

DAWSON ON MADNESS



EXCALIBUR: What do you feel differentiates sanity from madness?

DAWSON: Well, isn't it simply what other people think? (Madness is) a way of breaking the rules that other people have set . . . I suppose madness is the inability to control one's feelings or reflexes and responses. It's one thing to have a phobia, and another thing to have a phobia that runs riot, and I suppose it's a basic personality disintegration. One could have all sorts of "mad" thoughts or behaviour, but there's no personality disintegration, so you wouldn't call it madness. You'd call it sanity; you'd call it a form of self-determination I suppose. I think disintegration is the only thing that you can say about madness.

EXCALIBUR: Is that what happened to Josephine in *The Ha-Ha*?

DAWSON: No, I don't think she was mad. I didn't mean it to be a book about madness. I meant it to be a book about a society that can't contain odd people. And this is one of my interests: that society is so bizarre; and life itself; and consciousness is so bizarre. And people who can't behave by the rules, who don't know the correct reply to the ordinary questions of life, they panic and they break down and they're regarded as mad simply because they've broken the rules . . . That's not madness, it's refusing to play the game. I believe that social life as we know it is a kind of game and woe betide those who can't play it

EXCALIBUR: Josephine merely lived in a different reality then?

DAWSON: Yes, she lived in a different reality. I meant the end of the book to be quite happy. One critic said that in the end the character lapses into madness; well, that wasn't what I meant at all. I meant that she suddenly thought she was free . . . The fact that she couldn't play the game and give the right reply . . . didn't matter at all. And at the end of the book she's come to see that it doesn't matter. I meant it to be a positive ending.

EXCALIBUR: How has your outlook changed since you wrote *The Ha-Ha*?

DAWSON: I'm much more optimistic. I think as you grow older and as your days are numbered, you grow much more optimistic. It's like (going) to a very bad party and as the party comes to an end you get to enjoy it more and more because you know the ending is coming. And I think as you grow older . . . you realize that life is going to go on in spite of what you think or what you do. Another thing is, I think, as you grow older you realize that human fortitude is so strong; that people do have the most disastrous lives . . . but they still remain hopeful. It's kind of a "waiting for Godot" situation: the characters in *Waiting for Godot* will go on waiting for Godot to come even though he won't come . . . You don't realize this (when you're young) but you will as you grow older, that hope springs eternal.

EXCALIBUR: Your biography at the front of *The Ha-Ha* says that you were a social worker at one point.

DAWSON: Yes, I was . . . I was working on the Oxford English Dictionary for several years. I used to love it because dictionary entries are so

random and arbitrary and so unideological . . . And then I had a row with the same who was the editor of the dictionary. So I just looked in the local newspaper and saw this job; I'd never had any experience in social work . . .

This was my first experience of these dreadful country asylums—this one was built in 1760, before the French revolution. It really was a terrifying place, but it had a kind of grandeur about it, and it was when I had been working there that I wrote *The Ha-Ha*.

EXCALIBUR: What was it like at these asylums?

DAWSON: Absolutely terrifying. I'm going to try and bring (this) out in my talk at Atkinson. I called my talk "The Upstairs People" because all the hopeless patients were taken upstairs; there was only one staircase leading down, and it was locked at the bottom and top. These people upstairs were completely dependent for food and doctors and anything they wanted on someone being willing to turn the key and get them cigarettes or whatever.

And the wards, (some of them) were the size of Albert Hall in London, and they had a terrible smell—they weren't properly ventilated. Some of the patients hadn't seen a doctor or a friend or a relative for years. Sometimes we used to be asked to go to funerals—there was a little chapel and a cemetery on the hospital grounds—simply because there was no-one else to represent the old person who had died. It was a very tragic world, and thank goodness I don't think it exists anymore.

EXCALIBUR: So things have changed then.

DAWSON: Oh, yes. Of course things have gone to the other extreme now, because the dogma at the moment is that the patient's place is in the home and in the community. But with house prices and communities being what they are at the moment, it's problematic whether the patient has a place in the community.

For instance, in England—I don't know whether this happens in Canada—but you see, day and night, people just wandering about the streets, hopelessly deranged and sleeping under the embankment. They have no homes; they've been discharged from the hospital as hopeless and there's absolutely no place for them at all. They go to the Salvation Army hostels and places like that. But a lot of them just die or drown or commit suicide, and it's very tragic indeed.

EXCALIBUR: One of the problems in Canada is that there is a law which says, if a patient refuses treatment, you can't treat them.

DAWSON: Until the 1960s, a mental patient had no rights at all; and now the mental patient has absolute rights—i.e., you can't give any mental treatment, not even a drug, unless he gives his consent.

A patient has the right to commit suicide, and a 14-year-old girl has the right to die of anorexia. Now I believe that if a person has been extremely depressed for seven or 10 years, he has got the right to suicide, but for a girl of 14 to be allowed to starve herself to death, I think that's a freedom run wild; that's *laissez-faire* gone to pot.

EXCALIBUR: Were there any major literary influences in your writing? In your afterword to *The Ha-Ha* you mentioned Albert Camus.

British novelist Jennifer Dawson took the literary world by storm with the publication of her first novel, *The Ha-Ha*, in 1961. The book met with wide critical acclaim, winning the James Tait Black Memorial a year later.

The Ha-Ha is the story of a young woman, Josephine Traughton, who, because she lacks knowledge of the "rules" of life within society, is labeled schizophrenic and is consequently institutionalized. This theme of "madness" is one that Dawson has explored in much of her writing through the years.

Excalibur's Zena McBride spoke with Dawson recently about her views of madness and creativity, as well as society's changing perception and treatment of mental illness.

Dawson will be speaking at Atkinson College's upcoming conference entitled, "Creativity and Madness" (October 23-24), about her experiences as a social worker at a psychiatric hospital outside Worcester in the late 1950s.

DAWSON: Yes, he was. I wouldn't dream of comparing what I write with Camus, because to me he's a monumental figure. But it's the style of *The Outsider*: "Mother died yesterday . . ." It's a very quiet, low-key style. His feeling of alienation. I've just written another book—it's coming out next May—in which I've adopted the same tone of the "small" person, the sort of innocent "butter wouldn't melt in my mouth" kind of person, who is in fact saying something much bigger than they know, and it's not until well into the book that you realize that something much more monumental is happening than what they're saying. They think they're talking about Mother's bedroom slippers, and they're really talking about reality.

You see (the character in *The Outsider*) laughs at his mother's funeral; and he goes swimming with a girl the day his mother dies. That's what convicts him. Josephine (in *The Ha-Ha*) in the same way is convicted by her laughter. She can't stop seeing that life is absurd, that people are worrying about whether they should wear white gloves to the ball or whether they should have scones and butter for tea . . . when it doesn't matter at all . . .

EXCALIBUR: Have you ever been compared with writers like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf?

DAWSON: I have been compared with Virginia Woolf. My youth was steeped in Virginia Woolf. Her style—that kind of dreamy, off-the-ground style—influenced me tremendously . . . It's almost a dream-like style. At the end, when something's happening, Virginia Woolf seems to lift it off the ground altogether, and you feel you're floating . . .

EXCALIBUR: Does this whole idea of "floating" relate back to the idea of madness and hallucination?

DAWSON: Yes, I think it does, because madness is usually connected with a kind of trance-like state. A lot of people who are mad are in a permanent state of trance. You asked me at the beginning what I thought is the difference between madness and sanity. Surely it is that it's a person who knows that even if he is in this trance, he knows that his feet are still on the ground, whereas the mad person doesn't know that he is in a trance. That is the difference, this different level of consciousness.

EXCALIBUR: Knowing whether or not you exist.

DAWSON: Yes. You may feel you don't exist, but you know that you do exist. I have had strange hallucinatory experiences, but I have never been in any doubt that they were a dream or hallucination . . . At one time, I used to hear calling voices. But I knew that they were imaginary. I suppose that's the difference between psychosis and neurosis—the psychotic doesn't realize that voices aren't authentic.

Anthony Storr (in his *Psychodynamics of Creativity*) argues that the writer is someone who manages always to keep on the sane side—who never actually falls into the brink. The artist is in fact very, very strong, and doesn't get tipped into nonsense . . . The really insane person wouldn't dream of being creative because he'd think it was futile.

EXCALIBUR: Do you think there is a necessary correlation between madness and creativity, the

DAWSON: No, think of Trollope, think of George Eliot. These great creative artists are as sane as can be. Keats, Shelley, Dickens; Shakespeare wasn't mad. None of the great people are made—they're as sane as an oak tree . . .

(However,) one of the things about art is it's so obsessive. I mean, a real artist can't say, "Oh, if only I had a typewriter, I would become a poet," because a real artist wouldn't be deterred; he'd sell his whole house in order to buy a typewriter. So I think real art is a kind of obsession, you can't escape from. Gauguin just left his wife in Paris, left all his children, left his marvelous posh job with a French bank, and just when to the French Polynesian Islands and painted.

The puzzle is that where does an obsession stop being art? For instance no-one calls Gauguin's constant repetition of these Polynesian women obsessive; they call it great art. Whereas (with) a minor novelist, like myself, if I repeat the same theme again and again, they'd just say, "Oh, she's . . . got into a dreary groove; why can't she get out of her groove?" I think that the real difference between the great artist and the minor is that the great artist's groove is a good one . . . A good obsession expands all the time; it's like a tree whose trunk is the same, but whose branches are growing out and out all the time.

EXCALIBUR: It has been stated that things haven't really changed for women in Britain since Virginia Woolf's time. Would you agree with that observation?

DAWSON: Things are just beginning to change. For instance, we lived in Oxford for 20 years, and it wasn't until two years after we'd left, in 1982, that a Women's Studies group was started. My husband was a fellow of an Oxford college for 25 years, and last year they elected their first woman fellow, (allowing) women to come into the College for the first time in 800 years.

EXCALIBUR: So you experienced a great deal of discrimination then?

DAWSON: Yes, terribly. The Oxford system is based on tutorials; a lot of men wouldn't take women students at all, and the ones that did—you had to be much better than your male counterpart. You had to work twice as hard . . . Women really couldn't win because if you worked hard, it was a woman slogging away without any imagination; if you didn't work, it was a woman dilettante, frivolous, feather-headed, pea-brained, whatever . . .

EXCALIBUR: What experiences or influences in your life made you decide to become a writer?

DAWSON: My parents were never very happy in one place, so they were always shifting about to starkly contrasting places—you know, from a very middle-class neighbourhood to a very poor, working-class neighbourhood. These sharp contrasts—and my life until I was about 35 was full of these sharp contrasts—I think it was that made me want to write. I've kept a diary ever since I was 20 . . . Occasionally a day goes by when I don't write in my diary, but I'm not happy unless I've written something.

Another of the great influences in my life is that when I was nine or 10 the war broke out, and there was a flood of Jewish refugee children to England—most of whose parents were destroyed in the Nazi death chambers. And though we didn't actually know until after the war that their parents had been gassed, we were brought up with these children and we sense that something terrible had happened to their parents . . .

This has always given me an identification with the refugee . . . In fact, I think (this) is one of the things that's influenced me most: the asylum as an out-group; the Jew as an out-group; the retarded person as an out-group; the handicapped person as an out-group; the foreigner as an out-group—what it's like being a persecuted minority, or an invisible minority. I think I wouldn't have written *The Ha-Ha* unless I had had this experience of growing up with (refugee) children and then knowing later on that their parents had died . . .

EXCALIBUR: How did your interest in the notion of madness begin?

DAWSON: Partly because I'm (what they call) manic depressive; when I am feeling cheerful, I'm full of energy—physical energy, mental energy . . . When I'm depressed, everything seems lethargic and dead, and I feel worthless; I feel as though I have committed a great sin . . . My own extreme mood swings have always made me interested in madness as a way of seeing an inability to retain the same personality for more than a few days or a few hours. You know, it's a dreadful swing that one is never seeing life, as Ian Foster says, seeing it whole, and seeing it singly; one is always either high or low, never steady . . .