, in fact, in my definition of evil you wouldn't qualify at all, not being a control freak. Someone, (I wish I could remember who) once said evil is the desire to control other human beings. I think that's a pretty good definition and have adopted it as my own. From Hitler down to the class bully this definition seems to apply.

You see, Zev likes having power over Aaron. The priests in *The Burning Time* like to have power, ultimate power over women, the rabbi in *Primrose* is all about power and control. My supposedly "good" characters don't really want to control anyone, but *are* forced by circumstances to sometimes kill, lie, etc. And sometimes, a part of them *wants* to do it, but a bigger part finds it abhorrent. And I guess that my view of "evil" is that there is the potential for good and bad in all of us and that like form and shadow, they co-exist. It is the people who never acknowledge their "dark side" who are in danger of being overtaken by it. Hitler put all his darkness onto others and this is typical — Zev blames everyone for his misfortune, *never* taking responsibility. Aaron does take responsibility for his actions, he also sees his dark side, and, in the end, learns to live with it. That's what I consider courageous, honest, and yes, even "good."

PERRY: This all raises two questions for me, and I can't seem to choose which one to ask — there's a joke about being "of two minds" in here somewhere, but I'm not sure exactly what it is. Anyway, I'm going to ask you both of the questions at once. You may answer in turn, or together, or as you wish.

The first question is about specific episodes in two of your novels that clearly relate to this questions about good people being evil and evil people being good — episodes that often puzzle and even upset students when I've discussed your work with them in the children's literature courses I teach. One episode is the moment in *Lisa* when Lisa shoots and kills in cold blood — and only thinks about the implications of her doing so afterwards. Some students worry that this conveys a message that being a murderer is sometimes okay. The other episode is the scene in *Jesper* in which Jesper discovers that the Nazi in charge of his fate is an old friend from his past, and must deal with conflicting feelings about a friend who is also an enemy — and furthermore, a Nazi who, rather than being a despicable monster like the Nazis we usually see in movies, is someone Jesper always looked up to, an idealist with a strong belief in the positive moral value

of what he believes in. Here, students wonder why you made this all so complicated — wouldn't it confuse children and make them think that maybe fascism isn't so bad after all? I wonder how you would respond to their concerns.

The second question relates to that one, sort of. It's about the idea of evil as control. It occurs to me that Frederik's profound idealism about Nazism suggests his need for a system of ideas to believe in and feel secure about and shape his behaviour — in other words, a sort of religion. Because isn't much of what many religions (and especially the religion of the background both of us share, Judaism) offer believers exactly the feeling of being safely controlled by forces outside oneself, of having rules to follow and superiors to obey? Is this, perhaps, why you seem to be drawn so often to stories involving uses and misuses of religious authority? Do you see your books as being concerned with what it means to have faith or be religious? Is the fact of your own Jewish background of any significance in shaping this aspect of your writing? (Incidentally: I hate it when people ask me personal questions like this. You may refuse to answer if you want.)

CAROL: Perry, your students' comments that Lisa's shooting a German soldier in cold blood is a message that murder is OK makes my blood boil! This is really ignorant thinking.

First of all, Lisa is a character. As I said before she's not there to convey a message, but her action *hopefully* will make people think (not *not* think, like these students!). Secondly, she *does* react, it isn't a cold blooded act — she sweats, her heart pounds, she shakes, she throws up afterwards. Any intelligent reader can see that, in fact, she's *very* upset. Finally, she has to kill the soldier or *all* the fifty people counting on her will certainly be captured, and probably killed. She has no choice. She does the hard thing, the right thing, at that moment: to put her own scruples and feelings above the welfare of those she's caring for would be irresponsible.

Re your question about *Jesper* and why it's all so complicated. Again, the very question frustrates me — after all, that's the whole point of the book. To say it's complicated is to miss the whole point, which is, it *is* complicated. Frederick *does* believe in what he's doing, he *is* an idealist, but surely that doesn't mean fascism is good? Just because someone believes in it? People believe all sorts of things but that doesn't make those things true? And those people are often idealists — and ideologues, like Newt Gingrich, for instance. I think ideologues are *always* the most dangerous types. In Canada Brian Mulroney was a perfect example of that, and so are Preston Manning and Mike Harris.

Which brings me to your last question about control. I think I am more concerned with the political ideologues than I am with religious ideologues, because in this day and age religious ideologues have less power. But in the times I've been writing about, they often had a lot of power — i.e. *Sworn Enemies*, *The Burning Time*. Even so, I hope the parallels will be apparent to the reader — those that believe in a system which has all the answers are in danger of handing over their decision-making power to someone else. And that someone, whoever it is,

should *never* be given absolute power because absolute power corrupts absolutely. This is all too obvious in *The Primrose Path*.

How do my convictions affect those themes? Well, they must, I suppose. I dislike any kind of “orthodoxy” in any religion, for the reasons stated above. They give too much power to one person and not enough to the individual. Very rarely do we see people in those positions of power using it wisely. The Pope’s shocking silence about the massacres of Jews in World War II is still a scandal the church has not fully addressed. He very well might have slowed it, even stopped it, had he used the full weight of his office. Why didn’t he? Is it an accident that the worst atrocities happened in countries where the Catholic church had encouraged anti-Semitism for hundreds of years? It is no accident that *Primrose Path* is set in an orthodox synagogue rather than a reform synagogue, because, again, Orthodoxy sets out all the rules and regulations and then puts one *man* (never a woman) in charge of it all.

Now that I’ve managed to insult just about everyone, let me move on to the more personal side of your question about my upbringing. I was not brought up in a religious household, but in a household where it mattered what happened to others, where community large and small was considered our responsibility. What I hate most about the right wing agenda is the emphasis on the individual as removed from his or her community. All decisions are based solely on how things affect the individual. I hate to break this news, but eventually the larger community impinges on all of us — the person who has been made homeless by welfare cuts may have kids that will one day knock on your nice townhouse door and blow you away. Never mind the moral issues of leaving people to suffer like that!

Also I’d like to clarify here — because first I spoke of the importance of the individual thinking for him or herself. Then I spoke of the importance of the community. I don’t think these are contradictory ideas — but ideas which have to be balanced. After all, in communism we saw community overwhelming the individuals. In the U.S. right now we see the individual overwhelming community. It is the balance of these which forms a healthy society.

In terms of your *very* personal question about my own beliefs. I am a very spiritual person, but not religious. And I’m not sure how that affects my writing except that it makes me pretty sceptical about all formal religion.

PERRY: I’d like to pursue this whole business of the parallels between the religious ideologies and the political ones a little further, because I find it intriguingly paradoxical — and it also engages the matters of control and of communal obligation rather than individual ones that you’ve been talking about. Let me lead up to a question by way of some other things I know people have said about your work.

First, another student in one of my classes, this one of German background, expressed deep distress that your characters called those who invaded Denmark in *Lisa* “Germans” and not specifically “Nazis.” To her, it suggested that *all* Germans were evil, and encouraged prejudice against Germans in the past and

in the present. I couldn't persuade her that all these particular Nazis in the book were, indeed, not only German, but employees of the German government of the time, representatives of Germany — that it was an historic fact. That mattered less to her than the potential damage she imagined to the reputation of her people. Second: I know that a school board official somewhere in southern Ontario, this one of Jewish background, proposed the banning of *Sworn Enemies* because it suggested that some Jews in the past might have been bad people — thus confirming the prejudices of anti-Semites and damaging the reputation of her people. And third: there was also a similar decision recently to ban you from discussing *The Primrose Path* at a synagogue here in Winnipeg, wasn't there?

What intrigues me about all these responses is what they have in common — that people worry that your work might give comfort to those whom they perceive as their enemies. And yet the enemies are anti-German in one case, anti-Semitic in the others. That not only seems to confirm the presence in your work of the parallel between religious ideologues and political ones — it also suggest how that idea does bother at least some adults, who happily acknowledge the potential for evil for others but not in their own group or community. They want, also, to control things — to preserve one-sided orthodoxies? And they clearly believe that the welfare of their community as a whole is more important than the facts and your individual right to tell about the facts.

Now, finally, my question. Am I misreading all this? Because if I'm not, I wonder how you respond in this case as the individual a community is trying to condemn or to silence (and perhaps particularly, as a Jew being condemned or silenced for the good of the Jewish community)? How does that relate to or impinge upon your idea (which, incidentally, I fervently agree with) that we've currently overbalanced in favour of individual rights over communal responsibilities? Is this a contradiction, or a paradox? Or how exactly do you imagine a balanced way of walking through these particular minefields?

CAROL: Perry, you *are* reading it dead on. And in answer to your question, as an individual the community is trying to silence, I'd say, it's neither a contradiction or a paradox because, as I said earlier, it's a question of balance. Without the individual's voice, speaking what people often don't want to hear, we get fascism. The individual is all important. And yet, if the individual speaks only for his/her self, you get the "me" society that cares for no one and buzz words like "personal responsibility" which no longer mean that, but mean every man for himself.

As for walking through minefields — if you mean me as a writer, I will be responsible to my material and my audience to the best of my ability. And to me, that means being honest, being a mirror to our society, and inevitably some people won't like what they see.

PERRY: Mirrors are like that, right? But I started all this asking you about your interest in depicting the darker aspects of life — and we've talked quite a bit about responses to various of your novels which confirm the fact that some people — most of them adults — don't like what *you* see and know of the world

and want to show to children. I suspect this response is at its most intense in terms of the novels you've written about various aspects of the Holocaust and its aftermath. There's *Lisa*, *Jesper*, *Daniel's Story* — and now two new books, *After the War* and *The Garden*, about a girl who survives her horrific experience in a concentration camp and moves on to Israel, not always without facing new horrors. That's a lot of novels centring around the same moment in history — and to me, it suggests a fascination, a commitment, even an obsession. (I promise you that all of those, even the obsession, strike me as being good things, not bad ones — for surely the best writing comes out of a commitment to the things that matter most intensely to writers?) I wonder if you could say a little about your interest in this particular time in history. What led you to write about the Jewish experience in World War II in the first place? And why do you keep coming back to it so often?

CAROL: I have always been obsessed by the Holocaust, you're right. I admit it. And I guess it's because of what we've covered already — the issue of evil. After all, the Holocaust *is* evil, and to study it is to study the very worst in human nature.

But I came to write about it by a different path. My husband Per began to tell me stories of what his own father and grandfather had experienced during World War II in Denmark. The stories were so exciting I began thinking about writing a novel for young people which told the story of a boy in the resistance. At that point, I was given a book on the rescue of the Jews in Denmark and was amazed to discover a story I'd never heard before. I figured, as a fairly well-educated Jew, if I hadn't heard it, probably most children hadn't heard it either. So I felt I *had* to write it. I must admit it was as much for the drama of the story, as for the theme I wanted to explore. Also, it was an uplifting story, a story which said this didn't have to happen the way it did, look at what happened in Denmark.

That's how I came to write *Lisa*. So you see, I kind of fell into World War II. I never said, "I'm going to write a series of World War II books!" *Jesper* was, of course, the book I originally thought of, about a boy in the resistance. So it was quite natural for me to write that after I finished *Lisa*.

Now, *Daniel's Story* was something quite different. I was asked to write that by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum as a complementary piece to their children's exhibit. (Not a novelization, as some reviewers mistakenly stated.) And with their backing, I felt comfortable delving into that material.

But I must say, it was the most painful and difficult book I've ever had to research. In a way, although obsessed by the evil of the Holocaust, it was also a topic I actively avoided because I got depressed just thinking about it. This book forced me to look at the worst, most evil thoughts and deeds, and I could not flinch. And it wasn't only the litany of horrors that was hard to stomach — the detailed descriptions of atrocity after atrocity. Some images, like the German soldiers throwing babies out of hospital windows while their colleagues on the streets below played the game of seeing how many they could catch on their bayonets, will never leave me. (By the way, although I included that scene I left out the part about the bayonets, because the image is *too* horrible for anyone,

including children.) But always I was plagued by the *lack* of good, what could have been, why didn't the US bomb the train tracks which took the victims to the death camps. They could have but had "more important" targets. Why did townsfolk watch as Jews were marched by them, pretending to see nothing? Why was the Pope silent? Isn't the absence of good also a form of evil?

My two new books, *After the War* and *The Garden*, deal with the illegal immigration to Israel after the war, and the subsequent fight for a Jewish state. In *After the War*, the characters are survivors of the atrocity, the death camp. What kind of people were they when it was all over? What had happened to their own humanity? What were they willing to endure to find a place that could be called home? How had their encounter with evil affected them, moulded them? These are the questions of *After the War*. *The Garden* deals with survivors who want only peace, quiet, who are still afraid, now confronted with annihilation by the Arab nation surrounding them. They must fight but at least now they *can* fight, they are no longer victims. And yet, having to kill as they were once killed is a terrible moral dilemma, so the questions raised here are all to do with idealism and what one must do to survive. Apparently, when Golda Meir and Anwar Sadat made peace, Golda said that she could forgive him for all the Jewish lives he had taken but could never forgive him for turning the children into killers. That is the issue I'm trying to work through in *The Garden*.

As you know, I'm now proposing at least two new books set in World War II. Again, I suppose this time offers an incredible wealth of dramatic stories as well as an opportunity to explore issues and to put my characters in life and death situations where moral dilemmas have to be faced.

PERRY: "Moral dilemmas that have to be faced," you say. And earlier, you spoke about how *Daniel's Story* forced you to look at difficult things and that you couldn't flinch — and within the novel, Daniel himself often reiterates how important it is for him to take his pictures of the horror that surrounds him, to look and not flinch, to be a witness. As I remember my reading of *Daniel's Story* and think about what you've been telling me in this conversation, I'm fascinated by the ways in which you so often bring questions of evil and knowledge together — how important it is for you yourself to know evil, to witness it, how important it is for characters to do so, how important it is for your young readers to do so. In fact, as I think back on it, this question of knowing evil seems to be the thread that connects all the different things we've talked about in this conversation. Is that a fair assessment?

CAROL: Perry, I agree with your assessment. I guess I believe that old cliché, knowledge is power. Children without knowledge are powerless. This has become very clear to me in my writing of *The Primrose Path*. And one of the main reasons I wanted to write it. Perhaps if children have thought about these issues, have thought about how charismatic leaders work, how they slowly try to suck you in using trust and friendship as their weapons, perhaps they will be able to avoid such situations. But a child who is "innocent" which, to me, means ignorant, has *no* choice.

Similarly with *Daniel's Story*: perhaps reading about the devastation will put them on their guard, and if someone talks to them about becoming a skinhead they will *know* what that means. Educators and parents who are afraid of letting their children read this material because it might upset them should think about how upset their children would be once they were made a victim of a child abuser or once they were complicit in far worse things than the act of reading a book.

Sworn Enemies talks about moral choice, the difference between self interest and larger moral issues. Surely these are things worth considering.

I spoke earlier about evil being the need to control. While in New York recently I saw Terence McNally's play, *Master Class*. In it, the lead character based on Maria Callas spoke of how one *must* dominate a stage, be in control of the audience, and I suddenly realized that even with a concept like control there is *no such thing* as a clear answer. And maybe this is the best way to end this discussion — to agree that the world is a complex place and that what I'm trying to do is present this world, in all its complexities, to my readers. And hope they are both challenged *and* entertained.

PERRY: As one of your readers, I am both. And I know lots of children and other adults that are too. Thanks for talking to me about this. Now, what about that ripped hem of Lenora's.

Carol Matas has published sixteen books for young people. She has been nominated for the Governor General's Award for both *Daniel's Story* and *The Burning Time*. Her latest book is *After the War* (Scholastic Canada).

Perry Nodelman has written two children's novels, *The Same Place but Different* and *A Completely Different Place* (both Groundwood), and also, a picture book, *Alice Falls Apart* (Bain and Cox). He is currently working on a new YA novel, a satiric look at life in high school. When not writing children's fiction, he teaches children's literature in the University of Winnipeg English department. Together, Matas and Nodelman have collaborated on two YA fantasies, *Of Two Minds* (Bain and Cox) and its sequel *More Minds*, and are working on a third "Minds" book.

