

# The Writer's Quest

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I find writing is a very lonely business, even writing for children, which should be, of course, and is, at the same time very joyful. But when you don't know what you're doing and you confront your inner self sitting all alone at a desk with a pile of blank paper in front of you, then that's the moment you find yourself asking, "Why did I ever begin?" "Why am I doing this?" And quite often, when I get to the difficult part of a book, these same questions come up: "What am I doing?" And, "Why?"

I really don't think I had any choice about becoming a writer. It began with my love affair with books, and *that* began before I can remember. No matter how far I go back in my memory — and I have a good memory of when I was a child: I can remember things that happened when I was two — always I remember books. There was *The Adventures of Ludo*, the *Little Green Duck*, which was a beautifully sad book; there was *Der Struwwelpeter*: to this day I've got an irrational fear of long-bladed shears and scissors that stems from that horrifying illustration where the man came along and chopped off the thumbs of the bad, thumb-sucking children. That's still with me. But bad or good, books were part of my life from the very beginning.

I don't know when I learned to read either: I know it was well before I went to school, and it was a very natural and painless process, otherwise I presume I would remember some trauma. All I can remember is that books were there, to be opened and to be loved.

My father occupied the Chair of Mathematics at the University of Cairo in Egypt during my early childhood. We returned to England when I was 7 years old. I think perhaps the most fortunate thing that ever happened to me happened then. We settled in a London suburb that had what is still, I understand, one of the very best schools for girls in London — the Notting Hill and Ealing High School. It was quite a large school and, as I said, for girls only, from kindergarten right up to sixth form (which would be the leaving), and I went into it at, I suppose, perhaps the level of Grade two or three; I'm not quite sure about that.

We worked, of course, on our reading and our printing, but besides that we discovered how Early Man lived. We were read aloud to from books on pre-historic man; we took trips to the British Museum to see the Stone Age burials. Besides learning our own writing, we learned

to write on clay and wax tablets with a stylus; we learned some cuneiform; we studied hieroglyphs and learned the cartouches of Cleopatra and Ptolemy; we were taught about the Rosetta Stone. And all this, as I say, in the equivalent of Grade two.

Later on, in what would have been Grade threeish, we were read aloud to from the Norse Sagas, and I remember that the folk hero of *our* hearts wasn't anybody like the Fonz or John Travolta; it was Baldur the Beautiful for all of us, and we wept when he died — unashamedly — sitting in class, the tears pouring down our faces.

When I look back now — and I was thinking about this only recently — I am astounded at the enormous influence that the Roman Conquest has had on mythological literature. I think everywhere in the English-speaking world we're subjected to the Roman mythology, the Gods and Goddesses, and really, you know, I found their antics never made any sense at all. I don't think they did to anybody else. Whereas the Norse Sagas are part of — for the Anglo Saxon at least — the Northern heritage, a part of our bones and our blood. These are very stirring stories, and I wish they were used more in schools today to get that mythic link that children are lacking.

That same year we had the Sagas, we went back to the British Museum and we saw the Magna Carta and the Domesday Book. This, of course, is something that can't happen to everyone; I mean, it's just lucky if you go to a terrific school that happens to be situated in London and you can step into the Underground and go to the British Museum.

But it did have a really deep and, until now, unconscious effect on me. I've only just begun to go back and work out why all this has happened: a sense of the magic of words as an essential part of the process of becoming more human, beginning with Man in his cave, painting the creatures that roamed the Ice Age world and then putting his hand onto the wall next to them. We'll never know, but I think myself that this gesture or "autograph" was designed to gain power over them: "I am here, they are there, and I in my way as Thinking Man have more power than they have who can't draw anything." Then Man would tell stories to explicate his environment, his relationship to other men; tell of the terrors of birth and death and loneliness. And little by little all that storytelling moves forward until we come to the time of writing down one's memories — cuneiform, the hieroglyph, and then finally the simple rounded A, B, C's which are the same forms as we saw in the Domesday Book and the Magna Carta. And they carried this magic of formed letters, words, thoughts forward right into the school and the library of today. There's the whole power of man's self-discovery captured in the written word.

Even now when I'm writing I look at the page and I think, "It's still magic, isn't it?" These scrawls on paper — and you don't have to think about it as your hand actually puts it down — are an incarnation of one's deepest thoughts and emotions solidified into two dimensions right there. I would so much like to see reading and writing brought back into schools with this sense of magic: vibrant, instead of a physiological and psychological exercise which is painful for teachers and students.

I was only at that particular school for two years before we went up to Scotland when I was nine, but the influence that it had was profound and definitely permanent. I've always known, since that school, that magic lay between the covers of books, and all that was necessary to do to partake of the treasures was to open the covers and plunge in. All the time I was growing up I was reading: *Wind in the Willows*, *Black Beauty*, *Coral Island*, *The Children of the New Forest*, *Arthur Ransome*, all the books of E. Nesbit. I found her books in that first schoolroom in London, in the little library that each class had. And I found in them the element that is more even to me than adventure, and that is the sense of fantasy, the secret that there is a wellspring of magic just below the surface of everyday life, and that all you have to do is somehow tap it — if you can just find out how. And *she* always does in her books.

At this time my father had a new position at Edinburgh University; some of his original work in pure mathematics was being used in the problems of astronomy and he was invited to become a Fellow of the Society and he used to visit the observatory before it was closed at the beginning of the war. He used to talk to me about the stars and point them out to me, and he gave me James Jean's *Mysterious Universe*. I gobbled it up, not understanding half of it, I'm sure, but I could read books, I think, by a sort of process of osmosis — do you know what I mean? I just drew it all in and, understand it or not understand it, didn't seem to matter; it just became part of my fabric. I didn't worry about things I didn't understand, and so E. Nesbit's world of fantasy and the astronomy of my father were beginning to come together even though I didn't know it at the time.

Another great debt I owe my father was reading aloud, and that happened every Sunday afternoon without fail. He never read children's books — he couldn't be bothered; they weren't very good in those days, most of them. He read what *he* wanted to read, and we listened. We got *Treasure Island*, *Lorna Doone*, *Kidnapped*, *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, the *Ingoldsby Legends*, *Kai Lung's Golden Hours* — a really eclectic mix. But all of them had the same thing in common (which I think he found in his Welsh background), and that was the love of words and the sense of music in words.

Then the war came, my father died, and my sister and I were at boarding school. Later on I joined the WRNS, and after the war went to Zimbabwe. And then I came to Canada in 1952.

Canada was really a great shock and it became a catalyst that brought me face to face with myself in a confrontation that led to my first novel — the autobiographical novel, you know, that everybody writes and then hopefully just throws away. (Better out of the way.) I don't mean to be rude when I say that Canada was a shock, but it was totally different in the sense of "place" from anywhere else I had ever been. Europe has a great familiarity about it: you tread on history, you're rubbing elbows with the living and with the memories and ghosts of everybody all piled up through the centuries; it's absolutely crowded with humanity and with tradition. Now Zimbabwe was the opposite of that, really: it was an enigma. It was empty, not crowded the way Europe had been, but it was never lonely. I remember one day walking alone with absolutely nothing but this clear blue sky overhead and tawny grass, shoulder high, and I wasn't in the least bit lonely or intimidated or afraid, and then a tiny antelope stepped right out of the grass, just in front of me, and it was like Eve meeting one of the first animals. We hadn't got to that sense of fear between us, and we just looked at each other; then it bounded off and I just stood there. And I felt I had every right to stand there on that land, that I could claim it belonged to me because I was a human being and I was at home. It was the most extraordinary sensation: it went right down through the soles of my feet. I belonged there on that particular soil.

When I was back in England I came across a book by Laurens Van Der Post that had an introduction by Carl Jung. In this introduction Jung expressed exactly that sensation that I had felt standing on the land of central Africa; he said, "Yes. It's this common unconscious, this sense that *this* is the place from which we all sprung." And you can feel it belongs to you when you go there.

So I came to Canada and I settled in Ottawa and joined a canoe club. We used to spend weekends on trips up to the Gatineau and the Laurentian lakes. Now, this is where the shock came in. Africa itself is like a Motherland of the human race and I felt totally at home there. But the Laurentian shield seemed to me to deny humanity completely. I used to try to imagine the Indian people who roamed there and canoed on those lakes, and I thought about the Voyageurs and the Coureurs-de-Bois; I knew they were there, but still it seemed to me that the land was rejecting the idea of human feet on its surface. I still have some of that feeling about Canada: it's a marvelous place to fly over, but be wary when you stand on it, be very wary. It has nothing really to do with size; it has to do with the basic myth of the country in some way.

I felt very isolated when I first settled in Ottawa, and a lot of it was due to this feeling that I was not accepted by the land itself. So I wrote out these feelings in an adult novel, which was the first piece of fiction that I ever completed. I'd begun a lot, but I'd never finished anything before.

But then my years became filled with all sorts of other things, and it wasn't until I was married and we had moved to Alberta that the need to express my feelings in writing surfaced again seriously. We'd had this long drive with four small children across the apparently unending spaces that lay between Sault St. Marie and Edmonton, and I felt an intensification of that initial contact with the land of Canada that I'd had in the Laurentians. When later on I came to write *Earthdark*, I reached out into those memories and brought out the emotions and fears and all the loneliness that I'd felt in that trip across the Prairies. I used it to describe the feelings of Kepler and Anne as they crossed the Ocean of Storms to the far side of the Moon in their search for Anne's missing father.

I spent the next few years in a creative search just trying to find myself. I had no idea what I was doing. I painted; I embroidered; I wove. And it wasn't until my youngest child went into school that I made the firm decision — a deliberate decision — to start writing again. But I chose juvenile writing purely by chance — except I don't really believe in "chance". I "happened" to go into the library one day and I "happened" to see on a recent acquisition's shelf a book called *Writing for the Juvenile and Teenage Market* by Jane Fitz-Randolph. I just picked it up — I like new books — and I'm always interested in how to do things even if I never do them. So I took it home. You know, I had never thought, in spite of raising four children, in spite of all the reading I had done as a child, I had never thought of writing *for* children. It had never occurred to me as a thing I could do. I think I was caught in the days of "little" books — of "nothings" you know — there were such a lot of them back in the Thirties, Fourties, and Fifties: jolly kids having fun in boarding schools and that sort of thing, and I knew I didn't want to write *that*. I hadn't realized just what an incredible renaissance there had been in children's writing. So I read a great deal. Then I realized how exciting this could be, and that it was worth having a try at it.

I made a solemn promise that I was going to sit down at the kitchen table every day from eight until twelve and let no excuses, not even having to clean the oven or weed the garden or wash the walls, get in the way. At times cleaning the oven felt like quite an attractive alternative: it really is hard to sit down with blank paper and a blank mind

and say, "I'm going to do it!" — a bit like walking backwards off a cliff when you're rappelling for the first time. Everybody says it's dead easy: all you have to do is let yourself go. But *you* know it's a long way down to the ground, and wonder if the rope is that strong anyway?

The first problem I found was that I didn't know how to make plots "happen". All the books I'd read said, "Write about what you know." But how can you if what you know bears little relationship to where kids are today? What did I know? Life in Egypt in the 1930's with a nanny and going to the country club to see the races? An Edinburgh convent? Boarding school in Harrogate? Wandering around Britain during the war? Two years in Zimbabwe? Working in Ottawa during the Fifties? I couldn't find anything to relate to young people that I could truthfully talk about. I realized that really I had very few roots and it's hard to write without roots — particularly if you want to write with authority. I just had to go back to those very beginnings of being a human being who had known how to write and how to read, and draw on that authority of just being a human being on earth.

At first I produced a couple of really horrible formula adventures. Then one that was a bit better with an historic background. Suddenly, a year after I'd started, things fell into place — again by "chance". I'd watched a Jacques Cousteau program on television which had to do with setting up an undersea habitat where scientists or engineers could live for two or three days at a time while working at pressures of three or four atmospheres, and so avoid the hazards and the wasted time of continually having to decompress and surface after very, very short work intervals. It was an interesting program, but I found myself saying, "Well, what would it be like if men lived permanently in habitats sixty feet under the surface? If that were their real home for all time?" And then the crucial question popped into my mind: "What would it be like to be a boy growing up in an environment like that?"

When I look back, all this seems incredibly obvious, but, you know, at the time it was like a flash of lightning. I hadn't asked that kind of question before; I had tried to manipulate characters and words to make books "happen". Now I was exploring a territory that in a sense already existed. I had to ask myself the questions and find out the answers to something that in some other world in space and time existed and that I had to bring into a reality on paper here. I began, and I realized that what I wanted to do more than anything was write Science Fiction, simply because the question I had asked *had* to be answered in the future: What would it be like to live under the sea all the time?

From that moment I didn't have trouble with books. It's not to say that writing became easy: it didn't, and it still isn't. I still find — and

I'm sure everybody here who writes professionally will agree — that writing is very difficult; it's very aggravating. And in the moment when one dries up and one's mind becomes a desert, it's also rather terrifying; it's a scary way to earn a living when you don't know whether you will have another thought as you sit there staring at the paper. (I sometimes wish I could just go out to an office where all you have to do is open the door, go in and sit at your desk, and somebody will hand you something to do, instead of having to make your own things to do.)

But then the marvelous moments happen, and they make up for all the rest. Moments when a heroine makes a discovery about herself. (But I didn't know about *that* and I invented her!) When characters say truthful things that *I* didn't put into their mouths. Moments when the hand that's holding the pen connects right through to the mythic levels of one's mind, and the words write themselves. I find myself reading them back and saying, "Yes, that's exactly right, but how did I know that? I didn't know I knew it."

So, where did all the plots come from that had been so hard to find, and that now I was finding so easy? They come from anything, anything in the world around me that stimulates me to ask questions: "What if such and such a thing were to happen?" "What then?" "To whom would this situation happen?" "How would they react?" "How would it change them?"

I've got ideas for books from seeing familiar things in unfamiliar ways, from an emotional reaction, from a domestic crisis, a newspaper cutting, a family incident. The challenge, once one has an idea, is then to turn it into a believable story.

There are several problems — but perhaps "problem" isn't the right word; there are several things one has to be aware of in writing believable stories for children. The first is to get the protagonist into a context where something larger than life, something really emotionally grabbing and important, is going to happen to him or her. And then the second is related to that: how to get the hero and heroine into the position from which they alone can make the decisions or carry out the actions that are really important in the story. In other words, if they are only going to be observers to some scene in which the adults are really doing all the action, it's going to be boring for kids to read. And, with regard to the second point, it's important to avoid — particularly, I think, in Science Fiction — the kind of story that was popular back in the Thirties where the young hero — there were never any girls then; they stayed home and knitted or crocheted — when the hero would jump into a space craft and take off and single-handedly destroy the enemy fleet or whatever it was. And you can't help thinking, "Well,

where *is* the army? What are they doing? Where is the Interstellar Police? Come to that, where are this boy's parents and why isn't he at school?" It's all so unrealistic. So it really is important, I think, for believable Science Fiction today to enmesh the hero or the heroine in what is going on — suck them into the action so they are forced to react to it; they are not being puppeted around. I don't want them to be like Nancy Drew who's a female Johnny-on-the-spot all the time; you know, she's always there when the body is discovered.

I'd like to share just a few of the thought processes that went into a couple of plot plans. I won't go into detail but just give you an idea of how very ordinary the substance is that can turn into Science Fiction. The first I'll talk about is *Tomorrow City*. The plot came about very quickly in just one moment's question and answer. In Edmonton there is a relatively tall building — I can't say "tall" when I think of the CN Tower now, but it's thirty-three floors and it was the highest we had: the Alberta Telephone Tower — and there was a high speed elevator you could take right up to the top and walk around and look at the whole of Edmonton. (Now Edmonton is growing up so fast around the tower it's going to be pretty hard to see over the tops of the high-rises. But it was quite a sight once.) We would always take up people there who came from out of town. And I got bored: you know, you take them up to Vista 33 and you show them everything and it's all so familiar and you know the city like the back of your hand: boring! But this one particular occasion a friend came quite late in the evening — she was an old friend of mine and she had her two boys with her — and so rather than stay home and talk (which I would rather have done), I thought, we'll get the boys out of the house and let them see something so they won't be sitting fidgeting and miserable after they'd been on the plane all day. Let's go up to Vista 33; there's nothing else open. And we went up to the top of the tower and I was prepared just to show them Edmonton and be politely bored as usual.

But I saw an Edmonton that I'd never seen before: the city stretching out from me as a network of electrical connections, seeming to radiate from the tower where I was standing. And at once there jumped into my mind the idea of the city as a brain; then the tower as the brain-centre with all these electrical connections reaching right out to the horizon as the nerve network. But then I thought, you can't have a book about a brain running a city. What about a computer? The tower as a giant computer designed to make the city a beautiful place for children to grow up in? (Now I've got my linkages started. I have to get more linkages.) Supposing that my heroine is the daughter of the designer. Supposing he has programmed what he knows of her — his daughter, his love for her — he's programmed her and her future needs into the computer to make her the model of the child the city is going



to be made beautiful for. Sounds lovely, but of course things have to go wrong. And they have to go wrong naturally, not by the computer just running amuck: they don't do that. Computers make mistakes because the input is faulty. And I have to make the faulty input come from Caroline herself when she tells the computer — not quite knowing what's she saying — "Go ahead and do what you think is best, no matter how silly people may be about the changes."

And, of course, much more has to happen to strengthen that, but basically that was the story of how Caroline became involved in these terrifying events — because she had given the computer the directive to do what it, in its unloving, unfeeling, programmed fashion considered was beautiful for children.

A lot of children ask me when I'm going to write a sequel to *Tomorrow City* because they want to know what happened to Caroline afterwards. And I say there won't be a sequel (I don't think) because Caroline was really a very ordinary little girl. Once in her life something tremendously exciting and terrifying happened to her because of her father being the designer of the computer and because of a little slip that she made that caused the computer to go astray. And after that everything followed and she had to face what happened in the story. But that's not going to happen to Caroline again; I think she probably led — quite thankfully — quite a quiet life after that.

*Beyond the Dark River* came about in a totally different way. Again, it was one of these things that happens by "chance" when you're writing: the serendipities that come to writers are just amazing. On this occasion we had a power cut: one of the busbars at Rosedale Generating Station blew up and we were without electricity and without water (since the water is pumped) for a considerable time. And it was really extremely uncomfortable: cold; you couldn't turn on the tap; you couldn't get a hot meal. It was wretched! I found myself thinking about how much we rely on the trappings of civilization: the things that we originally invented but now are leaning on so heavily that we're in danger of losing our own initiative as human beings. You can turn on a light, you can turn on a tap, you turn up a thermostat, you open a freezer. Could we even survive in a northern climate — I'm thinking of Edmonton — if there was a total disaster that wiped out the whole of civilized structure: electricity, water, heating, comfortable buildings? And I thought, "Probably not. I don't think many of us could survive winter under those circumstances. But who would survive?" And right away I thought of two groups that live close to Edmonton. There's a Hutterite colony south of the city, and the Hutterites, as you may know, are like the old order image: they live very, very simple lives; they came from central Europe and settled in the northern United States and then in

Canada. There are several colonies in Alberta. They live most simply; they live a communal life on a farm; they're extremely self-sufficient and inventive. (In the States quite a number of farming patents for machinery have been taken out by Hutterites. They've really got this sort of knack for making do and making new.) I was sure they'd survive. Even if there's no gasoline, they'll go back to horse plowing, cultivating; no problem at all.

The second group I felt would survive might be an Indian community, but not the Indians on the Reserve or in the city, I didn't think, because they are too closely linked to all these things that are now destroyed. But in 1968 a band of Ermineskin left the Reserve at Hobbema and went out to start a new life in the foothills, living in the old way, living respectfully with nature, not using all the things we have taken for granted, but learning to live off the land; living in double-walled tipis (which are, I believe, very comfortable in the winter); hunting; fishing; gathering roots: they would survive.

Now the serendipity came when I looked at these two cultures and I realized how absolutely opposite to each other they are. The Hutterite is enclosed; the one source, not only of inspiration but daily living, is the Bible. The Indian looks out to nature; everything around is Holy. And I thought the Indian must be the girl in my story: I saw the Indian way as more the feminine way of looking at things. The Hutterite way of seeing life seemed the more masculine way so I made him the boy. And then all I had to do was to design a story in which in a natural fashion these two disparate people would come together and have an adventure — exploring the old, destroyed city of Edmonton, looking in the University library for an answer to an illness that has attacked the young children in the Hutterite community. And the linkage there is that the Indian girl is the healer for the tribe to whom all the knowledge has been passed down from grandmother to mother and to her.

Then I came to *Keeper of the Isis Light*. The idea for that came from the most simple connection — in a way — and yet the most involved: a newspaper cutting. (I keep them — anything that's interesting, anything that may in some future day a hundred years from now be an idea for a story — or perhaps be a linkage: that's happened, too, with something that I'm already writing and I suddenly find a piece of information I needed that I had cut out ten years ago — it's incredible how one does things like that!) This was a cutting about the young American boy, David, who suffers from a deficient immune system. He spends his entire life — he's eleven years old now — in a room by himself with air that is sterilized; everything that is in the room must

be sterilized. He has had no direct communication — skin to skin, lovingly — with a human being from the moment of his birth.

After I had kept this cutting for a long, long time wondering why I was keeping it, I realized that *that* was the connection for me: this extraordinary thing for a human being to be so alone that he had never actually been touched by another human being, except through the equivalent of a space suit. And I wondered, “Would David be lonely? Since he has never known any other life, would he be lonely or would being alone be a perfectly normal way for him to live?” And from that theme I developed *Keeper of the Isis Light*. I felt I had to go right out into space because there’s nowhere on Earth left that’s lonely enough. Lighthouse stations used to be just about as isolated as you could get with a ship going out only every six months or so; now they get a helicopter every week with newspapers and mail: not nearly isolated enough. So I had to establish a colony on a planet far, far distant — 7 parsecs, if I remember — from Earth. On it, three people: the mother and father and child who keep the lighthouse, as it would be kept on other planets that are not yet inhabited but someday will be. Then all I had to do was to get rid of the mother and father, and I had the child alone.

But I wanted my character Olwen to be older than a child to face these problems of being alone, being lonely: sixteen years old. If her parents had been killed off when she was in her teens, she would have been so devastated, so reft with loneliness, I don’t suppose she’d even have lived. So she had to lose her parents when she was a very small girl. And I thought, “Oh, dear, you know you start this plotting and get so far and then you find yourself with insurmountable difficulties.” So there was my insurmountable difficulty: how can I have a child of maybe two years old alone on a planet? If she’s going to be brought up by the equivalent of wolves or apes or something, it would turn into a sort of Tarzan book — which might be fun, but it wasn’t the book I wanted to write. So I had to compromise: I compromised with “Guardian” (and anyone who has read the book knows who “Guardian” is, and that in a sense it was a fair compromise). He is her protector, her mother and father, her teacher, her close friend.

Having overcome that difficulty, all I had to do to make a plot “happen” was to land a ship from Earth and face this girl who had been happy alone for her entire life with a crowd of eighty strangers from Earth, including twenty teenagers. She has never been exposed to teenagers, doesn’t know how to talk to them, how to relate, while they, of course, are a welded group because they had been chosen as a group on Earth. They have come together on this dangerous flight; they have

been indoctrinated into a loving family situation so that they are able to cope with this new planet. And now she's the outsider: from being the owner of the planet, she has become the stranger. And from that story developed the whole of the Isis trilogy, from just a little newspaper cutting.

A more recent novel — *Hunter in the Dark* — came from a simple incident in my son Russell's life. I had no intention in the world of writing a story about young people and death. My son came home in Grade 12 just before Christmas and asked us if he could have three days off from school to go hunting. He was crazy about hunting and the season was very short, only November in this particular area of the Swan Hills, where he wanted to go hunting deer. Everything had gone wrong on all the previous weekends: he hadn't been able to get a truck or his friend hadn't been able to go; and here we were: the last three days of November fell in the middle of the week. But we said, "No." It was Grade 12 and he hadn't been doing too well and the exams were coming up. But he went anyway. He sent a note home with his younger brother Tom — a long, explanatory story. (I wasn't even there. I was — I forget where — I think in B.C. with the Young Canada Book Week doing a lecture tour!)

When I got over being angry at him for skipping school, I started asking myself — again, these questions come up that always lead to plots — "Why would somebody want to hunt so much?" I cannot myself even endure the idea of hunting, but why is it important to a young man to go out with a gun and track down a deer and shoot it dead? And I started thinking about rites of passage in other cultures and, of course, even in Canada — particularly in the West — not that long ago. If you wanted your dinner, you went out and you caught it. And how proud a son must have been the first time he brought home a deer, and said, "Here, mother, here's food for the family for the next couple or three weeks or a month" — or whatever it might be. That must have been some moment, that of becoming a man. But there isn't anything like that nowadays: they stay home so long, and they go to school, then they go to university. You don't even get what happened in Britain, perhaps especially between the wars, when a boy would leave school at 14, and he'd bring Mum home his first pay packet. He was a man at 14 when he left school, brought home the whole pay packet untouched; you don't get that now.

So in what fashion does a boy find out that he's a man? And then I started thinking, "What is happening to this one particular boy?" I didn't even know what was going to happen to him yet, but I could see him; he was beginning to come clear in my mind. I knew he was

called Mike. And I asked him, “Why *do* you have to go hunting? What’s so important?” And I had to keep asking this question for quite a long time before *he* began to let me know that he was very ill, that he might die, that he might never have the chance to be a man, and that he was angry at life getting away from him without him having had a chance to experience it. This was the symbol — this hunt, this trophy deer — the symbol of his manhood.

And so you see, it was just a simple incident but it came a long way from my son being disobedient, and turned into this rather complex novel.

But no matter where I get the ideas from, from that original thought-outline to the finished manuscript, there is always an intensive search for truth. That’s what we writers really do. The truth about my characters: Who are they? How do they think and feel? How are they going to react to the circumstances that I’m going to throw in their way? That’s the most important truth: the characters.

The other truth is the background of the story. That is usually not a question of looking inside oneself (which is where I look to find out about my characters) but a question of simple research, reading everything I can about a subject, whether it’s about living on the moon or under the sea, or even designing an original planet which is what I had to do with Isis. (And very exciting it was, too, to design a logical planet that kept Newton’s laws and wouldn’t fall out of the sky or fall into its sun nor have a climate totally at odds with the sun that I placed it in orbit around.)

Research leads one into all sorts of fascinating byways. I found — and I should think that people who write historical fiction for children must find this too — that the hardest part of writing the actual book is knowing what to leave out. You do so much work: I read at least thirty books about the surface of the moon, local conditions, low temperature/low gravity engineering, to find out how the cars would run. What kind of transport system would operate at extremely low temperature, near vacuum conditions? When I sent that particular manuscript of *Earthdark* to the publisher, my editor wrote me back and said, “I was absolutely fascinated with the technology. Now will you please take it out.” And it’s a hard moment, you know, when you’ve worked so hard and the material is fascinating. You’re dying to share it with the kids: “Look! this is exactly what it would be like to live on Moon. This is exactly how cars would work.” (And I may say in passing that there *is* somebody out there who would like to have known: I met a young boy who did ask, “How did the cars work?” And I couldn’t remember! It’s so long ago now. I only met him just

about a month ago, and I had to say, “It was in the original manuscript and, honestly, it works. But I’ve thrown it out and I haven’t thought about driving cars on Moon since then and I’ve forgotten.”)

The point, of course, is — and the same with historical fiction — that if you know a subject totally, then you’re not winging it. You can write freely without putting anything much in — but you know it’s right, the tiny detail that you do put in — and you know that the background that your hero or heroine comes from is right. You know where they live before they come onto the printed page and *that* gives truthfulness.

I had a lot of trouble with *Gold-Fever Trail* that way. After I completed my first Science Fiction novel, *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*, but before I found a publisher for it, a small Edmonton publisher, John LeBel, asked me to consider writing a historical book about the Klondike Gold Rush. I thought this was going to be pretty easy, that I’d just go over to the Edmonton main library and it would be there. I was really amazed: there were, as I said, thirty books about conditions on the moon — really up to date stuff, 1980ish engineering stuff — but I found only about five books on the Klondike, and all but one of them were written by Americans. And in all of those the Northwest Mounted Police were the bad boys: they were the ones who stopped you taking the gold out that you’d dug up! And the Yukon was only an extension of Alaska; in fact, it was sometimes not even mentioned: you just went a little further over and there was Dawson, just across the border. I found, of course, Berton’s *Klondike*, and I have never read a book so full of fascinating historical facts that was at the same time so unsuitable for children. I couldn’t believe it! There was nothing usable there: it was full of riotous living. Not for Grades 5 and 6 which I was supposed to be writing for. “What am I going to do? Am I just going to have to tell him I can’t write this book?”

And then — I will never understand quite how libraries classify things! — in a slightly different section in the decimal system there was this lonely book on the Klondike, a journal of the Klondike stampede of 1897 to ’98. It was by E. Tappen Adney, a New Brunswick naturalist, an unusual person to think of storming off to see what was going on in the Klondike. But he had been commissioned by the *New York Times* and a few other American papers to do articles for them on a fairly regular basis. They asked him to go up to Klondike and see what this phenomenon was. Was it worth writing about for them? So he went up in the Fall of 1897 — before the big winter — and his account was marvelous, the answer to prayer. I could never have written that book otherwise. He saw through a naturalist’s eyes, which are like a child’s eyes: he saw what the country looked like; he saw the climate; he saw

the trees; he saw the way the rivers went. I could put all that in *Gold Fever Trail*, and I just followed in his steps as he went up to the Klondike; the children in the book just went along for the ride, as it were, on Tappen Adney's diary. It was marvelous.

*Gold-Fever Trail* was my only serious excursion into history, and I don't think I'll ever dare do it again. I don't really think of myself as a historian, not anymore in any case, and I'd probably never again be as lucky as I was with *Gold-Fever Trail*. But it's a pity in a sense because, you know, there is a tremendous strength in writing history for young people: right away you can overcome this problem of, why is the hero — or, occasionally, the heroine — in these unusual and difficult conditions? Well, certainly back in the middle ages and in Roman Britain, for instance, life was so nasty, short, and brutish that there was little differentiation between being a teenager and an adult: you were an infant, and then you wore adult clothes, you faced all the adult things. If the Vikings were coming, you were just as likely to be captured as an adult; that you were a kid (who would have been in school nowadays) didn't affect your daily life. You could be sold into slavery; all sorts of things could happen. The historic context is a marvelous field for people to write in, with great plot possibilities that we can't have writing about today.

But certainly we can read about the past and we can learn from our mistakes in the past and bring a sense of history even when we're writing in the present and also when writing about the future. I think of Science Fiction as history that has, in a sense, not happened yet, where we can learn by our mistakes before we've made them. We can write, for instance, a story about a computer that can take over a city and realize that if we are lazy enough to give up many of our mental powers and our choices to computers to handle, we might find ourselves in a situation in which a computer was running the world. But it's in the future, so we don't have to suffer the consequences. Science Fiction has got that power about it!

And I think Science Fiction is very, very good for young people — particularly today, when they are facing so many difficult choices in life, and we don't even know what kind of choices in their future. Becoming familiar with Science Fiction, I think, helps us reach out fearlessly into that many-branched future and take control, perhaps, of our destiny. It teaches us to ask questions: "What if?" "And then what?" And it teaches us to find answers.

And I think one of the functions of a good writer for children (besides, obviously, being entertaining) is to help them explore the world and the future. And to find acceptable answers to the Big Questions:

“What’s life about?” “What is it to be human?” As I said before, those are questions that demand truthful answers, not pat ones. So I think my chief criterion for a story for children — it should be for all fiction in fact, of course, but very especially that written for the young — is that one should write as truthfully as possible, even if it isn’t easy or painless. One faces oneself in the darkest inside places of one’s memory and one’s subconscious, and out of that comes both joy and sorrow. But always — and I think again this is perhaps the second crucial thing for children — always there must come hope.

And then one writes and one scribbles out and then one writes again, and then maybe after half a dozen drafts (as one of my favourite writers, Alan Garner says) maybe — then — a book will emerge. And if it is good enough, it will probably be for children.

## Question period:

**Q:** I was interested in your collection of newspaper articles. How do you ever keep them sorted so you can find your materials when you want them?

**MH:** I used to have a horrible filing system, but you know what I did with my Vicky Metcalf Award? I got a desk made to my specifications that fits in my room — which was a difficult room to fit in because it’s rather small, so I couldn’t get a standard, double pedestal desk in. It’s got file drawers on both sides: one is for “Everything Else” and the other for “Writing.” And I just keep files: “Solar System,” “Outer Space,” “New Technology,” “Underseas”. And then I have this funny little one which is called “Ideas — Question Mark.” Things like “David” go in there.

It is quite extraordinary. For instance, even since we came to Alberta I have been interested in everything I could find out about the Indian culture, and it wasn’t always easy to find things out. But at one time there was a truly beautiful article that one of the journalists wrote in the *Edmonton Journal*. *He had been permitted to take part in the Sweat ceremony, in the Sweat Lodge, and he did a full page article, not writing like a newspaper man but writing like a human being going through a spiritual experience. And it was so beautiful that I cut it out and I filed it under “Indian Culture” without any notion in the world of whether it would ever be useful. Then when I came to write Ghost Dance Caper, I found that a necessary part of the Dance ceremony was the Sweat. Now, there’s no way I would have been able to go or*



to get involved in this. But I just remembered the clipping as soon as I made this connecting link: I read a little monograph on the Ghost Dance that Hugh Dempsey had — one of those Glenbow Monographs — and he mentioned the Sweat just in passing. I said, “Somewhere I’ve got that. I’ve got to look through my files.” And there was this thing: he had done it for me, you see. Full, and with the emotion, with the sense of pain and the heat in your shoulders, and then suddenly feeling all your sins and sorrows just pouring out of you. And I could use that in the book, just as if I had been there and gone through it. Oh, I’d never give up my file system; it’s worth its weight in gold!

**Q:** Do you read much Science Fiction?

**MH:** No, with a few exceptions. I’m enjoying the exploration that Doris Lessing is doing into — I don’t know — inner persons or outer space or both in her new *Shikasta* books. That’s exciting. I used to read a lot of Science Fiction but I found that more and more it was involved with what I call “nuts and bolts” — not people — with a few lovely exceptions like Zenna Henderson’s *The People*. Now that’s the kind of Science

Fiction I can truly relate to — where these beautiful people escaped everywhere they could into the galaxy when their planet was destroyed; a ship or two managed to land on Earth. And they had these incredible emphatic powers, but mankind just destroyed them. They’d find these little enclaves of them hidden in places like the Kentucky hills and so on, and they had these marvelous powers but they couldn’t share them. Oh, they’re beautiful books. That kind of thing I love. But not this “nuts and bolts” stuff: it’s not so moving.

**Q:** Is there a great demand for children’s stories?

**MH:** Yes. And Science Fiction is becoming very popular now, I’m glad to say. It’s always lovely to find yourself on the crest of a wave.

**Q:** Was it easy for you to sell your first book, or did you go through the rejection slips like I did?

**MH:** Not so much rejection slips as stony silence — which, in a way, I think is worse. I had written about three novels, one of which was *Crisis on Conshelf Ten*. I had by this time also written *Gold Fever Trail* and that had been published but, as I said . . . it wasn’t a major book. So I made a list of all the Canadian publishers that had a “Children’s” list. I wrote them a well-thought out letter with a little precis of each of the books I had written and the age group each was aimed for. I

did it all really according to the book: enclosed a stamped, addressed envelope, and asked if they would be interested in reading any of them. Only three publishers answered. That's all. The others didn't even answer: that's the stony silence. One of the three said, "No." (Not even interested in looking at a manuscript!) This was all. We're talking about eight years ago. But, goodness, things have changed in eight years! Back then the publishers would say, "Oh, we can't find any Canadian writers. That's why we're not producing Canadian books." Then, when they got a Canadian writer, they'd say, "Oh! I don't think we dare publish an unknown Canadian writer." But things have changed so much since then! There's real strength in Canadian publishing today.

Anyway, when I was first starting in the mid 1970's, two publishers said they would read them, and one of them took *Crisis on Conshelf Ten* conditionally — *if* they could find an English co-publisher. Again, at that time, that was always a "must", and it's been the downfall of several writers I know who would have had books accepted, except that they were not able to find either an English or an American co-publisher who would carry the risk.

But that's how I came to have an English publisher. Hamish Hamilton: they took it. Canadian distribution is still a problem.

**Q:** And then people say, "Why aren't you loyal to Canada?" I've had that problem myself very often.

**MH:** Yes, yes, exactly. And you know, one tried; one really tried. But there was nobody out there listening.

**Q:** When you go out to speak, do you find that they have your books there ahead of time? Are the books available for the people who hear you?

**MH:** Oh, this is always a problem. During my last November tour, I found that none of the libraries had *any* of my books. None of the children had read Science Fiction. It was just like jumping into cold water.

**Q:** But wouldn't the publisher have done anything to have the books put into the bookstores or anything of that sort? It's ridiculous, isn't it, when you think of all the money spent on sending people out, and then, they get there and the people want the books, and there are none available.

**MH:** Yes, absolutely. At Oshawa today, the children had been prepared by a very, very good librarian — very enthusiastic about Cana-

dian books in general — Oh, my goodness, she was good. She's really been working on getting Canadian literature into the schools. She had done a little Science Fiction segment prior to my arrival. But the children had gone to the local Classic Bookstore and asked, "Have you got this?" They said, "No. Never heard of her. No, we can't order less than ten copies at a time." Of course, the kids had come in by ones. I suppose if they had gotten ten of them together at once, the bookstore might have believed them and have gotten ten copies. And you know, I'm talking paperbacks at \$2.95. It's not the greatest risk in the world for the bookstores.

**Q:** No, but you must consider that Classic orders for the whole country.

**MH:** Yes. But it's still sporadic. One of the Classics in Edmonton has *Hunter in the Dark*. Not one of the Department stores had it: not Eaton's, not the Bay, not Woodward's.

**Q:** Today I went into the Eaton's Centre in Toronto just to see what was going on in the Children's Department. I said, "Do you know that Monica Hughes is going to be Resident Writer of the Girls and Boys' House? And that there was quite a bit of advertising about it. Have you her books here so that we can tell people where to buy them?" I just wanted to find out. The lady was very sympathetic, but there was no person there to take care of ordering it.

**MH:** Well, you know, I got the Beaver Award for *Hunter in the Dark*. Yet, it wasn't at the Bay. The first time I was on a radio interview, they said, "Where can we get your book?" I said, "In a bookstore, I suppose." I had no idea. So this time before the interview I got my husband to phone everywhere. He really found it a fascinating exercise. The four private bookstores had it; it's always the private bookstores: they *are* good to Canadian writers, aren't they? But when he phoned the Bay, it wasn't there, though I must admit that the manager of the Book Department was totally mortified. And, you know, the Beaver is an annual award and they advertise it across the country, but they didn't get the winning book into their own store. It's really strange.

**Q:** I'm always troubled when reading *The Tomorrow City* that you have your little girl go blind. And then you were mentioning about "hope" being so important. I wonder if we could get back to that?

**MH:** Yes. If any of you haven't read it, the computer has made itself impregnable at the top of the telephone tower. There is no way my characters can reach it, and it has all sorts of weapons to defend itself,

because Caroline quite early on put the notion into the computer's head that it might well have its circuits pulled and be turned back into another budget-keeping computer. It took that warning seriously and it made itself a more or less impregnable defense.

So, when Caroline and David do manage — by going back to her designer father's blueprints — to find out the back way up the tower (that existed prior to the computer's knowledge because it was there before the computer was built and didn't get involved, as it were, in the computer's memory banks), they were able to get up there. Now, the computer has taken over the city; there is indeed some fear because Caroline's father is going around lecturing on this marvelous computer and other cities are very interested in taking it up. In other words, it's an extremely grave peril for the whole of mankind if it goes its own way. I think for Caroline to destroy it, there has to be a penalty; I think if she destroyed it easily — the computer — it would be demeaning her as a heroine. She has to overcome really great obstacles and in the end pay a price. I thought about that a lot, and my editor said, "Do you really have to do that?" And I explained my feeling that it was demeaning to her as a Class A-1 heroine if she could get away scot-free.

But, if you remember, on the last page Caroline and David go outside and it's raining — old fashioned rain that really comes down, not the kind that the computer had allowed the city to have, just a gentle shower — and Caroline puts her face up and feels the stinging drops — the "healing drops" — on her face. And I think — my sense is — that her eyes will heal. But I don't do it within the context of the story: I leave her as the victor but with wounds. I felt it was the right place to stop the story. But there's hope there. That's why kids want me to write a sequel: of course, they want Caroline to get her eyes back. And yet, what else could I write except, "Gee, she's O.K., kids." I usually tell them that: "It's going to be alright in the future. Go back and read that last page very carefully and you'll see that, likely, there's hope."

*Monica Hughes has completed two new novels which she hopes to publish shortly. One is science fiction; the second, for which she was awarded a Canada Council "Explorations" grant, deals with the effects of the 1930's depression on the childhood and youth of an Ontario farm boy. She is currently writing a contemporary novel.*