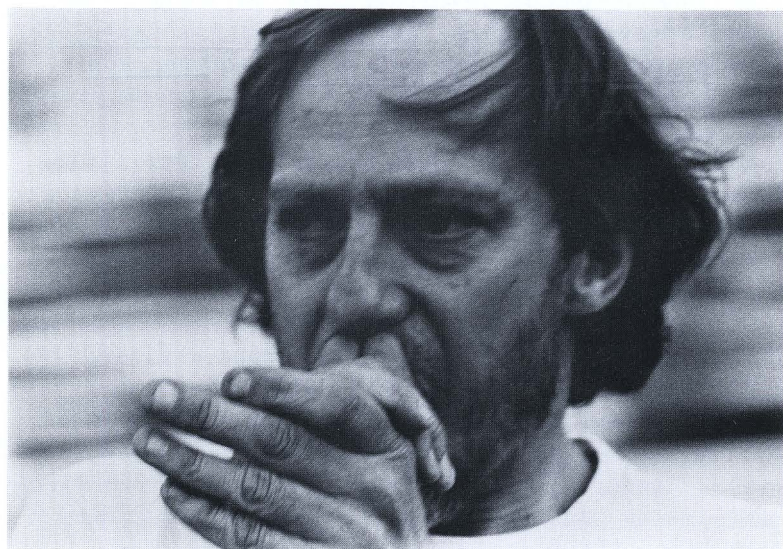


INTERVIEW / Bill Schermbrucker, Robert Sherrin, Claire Stannard Guffey



CSG What is your motivating principle in writing?

BS I guess there are two. One is purely that I feel like it, and I do it. I like to sit at the typewriter and write. But I've been very slow to produce publishable text, and so I've come to tell myself that that motivation, while it can be a source of good writing, is often purely therapeutic or just pleasure, and it is not producing a publishable product. I'll remember a story I've lived through or something like that — like I told a story today to Jim Bizzocchi about my friend — and I know I'll want to write this story, but meanwhile I enjoy telling the story, and I enjoy shaping the story and seeing people's reaction to it and so forth. At some point, I guess, then comes the other motivation which is to create a text that is publishable. I don't know if that answers you.

RS What is your motivating principle in *Chameleon and Other Stories*? They all deal with a place during a fairly distinct period of time. You obviously decided in a lot of your stories to focus on what happened in Kenya and to collect those stories together and exclude those that dealt with other things.

BS Well, I guess around 1972 or '73 I began to write short stories about Africa. Prior to that, I had written most of quite a long novel, and I had gotten tired of it, but around '72 or '73, I started to write these short stories about Africa, and I found that as I sent them out to various magazines, people were quite interested in them. So then at some point, maybe seven or eight years later, I looked at these stories and found that I had reached a point that I wasn't getting any rejections. I'd send the story out, and it might not be accepted at the first magazine, but it would be accepted at the second, and in fact there was one year when everything I sent out was accepted. I felt, well, people like these African stories, so I better just mine this vein and finish and get a book.

RS Do you like these African stories?

BS I didn't really enjoy some of them as much as others. "Mile Eighteen" is really not very interesting personally. I didn't discover very much when writing it. In "Mile Eighteen," I took some memories and used them as a basis to create a story — which is very close to the autobiographical reality. One of the things I was doing in "Another Movie" was getting rid of some old, old nightmares that had haunted me, so I don't think I really enjoyed writing that story. I really enjoyed * writing "Versions." I learned a lot partly because I researched so much, and "Chameleon" gave me quite a lot of pleasure because it was such a difficult story. It's really two stories, and I was teaching more than one Creative Writing class through the composition of that story. When I teach Creative Writing classes, I tend to show some of my work to the students, and "Chameleon" was shown to at least one class, maybe two, and I recall the students in Squamish telling me that that story must be taken apart and rewritten because it was two separate stories. Criticism is often very useful because it brings

something to the fore and you study it. I studied that problem for a long time, and I couldn't agree with them. I *know* it is two separate stories, yet I felt that those two stories belonged in one story. So there was a lot of pleasure in dealing with that as an aesthetic problem.

CSG Who do you write for or to?

BS I write for the people I respect as readers, I guess. I write for people who appreciate my language. I can't put names on them; I don't have an ideal reader particularly. I do have some friends who I routinely give my stories to and pay attention to their comments.

RS Are these African stories addressed to anybody in Africa or to characters within them? How much of the composition has to do with directing commentary towards the past, towards people from the past?

BS Well, I don't think I'm addressing myself to those characters or to the real life models from whom they might be drawn. What I am doing is I am telling my story. I guess ever since I was a small child, I felt that not many people viewed things the way I viewed them. In my own society when I grew up, I was kind of a rare species: people looked on me as a weakling; people looked on me as someone who didn't think rightly about things. I got into quite a lot of trouble at school expressing some political thoughts, and in my own family was told often to shut up because my ideas weren't mainstream ideas. I guess I've grown up with a notion that I have my story to tell which is my way of seeing things, and I am very aware that some of my own family and close relatives will not enjoy reading these stories at all.

CSG When you were growing up and people were giving you those messages, did you believe them, or was there a turning point when you started believing in the way you were?

BS I never believed them. I knew that I was different, but I never believed that my story was wrong. I thought they were wrong. But you have to understand that I grew up in a very non-literary culture. When I was about 15, I won a prize at school, and the prize was a book token. We were staying in what's now Zimbabwe — which was then Southern Rhodesia — on my uncle's farm. My older brother and I went into town. I bought a book, and as we were driving back in the truck to the farm, he asked me what the book was. It was the Nonesuch edition of Byron's poems, and he said, "Poetry, hm?" and I said, "Yeah," and he said, "Kipling wrote some good stuff." And I think that is the sum total of my literary conversations with my brother throughout our whole childhood.

CSG When books come up in your stories, they are like little treasures or gifts. In "Mile Eighteen," there are a couple of books. One is from your mother. Should we be saying your mother or Alistair's?

BS [Yeah, his mother. Well, it is true, the facts in "Mile Eighteen" are very close autobiographical facts, although the shaping of the story has been clearly fictionalized. I feel that my brother comes off quite badly in "Mile Eighteen," more so than I really want him to. But getting back to the books, it is true that books were gifts and they were special. In fact, I hadn't realized it until you said it now. Getting a book was a real special thing. And the person who would give me literary books was my mother. She bought me a book called *A Thousand and One Poems*. It was a wonderful book, I just lived in it.

CSG Do you still have it?

BS No, I don't have any of the African stuff. She bought me *Other Men's Flowers*, an anthology of poems by Lord Wavell, and that really pleased me. Also there was the woman who was the prototype of that woman in "Mile Eighteen." She gave us books for Christmas, and she gave me a book called *Big Brownie*. When I was writing that story, I went back and tried

to find that book — not on my shelves because I don't have it — and I couldn't find it, but I did manage to find a book review of it in *Book Review Digest*. It's about a bear. I don't think it's actually in Canada. It's set in Alaska.

CSG Have any of your family ever read your writing?

BS My stepmother read a story of mine, an African story which is not included in this collection because it really doesn't fit: it would pose too many problems — it has the wrong people dying at the wrong time and so forth — but it was one of the first of these African stories to be published. It is called "The Grave by the Fig." My stepmother read that story when she visited me in about 1975, and all she said was that I had "taken some liberties." I think my brother has read "Aga Dawn." I sent it to him, and then I spoke to him on the phone, and he said no, he didn't know what I was talking about, what story. A little later, he wrote to me and said he had looked now, and he thought I had remembered my father's attitude to East Indians wrongly, and he would like to sit down and talk to me and straighten out a few things.

CSG So they took it very literally?

BS Yes.

CSG You hadn't gotten it right.

BS Yes, you must get it right.

RS But how is it possible to get it right? Really, you're dealing with memory, and who knows whether you and your brother even share the same facts in that way. Could you ever get it right?

BS I don't know if that is a question that I could debate usefully with my brother because fiction isn't his bag. He is a veterinary researcher.

CSG [Audrey Thomas uses the term “autobiographical fiction” for her writing. Is that what you would call your stories? How would you define them?

BS [I knew you’d be asking me this question. The stories in *Chameleon and Other Stories* are autobiographical fiction. The distinction between autobiography and fiction has bothered lots of people for a long time, and it bothered me for a long time, but it doesn’t bother me any more because I don’t think asking questions about the distinction will ever really produce satisfactory answers. It was in ’67 that I was put off by the idea of writing anything that would be identifiably autobiographical. And now I’ve lost that because I see quite clearly that everything we do write is autobiographical. I think it’s Audrey who said, “Who does Rudy Wiebe think he’s writing about when he writes about Big Bear?”

RS I don’t know many writers that don’t work autobiographically to some degree. Some, more obviously than others, use a sense of autobiography to create a form for fiction.

BS Robertson Davies writes pseudo-autobiographies of his characters which may well be autobiographical to an extent. But the whole thing really has to do with story telling. If you’re sitting down with some people, and you’re telling them a story, they have to believe somehow in the reality of that story at some level. Now, whether you’re making the story up or whether the story is an attempt to actually transcribe the events that happen doesn’t matter so much as whether the person is interested in the story. I was teaching a class the other day, and I was reading some essays that they had written. They were comparing Michael Ondaatje’s work and Daphne Marlatt’s work from a special of *The Capilano Review* with the work of Hemingway. The students say that Michael Ondaatje and Daphne Marlatt are being faithful to what happened — they aren’t really writing fiction; they are writing historical stuff — whereas Hemingway is just inventing the stuff. Now, that is really quite amusing because the book of Hemingway’s that they are talking about is *The Sun Also Rises*, and we now know from critical studies that are being

done that it is heavily based on actual events. There was a beautifully clear sentence in one student's essay where he said something like, "Audrey Thomas' stories are based on real characters. She went there and she has conversations with these people. Whereas Hemingway never went to a bullfight with these characters. He made it up." This student has that sense perhaps just because Thomas and Marlatt and Ondaatje are Canadian writers and closer to that student's experience, whereas Hemingway in the Twenties in Paris and Spain must just be made up. By the way, this distinction between truth and invention is one that I was very familiar with from the time of being a child because whenever I travelled outside Kenya as a child, people were very interested, as they still are today: "What's Africa all about?" Africa holds this lure for people. So, from the age of nine or ten, when I'd be travelling in some other part of Africa, people would say. "Tell us about Kenya." So you embellish. They wanted a story to be interesting, and you made it interesting for them. You didn't tell them that Kenya is just like it is here; they weren't interested in that. They wanted to hear how it was different. You might move a tree a little bit or increase the height of the rhino that charged you, or make a rhino charge you when it didn't actually happen. It happened to somebody else, or you heard about it.

RS I was wondering about the author/narrator relationship. In your African stories, I see it overlapping almost completely, and that's where I begin to wonder if what I'm reading is not merely autobiography or fiction but actually a form of essay versus a form of fiction. At points the focus of the stories shifts from the fictional life of Alistair to the political and social events of the past. So, there is this interesting tension between the author and narrator, sometimes very close, sometimes very distant.

BS I guess so. If you think of "Versions," he says at the end that if I sit in libraries in Canada and research all these things, that's because I want to know. Who is the "I" that is talking there: is it Bill Schermbrucker or is it Alistair? It hasn't been identified as Alistair there.

CSG "Versions" especially reminds me of new journalism. It doesn't seem like fiction to me.

BS I don't know why these things are so important to us, these distinctions. We seem to find it really important to be able to say that this is clearly fiction, this is clearly history, this is autobiography, *etc.*

CSG I think the distinctions are shifting at this time. They used to be clear, and now people are not caring so much about that and just writing what they want to write. It's changing.

BS "Versions" is all about really cutting through and finding out what was going on. It is a story about somebody doing that. It is not so much a story about the events themselves.

RS I think that at some points the reader feels he's being instructed without recognizing that Alistair is being instructed at the same time. I guess what I sense is Alistair's frustration at being educated by hindsight. I wondered, too, about Alistair's sense of what took place then and what it implies now. I feel a good deal of anger running through the collection.

BS I think it applies to Alistair, and I think it applies to me and to all of us: it should. I don't think people have recognized at all in our society the extent to which we are duped by propaganda. People think that is what happens in Communist countries. When I first came to Canada, I was amazed at the reporting on the Vietnam War because I had come from a country that had somewhat a different political slant. Whereas in Kenya I was reading about American forces in Vietnam, I came to Canada, and there were no American forces in Vietnam in the Canadian papers: they were American military advisers. All through the writing of "Versions" or the end of it, the Falklands War was going on, and we were hearing that very punctilious British news spokesman: "Four Harriers took off from the carrier; two returned." There is that whole making sacred of news so that everybody will utterly trust it. And we don't know at all what is going on; later on

we find out more interesting stuff about the Falklands War which is, e.g., the names of the deceased are often the same family names because a lot of Welsh descendant people were fighting in the Argentine Army, and a lot of Welsh people were in the British forces. Things of that kind are much more interesting than hearing about how many Harriers took off and how many returned.



RS

When you were in Kenya and Mau Mau was happening, did you receive distorted information through the Kenya press as we did through the Canadian press with the FLQ situation?

BS

You've really defined something correctly I think. There is a sense of frustration that to discover what was going on you had to get out of the country or be distant from it, and, although I was a bit sceptical of the traditional attitudes in Kenya, I would not have been nearly as sceptical as I am now. For example, when I left Kenya even after Independence, there were certain books that were not available, and one of them was Montagu Slater's book on the trial of Jomo Kenyatta. I first read the book in the UBC Library. Transcripts of trials are not generally readily available to the public until somebody puts them into a book and publishes it. That's how we find out about Louis Riel or something of that sort. My girlfriend's father at the time [1953] — the very time that I was fooling around with his daughter playing Kick the Can and so on — was saying these things in court which I was just astounded to hear him say. And the magistrate at that trial whose name was a household word in our family because he was part of the legal establishment was trying to twist one of the questions. The magistrate, not the prosecutor, the *magistrate* was trying to twist Dr. Leakey who was the official court translator, trying to twist Dr. Leakey's translation. I was appalled to read that and to read it here when I was no longer in the country and able to scream about the injustice of it. That did, and does, give me a kind of rage. It would never have occurred to me until some years after I left Kenya that Mau Mau did not exist. Such a notion just didn't make any sense. What do you mean it did not exist, people were dying, *etcetera*. The fact is, that as an organized, terrorist army fighting against the establishment with some kind of co-ordinated plan of attack

and with a name such as Mau Mau, it did not exist. What there was was a series of events that drove both legitimate political centres and also criminals who were on the run into hiding, and in those little pockets and in the forests and wherever, gangs got together, and there was a little bit of inter-communication between the gangs. What held those gangs together was perhaps a recognition amongst certain individuals that a time had arrived in history when the political work that had been done in the last twenty years by legitimate politicians like Kenyatta and others might now be able to produce a unified rebellion. But the rebellion was never unified. And the origin of the word "Mau Mau" has been much debated by historians. I am not sure what the latest state of the research is on that, but it appears to have been a term created by the British Army because they had to fight somebody, so they had to name it.



RS In "Afterbirth," Alistair thinks about meeting up again with some of his former students. It's a bit shocking to people who read the entire collection to realize that Alistair, too, was native born Kenyan, and yet there seemed to be no room in that country for him.

X BS I was never kicked out of Kenya. The decision to stay in Canada and not go back to Kenya was a decision that I took, and it was a decision taken with the head not the heart. There was certainly room for me in Kenya and probably still is, but what about my children and what about their children? One thought in those terms. At the very least one would have to say that if education was democratized and there wasn't room for every student in a classroom desk — that only some would have it; there might be universal primary education but not universal secondary education — that what are you faced with in terms of the education of your children when they reach the secondary level? Your standard of education as a person who was formerly privileged as a white is now no longer protected, and so, if you happen to have a C- student in the family, he is not going to get into high school; there won't be a place for him. So these considerations led me not to go back, but my heart has always felt very much in Africa, and it took me 20 years. I'll go back to answer your question again about why I wrote the African stories. I guess they are natural stories for me to write. They are what I know, and you always tell people, "Write what you know." But I didn't write about that stuff for a long time because I couldn't deal with it. It was too painful. I didn't want to have any identity as an African. I wanted to be a Canadian. When people from the African Students' Association or somewhere would call me up and want me to get involved, I wouldn't go. I didn't want to have any of these debates and conversations. I wanted to spend as much time as I possibly could trying to find out what Canada was because I had started about 28 years late being a Canadian, and when my children started talking about Africa,

I shut them up. I didn't want them to talk about Africa. I wanted them to become rooted Canadians, and it was only when I felt really comfortable that I began to realize that this country is made up, to quite a large extent, of people like me who have emigrated from other countries, that I am as Canadian as anybody else, that I became easy about it.

RS The stories that you're writing now, do they deal with Africa?

BS I am not writing any stories at the moment. I've got two or three directions that I am going in. I'm accumulating a book called *Written In Cars*, and some of that has some African material in it. I'm accumulating another book called *Letters To My Father*, and that is much more to do with the relations between fathers and sons than it has to do with any particular setting of that relationship, whether Africa, or Canada, or wherever it might be.

RS The politics that emerge from *Chameleon and Other Stories* are uniquely African, but they also have universal applications. I wonder whether this block of stories and a certain element of your autobiography have been objectified. Do you now think back to Kenya in a different way, or do you not think about it at all? Are you seeking out more information about Mau Mau and what actually went on there, or has that curiosity been satisfied?

BS Well, it has certainly reached a level, a stage. I am not very much interested now in digging up more and more of what went on during the time that I lived in Africa. What was really going on — yes, that interest has been satisfied at the moment. I am a little bit afraid to go back to Africa and confront a different Africa than the one that I've written about, and I suspect that is something that I may find myself drawn into if I go back. I may suddenly want to look at Africa as it now is, to see it as a visitor, and that would be a whole new set of perspectives. But, at the moment, I don't really have the energy, or impetus, to do that, although I see it as something that may happen in the future.

RS Do you think that possibility threatens your memories or threatens the validity of *Chameleon and Other Stories*?

BS Well, actually yes. I don't know if it threatens the memories in any important way, but it threatens the emotions that lie underneath those memories. For example, I recently read Shiva Naipaul's book called *North of South*, and I was horrified with this book. I hated it. I disliked it from start to finish, and I disliked the writer. I was somewhat surprised at the extremity of my reaction to the book, and I went back to it again after a month or two. What I discovered was that I was dismayed by the fact that he had travelled, in part of his journey, over that very same area of land that I wrote "Mile Eighteen" about, and what he describes is a totally different kind of thing than I experienced. The whites, by and large, have gone, and things have tumbled down. The hotels are crumbling, there is no service, bribery all over the place.

CSG What is the time difference?

BS Twenty or twenty-five years later, I suppose. He is coming in as an outsider, too, and I just felt that my emotional birthplace had been trampled on by foreigners.

RS So, in a way you still are Kenyan then. You sound very protective of Kenya. I love the name Eldoret, that it is your birthplace in Africa, but your response strikes me as very protective of that little environment which is really an environment of memory now.

BS Yeah. Maybe that is a little self indulgent to think of my Eldoret and to think of the real Eldoret that exists today. They're completely different places. I guess I was a little bit prepared for this kind of pain and disillusionment because when I read *Out of Africa*, I realized that she was writing about an Africa that had long passed when I got there, so that she probably would have thought of me as some kind of interloper in her real landscape.

CSG I don't know how to form this question because it is just made up of impressions. Throughout "Mile Eighteen" and "Another Movie," Alistair is developing his sexuality in an atmosphere of violence and tension. It almost seemed in "Mile Eighteen" that the boys have to prove themselves by going out and shooting birds and things like that. There's that whole competitiveness with his brother being older and when he shoots his first bird. In a number of the stories, and especially in "Another Movie," I found the images of women really disturbing, the way they recurred: women being tortured, or shot, or dying, or grieving for the dead. The mother is dying and there are mentions of her just crying out in pain. And then you are very blatant in the end of "Another Movie" about the relationship of violence and sex.

BS Well, I certainly realize that you are talking about something that is in me and in my background. I don't think I've got a critical perspective on it so that I can say anything intelligent about it. I can tell you, though, that we're perhaps moving a little bit behind the text into psychoanalysis here, and I don't know if it is useful. But one of the most powerful things in my imagination as a child growing up was the scenes of desecration, of sexual desecration of any kind: rapes, especially cross-racial rapes, things of that kind. I think this is true of the South too. It is still such a powerful force within me that I can't repress it. I don't quite understand it. I was travelling in Europe in 1960 or '61 and the Congo crisis occurred, and you had the reports in the news magazines of the nuns being caught and having their breasts slashed or breasts burned by cigarettes, or the wives of the white Belgian soldiers being raped in front of the bars of the cells of the white soldiers, being raped there in front of their husbands by the black soldiers. These kinds of things just inflamed me, absolutely enraged and infuriated me. I must have grown up in some way thinking of sex as a weapon or vulnerability or something like that.

In my culture, sex was something that was not really discussed at all amongst men except in perhaps a joking way. Even with your more sensitive friends, you never really got down to talking about any of the details. I grew up with a very warped notion of sex. I felt apologetic about it towards women. I remember at one time, I must have been about 13 at the time, I was in boarding school and I was writing to this girl who was my girlfriend at another boarding school and this is a little bit daring because the teachers intercept the mail and if anything very overt was going on, you get clamped down on, so on and so forth. I remember a friend of mine asking me, "Why do you write to her?" and I said, "Well, it is the only way I can keep my thoughts about sex decent." He didn't quite understand what I meant by that. I somehow could not bring together the woman on the pedestal, or the woman over there in the girl's school, with my sexual feelings in my own body. I remember trying to imagine how it would be to have sex with a woman. Of course, it never occurred to me that the woman might enjoy it or have any sexual feelings of her own. I thought, well, I guess you just sort of enter the woman and try to get it over with as quickly as possible and not give her too much pain or inconvenience. I remember thinking — I guess when I was a thirteen-year-old and I started masturbating — well, there is a good technique: I could masturbate myself till I almost come, then I could just quickly insert it, then that wouldn't disturb her too much.

RS In "Another Movie," you make a reference to the fact that now Alistair is back in the library on the floor with all these books scattered around trying to figure something out. I copied your words down: "Some strange motive in me wants to relive the atrocities."

CSG There's this fascination with violence.

RS I found that really interesting too. There is that link with the sexual growth of Alistair. In "Another Movie," Marcus accidentally shoots himself with the gun, and that is the night that Alistair has his first wet dream. There is a link between blood, violence, manhood, and sexual power. All those things

get wrapped up in characters like Marcus and Roger, who in the end seem to be terribly disturbed and manipulated individuals. They were white in a black country, supposedly the same in many people's eyes as the British who came in to take charge of the military situation, yet white Kenyans were used by the British to bring about their own demise as a people. I found it absolutely disturbing.

BS Well, I can't explain any of that stuff, of course, but one of the things that you referred to was that strange motive to relive the violence, the atrocities. I think I can understand that at one level, and that is when I lived through those atrocities the first time, it was as an observer and as a member of the colonial power. Now, as I look back on that whole chapter of history, I see it quite differently, so that if I remember the fear of that gun barrel poking in through the burglar bars to find my bed, and I remember the fear that makes me move my bed around, and makes my dad come to check where my bed is and make sure that I'm out of the line of fire if somebody comes to the window, then as far as possible, I now want to relive that story from the point of view of the guy who is behind that gun, who I now no longer see as just some absolutely inexplicable, wild terrorist but rather as somebody who is participating in the war of independence of his own country.

RS The images of Mau Mau and the independence movement in "Another Movie" and in "Roger Ash" are strong, and they're not terribly positive for either side. It's quite clear that the blacks tortured other blacks, and the F.I.O.'s did the same thing. Violence becomes, I suppose, a tool of mediation, a brutal form of it. What you describe in the hamstringing of cattle are horrible ways of delivering messages that are incommunicable before.

BS Oh yeah. I remember Drummond's book that I talk about in one of those stories. One of the things that upsets them more than anything else was that when this food gang came down from the mountains to get food and they slaughtered some cows, it was pedigreed herd they slaughtered. In other words, it was the perception that they weren't just getting food but that they were really delivering that message, as you say.

RS There's another question I would like to ask about women in the stories. One thing that I did notice was the lack of women.

BS In general, women were not very present in my life as I grew up. In regard to the later stories, like "Muriuki's Mother," your perception is interesting because the publisher has the same perception I think, and he's asked me to write an additional story based somehow on my relationship with my first wife.

CSG There are all the wives who keep passing in and out of the stories without ever speaking. Julia speaks in one story, but just barely. There are different phases of coming together with someone and then a marriage ending, and then a second marriage ending, and there's a line in "Another Movie" about spending his fantasy life in the body of the woman he lives with. I found that a really disembodied image. I didn't see a live woman there.

BS I think you have pointed out the absence of the women. I guess it's a way of thinking where you're brought up and you simply take women for granted. Although surely Mrs. Johnson, old Marie Johnson, is quite a strong presence in "Afterbirth."

CSG But Nora and Marie Johnson seem interchangeable to me. They both seem like strong influences but not very warm influences. There is a love there, but there is a distance too. When I read about Alistair's father, I sense a seeking or reaching there, but the parts with the mother seem to be explained away as quickly as possible. I feel there is a presence of pain that is not being spoken about. When she is mentioned, it is as a brief aside, but with the father there is a real reaching to try to capture his essence.

BS It may be an accident of the selection of the stories because there are other pieces that I've written in which I autobiographically go back and try to deal with my mother or my aunt. "The Grave by the Fig" has a bit of it. And also, there is another story in which I totally shifted out of this

African setting and set it in West Vancouver. It's called "Dear Betty and Father." It's never been published, and it's all about my father's second wife. She is the only woman I really had a relationship with as I grew up because my father would go off to bed about 7 o'clock at night after supper. She was about 30, and I was about 15, and we'd sit up and talk all night in the sitting room. She was where I got a first new access on life.

CSG Did you talk about sex?

BS Not really, although we certainly went beyond the normal boundaries. For example, when I was at university, I was only 16, and she knew I was writing to somebody. So she would ask me questions about this girl, and I would tell her a little bit about her.

CSG You were an actor at one time of your life; did you study drama?

BS Yes.

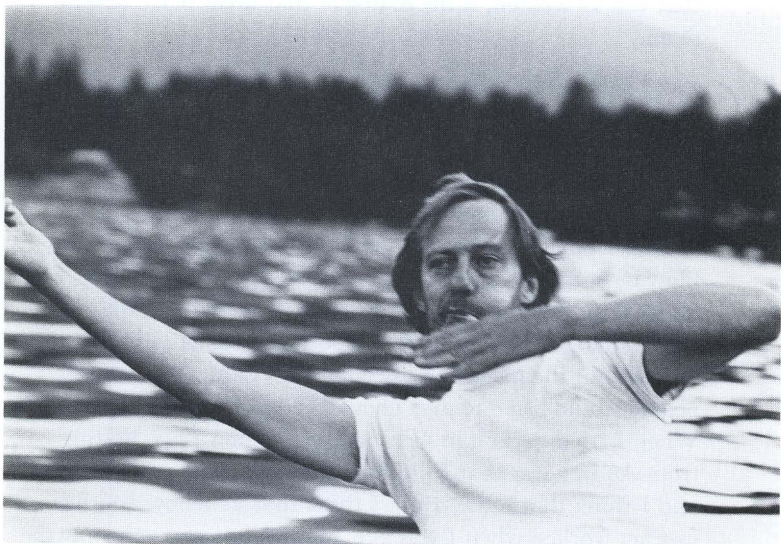
RS One thing I've always liked about these stories, and most things that you've written, is the dialogue that takes place within them.

BS (Years ago, Audrey Thomas said that I didn't write good dialogue, and I just couldn't understand her saying this because it seemed like good dialogue to me. Then she said that I didn't listen to what people said, and that I found even more difficult to understand because I am a good mimic, and I've always been able to hold an audience at a party. Sometimes I blow it, but it has been a personality feature of mine that I've always enjoyed and used. I was puzzled by the fact that I could almost at will move into a scene and start telling a story and act out the parts and say what the characters said and people would listen to me. They would stop their conversations. When I tried to do it in writing, the reaction I was getting from Audrey was that I didn't listen to the way people talked, and I think that is the truth. I think that somehow another instinct worked when I was live, mimicking; yes, somehow the

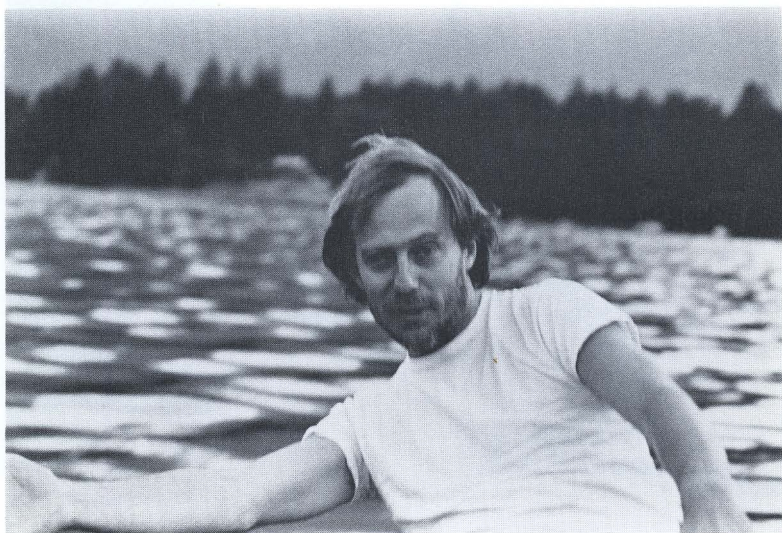
magic was flowing. Somehow when I sat down with a pen to write, a different set of motives came in and got right in the way.

CSG Do you find there is quite a difference between your oral story telling — which seems quite natural to you — and your writing?

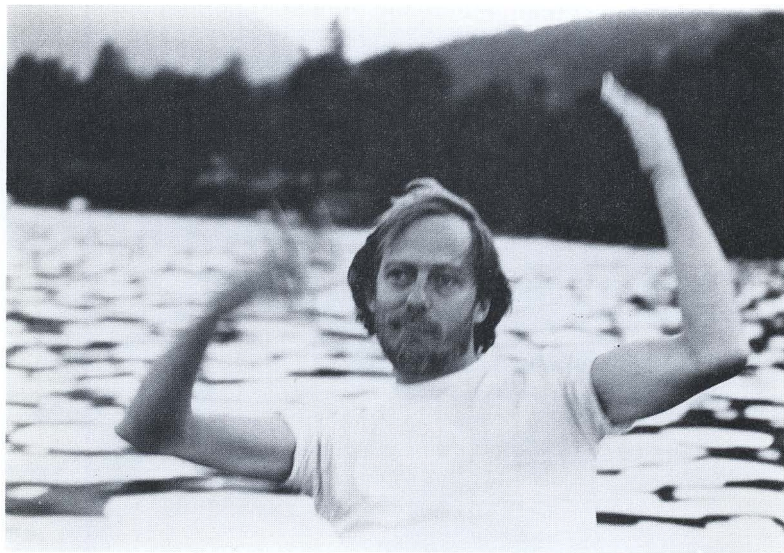
BS ~~✱~~ Yes, and it has something to do about my psychology. Go back to your first question which is “Why do I write?” One of the reasons I think I write is that it was so hard for me. Some instinct in me often drives me to try to do the thing I can’t do. The thing that I can do I become uninterested in. The thing that I cannot do or cannot do very well — this intrigues me. I discovered very soon as I started writing that my skill was really quite primitive compared to my skill at talking or dramatizing or whatever, and this so fascinated me that I just kept pushing at it until, eventually, I got publishable stories. And there was a great sense of reward out of that.



- RS* Do you find yourself writing all the time, in the sense of composing?
- BS* Absolutely, especially in the morning. I have been writing this book this morning in my head. It's a non-fiction book, in a way, but it is still a story.
- CSG* How do you write? What is the process of writing for you? Are there any things that help you to write?
- BS* I had a really bad habit which I don't do any more: I used to try and sit down with the typewriter and write a story. I can't do that. My writing stint is about 4 hours, and after 4 hours, I'm wiped out and have to go and do something else for quite a while. I can't do something else for half an hour and come back. I have to do something for at least another 3 or 4 hours and then come back. So what I do then is try to get prepared for that first 4-hour stint. What I'll do is I'll think about the story. For example, I can give you an example of the story



that is in progress right now. I want to do a story about my friend Nathaniel who lives in Vermont. I have already taken some sheets of paper and tried to type out little incidents, and I've thrown them into the file so there is a building up of various things that he did. There's the incident of how he decided to learn to play the piano and he had moved into a very small house to stop people from coming to stay with him. He was in the American Peace Corps teaching in East Africa, and all the other American Peace Corps teachers would come and stay with him because he lived near the campus. So, in order to get rid of them, he actually transferred into this tiny little house. He got into the tiny little house, then he went to take piano lessons. He asked the teacher should he have a piano. She said it would be indispensable, and he said which would she recommend. She recommended a grand piano. Well, how would you get a grand piano into this little house? What's interesting in that little anecdote is that this is the guy that taught me that you have to have a certain amount of space:



"A person has to have a certain amount of space." I was brought up to think you shouldn't. You should be quiet and shut up, you should listen to your father. Write it down, go away, think about it some other time, you know. Don't make statements. So, there is the piano. I won't go into the background of all this. But there is the time I called him up last summer in the middle of the night. I was drunk, it was 3:30 in the morning in Vermont, and he wasn't at home. Finally I got him, and he is staying in some little room in Vermont, and I say, "What the hell are you doing there, why aren't you with your wife, *etcetera*."

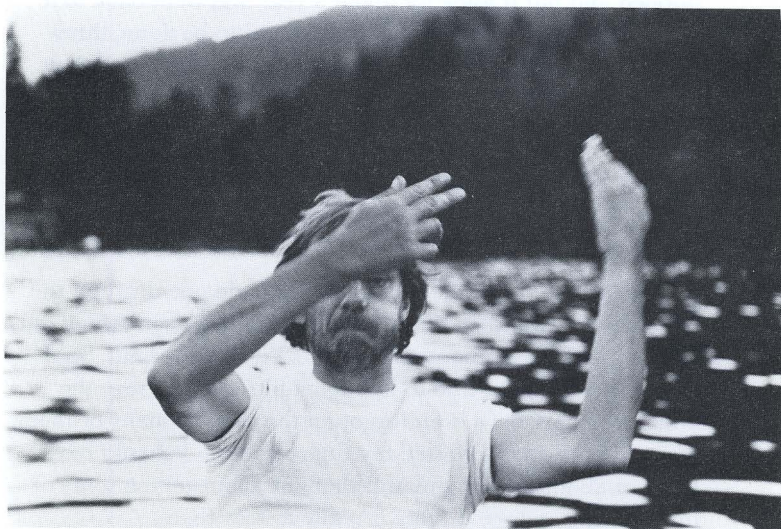
"Oh, it's all broken up again."

"Oh God, how awful."

And he says, "Listen, I really want to talk. Put the phone down, I'm going to call you back. I'm going to pay for this. I'm going to talk."

I said, "Talk on."

He says, "No, I mean I'm going to talk half an hour, an hour."



I said, "Fine, you talk on."

Well, the story culminates in him explaining to me why the second marriage has broken up for the third time. He says, "You know, the problem is that we didn't sleep together, and you know," he shouts, "I like to fuck!" He says, "I like to fuck somebody who likes to fuck!" And then he screams, "I like to fuck somebody who likes to fuck me!" And I'm sitting on the other end of the phone, thinking of him in this little house in Vermont at 3:30 in the morning where he rents this little room, screaming loudly. I imagine this retired couple, in their bedroom down the hall, rigid, eyes staring. Okay. The point is, since I told that story today, and enjoyed the whole image, and now as I come to write that story — whenever it is going to be, the next week, or month, or year — I will make some notes on that, and I will accumulate enough notes. Then I sit down and do a draft of the story.

CSG How many drafts do you do? Is there ever a single draft of a story?

BS No, it gets close to that. "Roger Ash" was one draft, and I stopped and put it aside for about a year and went back to it and picked it up again, realized what had to be done, threw some stuff away, wrote the second half of the story, and then maybe I went over it just one more time, and that is basically it.

RS So, you compose quite consciously, inasmuch as you store moments on paper regardless of whether you know them to be part of the ultimate story or not.

BS You see, in the past, when I was trying to do one draft on the typewriter, I would go and I would try to draft something out, and I would get to about page 8, and I'd be wiped out. So, I would then assign a title to it, open a file, and put it in the filing cabinet. I have even forgotten the titles of many of them. Some didn't work, I wasted my time on those. I should have thought about them more and thought about telling some of them a little and see if there is really a story there.

CSG So the impetus of the story doesn't get diluted by talking about it, telling it.

BS No, the impetus never gets diluted by talking about the story. But I tell you what happens: if I read a draft of a story to friends, sometimes it just gets diluted.

RS Okay, so we're talking on a number of levels here: about language, activity, insight, also — at least in the African stories — about political revelation.

BS Well, if we take the Roger Ash story. I knew that I had a story there as soon as I wrote that sheep off the wing scene because I thought, there is something quite funny; it can be embellished from then on. But the Roger Ash story, at another level, is a portrait of my generation of people, and it is actually consciously drawn. There never was a person called Roger Ash. There were three people, parts of whom have gone into the making up of that character, and that was, in a sense, a piece of history, a piece of historical fiction. I was deliberately creating the vanished white Kenyans of my generation who now live in Perth, or Vancouver, or Montreal.

RS And Marcus Chillingford is an amalgam as well?

BS Marcus Chillingford is much more based on a single character. "Another Movie" is a much more personal story than the other. The models of the Roger Ash character I didn't know very well. There was a guy who gave me a book and said that thing about the oddness of sex, there was such a guy. I didn't know him very well, he was older than I, and he was at school. He was more a friend of my brother than he was of mine.

CSG Did you know when you were writing the stories that they would be a collection, that they were inter-related?

BS No, I didn't at all. No, in fact as I began to see the possibility of a book, I asked myself whether I should stop, take the whole stuff apart and rewrite it all as a novel just because I felt that, financially speaking, a novel, probably in the long run, would be a better bet than stories. But I decided not to do that

because I was satisfied with some of the stories the way they were, and I didn't want to disassemble them. I also made enough money from the publication of some of these stories that I began to think that I could probably make more money from the stories than if I ever published them as a novel. But that was largely because of one big dollop of money which was the CBC prize.

CSG What writers have influenced you? Who do you find most affects you?

BS Well, there have been good and bad influences. Bad influences in the past were literary influences developed in university. And they were the people that I studied most, Patrick White, D. H. Lawrence, and William Faulkner. These were really devastating influences on my early writing I think. Very bad.

CSG Would you have been better off not to have read them?

BS Perhaps not, but the writing that was produced under their influence was pale imitations-type writing and just really garbage. The writer that I've learned a fair bit from is Audrey. As much from her talk as from her own writings, but I really like her entrances into stories, and I like her reliance on detail. But I think now I'm much more aware of influence in terms of a single phrase or, in other words, theft, rather than general influence. I hear somebody say something, or somebody uses an image, and I think, "Ha, I'm going to use that."

In fact, I wrote a story which was published in *Grain* called "Esther: A Spring Sketch," and I used an image in that story which I took straight from a Creative Writing student. I asked her, "I want to use that image, may I use that image?" and she said that I could, and I used it, and I read her the story after it was published, and she didn't recognize the image. But I'm much more aware of that kind of — I don't know if that is influence or what it is — that grabbing of material. But there is a colleague in the department, and I'm very aware of his speech patterns, and I've borrowed from him. For example, in "Another Movie," when he says, "Marcus, isn't it?" I took that actual usage directly from a letter I had

from a guy in Toronto who said, "Please get in touch at the next CPPA meeting. September, isn't it?" I just liked the sound of that, so I used it. Those are not large influences perhaps.

CSG They're like environmental influences, atmosphere.

BS I suppose a recent influence to some extent, unconsciously, has been Ondaatje because Ondaatje is a trickster as a writer. He is theatrical and I, to some extent, in some stories, am theatrical. I manipulate experiences for the reader to have.

CSG Do you find you are influenced by your students, being a Creative Writing teacher?

BS Well, I don't make a distinction between students and other people, but a lot of the students who take Creative Writing I find are so elementary that many of them I doubt carry on writing for very long. I have begun to find lately that that is a bit debilitating to me, so I am stopping teaching Creative Writing, and I don't know if I'll go back to it later or not.

CSG When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

BS When I was a very small child, I wanted to be a mountaineer. People would ask me this question when I was about 4 or 5, and I would say, "I'm going to be a mountaineer and I'm going to write poetry in my spare time." My mother fostered the poetry side, and my father had been a mountaineer, and he had these mountaineering pictures, so I thought that was a neat, masculine job, and the feminine job would be for the spare time, the second status because it was Mother's suggestion. Then in my teens, I decided to be a lawyer. My father was a lawyer, and my mother was a nurse, and my brother had decided that he was going into medicine, too. So that seemed to me to have a certain balance to it. He would follow her career, and I would follow the other parent's career.



RS Do you think you'll ever go back to Kenya?

BS God knows! I just got a letter from my brother. It's quite interesting. It's a postcard on the beach at Malindi which is a northern spot: there is Mombasa, there is Malindi, and there is Diani where I still own some property. Malindi was a place we used to go. Suddenly, after my mother's death when my father had time on his hands and it was a more difficult trip, we would rent this house on the beach there, and it was just lovely. Anyway, my brother is there right now, or he was when he sent this card: two guys walking, big, husky black fellows carrying an oar, just something around the waist. Hanging from this oar are all these fish. There must be two or three hundred pounds of fish, all red and blue and various colours, great whiskers and things. He has crammed on the back of this postcard every piece of writing he could do, and he says, "Do you remember when we went fishing here in the 'ngalawa for sharks?" This was a thing with us, to use the Swahili word, that meant something to us. When I wrote some of these stories, I would write *panga* and the editor of the magazine would say, "What is *panga*, do you mean knife or something?" I'd change it to *machete* because people understand it. Machete, hell, machete wasn't what we had in Kenya, that's what the Belgians had in the Congo! WE HAD PANGAS!

The interview took place May 5, 1983. It has been edited and re-arranged for inclusion here. "Like a Hinge on a Gate" that follows is a new story that grows out of Bill's friendship with Nathaniel; "Versions" is included in Chameleon & Other Stories published by Talon Books in Vancouver, 1983.