

# W.O. Mitchell talks about writing

## "Any work of art is successful if unique"

by PATRICIA HUGHES  
THE GATEWAY

Hughes: This will be quite an informal interview. I want you to talk to me. I don't want a particular set of points to discuss and I won't be firing questions.

Naturally, I want to ask you about Canadian literature, about the landscape of Canadian literature, and I want to ask you about gophers.

Mitchell: About gophers, hhm?

Hughes: Yeah, about gophers.

Mitchell: I was just talking to Dr. Mandel, and we were speaking of Wallace Stenger's lovely book of recall and boyhood in Saskatchewan, *Wolf Willow*, and he was saying that he hadn't realized what wolf willow was.

It's called silver willow in the prairies, and I was saying that to me the most significant thing of my boyhood was this honey perfume of wolf willow on an August afternoon.

But he was saying "no," he thought gophers would be, and they truly entered into a prairie boy's life. A gopher taught you your own truth.

When you were out on the prairie, with your brother or your friends, drowning out gophers—you got three cents a tail for one before they produced young in the spring and two cents after—this was when a person in the prairies often had his most true feeling, and first became aware of his own mortality.

Killing the poor, bloody things, but also probably coming upon an old, dead gopher, acrawl with ants, in a cloud of flies; nothing but a dried husk of a body.

It's terribly important, I think, to a prairie boyhood.

Hughes: You speak of recall, and how much it means to you. Does this tie in with nostalgia?

Mitchell: Not really. It is Wordsworth who speaks of tranquil recall, remembered passion, out of tranquility?

Hughes: Oh, "emotion recollected in tranquility."

Mitchell: Yes! No, this isn't really right.

Let's put it this way, a work of art, literary art, has its genesis in reality, and only in the extent which that work provokes the senses, is it successful as an illusion of reality.

Therefore, the writer works from life and immediate experience, trying to capture exactly the right expression. And it seems that when one is young, our sensuous experiences are much more vivid and provocative.

So one has an illusion as a writer, of remembering, of recalling from childhood, but actually not.

Actually the recall may be simply from the day before, or last year, or a person is trying to capture . . . like the smell of wolf willow as I said a moment ago . . . trying to remember what wolf willow smells like. I was trying to remember what the smell of a sweet pea is, or the cling of an icicle if one touches his tongue to it, or any of these things?

### NOTE:

A major Canadian writer, W.O. Mitchell, was at U of A Nov. 19. Mr. Mitchell, who was born in Saskatchewan, now lives in High River, a town with a population of 2,000 in Southern Alberta.

He used to teach English at High River High School, but now is dedicating all his time to writing.

Mr. Mitchell's best known works are *Jake and the Kid*, a collection of stories, and *Who Has Seen the Wind*.

He was interviewed by Patricia Hughes, feature review editor of *The Gateway*, University of Alberta, Edmonton. Photo by Jim McLaren.

It's more immediate recall than remembered emotion in tranquility . . . .

Hughes: In other words it's more a remembrance of images, than of feelings in the sentimental, or nostalgic sense.

Mitchell: Yes, but it goes for feelings too.

Let's put it this way. A person may, say he was writing of a child—not necessarily his own childhood—but of a child, not remember how he felt as a child, he remembers yesterday, or last year when he felt joy or disappointment, and hopes then the illusion comes across of the disappointment of the child in his piece of work.

The success will be as great as his attention to life.

So often a writer is asked, "Where do you get all those stories, or where do you dream up that sort of thing?"

That is not the way it works. A writer does not spin it out of his insides as a spider weaves a web, definitively ways of speaking or expressing oneself, the clutch look of an arthritic hand, or the smell of an old person's breath, conceivably, anyway he notes these things, and quite overtly will be putting them in a notebook.

I think anyone who says that after five years or even ten he keeps a notebook as such, is lying or else he's silly.

In time he develops a notebook sort of mind, as a painter will develop a certain eye, for shapes and colour and space; the writer is listening for the voices, and he hears, and they register, a little more indelibly than other people.

Then, I think in periods when he's relaxed, and things are just right, inspiration takes place and consists of this notebook of the mind opening and floating these things to the surface that he may use.

Hughes: But he forms from the material, rather than "creating" . . .

Mitchell: Yes, the way, in which he selects and rejects "lumber," is the thing that comes from within himself, and this is where the real creation comes.

After the creation of the illusion, comes the use of his narrative, and the events, the people, and the locale.

In such a way he hopes a specific, unique, and individual thing in time and place will happen, which will have at its core, a universal human truth.

He hopes this work will articulate and communicate, and will transcend time and place.

You know, at times I've winced when someone has spoken of me as a regional novelist. I believe any work of art is successful if it is unique; successful if it belongs to one spot on the earth, one place and time.

And it also depends upon how well it has at its core, a universal truth which transcends that time and that place.

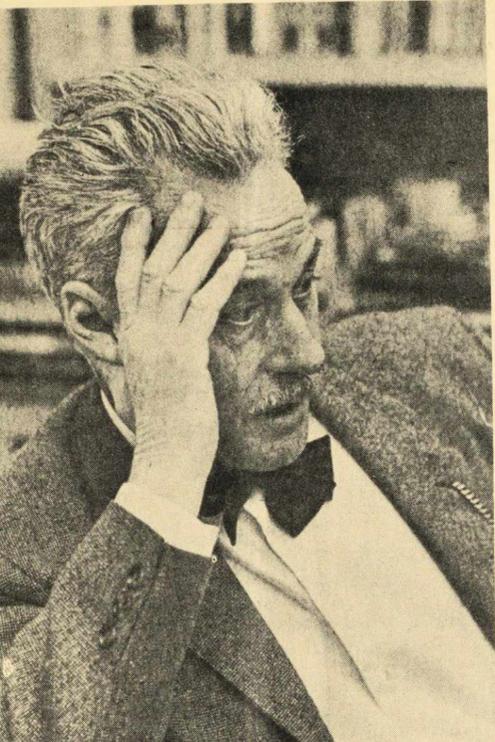
I think most good novels are regional. Of course my meaning of regional is different from what most mean by it, I guess.

Hughes: I'm very interested in this. You hear the term so-and-so is a Canadian writer, W.O. Mitchell is a Canadian writer, and you think perhaps this is an artificial distinction, and yet I'm very curious about the problem of locale, and that you have this place from which you write . . .

Mitchell: Let's put it this way; it's a peculiar thematic truth, that a novelist is interested in his work.

It's that sort of truth which cannot be created except through the creation of characters, of a relationship between them, of a moving of the readers to empathy so that he willingly identifies himself, and then experiences empathetically, the feelings, the disappointments, and the successes, and achieves the feeling of climax, the catharsis, which reads him for the planting of the truth the artist wishes to communicate.

Now if this truth could have been simply stated say, it's psychological, say it concerns divorce; then it



W.O. Mitchell

"The biggest audience a writer has is himself, the philosopher-king within, and if he had not had that critic within himself, he could never then have created."

interested in communicating. And it's not the sort of truth he wants.

He wants the sort—a qualitative truth in which the important thing is not so much the fact of the truth, as the experiencing the arrival to an appreciation of that truth. This is the TRULY important thing about a piece of work, but contradictorily it can't be achieved unless you could—almost if you were a great philosopher or an idealist—say the IDEAL portion of a work was its transcendent truth.

I wonder if this isn't maybe why Plato had trouble with his poets in his republic.

He didn't seem ever to find the proper place for them, y'know . . . of dignity. They were just to be used, but not appreciated.

Hughes: He considered them dangerous. In this province, ever so many things are considered disturbing, if not actually dangerous.

Mitchell: The CBC is filthy!

Hughes: Oh yeah, mm-hmm . . .

Mitchell: Blanket-filthy . . . we always have the philistines.

Hughes: Well, in our province it seems, more than in other places, the philistines have the power.

Mitchell: Our province is in the Bible-belt of Canada.

Strangely, the philistines and the Bible-belt go together. Philistines are literal minded bastards! aren't they, truly, in the context we're speaking of?

It is the literal religionists who populate the Bible-belt.

And we have them. I think we have them more than Saskatchewan. I mean we have all the unshriven, manic religions here.

Hughes: But do you think it interferes with any sort of cultural climate we might be having in Alberta? Do you think it might interfere with someone who is writing in Alberta?

Mitchell: I don't think so. It's disturbing and upsetting, and disgusting, it's disgusted me, especially in the last few years, but . . .

## "Writer's biggest audience is himself"

Hughes: It's really too ludicrous.

Mitchell: Yes, why should it? There are much worse things.

Hughes: What do you find is a particular problem as a writer? This is a very vague, very broad question but I was wondering if you . . .

Mitchell: Well one of the important things about art is grace. And grace is that a thing shall be accomplished with seeming reserve of power, and gracefulness means done with great ease.

And this is characteristic of art, that it shall seem easily done. But it isn't, and it's very hard work.

I think the big problem with any writer is the fear that he may not do the thing gracefully, with the appearance of ease; but what is even worse than that, is that he may be impotent, that he may fail unsuccessfully, that he may fail.

I often think in terms of trapeze-artists, because I used to be a high-diver . . .

Hughes: Oooh!

Mitchell: I often think of it in those terms, but instead of saying "diver" I say "trapeze-artists"—each time he goes on the trapeze, he thinks he may not be ready to go, that he may not be successful—this, I think, is the big problem: that after the writer has finished a work, he feels he'll never do another, or he can't do another, or feels he hasn't done it well enough or he can't do it well enough.

So the big thing, the big problem, is to gain confidence in yourself, in your art, in your talent.

Hughes: A writer is, in a sense, to himself if to no-one else, a performer?

Mitchell: Well, a writer, to write, has to be schizophrenic.

One part of the writer's attention or consciousness can work with no criticism from himself.

A writer will have periods when he hopes to sit at his typewriter and just pour out, if things are right, everything that floats to the surface.

And some of it may be used and some of it may not, and he may have that very mildest, gentlest rein or direction upon what is coming to his mind, but very little.

And this will be even ungrammatical. It will be unpunctuated. It will not be in complete sentences.

It will be the roughest sort of thing.

And such a period of creation will last for hours—six or more.

And it all seems wonderful, because during this period the other half of the personality sleeps; is not there to inhibit.

Then, days later, the writers looks at it, but now the censor is awake; weighing, assessing, rejecting, accepting.

And from what had seemed so wonderful—this is fatuous, this is vulgar, this is cliché, this is not sharp, this must be improved, this has nothing to do, this isn't pertinent.

So he discards ruthlessly. These two are never operative at the same time.

I believe this about the creative process, and I believe only in this fashion could long works, like books, or short ones too be written.

How could the tremendous area be covered for a novel if the censor were always tripping and inhibiting?

I think what the writer worries about—and this goes back again to your asking "What is the big problem?"—is not that the critic, the censor, or the discipliner will fail him but these powerful springs may not come, and after he's finished a piece of work he's afraid that they will never come again.

But they do, and the biggest do the thing gracefully, with the appearance of ease; but what is even worse than that, is that he may be impotent, that he may fail unsuccessfully, that he may fail.

So ideally, a writer can say that he does not care, or is not interested, in what a publisher says, or a critic says . . . he does of course, he wants verification, he wants confirmation, but he must never rely upon what they say. It's got to be the critic within himself.

Hughes: I find a great many people writing in universities . . .

Mitchell: Yeah, they have resident novelists . . .

Hughes: There seems to be a certain amount of discussion going on about whether or not a person can be creative, and be an academic as well . . . ?

Mitchell: Well, I'm very interested in teaching. I've always known that at any time those springs I was speaking of might dry up, or I couldn't make a living, and the second thing I wanted to do next to writing was to teach.

And I've always thought, well, I'll go back to teaching if I don't write. That wouldn't be a terrible thing.

I would highly doubt if there was much—the sociologist would call it correlation, wouldn't he?—between being able to teach, and being able to write. But there should be . . .

Hughes: They both demand intelligence, but I imagine in different ways.

Mitchell: They are, they're both talents . . . I've never, to this very moment, wondered whether the teaching talent and the writing talent had anything in common.

I was a good teacher and I don't think it hurt me as a writer, so . . .

Hughes: I imagine you have a great deal more freedom teaching just with your students in a high school classroom than one would have, being involved in an intellectual community, with the tightness, of say a specific department of a university.

Mitchell: I can see conceivably how it might limit a writer. It's nice to be immersed in the people you're writing about. So the tendency would be to write about people of this setting, as does C.P. Snow.

### Folk-rock trend:

## On the eve of correction?

BY FRASER SUTHERLAND  
GAZETTE STAFF

When Barry McGuire sings "Eve of Destruction" you are right there in Armageddon. That gravelly whine you heard in the New Christy Minstrels' "Green Green" now is utterly neurotic. He might just as well be complaining of athlete's foot, arterio-sclerosis or chapped lips.

The neurosis is made clearer by the ballad's lyrics. Lyricist P. F. Sloan makes sure things are suitably gory by inserting a barrage of words with destructive connotations. Some of these: "explosin'", "violence flarin'", "bullets loadin'", "to kill, war, 'gun you're totin'", "bodies floatin'", "fear, 'no runnin' away", a grave, disintegratin', crazy, frustratin', hate, pride, drums pounding, pride, disgrace, "bury your dead".

P. F. Sloan is a 19 year old Californian who has also written "I Found a Girl" and "The Sins of a Family". After Bob Dylan the meteoric Sloan has become the foremost exponent of the folk rock sound. Popular music is split into sounds with folk rock being the newest intruder into the realm. Each sound has its special protagonists. The Mersey sound has the Beatles, Surfing has the Beachboys, and the Falsetto sound has The 4 Seasons. Folk rock is more or less equitably divided between McGuire, the Byrds, Sonny and Cher, and Dylan.

As a song writer Dylan has absconded from the legitimately "parist" folk into folkrock. However he still deals with the old familiar young lovers-buffeted-by-the-winds-of-fate theme. When he does tackle the condition of the world it is always in abstract terms. as in "When the Ships Come In". Sloan is the man who has come most conclusively to grips with practical matters.

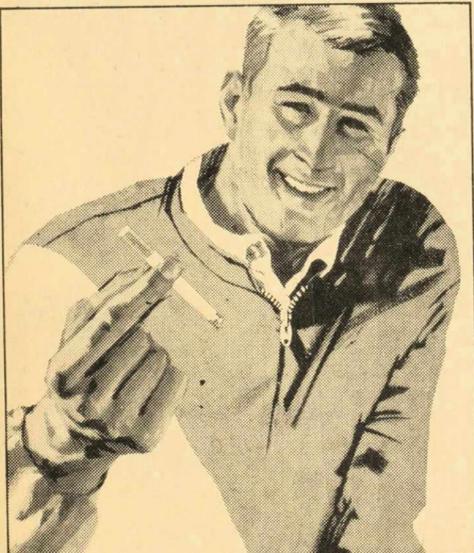
"Eve of Destruction" is a rough-hewed piece of verse as evidenced by the ludicrous line, "My blood's so mad feels like coagulatn' ". We gather that the singer's blood is boiling. But he doesn't do anything - he just sits there "contemplatin' ". A rebuttal to "Eve," was hatched shortly after McGuire's croaking protestations. The spokesmen came out with "Dawn of Correction", the singing a little better, but the lyrics even more naive. "Dawn ." specializes in polysyllables: annihilation, negotiations, demonstrations, recommendations, aggravation, evaluation, commendation, colonization. A typical illiterate teen will be sent scurrying to an Oxford Unabridged.

"Dawn." has asinine yet significant closing lines: "What about the Peace Corps organization - Don't forget the work of the United Nations." Here is the predicament of the U.S. liberal - he supports the Peace Corps and the U.N. yet patriotically feels he must endorse the Viet Nam escalation.

The marriage of folk to rock may seem incongruous. It is difficult to see how the Big Beat can be saddled to folk lyrics that at the very least must pretend to say something. Rock n' Roll lyrics typically were not supposed to mean anything; the electrified smashing, crashing penetrating RUMBLE was everything.

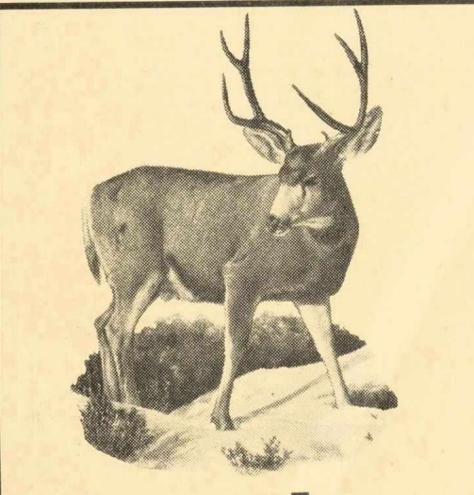
While the lyrics are garbled, the song is slurred, and the sentiments defeatist. "Eve of Destruction" is important as a reflection. It reflects the fright of a new generation who feel they are being sold down the military river. Folk rock is a legitimate phenomenon, and initially, there is nothing phoney about it.

Folk rock will be around for awhile. But don't expect it to be so for an extended duration. After all we're on the eve of destruction.....



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