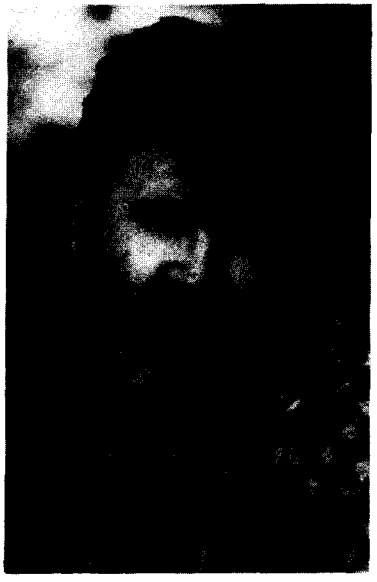
The sad J(y)oke of cultural appropriation



Tim Wynne-Jones

Résumé: *Après l'analyse du droit de l'écrivain à l'appropriation d'autres cultures, T. Wynne-Jones avoue avoir largement "emprunté" à l'univers culturel des Inuits afin de produire un oeuvre consacrée au mode de vie des Autochtones. Selon lui, les opposants à ce droit à l'appropriation du monde amérindien s'en prennent à des boucs émissaires: les vrais coupables, ceux qui détruisent les valeurs autochtones, ne sont pas les écrivains mais le cinéma et les séries télévisées.*

Did you hear the one about the Welshman who started a chicken farm? The government helped him out with 500 pullets. When he asked for another 500 they sent someone out to check. No chickens. When asked what had happened, the Welshman replied: "Either they're too deep or they're too close together but none of them came up!

I remember making Polack jokes. Then came Gdansk and Lech Walesa and Solidarity and it was suddenly all too apparent—on the news every night—that these people were not buffoons. Where had that absurd caricature ever come from in the first place? Oh, I had known from childhood about Chopin and Marie Curie (nee Skoldowska); not to mention Josef Teodor Konrad Walecz Korzeniowski (better known in this part of the world as Joseph Conrad—his name by appropriation). But for me, the events of 1981 firmly and convincingly put pay to the Polack joke. Even though my intentions had never been anything but benign—"Hey, it's just a joke!"—I found I just couldn't put any oomph into my delivery if the butt of the joke was a representation of a people or nation as being of less than average intelligence. So what to do about indulging in this admittedly base form of humour—Stop? No thanks. And thus I chanced upon the dumb Welshman. I didn't actually find any dumb Welshman jokes, I just reworked Polack or Newfy or Frog jokes. I guess you could say I appropriated them. I'm half Welsh: I can poke fun at my own.

The Welsh have never been characterized as being particularly stupid or particularly funny, for that matter. Indeed, they've never been known for much of anything. But then, I figure, any race that could produce the nightclub singer Tom Jones deserves anything it gets! My wife, who feels no strong cultural roots with any one ethnic group but who shares a distaste for racist humour, tells cruel jokes about Ontarions. These go over surprisingly well.

Jokes which imply that someone is playing with less than a full deck are universal. It's no big deal to switch the name of the jokee. But such humour is not the same as that which hangs on presumed racial characteristics. A joke in which the punchline turned on a Welshman's stinginess, for instance, might meet with blank stares; whereas, if I substitute a Scot, all is well. Well, actually, not—except that in my case, I'm also Scotch (50% by volume), I can get away with it. These are also my people. In what other tribe can I claim membership? Canadians, writers, socialists, the United Church—nothing very funny there. Oh, to be Jewish! Now, while I might share a Jewish joke with a trusted friend who will understand that there is no anti-semitism intended in my telling of the story, I will shy away from such jokes, even mild ones, with people I do not know very well. I live with a certain uncomfortable fear of running into prejudice where one might not have expected to find it. Best not to give it a lead in.

It's about knowing your intended audience. It's about the storyteller's intent.

There is a difference between extrinsic and intrinsic humour. It is all right for Howie Mandel to be scathingly funny about Jews; it's his birthright. It's not mine. Humour can be intrinsically useful too. In an article entitled "Excuse me! The case for offensive humour" which appeared in the magazine, *The New Republic* (May 11, 1992) David Segal talks about the disarming nature of risqué humour. "It's safe to bet, " says Segal, "That the films of Mel Brooks and Woody Allen did more to stymie anti-semitism in the past twenty years than all the wide-eyed vigilance and arm-waving of the Anti-Defamation League." The anti-appropriationists in this country might give this some thought. Or have they already: accusing Emily Carr of ripping off native imagery in her paintings is pretty funny, I guess. Maybe it's the delivery...Or maybe the whole thing is just too charged with solemnity to take lightly. I once tried circulating Herman Hesse jokes, when Hesse was big with my crowd. They were pretty morose; they were supposed to be; they didn't go over so well. So I stick to Welsh jokes, such as they are. I can live with this.

What about blonde jokes, then? Could this be an example of a joke type that is so obviously without any grounds in reality that it can be told with equanimity? (Do they even have blonde jokes in Sweden?) Lawyer jokes are okay too, I guess, because *nobody* likes lawyers. Mind you, if they ever took umbrage in a big way, they'd be a dangerous lobby group.

Which brings up the question of power. It seems that it's okay to make fun of people in power. I sat in an audience in Ottawa lapping up Rick Mercer's *Show me the button and I'll push it*, a killingly funny one-man-play which includes a

frontal assault on central Canada—Ottawa, especially. We Ottawans loved it: we could afford to love it, because: (1) it certainly wasn't *me* Rick was lampooning and (2) he's from Newfoundland, so it's kind of tit for tat and anyway (3) we're in power so we probably deserve it. Similarly, I can accept a WASP joke levelled at me because, ostensibly, "we" are in a position of dominance and realize that those clammering to share our power need to let off steam. After all, it must be hard being on the outside of all this glamour and prestige. Now I'm not really a WASP, myself, I'm a WCP but—Hey, a joke's a joke. I can accept jokes about men from feminists too, because, again, us men have so much power, especially us white men. Besides I'm getting used to it. A study done in 1988 revealed that out of 1,000 TV commercials in which one of the characters was made to look bad or silly, in *every* case, the butt of the humour was a white male. It comes with the territory. Interestingly, in my particular territory, publishing, women hold a great deal of power: my publisher is a woman; nearly every editor I have ever worked with has been a woman; and Anna Porter is, arguably, the key figure in all of Canadian publishing. But still, I get the joke about being from Ontario, white and male. And I can live with it. I don't think that's what's bothering me. But I am bothered. Part of what bothers me is that it's not expected that I should have anything to be bothered about. With all this power of mine, I mean.

About power: teaching a writing course some years ago in Kingston, I found myself having a beer with the poet Di Brandt and a self-assured young black writing student with a gold earring. It turned out that he had sent several stories to Women's Press under an assumed (female) name and had been published. Di, an ardent feminist, was appalled. The young man defended himself: he had grown up poor and black in Brazil; he knew all about being in a minority group—more than one—and felt he had every right in the world to take his advantages where he found them. The argument went on and on; I only listened; I wasn't sure how I felt about any of it. I tend to respect rules. For instance, if a competition is open to children twelve and under, then a sixteen-year-old has a decided advantage. But in this case there was no advantage to being a male, was there? And besides, I think in this case, there might not have been a specific rule saying "no men need apply" but only the assumption that none would. Something, however, did bother me about the quarrel: the question of quality never came up. Were his stories good? More importantly, did they *speak* to women? Did the writer connect with his audience?

I think these issues: intent, audience, power and quality are all inter-related in the context of cultural appropriation. I think also that maybe one should not let a perfectly good beer go flat over any of this.

An article in the *Globe and mail* lit the fuse which led to the latest imbroglio in the cultural appropriation skirmish. It was claimed that the Canada Council seemed to be making its granting policy coincidental with a position rejecting appropriation. This was refuted by both the director and the head of the Council's

Arts Awards Services but the wild rumpus the incident created has not entirely laid down and died. Robert Enright, in the spring issue of *Border crossings*, identified the furor as "a warning shot fired across the bow of the old frigate, H.M.S. Kulchur."

The politics of cultural kleptomania is not, it seems—at least, I have not heard anything so far—aimed at actually producing legislation meant to gag artists. The Canada Council fuss centred on whether an arts granting bureaucracy should even be considering debate on such an issue let alone formal guidelines. But what I am most concerned about personally, at this point, is that the Anti-Appropriationists are but one voice in the larger Politically Correct movement, if it can be called that, and the voice of this mother of all moralities is reminiscent of a voice I cannot quite shake: the insolent, abusive, hectoring voice of one Senator Joe McCarthy. Now there's someone who did not have a sense of humour! It's a far-off kind of voice, to be sure, and certainly I have not heard it's like in this new turmoil—Hey, we're Canadians. But if I try to imagine how a country could ever fall prey to such a posturing scoundrel, I have to wonder if it started innocently enough, like the politically correct business, and got bigger because, gosh, a good, moral person doesn't like to complain. It isn't me they're talking about; we're in power, we probably deserve it.

There is a certain troubling irony about comparing the shrill voices of the politically correct to McCarthyism, as James Nadler points out in the summer issue of *Actrascope* (the official publication of the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists). His essay entitled "The Left moves Right" suggests that in issues of political correctness the Left are not above their own brand of pressure tactics. Righteous indignation and finger-waggling are one thing. Are there to be new-age witch hunts? Whatever one's political stripe, it is reasonable to say these are not liberal times!

Nadler's essay expressed a personal point of view and was not meant to be the opinion of ACTRA. The Writer's Union of Canada, to my great annoyance, as a member, does have an official point of view, a motion voted upon at this summer's AGM. It apparently represents a watered-down version of a motion put forward by the Racial Minority Writer's Committee of TWUC. I have not seen the original motion but in the new one such phrases as "cultural appropriation" have been diluted to "cultural misappropriation" so that other member-writers who might frown about losing their "freedom of expression" in order to be "responsible" and "accountable" need not worry a whole heck of a lot. This tokenism irks me but it is more sad than reprehensible.

If I have a credo I would say that, in a profound way, I deplore writing which is immoral, unethical, pornographic, or malicious. But I have little truck with those who feel they can define *for me* in any kind of ultimate way what constitutes a breach of these decidedly abstract notions. Part of my job as a writer is to be responsible for my actions and to take the consequences if I am not. There are legal guidelines on what constitutes plagiarism. Are these laws to be

strengthened to include the telling of tales from a culture not one's own?

It is a rare day indeed on which I dare consider laughing about the issue of cultural appropriation. The players in this game are not a particularly funny bunch. It's a volatile subject and difficult to comment upon with impunity. I feel that my rage towards this form of censorship—for it is certainly that—requires my urgent attention; it also requires tempering. That's why all this unbounded hilarity; well, what a Welshman thinks of as hilarious.

I am plagued with doubts: why this rage on my part? I have not been attacked personally. Not yet. I once was criticized for having whipped off a novel, but I've never yet been accused of having ripped off a novel. And yet it is there: this guilt by association, paranoia. I want to say "Alright, have it your way! In my next novel all the characters will be white males in their forties with lower back pains who live in the woods of eastern Ontario." But actually, that idea has a certain Ira Levine cachet to it and I'd hate it if anyone else stole the idea. Would I hate it less if the person who stole the ideas was, let's say, an Ojibway woman?

And as for being a writer for children—what gives any of us the right to appropriate the voice of this largest of all tribes! It depends, I think, on whether you feel that you are merely writing for children as an audience or, writing *for* children in the sense of representing them. I fear there are people, nice people no less, who feel they write for children in this latter sense. These folks probably use age-appropriate language and talk about what subject matter the average "eight-year-old" can digest. I've never had the misfortune to meet an average child, thank God. There's good reason to think such writers should be dealt with harshly: maybe made to live on Welsh cooking for a week. But no, they'd only come out even more bland than they already are and they'd keep writing so called appropriate material anyway. *No real literature should be appropriate, but rather it should be challenging and the two things seldom go together.*

All of which brings me to another issue for consideration along with intent, audience, power and quality—who one is writing for. This, to me, is perhaps the most important consideration. A writer, I feel, represents in his opinions a constituency of one. Is this just another white, male ploy for getting off the guilt-hook? Well, listen to playwright, Tompson Highway, for example, on the subject of cultural appropriation. "Fuck the controversy!" Highway has been quoted as saying (thus seriously jeopardizing the chances of a children's version of *Dry lips oughta move to Kapuskasing*). "I am totally and utterly against indoctrination of any kind," he continues "As a writer, the whole process of writing is so hard ... I wouldn't dream of telling anyone else what they should write about." Could this be a native voice speaking? Yes and No. Tomson Highway is a native but he is speaking for *himself* not for *his people*. Indeed, there are those among his people who are not at all pleased at the fact that he is presently writing a screenplay based on one of W.P. Kinsella's stories. Kinsella (white) has long been at the centre of this controversy over voice appropriation because of his portrayal of life on an imaginary reservation in Alberta. I suppose

the principle at work here is that Kinsella is trespassing on that reservation. And Tomson?

When I write, I speak for me, not white people or the middle class or men or even the Welsh (who wouldn't understand anyway unless I peppered every word with extra "L"s and spit on them.)

Donn Kushner has said: "I know of no writer who wants to speak *for* another culture but plenty of us want to speak *about* other cultures of fellow human beings." (I quote this from the Writers Confidential section of the September issue of *The Writer's Union Newsletter* with the author's permission.)

So here's the confession. Once upon a time, I wrote the book and libretto for an opera commissioned by the Canadian Children's Opera Chorus. It's called *A midwinter night's dream* and all the characters are Inuit (except for a seal who likes to play cards, cribbage particularly, though, understandably, she finds herself playing a lot of solitaire.) I did indeed appropriate Inuit myth and contemporary Inuit social and cultural concerns in the creation of the narrative, not to mention setting the tale in a fictional arctic community. I scattered a few wonderful sounding Inuktitut words and phrases throughout the opera and one wonderful poem. I've never been north of sixty in my life. To make matters even more blameworthy, the composer, Harry Somers, borrowed from Inuit musical traditions in writing the score. At one point he has a small chorus attempt to imitate the sound of throat-singing. The result is quite extraordinary.

We both, obviously and blatantly, indulged in cultural appropriation. I can see where this could lead to a problem. A lot of people, upon seeing the opera said to me afterwards: "You've said it all! Now I know everything I'll ever need to know about the Inuit people and so I won't have to bother looking at those prints anymore or even caring about them. Thank goodness." Well no, actually nobody said anything of the kind. And in truth, my book and libretto are in many ways probably about as authentically Inuit as Gilbert & Sullivan's *Mikado* is Japanese. I cannot speak for Mssrs. G. & S., but I know that my intentions were entirely honourable. My theme was the preservation of one's culture: I picked a culture with a better track record than my own. I am deeply fascinated and impressed by the North and the people who live there. Or does that sound too patronizing?

My shaman starts the opera singing:

> Shi kin 'e luk!
> Winter darkness.
> Aiyee, how the wind bites,
> How the northern lights
> Murmur like a baby
> In the belly of the night.

How thrilled I was to find a word for "winter darkness." And oh how

beautiful is the description of the northern lights murmuring in the belly of mother night. Whatever anonymous storyteller first described the northern lights this way, his or her words are only to be found in document form now. If I have plundered a culture to write my opera, I had to dig pretty deep in a research library's shelves to find this gem. Or maybe it is a description a lot of Inuit use; I don't know. How about this comment by another northerner: "Once I was in the South. Oh, I did not like it. So many people in the train station, moving like maggots on rotten meat." Pretty good stuff.

But I have transgressed further than that in *A midwinter night's dream.* I have used one whole published poem written by an Inuit, Mary Panegoosho, which I found in a book entitled *Paper stays put* (Hurtig Publishers). "Morning mood," according to Robin Gedalof, the editor of *Paper stays put,* is considered "one of the best known contemporary Inuit poems and no collection of Eskimo writing would be complete without it." I'd go further and suggest it should be in every school poetry anthology.

Here is the first verse from Panegoosho's poem:

> I wake with morning yawning in my mouth,
> With laughter see steaming the tea kettle spout.
> I wake with hunger in my belly
> And I lay still, so beautiful it is, it leaves me dazed,
> the timelessness of the light.

My character, Eva Padluik sings this to her friend, Jimmy Moonwok, who is bored—he has just returned from a trip to Edmonton—to remind him that there are things even more wonderful in the world than Star Wars or The West Edmonton Mall.

Like myself, Harry Somers was enchanted by this poem and his setting for it is exquisite. I only wish Mary Panegoosho could hear it.

After exhaustively trying to find her to get permission to use the poem, I included it anyway with an appropriate credit in the program. In each of the three productions of the opera, to date, I have tried to make certain the credit appeared.

This then would seem a perfect case in point of the native anti-appropriationists' cause. Would I have taken this liberty with the poem of a white writer? Is part of the point the anti-appropriationists are making that their work is not protected as effectively as white artists and therefore is open to such misuse? Is it misuse? Is not the context, the intent, worthwhile? Is it enough for me to say that I thought long and hard about the moral implications of this business and decided it was worth bringing Mary's poem to a larger audience. (Which is really a joke considering the limited audience this opera—or any contemporary opera-will ever reach!) Is this just a typically white European attitude to art, for it is certainly true that this kind of stealing has a long and illustrious tradition in our literature. Is it worth saying in my defense that this poem represents only a moment of the

piece—although a beautiful moment—and that, for the most part, the opera deals with universal themes: the return of the prodigal son; the old ways versus the new ways; and the ritual of coming of age. Matters which deeply concern me? Is it worth claiming that I have resolutely painted the people in this story as warmly human and heroic? Or is that too patronizing?

Paul Simon was widely criticized by the cultural appropriation people for his Graceland album which, incidently, introduced the world at large to King Sonny Ade, Ladysmith Black Mambazo, Tao Ea Matsekha and a whole lot more African musicians and musical genres North America gobbled up, hungry for new sounds. Those groups didn't do too badly from it. Strangely, nobody kicked up much fuss when Stevie Wonder came back from Jamaica a few years earlier and enthralled us all with, what for most of us, was something we hadn't heard before called reggae. Maybe the times were different. Or maybe it was because Stevie was a "brother."

The truth is, I approach this whole subject with trepidation. Am I confusing my own personal paranoia for something larger? Or am I upset because nobody has actually ever cared enough about *A midwinter night's dream* to censure me and I feel left out? Paranoia, by definition, is a kind of dippy form of a superiority complex after all. Can this simply be passed off as another white, middle-class, male delusion of grandeur? And am I trying now to pass this off as funny because maybe what I have done is wrong?

My bad temper about this subject provokes me to mockery which is—dare I say it—inappropriate. For my own anger is the flipside of that red hot coin which is the currency of some native cultural activists, certain feminists, and apologists for a variety of minority groups to whom I feel, otherwise, a very genuine solidarity and towards whose concerns I am most unused to being at odds.

I am certainly cranky about all of this. If, however, my voice comes off sounding scornful of those who feel their culture is being yanked out from under them, then I have failed terribly, for that certainly is not my intent. I may be cranky; I feel threatened. But to strike a derisive stance would be to ignore or, worse, disparage, the much greater threat felt by those writers who, already marginalized, insist that their rights are endangered by this cultural poaching.

Here is the nightmare. Native culture in this country is on its death bed. The muscular plays of Tomson Highway, the powerful imagery of Bill Reid, the gorgeous music of Kashtan, the fine poetry of Mary Panegoosho, the stories of Maria Campbell gathered up from *mom tune ay chi kun*, "the sacred well-spring of stories," the mind, are just the last gasp of a dying culture. In the nightmare, the natives who cry out "stop stealing from us" are really crying "Murderer!" And, nightmarishly, in their rage they've drawn their knives on the wrong suspects. Perhaps I have stolen something. But I still cannot concede that I or W.P. Kinsella or Joan Clarke or Emily Carr have done the natives of this country a disservice. With varying degrees of talent and sensitivity we may even have

opened a few bleary white eyes. Daniel David Moses, a native poet and playwright has likened Kinsella's stories to "a bad ventriloquist's act;" be that as it may, Silas Ermineskin and his fellow characters are not portrayed as dummies.

I want to rail at these people: "You want a real villain? Round up: Beverley Hills 90210, Family Matters, Jeopardy." These TV programs say absolutely nothing to or about native culture, to be sure, (or my own culture, for that matter) but beamed, through the wonders of satellite technology, into an increasing number of northern communities, they say in no uncertain terms: *this* is What It's All About. These shows are not stealing native culture—from their point of view, who'd want it!—but in their glossy, seductive way they render its myths and legends boring and meaningless. They banish the Old Stories to Nowheresville. And not just native myth and legend—*all* myth and legend. The new sweat lodge is a bar in Boston. The new altar is The Wheel of Fortune. The new peace-pipe is the videocam handed around so we can all have a good laugh at ourselves. TV says to all of us who cling to the notion of tribal lore and nationhood and the story of our people: "get a life—take the Pepsi challenge."

Funny bit of synchronicity: a friend just phoned and when I told him I was writing about cultural appropriation he thought I meant American appropriation of Canadian culture.

On a recent trip to the Northwest Territories with Peter Gzowski I couldn't help noticing this cultural death, asphyxiation from the airwaves, even while extraordinarily creative and hardworking people, native and white, worked to resuscitate the corpse. Native broadcasting has been about as successful as most local cable access stations in the south. The complaint of the viewer: "It may be us, but it ain't Hollywood."

Every child in Fort Providence, where we were staying, took Slavey Language classes every morning. This should be good news but I couldn't help noticing it was really only a reflection of the fact that the language is no longer being uniformly handed down from one generation to the next. Why bother. I mean, how good is Hulk Hogan's Slavey?

Here's a chilling fact: it is estimated that of the 53 native languages extant in Canada today only three will survive into the next century. And with the language die the stories. And it won't be because I included Mary Panegoosho's poem in my opera or, some other white guy—let's say James Houston, for example—had the gall to imagine being inside the head of Tikta'liktak marooned on an ice flow resigning himself to death and then resolving to live despite everything.

Can I relate to this kind of remorse? Dare I, for instance, equate my own dread and frustration at the conquest of Television and the end of literate culture? Television, a medium which I can barely tolerate, picks over the bones of literature looking for suitable "properties." And the Hell of it is that we writers kind of *long* to be plundered and have one of our quaint print-medium artifacts

made new—brought to living colour—by these conquerors who speak so glibly in a strange tongue but are so eloquent with cash. When I holler "Where are the true stories in this trash pile of broadcasting!" am I really saying: "Here, you wanna buy some really good stories?" And is that what the natives and feminists and minorities are hollering too? "Me, me—have I got a story for you."

And they do. Beyond the politics there are great stories to be told. I'm not against the hollering if that's what it's all about. Besides, every new batch of artists bangs on the doors of the establishment and throws rocks through the windows. I just wish the name-calling and abuse was hurled at the right establishment. Get your bad guys right!

It's hard to get published; hard for anyone, these days. In the children's book world, there are more than ten times as many books published as there were when I arrived on the scene almost twenty years ago; however, the number of children's writers has grown a hundred fold. But I would go so far as to say that at this point in time a native writer has a *better* chance of being published than a white writer in as much as he or she has a better chance of being read intently even if it is partially for conscience-soothing ulterior motives. As an acquisitions editor for Red Deer College Press, I am always looking for a wonderful new story and a wonderful new voice. I'm sick to death of masochistic Christmas trees and enviro-friendly leprechauns; Princess Crystallina charmed her last prince ages ago, as far as I'm concerned; and Bobby Dinosaur's loose tooth fails to matter to me anymore. Who better to tell us new stories than new voices. I want to say, "We're listening."

I think it is also reasonable to say that most publishers in this country would think twice about publishing a book about an ethnic minority unless it was written by someone of that group. It would have to be awfully good. *The chill has set in.* If Jan Hudson's *Sweetgrass*, for instance, came across my desk today, I ask myself, would the quality of the prose, the obvious *honesty* of the writing, win me over; or would I be swayed by the political issue of her "otherness?" I truly believe, perhaps naïvely, and for better or for worse, that this is the prevailing spirit of the times in the arts in Canada. Perhaps the hew and cry is paying off? Perhaps, what is bitter for those who feel marginalized by the predominantly white culture in Canada is that it's too little too late. Or perhaps it's too much like charity?

I cannot address this problem dispassionately or entirely rationally. I am not a political animal. And while it is in the political arena that cultural appropriation has been identified and vilified, it is, I think, at root, an issue of Story: whose story is this anyway?

It comes to me now that in some small ways I have suffered abuse as a cultural poacher. I was in Halifax on the publicity trail for my novel *Odd's end* which takes place on the south shore of Nova Scotia. My first stop of the day was at a radio station where my interviewer could not have been more happy to see me, he fairly gushed with enthusiasm. He had loved my book and was down-right

proud of it. The taps got turned off pretty quickly, however, when he learned I was not a native Nova Scotian—that I had, at that time, *never once visited Nova Scotia*. He turned cold and could scarcely conceal his newly-minted wrath. What bothered me was that this man, from the outset, had not shown the slightest trace of scepticism that I might be a fraud or that I had written with anything less than "authority" on my subject—that is a writer's job, as the name implies. Had he been suspicious, found the book lacking verisimilitude, then his disapprobation would have seemed, if no less painful, at least deserved.

Then there was the time a host of mine in Victoria almost threw me out of her car when she learned that I was not a fan of the jazz saxophone player, John Coltraine. One of my characters in a novel had been quite a fan of Coltraine and she had just naturally assumed that I was too. Considering that there was a psychotic killer in the same book, I wonder what else she naturally assumed?

In each case it was assumed I had acted impudently. Are these examples petty? I suppose so. I guess it's just that writers have always claimed to be what they are not. And audiences of every stripe, I guess, have their sacred turf.

What is the writer's purview? The best short story I've written, *Whatever happened to Baby Roo*? is told, in the first person, from the point of view of Dulcie Sutcliffe, an aging female librarian. I *know* Dulcie Sutcliffe better than I know my own self. Will there come a time when I would have to show a proof-of-menopause card to pawn such a story off on an unsuspecting public? How stupid do we take our readers to be?

Is a man just his sex? His skin colour? His faith? Natalie Babbitt has said, somewhere, that "...we do not come into the world but we come out of the world." I think she means we are what we encounter and how we interpret it. When we can see this, she says, "then we can flow, grow, evolve in the growth and evolution of the universe of which we are a functioning organism." The notion of writing (only) about what you know seems to have achieved wide prominence in the last three or four decades. It's lucky Shakespeare never heard about it.

No writer worth his/her salt makes decisions of voice lightly. And there is always this paradox in fiction: a character's voice is never the author's/is always the author's. The closer to home, geographically or ethnically, one writes one's fiction the more chance there is of writing "authentically," perhaps. Then how to explain *The remains of the day* by the British novelist, Kazuo Ishiguro. It won the 1989 Booker Award and is an extraordinarily cunning and assured vision of the British aristocracy during the second world war. Ishiguro—is that a midlothian name, perhaps? And how to explain Michael Ondaatje's Toronto of the forties or Bram Stoker's Transylvania, not to mention Lewis Carroll's Wonderland: these are all extraordinary evocations of place and time, each in its own way, and all are based on other than first-hand experience.

Writers imagine. Some only do it for money, maybe. But most of us go to great pains to say something that might have some real value. We fail a lot of the

time. I'm not pretending this is noble; nobody made us do this. But most of us take very seriously the responsibility that comes with assuming "authority" on a given subject.

Well, I started off trying to make this funny. Where'd it all go wrong? Maybe it's just that, as Reinhold Niebuhr has said: "Laughter is a kind of no man's land between faith and despair." Maybe my faith in the rightness of my own actions, my own point of view, is not at all secure. Maybe I despair at the frustration felt by those whose discouragement has made them reckless in their aspersions. Maybe my own frustrations are just too deep. Or maybe, like the dumb Welshman's, they're just planted too close together.

Tim Wynne-Jones *lives in the woods of Eastern Ontario with writer Amanda Lewis and their three children. He has three books coming out in 1993, including a collection of short stories for older children.*