

W. O. Mitchell

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?

ture . . . 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?

It's more immediate recall than remembered emotion in tranquility

Hughes: In otherwords 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

definitive 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

late 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 can not be communicated 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 readies 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; then it should have been a psychological treatise, or if it's sociological, say it concerns divorce; then it should have been a sociological monograph on divorce.

That is not what the writer is 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?

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 *Inside* editor, Patricia Hughes. The photos are by Jim MacLaren.



"I believe any work of art is successful if it is unique, if it belongs to one spot on the earth, one place and time."

by PATRICIA HUGHES

Hughes: This will be quite an informal interview. I want you to talk to me. I don't have 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, hmm?

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

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 cap-

may, say he were 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.

He, perhaps in the first five or ten years of his life, may keep an actual, deliberate notebook and in that he records provocative character bits, physical appearances,

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 articu-