

and artistic freedom

write about it. It makes for interesting experience — but it's not so good for a writer's society."

Skvorecky's books reveal his interest in youth, memory, music, love and mystery as well as politics. "The best part of life," Skvorecky claims, "is the first part, when you are young...because your senses are still fresh. You still have new experiences, and you react much more strongly to whatever you go through. As you grow older, you don't react so much anymore to external influences, and so you start to rely more and more on memory."

Skvorecky's position as a professor stimulates his memory. "Daily I'm in touch with young people, so

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I am reminded constantly of my own youth, and I see how similar these things are...The lives of young people are very similar under any regime, because they live the basic things of life: the future, love, and so on...That probably led me to write more and more about my young days."

When Skvorecky was a teenager, he wanted to become a musician. "I played the tenor sax, and I wanted to be a jazz man. But first, I never had the talent for it, and I also was not healthy because I suffered from chest problems.

"Since I could not become a musician, I started writing about musicians," says Skvorecky. He quotes from Faulkner's *The Unvanquished*: "Those who can, do. Those who cannot, and suffer long enough because they cannot, write about it."

The theme of love is prominent in his books, which, Skvorecky feels is only natural. "Everybody writes about it, because what would life be without its existence?" As for the atmosphere of mystery that many of his novels convey, Skvorecky states that "life is basically a mystery. We don't know what it is all about."

Says Skvorecky: "I think that any good fiction, serious fiction, that does not contain some element of this sort of mystery is not really that great. When you read really good fiction, you always find this, in one way or another."

The majority of Skvorecky's work is written in the novel form, although he also writes short stories. "People who specialize in short stories," he says, "have a tendency to claim that the short story form is more difficult than the novel form. But that's simply not true."

"To write an excellent novel, I think, is more difficult than writing a short story," claims Skvorecky, "because it's simply much more complex. You have to put together so many elements that you don't have in a short story, so it's simple; more demanding. It's like a symphony."

"I'm not underestimating string quartets, of course," adds Skvorecky. "That doesn't mean that I underestimate short stories; they are a great form." He cites Chekhov as a master of the short story: "his stories are eternal as far as anything is eternal."

How does one go about writing a novel?

Skvorecky claims that it "depends on what kind of novel you write." When he wrote *The Cowards*, Skvorecky says, "I had only a very vague sort of idea of where it would start and where it would end. Otherwise, I wrote it in a sort of inspiration."

But this quickness is not possible when writing "a long, complex novel like *The Engineer of Human Souls*," comments Skvorecky. Nor is it feasible when working on an historical novel like *Dvorak in Love*, which required two years of research.

"I am at present writing an historical novel about the Czechs in the American Civil War," says Skvorecky, "and that is very difficult to write in a rush of inspiration, because you have to read so many books.... So it is very different from writing a novel like *The Cowards* or *The Swell Season*, where I only relied on my memory and imagination."

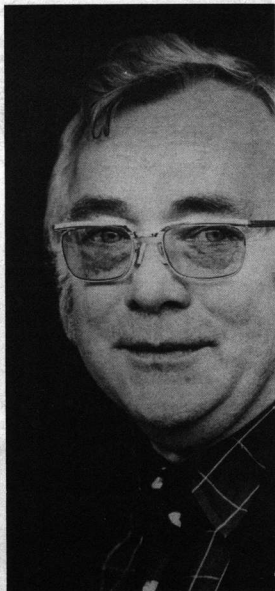
"Historical novels," comments Skvorecky, "are technically much more difficult — and more frustrating, because you get into the mood and suddenly you have to stop and go to the library."

Skvorecky tells how he works on a novel: "I write the first draft relatively quickly, and I don't bother about refining it while I'm writing it; I just want to finish it. I think that's the only rule...that once you start something, you should finish it — no matter how you feel about it. And then you usually put it aside for about a year and you come back to it, and you start refining it."

The refining process seems to be increasing in importance. "Modern fiction," Skvorecky observes, "increasingly gets more and more poetic; not in the sense that it would just present moods, but that writers take great care of every single word."

"This [care] is common in good modern fiction, and brings it closer to the care that poets take in their text; and to music, because music also has to be very precise," Skvorecky says.

This precision of language, his rich experience, and the artistic freedom of Canada promise to continue to give Skvorecky's works a secure place in modern fiction. It's a pity that his colleagues in Czechoslovakia do not enjoy the same opportunity. "It's a sad situation," says Skvorecky, "that the most important Czech literature comes out in the West, and many of its creators live in the West."



Josef Skvorecky

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