An Interview with Ruth Nichols

JON STOTT

Ruth Nichols, born in Toronto in 1948, set out to become a writer while still a child and at age fourteen won an essay contest sponsored by the Government of India. In 1969 she published A Walk out of the World *and* Ceremony of Innocence*; in 1972 she won the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians' Bronze Medal for* The Marrow of the World. *As readers of her works will notice, she has developed rapidly as a writer, each novel showing a greater maturity and control of her subject matter. Her most recent book,* The Left Handed Spirit, *is a continuation of the stories of Margaret and Paul, heroine and hero of* Song of the Pearl. *She is now at work on an historical novel set in renaissance Poland.*

The following interview was taped Friday, July 22, 1977, in Ruth Nichols' home in Ottawa. Since then, the typed manuscript has passed between us a few time for revision and clarification.

STOTT: I read once that when you were four years old you decided that you wanted to be an author. How did your career begin and how did it develop?

NICHOLS: Any child who, at the age of four, knows what he's going to do with his entire life has done something very mysterious, not least to himself. Where does vocation come from? I'm sure there is a genetic predisposition. In my case, there was a very literary-oriented, fostering mother who was warmly appreciative of my abilities from earliest childhood, and so I'm sure that physique and physical hereditary and environment have a part to play.

STOTT: Did you start telling stories as a young child? And what kind of stories? Do you remember telling stories to anyone who would listen?

NICHOLS: Oh yes. My sister was my constant victim and she hasn't quite forgiven me! We made up vast story cycles about our dolls. I had a doll named Daniel who was a prince and a very mischievous boy. And I, of course, was a very over-controlled, earnest, frightened little girl; so Daniel was -- although I didn't at all know it at the time -- my own devilish little masculine self, and as such he was very, very good for me. His adventures went on for about five years. I still have Daniel; he's mouldering away, but there's no way I'll throw him out.

STOTT: It seems that right from the very beginning you were thinking in terms of elaborate plots and quests.

NICHOLS: Yes. I remember making Daniel fly, just because it would be nice to fly. He was an outlaw in the woods; he used to kidnap my girl dolls, and my characters are still doing that. At least in my latest book. I was always ori-

ented toward a story-cycle. When I was about eight, I began to put my stories down and draw them. I had, at that point, an equal ability to draw and to write. And that raises an interesting question, because my ability as an artist was as precocious as my verbal ability. At about the age of nine I made a subconscious choice, and I began to write a commentary to the pictures about the life of my three princesses (as they then were), and the commentary overwhelmed the pictures. The pictures disappeared; the artistic ability disappeared, but perhaps to be recovered some day.

STOTT: I read that at age fourteen you wrote about Catherine de Medici and won a prize. Can you tell about this?

NICHOLS: There's not really much to tell. I've always been fascinated by the Renaissance. I'm sort of a Miniver Cheevey type who considers it my spiritual home, though I think that I have a hell of a lot more realism about it than Miniver ever did. I don't think I'm that kind of romantic about theRenaissance that he was.

STOTT: Why did you write about Catherine de Medici? She was a pretty tough woman.

NICHOLS: She was also, in her day, an orphan and an abandoned, imprisoned child. I wrote about the remarkable passage in Catherine's childhood when she was the only member of her family who was captured by the Republican government of Florence when her family was kicked out and barely escaped with their lives. She was about ten and she was basically imprisoned in one of the convents, and child though she was, she knew that these people would kill her if it so suited them. Her courage did save her in the end. She was betrothed to the King of France, which must have appeared an optimistic development at the time but which was, in fact, the opening of a very unhappy future for her. And that ambiguity was the one on which the book ended, an interesting ambiguity for a child of fourteen, I think. Then I heard that there was a literary contest sponsored by the Government of India. I sent in what I had on hand; they wrote me back to say they had entries from eighty countries, but none of them had been as long as mine -- which surprised me; it was only a hundred odd pages -- and they awarded me a gold medal.

STOTT: When you were eighteen, you broke into print with *A Walk Out of the World.* How did you get into print?

NICHOLS: I had a teacher, in grade nine, who worked briefly at Longman's, Green, as an editor and he knew Helen O'Reilley, who was then also an editor there. He introduced me to her when I was about fourteen, and she said, "You're not ready to publish yet, but you will be presently." She found out where I went, even though we moved to British Columbia in the meanwhile, and when I was several years older, she wrote and said "Here I am, still waiting for you, wondering what you've been doing? " And I said, "Well, there's this little fantasy that was rejected by Faber and Faber and I put it away, but here it is for what you can make of it." She wrote back and said "I'm putting you in touch with Margaret McElderry at Harcourt, Brace in New York; you'll be hearing from her and we hope you'll be taking the plunge." Since then Margaret McElderry, first at Harcourt and then at Atheneum, has been my editor and my teacher and one of my dearest friends.

STOTT: Where do your ideas come from? What kind of research do you do for a book?

NICHOLS: You have to saturate yourself, to get everything you can obtain about a period. When I'm not dealing with fantasy, when I'm doing historical writing, as I am more and more -- which is really a return to the trend of my adolescence, not a new development at all - I exhaustively research for about a year for each book, often concurrently with bringing out the last book, which makes for a very busy day! Meanwhile, I keep large notebooks in which I jot up the characters I want to have, the problems I want to treat in the book, certain basic phases that the book will have to have; for instance, a hero and heroine are destined to be united at the end, but in the meanwhile they've got a lot of length of plot to wind through. I want them to become major enemies and work it out that way and then they become friends and are in alliance against an enemy -- something like this general sort of shaping. It's like a sculptor just giving his clay the first, most ghostly shape; I'm doing this concurrently during the year with research and not asking any of it to come together in my mind, because I know the subconscious needs time and privacy for its work and it cannot be hurried. So whenever anything new occurs to me -- like, "Hey, the hero just shrank in stature by six inches and is quite a black-haired, ugly little man" -- I will note that down. The plot also will get more specific, there'll be current problems I want to look at, fantasies I want to express; fantasy is always a very important source of plots. We're all making plots in our heads all the time. So the problem of plotting a book is not all that difficult. If you give it enough time, a year, two years, five years if necessary, you find the characters start to acquire a definite appearance, and they begin to talk to each other in your head, and when they do this insistently enough you have to start writing it down, and you begin to realize where in the plot that goes, and the plot will get more refined. Furthermore the characters will interfere with it to some extent; you will not be able to make them do a certain thing your plot had hinged on their being able to do; they will do something else entirely. Now this verges on the Romantic theory of the character having an autonomy of his own, which is a theory

tic theory of the character having an autonomy of his own, which is a theory one is supposed to despise, but it is, in fact, to some extent true; you delegate a portion of your own consciousness to a character and that portion then acquires a limited autonomy.

You'll remember *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* One of the things that indicates Fowles' mastery of the fictional medium is that he keeps stepping out of the book and saying, "You people know that I'm only inventing these characters. Now my hero had not been going to go down to the dairy for a bowl of milk at this point; he'd been going to walk straight home. But my experience was that he demanded to go down to the dairy, so that's what he did." And then he takes you back to the narrative; and such is his power, you just accept that, although -- to be fair -- I know some readers who can't stand him for doing exactly the same thing. So characters do have this autonomy.

STOTT: You mentioned once that you often note down images from dreams. Does the subconscious create out of itself some of the background, some of the raw materials of fiction?

NICHOLS: Very definitely. Many dreams are just ordinary rumination and one should not pay too much attention to them. But a dream that comes from somewhere deep in the subconscious will declare itself by the emotion that's associated with it, and one should always write it down. I weave such dreams into my fiction or develop them, but I also ask what a dream means, why it is so important to me. So I interpret on two levels.

STOTT: Are you a Jungian?

NICHOLS: I'm not an "Jungian" in any sense, I am a creative thinker. I think Jung was a sharply limited man and, like most psychiatrists, he knew nothing about women. He knew more about women than Freud, but that is not saying very much, is it?

STOTT: Can we talk, now, about your reading? Whom did you read as a child?

NICHOLS: Rosemary Sutcliff, who helped form my style, whether or not it is visible; Tolkien, and I'm afraid that influence on my style is glaringly visible, or has been until lately; L. M. Boston, to whom I owe much more than I consciously remember, as I realize every time I reread *The Children of Green Knowe.* Whole phrases leap out at me and I think, "I thought those were mine; I put them in my last book!"

STOTT: Has her movement in time influenced you?

NICHOLS: I'm sure its a seminal influence, but if so, it's so far back I'm not aware of it any more.

STOTT: Let's talk about the people that most obviously come to mind in looking at fantasies with younger children moving into another world -- Tolkien and Lewis. They obviously influenced you very much when you were younger. What are your thoughts about them now?

NICHOLS: I was so involved with Tolkien for so many years that I now feel sharply aware of his limits. He's the greatest fantasist of all, in my opinion. But the limits of fantasy are apparent, even with him; and one of the most important limits is the fact that sexuality cannot be treated with realism or is not conventionally so treated -- not so much in the physical sense as in the emotional. Now *Song of the Pearl,* for instance, is a fantasy that uses extremely honest sex in the emotional sense.

STOTT: It treats it very painfully in the heroine's recognition.

NICHOLS: Exactly -- and very guilt-ridden. Now that is not a Tolkienish fantasy; that kind of guilt does not concern him, Christian though he is. I think Tolkien is a great writer. I don't know if I will read him again; I read him every year for ten years; even now I can open *The Ring* and recite from any given page. So I'm finished with Tolkien, but in my mind he stands up there with Proust as an influence on me, though people are going to consider that a bizarre equation!

Lewis influenced me more than I care to remember. I knew the Lion books, the whole series, as a child. My mother introduced me to them. I now intensely dislike overt allegory. The kind of impoverished allegory in which the Lion is merely one step removed from Christ, and the sacrifice of the Lion is merely one step removed from the crucifixion. It's like a code; if you know how to crack it you can say, well, T means A, and the symbol I means V, and so on. That is imaginative impoverishment, and I consider Lewis to have been an imaginatively impoverished writer. I consider Lewis's preoccupation with guilt, sin, and hell to be perverse. It is a severe limitation on him as a man, and it's a limitation that shows in his fiction. At this stage of my life, I reject Lewis as a man and as a fantasist.

STOTT: Do your books deal with fate to a degree: a sense that something is destined to happen? How much free will do your characters have within their universes?

NICHOLS: Fate I do not believe in; I absolutely disbelieve in it. And if you look at my books you will see, beginning with *Marrow* and continuing through *Pearl,* that destiny is the result of our own past choices: we *are* our destiny, we form our destiny, and the circumstances we find materializing around us are the materialization of our own past - and possibly forgotten - choices. For instance, in *The Marrow,* they are transported into the fantasy world because Linda came from there in the first place and she has unfinished business to complete. And this is exactly, in a far more deliberate sense, the burden of *Pearl:* that Margaret has unfinished business to complete, a great deal of it.

STOTT: That suggests to me that there is something that we really ought to do. We are given moral choices, are then tested to see whether our wills and our moral fibre are strong enough to do what we should do, and, if we don't, we're measured and found wanting.

NICHOLS: That's a good way of putting it, though I think the emphasis is always on learning. If one is tested, I think -- in my books certainly and also in a larger context -- it is to discover what is within one's self. Or as Steinbeck has said, "The writer is delegated to celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness."

STOTT: Let's talk about setting. Obviously you have to have somewhere for a story to take place. You seem to have a very strong or very clear awareness of the geography of the worlds that you create: where the places are, where the rivers are, where the mountains are. Can you comment on how you create your geography?

NICHOLS: Ever since I was adolescent, people have remarked that my writing gives them a feeling of great concreteness, and it seems to give them this feeling equally even when I have not visualized clearly. I think part of that is because I try to visualize with extreme sensual accuracy what is immediately around the character, and this extends outward into an impression that the rest of his world is equally concrete. That is an illusion to some extent. I may not, in fact, know where his world goes when it vanishes out of the scene I'm doing. But I can give the reader the impression that I do.

STOTT: And even if you don't know, you know it's there.

NICHOLS: I know it's there, but, as a matter of fact, I often don't visualize nearly as concretely as my books seem to convey or as readers believe I do. I try to map things out. If you've got a quest, you've got to keep moving, and if you've got to keep moving, you have to keep passing landmarks. It's just part of the structure of the thing, the job.

STOTT: Are your landscapes iconographically symbolic?

NICHOLS: No, not consciously.

STOTT: I've noticed that streams are directional, forests are sinister, travel in mountains is movement toward a significant event, and subterranean areas always have dwarfs who are ambiguous -- Kobalds or dwarfs. Particularly in the first two books, I see not realistic landscapes, I see highly iconographical patterns.

NICHOLS: It may well be there. As I say, I work avowedly on the basis of my own subconscious. And I think that Jung was right to the extent that there are archetypal symbols -- I'm using archetypal in the loose rather than the technical sense -- but I think it would be rather that I was drawing on those unaware than that I was deliberately allegorizing which, as you know, is something I dislike.

STOTT: Your worlds are obviously ones that, in a sense, you have created yourself. Are they metaphors for parallel states of being? Here we live in a Newtonian universe, so to speak. Are your fantasy worlds, to paraphrase Shelley, approximations of the visitations of the divine? In "The Defence of Poetry" he said, "Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divine in man." So poetry is a metaphor or a structure of words which approximates what the poet has actually experienced in a non-Newtonian way -- another realm, another dimension of being, maybe a mental dimension.

NICHOLS: I think to claim to agree thoroughly with Shelley on that would be to claim too much for my fiction. Although it contains some attempt at such deliberate participation in other states of being, people tend to assume that much of it which is mere fictionalizing is deliberate, and that is a mistake. Much of the time I was simply telling a story, especially in the early books. *Walk* and *Marrow* are books which should not be over-estimated. But the Newtonian universe is only one universe. There may well be other structures of reality which in their own terms are as concrete, as physical, as the universe in which we presently find ourselves. Our ability to participate in these universes would depend on positing that we are essentially beings that can exist and perceive and experience in at least two different universes, which would appear *equally concrete* to us when we are cast in the terms that are appropriate to them. I've put that vaguely, but you can see a number of ways in which it could be very concretely applied.

STOTT: In *A Walk Out of the World* and *The Marrow of the World,* there are very animate universes; man is not the only sentient being. Can you explain to me why you created those kinds of universes in the first two books?

NICHOLS: I haven't created it; I've perceived it. There was a very great Sufi poet named Jalaudin Rumi who says "I was mineral, and I became vege-

table; I was vegetable, I became animal; forgetting earlier states I have become man; I have gone through a thousand states of being and I have a thousand more to experience; and I will end as an angel and as things greater than that." Now what Rumi is saying in his way, I think, is that the motive power behind the physical universe is intelligence -- active, creative intelligence - and therefore the creations of that intelligence would, in their own degree, partake of its qualities. A rock is less conscious than a man, which is why a man became necessary; a man is less conscious than an angel, though perhaps he can evolve.

STOTT: This is teleological and hierarchical.

NICHOLS: Yes, it can be perceived that way, but I perceive it as evolutionary and as growth thrusting toward growth, which is why I speak not of punishment for failure, but of learning from experience. So that if I depict an animate universe, it's basically because that's what I believe the universe is.

STOTT: Is the universe worthy of respect? Are all forms of being, even a rock as a form of being, as worthy of respect as ourselves?

NICHOLS: Yes, and there are certain ways in which we have a right to use these things. For instance, I'm no vegetarian; it seems to be the law of the natural order that creatures eat each other, and I see no objection to man's being a carnivore. I see great moral objection to killing animals with undue cruelty, which I believe we do in our society. There are certain ways in which one is justified in using the natural environment, and one need not be like some of the Indian sects who cannot drink water without straining it least they harm the smallest insect.

STOTT: To what extent has the Canadian landscape, physically, symbolically, and emotionally, affected the landscapes you create?

NICHOLS: It's affected them immensely. For me landscape has always been a chief medium for the perception of salvation, by which I mean a perception of emotional refreshment and sanity. And I've had the good fortune from childhood to be set down periodically in very beautiful landscapes: in the Maritimes as it appears in *Ceremony of Innocence;* in Georgian Bay which is one of the major experiences of my life; even in Vancouver, which is physically a beautiful place; and now in the Ottawa Valley which is, in its own cultivated way, also a very beautiful place.

STOTT: Do you feel that as you get into the Canadian Shield region, which is the setting to the *Marrow,* the sense of the past, of geological time, influences you?

NICHOLS: Very, very much. It is connected with the whole idea of the animate universe in that the rocks encompass a vast span of time. The rocks in the Canadian Shield are the oldest in the world that we've yet discovered. That span of time is to me almost homey, almost familiar in that through those rocks, in the fossils and in the dinosaurs, I can see erupting this life and this consciousness evolving towards our own form, which is the form it presently takes. So those rocks for me are alive. I don't mean that they're conscious, but that life erupts through them and that the vast spans of time involved are something that the human mind can compass.

STOTT: How do you create your characters -- do you start with an idea, an image, a concept, a person you may have remembered?

NICHOLS: I use all those. I often, though not invariably, use faces of people. Again you must read *The French Lieutenant's Woman.* One of Fowles' delightful digressions is at the end of the book where he puts his hero in a railway carriage on the way to London in 1851. Across from the hero we discover sitting a bearded gentleman dressed in a rather flashy manner. And as the hero drowses, this gentleman looks at him in a calculating way, and it soon becomes clear that this is the author himself sitting in the carriage regarding his character. Fowles compares the stare of a novelist at a stranger with the stare of the sexual molester. He says the voracity involved bespeaks the attitude: "Now what can I do with you, how can I use you? " That's not flattering to the novelist, and I think Fowles is right: it is a plundering of other people in some ways. I would not pillory people I know: that would be an abuse of power. But I have borrowed faces, and preferably faces that I see only once or twice; people I pass on the bus are good because you see the same commuters but you don't get to know them. I'm presently doing this. My present hero has acquired the face of an eminent musician who died recently. But I find that I'm almost at the point of knowing too much about the man to whom that face actually belonged, and I find myself drawing back and saying "OK, I don't care about him -- that's my hero, that face." So one does use others to that extent. One uses concepts more in their dynamic form, as problems that one has found painful oneself and needs to work out in a fictional context. Basically what I try to do is to assign to each major character one particular complex of experience, or one type of painful experience, because I find that if you put a little pain of your own into a character it will give him a dynamism. It's almost like putting a motor into a machine; it will start him running and then emotions will cluster to it, experiences in the fictional world, and so on. So you put these things together: the face you've borrowed, the part of yourself you've decided to assign to that character, maybe a few abstract ideas. But then something happens: they coalesce and the heart begins to beat and the person begins to live in his universe -- or not. And if not, then you've got to start all over, because you haven't got a character. So it's very much just crossing your fingers and waiting, which is what I'm doing now.

STOTT: You have a lot of very strong women, matriarchs, even in the Compound, and Lady Eorwen and Morgan, the mother of Linda. We've seen this enough to make it a recurrent characteristic. What is it that makes these kinds of characters so central for the themes you're developing?

NICHOLS: Well, I know I have immense strength in myself, and the women to whom I'm close, my mother and sisters, are equally strong. The strong woman is a basic fact of my experience and is a human type for which I have an almost unlimited admiration.

STOTT: Catherine de Medici, for example?

NICHOLS: Yes, even there, although it was not conscious or developed. Women have been oppressed, and I think they need to be represented as the force they are, although that's one of the reasons men fear them, because their strength is almost matriarchal, almost archetypal. In my books, they are the

conservers; I succumb to stereotypes to that extent. Women are magnificent, strong conservers; they are the rescuers of sanity in my books. The quest motif in my books is basically a quest for sanity, is it not? It's a quest for a reintegrated being through the fire -- that image again -- through an experience that appears at first to disintegrate you like Margaret's death. So there is that quest, but there is also something like a hand holding you up, a stable, cupping reality which, however unobtrusively, sustains you even while you think you're falling apart. And, to me, the matriarchs symbolize both the reintegration that is finally achieved and the reality that really is there for you all the time, even when you can't feel it. So they have a symbolic function really -- they are the earth.

STOTT: In reading about Inanna I was going back to *The Marrow of the World;* I was going to the basics where it all began. She comes on you as a surprise in *The Pearl,* you're not expecting her and there she is at the end. Why doesn't she appear earlier in the book?

NICHOLS: Because she's there all the time.

STOTT: But Margaret doesn't know that.

NICHOLS: Margaret doesn't need to know. Margaret needs to be sustained, she needs to be led, she needs to be hurt, she needs to do her own growing.

STOTT: And only when she has grown is she able to confront this force?

NICHOLS: Only when she has grown does that force need to unmask itself in the book, only when it's about to take its departure from Margaret's reality because she no longer needs it. So I represent that force as being most active and most sustaining when it is most hidden. And that is very important. What good would it have done Margaret to know Inanna? What Margaret needed to know was Margaret.

STOTT: There are twinnings, brothers and sisters, all the way through your fiction: Judith and Tobit who are brother and sister, and Linda and Philip who are cousins but who are almost brother and sister in spirit. It's almost an incestuous knowledge they have of each other. And then the relationship between Margaret as Lilit-Inanna and her brother Tirigan. Why is this a recurrent pattern in your books -- "the gemini complex," if you want to call it that ?

NICHOLS: The twin motif also occurs in my new book, *The Left Handed Spirit,* which will be published by Atheneum in 1978. This twinning pattern was even in my unpublished stuff when I was an adolescent.

STOTT: Is the union of the twin a completion of personality? First do you have to be alone, do you have to be divided finally to be united?

NICHOLS: It's a very complex, very rich symbol. But I think the divided self is basic to me. And I think that the very fact that the one self could be perceived as another being is -- to bring in that awful word alienation -- the alienated self, the self who doesn't know, who can encounter itself walking in the world and yet would not recognize its own face. This is exactly what Margaret has to learn to do. She encounters selves that *appear to be* separate from her,

and only by reintegrating her personality on a basis of honesty, forgiveness, and knowledge does she perceive that all these selves are one. I have always tended to do this, you know; I have tended to create fictional selves of one sort or other who could experience for me, or could take the burden of what I couldn't handle.

STOTT: What about Linda and Philip? Whose story is *The Marrow?*

NICHOLS: Well, I always thought it was Linda's, but you seem to have a different opinion and yours is as valid as mine, no doubt.

STOTT: Let me try this out. I see Philip as the non-agressor who is filled with considerable ambiguity toward his cousin-sister-lover, who recognizes that his great responsibility is abdication; as he says: "She has got to make the choice. I will fight for her, protect her; but her inner decision is hers. I have to leave her alone." And he has grown considerably -- I think you said at the beginning of the novel what a basically conservative, quiet, non-aggressive person he was, as opposed to Linda. It's almost as if the roles are reversed and he grows tremendously in knowledge of self and about how self relates to someone else.

NICHOLS: Yes. There is involved here the recognition, which I have always made, that a non-aggressive person projects his own aggressions into someone else; that is, he will associate himself closely with someone who lives out all the drives he himself denies. He will also be devouringly possessive toward that other person because, of course, that person will be an alienated fragment of himself. So the Philip-Linda pair dramatizes a split within the self.

STOTT: When we consider Linda, whose mother had been overthrown, we come to the whole question of the nature of power and the nature of Right Order and authority. There is a hierarchy; power is very important in that hierarchy. Could you tell us how that universe works, how, in all your books, the concept of authority and power works? They can be very good and very bad.

NICHOLS: Part of the liberal illusion is to abdicate power; to say, "I'm not going to lead." But leading is necessary -- it's right power, it's a sense of proportion. As a teacher, you're not going to say to your students, "I'm basically no better than you guys, so why don't we just talk about whatever comes into our heads? " That would be liberalism as I understand it -- and it did happen in universities in the '60's. So to me liberal abdication is almost the antithesis of right power. Now, this could make me -- and I'm very careful that it does not -- the kind of romantic who is a romantic fascist. I could be, and many people like me have been, attracted by the idea of the Good King. In my next novel, Marcus Aurelius appears. Of course Aurelius is the epitome of the Good King, and I present him as such. This is all very well if you keep it in mind that all human beings are, as Christians put it, in sin: there are no good kings on earth, and dictators, by the very fact of becoming so, are revealing their own evil. A dictator is not assuming right power. So one can revere the *idea* of right power, the idea of the Good King, as long as one does not carry it into actual political action in this world. Politically I am a democrat because I recognize that there are maybe half a dozen countries in the world in which somebody of my independent cast of mind could be allowed to flourish, and this is one of them and I'm grateful for that. So you see there is another split there, between actual democracy and ideal, hierarchical veneration of right power. But the story of growing up, and

that's the story of my books, is the story of recognizing one's own proper power, recognizing that power inside one is innate and that if one denies its existence it will not be made nonexistent but will merely destroy others, because it will run wild without control; so it is the process of bringing one's own power to conscious focus and using it deliberately for what one conceives to be right. This is a responsibility which reality does not allow us to avoid. This, to me, is in essence the maturing of the person; it is, therefore, in essence, the maturing of my heroes and heroines and part of their quest.

STOTT: Power can be very evil in your books.

NICHOLS: Where is it very evil?

STOTT: Morgan, Ygerna, Hagérrak. Here the power is associated with some kind of demonic force. Is the evil in your books an actual entity which controls people, or is the evil generated within one? Are there princes of light and princes of darkness somewhere beyond us, or is evil within one?

NICHOLS: There are princes of darkness, but they do not concern us. If there are beings beyond our ability to perceive, then presumably they can be both good and evil. But I think the idea of the prince of darkness, who is of course the devil in Christian folklore, is one of the biggest cop-outs the western mind has ever devised. If you exclude earthquakes and other so-called acts of God, most of the cruelty in the world is human cruelty, cruelty from men to men. Hagérrak is just a villain in a story and therefore he's empty, so I forget him. Ygerna is the demonic power of utter human selfishness. She sees other people only as things to be used, even her own blood; and, within my fictional universe, to use your own blood, your own kin, for your selfish ends is one of the worst things that can be done, because they above all are to be cherished. I've met a few people who were demonic, and they were utterly, depravedly selfish. But they were not devil-possessed. C. S. Lewis was once asked if he believed in devils and he replied, "Yes, I know plenty of us."

STOTT: In *Song of the Pearl,* which has been so central in all of our discussions today, Margaret has been possessed by lust over many, many incarnations, and she's also been possessed with hatred. Why is she so negative about her lust all through her life and particularly after the encounter with her uncle? Why does she hate the men who call forth the lust in her?

NICHOLS: I don't think she rejects or hates anything on the physical level. It's clear that Margaret was a precociously sexed young woman in her physical life, and furthermore that this is not merely a physical tendency but has been a tendency in every one of her earthly lives. She has been a passionate person. And I'd be very surprised if that is ever rejected or condemned as such in the book.

STOTT: After her original life with Paul she seems to have got caught up with some pretty bad fellows. Does she do this to punish herself ?

NICHOLS: Possibly -- who knows? Margaret is not myself, she is a mystery. I think that the lust of which she is basically guilty is the lust of hatred and of self-hate. She has succumbed to the temptation to hate and condemn herself and others again and again, rather than making the effort to change in herself and just forget it. It's one of the basic knots that I've found to be in

everybody's psychic life, the business of guilt. And I don't think sex has anything to do with it. I don't think lust has much to do with sex; sex is only one locus for lust. Hate is a far more seductive and powerful and dangerous locus for lust.

STOTT: And power -- Ygerna is a woman with lust and so was her mother.

NICHOLS: Sexual lust?

STOTT: With the mother, I thought the lust was lust for power through using sex, seducing the poor woodsman.

NICHOLS: Probably yes. But again, as you've noted, power for me -- power and sex both -- in my fictional universe are natural forces which are tremendously dynamic, but they are both basically good. It's the *use we make of them* that can be bad. Often my characters are trying to cope with their misuse of both powers.

STOTT: *Song of the Pearl* is obviously a major turning point in your career; you are moving away from fantasy in the tradition of people like Lewis. How do you see your career having changed with *Song of the Pearl?*

NICHOLS: Well, I've found my own idiom. I haven't found my own *literary* idiom; I think literarily *Pearl* is much less polished and much less complete than either of the other earlier books, because it was infinitely more demanding. In terms of the dimensions of reality it explores, I think it is a major achievement for me.

STOTT: What way is it different, not in terms of plot, but in terms of its dimensionality, its resonance? Is it because you're dealing with a mature heroine?

NICHOLS: Yes, the fact of Margaret's physical youth at the beginning is purely incidental. The youth of my heroes has always been merely a guise for the questing soul, but in Margaret this becomes explicit and I juxtapose extreme youth with extreme age in the same person. For me to bring these things together is the sign of an emerging oneness. In Margaret the fragmentation, which has always been implicit in the symbolism of my books, becomes explicit and present to the heroine's mind. She has to deal with it consciously, and I needn't stress the importance of that or of the reintegration into a single self that she finally achieves. In Margaret, guilt becomes explicit; it is no longer run away from into parallel worlds. Nobody walks out of the world anymore, or, if they walk out of the world, it's only to find out that there are certain things you cannot run away from because they are lodged in yourself; therefore they are faced through. *Pearl* ends with a return to the world that completes this ten-year cycle which began with the *Walk Out;* it's a walk back in. Margaret is Linda in excelsis. Linda's evil was symbolized by her being from another dimension; Margaret's evil is securely lodged in her own actions and she accepts the full responsibility for it. Responsibility is the key word.

STOTT: In the other books, the other half of the brother-sister-combination is there. This book, although you have the twinning of Margaret, is ba-

sically about Margaret. There must obviously be more books, more stories behind or beyond or in addition to the one you've told us in *The Song of the Pearl.*

NICHOLS: Yes. I'm still working with the same hero and heroine; I think it's time Paul was given his full acknowledgement as the independent human being he is. To some extent that's difficult for me simply as a female writer; it is difficult for any writer to create a fully convincing person of the other sex.

STOTT: It works both ways.

NICHOLS: I'm aware of that. To refer again to *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* the heroine appears to the hero to be a tremendous mystery, the incarnation of feminine mystery, the Sphynx herself. Actually she's a poor, neurotic, intelligent governess who, at the end of the book, tells the hero soundly that he's been mistaken about her all along and that she's done him great harm and that she's now leaving him so she won't do him more. And I don't really think that John Fowles himself understands that the heroine is only that. She's simpler than either he or the hero believes. And so here is a very sensitive and intelligent man, who obviously loves women, trying to create a convincing female character and not entirely succeeding. And I, as a lesser writer, will have correspondingly greater difficulty creating a convincing hero. But I'm about to try.

STOTT: The male characters have important lives, but they're certainly not dominant in the worlds that you write about until we come to Paul, who is now waiting his turn in the wings for the next book. Why are the men not as effective or as important in these books?

NICHOLS: As I said in talking about Fowles, there is a great difficulty creating convincing characters of the other sex. I think that one does have to be, in certain of the more obvious ways, a mature and experienced person and writer before one can do that. It just takes a while, unless you have brothers -- I never had brothers, I wish I had. But I wonder if that's why the brother-sister motif occurs so frequently, because to me a brother and sister know each other as human beings, and I never had an opportunity to know a man in this way until my marriage. It was at that point that I discovered that men really are people too, and I'm sure that male writers go through the same realization. In Gore Vidal's novel *Burr,* Aaron Burr says to his apprentice Charlie, "Women have *soul,* Charlie!" And that's the flash: there's a real person there despite the difference of sex and despite all one's own projections and delusions. I think that only when one has passed that realization as an individual can one begin to work it into fiction. So it should not have been expected when I was a young writer that I could create convincing men. I've said that women are conservers, for me. And for me, in the last two books -- *Pearl* and *Left Handed Spirit,* which is the one I've just completed -- the male performs the function of demanding that one grow. In a sense, he's almost the fate, the force that pushes one against one's lethargy into growing. This is the function he performs in relation to the heroine. It's a very active function, a very strong and necessary one, and it complements the sustaining function of the matriarch.

STOTT: You've been called a children's writer, and your books are read and enjoyed by older children and teenagers, but you're not a children's writer, are you?

NICHOLS: No. I'm sick of justifying myself. It savors of protesting too much to keep on saying I'm not a children's writer, my books are not for children, fantasy is not really for children, please . . . etcetera; it's so damned undignified.

STOTT: Let me rephrase the question. Perhaps you're called a children's writer because the association with fantasy and children's writing is very strong. Obviously fantasy -- and I don't mean just science fiction -- serves larger purposes than the entertainment or edification of children.

NICHOLS: This whole business is part of the demotion of the fairy-tale. Again, take the Sufis and other esoteric teaching sects, who will tell all these funny little stories which have about five different levels of meaning. In the minds of the ignorant, these fairy stories become just stories, until finally they're demoted to the nursery. This is part of the modern degradation of esoteric wisdom. Fantasy at its best is esoteric wisdom. And I hope that the success of Tolkien and people like him will help to restore it to consideration as a medium for intelligent and mature people. I have a high opinion of children, as I hope is obvious; I'm delighted they like my books. I know myself how profoundly a good writer will influence a child's mind and how he can mark a child for life. And furthermore I know that people who read me as children will still be reading me in thirty years, when they're not children and nor will I be. But to some extent, there was a mistake to begin with. My first few books were written when I was a child: not quite numerically, but mentally. And therefore they appealed to kids. But I have always written what pleases me, and I'm still doing that. It's inevitable that a creative artist, as he grows, appeals to different audiences, and I think that I'm in the course of changing my audience. This seems an unavoidable conclusion.

STOTT: Are you really using fiction, the structure of fiction, the structure of narrative, as a means of poetic insight for yourself or as a way of philosophical probing, questioning, and examination?

NICHOLS: Well, I don't know what poetry is. It's a word that is so overused that to call myself a poet conveys nothing to me.

STOTT: Let's say, are you creating a meaningful pattern as mythology does? If mythology uses stories which create an order and pattern in the universe, are you doing that in your stories, as perhaps Yeats did?

NICHOLS: Yeats is still often called a crackpot, and I run the same risk if I attempt the same enterprise. If there is a pattern in reality, I would like, obviously, to be able to find it, because I think that only there can sanity and safety be located. If I find a pattern, then it will certainly be reflected in my fictional worlds. But I also want my fiction to reflect the reality of the questions. If there are no answers, if there is only anguish, if there are only the questions, then I won't avoid that in my fiction. Again we come back to Lewis's allegory. He imposes meaning on his imaginative universe. I allow my imaginative universe to *reveal meaning to me,* and if all it can reveal is the anguish of the question, then that is what I will record. I think I am an honest philosopher, inasmuch as I am a philosopher. And if I claim to teach in my books, which I do claim to do to some extent, I think one should remember that I am also always being taught.

STOTT: You could say that the surface of fiction, fiction as stories and characters, is a way of confronting, if not coming to terms with, existential questions.

NICHOLS: Definitely. It's a way of multiplying. You know the way hairs on the body of an animal multiply its surface area? Well, to create fictional selves and fictional milieus is one way of multiplying your experiential surface areas so you can face the problems in several different milieus at once, and it will always be the same problem basically. Or maybe you'll discover new problems which only the fictional circumstances could have revealed to you, though they will be rooted in your everyday life. It's a way of expanding the limitations of living merely in one world. And since my concern is the quest for knowledge always, it's my concern in all dimensions.

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