The technological pastoralist: a conversation with Monica Hughes

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Although Monica Hughes was winner of the Vicky Metcalf Prize (1981) and the Canada Council Prize twice (1982 and 1983), her work has been accorded little serious critical attention. This is especially surprising because Hughes has also established an international reputation for her fiction. As she herself has indicated in "The Writer's Quest" (*CCL* No. 26, pp. 6-25), a discussion of the origin of several of her books, her writing begins with intense intellectual curiosity. Gripped by an idea, she explores its implications by transforming abstract ideas into concrete fiction. This speculative ability is evident to a degree in her two adventure novels and three contemporary problem novels, but it is most impressive in the work for which she is most recognized, her science fiction. Her best novels, *Beyond the dark river* (1979) and the *Isis* trilogy — *The keeper of the Isis light* (1980), *The guardian of Isis* (1981), and *The Isis pedlar* (1982) — stand apart from so many others in this genre because they are rich blends of artistic and intellectual elements. In them, Hughes successfully combines traditional adventure, thematically significant settings, and ideas, especially those concerning ecology, prejudice, and the clash of social obligations and individual rights. The result is fiction that entertains, challenges, and rewards rereadings.

Having come to the writing of children's books only after she had raised her own children, Hughes has become a prolific writer. When I talked with her in her Edmonton home on 21 May 1986, she was awaiting Canadian publication of three books. Two of these were science fiction novels earlier released in England. The other, her nineteenth novel, was a non-science fiction work set in Depression-era Ontario. In addition, she informed me, she had already sent two more novels to her publishers and had been busily at work at her kitchen table on her twenty-second book.

JONES: Do you consider yourself a science fiction writer or a fantasy writer?

HUGHES: I make a very strong distinction between them. I am definitely a science fiction writer. I do not write fantasy. I haven't attempted to write it. All my worlds are logically based upon the universe that we know and the normal Newton's laws and laws of thermodynamics. That is science

fiction. Fantasy is if you design your own universe and it may have different laws. I've never gone that way. So I am primarily a science fiction writer. Now and then I get an idea which I have to deal with which won't work in science fiction. So *The hunter in the dark*. I had to explore this issue of why kids want to go hunting, what is so important, what made him disobey his father. It is very, very difficult. I suppose because I am not able to create my own world.

JONES: Is it difficult in the externals? Surely it can't be different in the psychology?

HUGHES: The externals can be a real nuisance because of the facts. I have written one just now which is with my editor. I keep falling over the facts, little things, far more than in my science fiction. It can be a real nuisance. It is the being in touch with my own mythology that I want. It seems to me that it comes to the surface more readily when I have designed my own world and my own time. It's much harder to be in touch, and I find less of these magic moments in realistic fiction.

JONES: Just so that we can make sure we're clear on this, your own mythology seems to involve the notion of the recognition of one's imprisonment, an escape from imprisonment, then a rebirth. Would that be accurate?

HUGHES: That's much closer to the surface. Maybe I shouldn't talk about my mythology. It's not my mythology. It's my subconscious which is in touch with the common unconscious mythology — THAT mythology — when you have no idea that you've done something 'till you've done it. I have no explanation for things that happen, patterns that work.

For instance, Olwen's masks in *The keeper of the Isis light*. Smashing! I was so thrilled when that happened! But I only plotted masks into the story because I realized that there was no way that Mark was going to fall in love with Olwen looking like a lizard. So I had to think of a way out. Guardian, aware of this problem of her difference, thus makes a beautiful, beautiful mask to cover it. Therefore Mark falls in love with the mask, not with the real Olwen, a common enough fault in teenage romances, too. When Olwen takes off the mask, she likes herself better and there's this wonderful growing up as she discards it — the whole Jungian thing of masks. All that simply happened because I needed a mask to overcome this problem of an alienbeing falling in love with a normal earth person, which of course, wouldn't happen on earth. That was a "found" that came out of my subconscious and was not recognized until I'd finished the story. I thought, "Good Lord, I'm doing all of this Jungian thing in here!" That kind of accident doesn't happen very often in a modern story. I have to work for my effects.

Now and then the magic happens. I got the magic when Mike Rankin faced the deer near the end of *Hunter*. As writer, I didn't know whether he

was still going to shoot it. As person, I hoped he wouldn't, but I wasn't going to manipulate him in any way. And then he looked at or thought about the acquisition tag that he would be clipping over the deer. The big game acquisition tag has a one-way clip. It's the same principle with hospital tags. When they're clipped on, you can't undo them. They have to be cut off. As Mike thought about the acquisition certificate, he remembered the hospital tag, and I got that whole scene when he thinks about dying, about maybe the only way you get released is when it's cut off when you're dead and they take you to the morgue. He thinks about this deer he's going to kill, and then he thinks about life, about freedom, and he lets the deer go. The connection between the hospital tag and the acquisition tag was not planned at all. One of those marvelous found moments!

But they are rare in writing modern fiction. You're just so thankful when they happen, whereas in that marvelous other world they accidentally seem to happen all the time. This is one reason why I enjoy science fiction.

JONES: The indigenous peoples are important in both kinds of books. When you treat the Indians — I'm looking at Doug Smalltree in *Beckoning lights*, Tom Lightfoot in *Ghostdance caper*, Daughterof-She-who-came-after in *Beyond the dark river*, the Ekoes in *Ring rise, ring set*, and even the "white Indians" in *Devil on my back* — you show them having the intimate communion with the land that you yourself found difficult to feel when you first came to Canada and you show that they are attuned to a kind of sympathy or a cosmic spirit, making them more open to others than the technocrats, whom they always oppose.

HUGHES: Right.

JONES: Do you have any particular feelings about spirituality or the nature of the indigenous connection to the world as opposed to the technological connection to the world?

HUGHES: I think probably we all had it at one time. I am, I know, overromanticizing if I apply it to, let us say, the Indian or the Inuit today. I'm making more of an abstract case. We gained an awful lot in the Renaissance, but I also think we lost a lot by centering upon ourselves, upon our achievement, and upon how we could change our environment. We cut ourselves off from the rhythm of the ecosystem, which has been only too plainly shown in all the horrors that have happened — denuded Mesopotamia, and denuded Greece, and the Sahara. Under my writing there's a lot of my concerns for social justice. I read and I hear a lot of what's going on. So that when I see that they're cutting down rain forests in Brazil to make the yellow pages of the 'phone books for Vancouver and at the same time destroying the lifestyle and the life of the indigenous peoples there, I know something is terribly wrong with our whole value system. The trouble is the technocrat can no longer see the value system.

JONES: Very simply, what is it that the Indian or the indigenous person

has that the technocrat lacks?
HUGHES: I think a sense — now this may not be defined right and it may not even hold true, but this is how it seems to me, filtered through my moral sensibilities — that they are in touch with a belief that all life is a gift. Therefore, when you take something, you thank for it and you don't grab it. You may ask for it, you may pray about it, you may do all kinds of things about it. Of course, I know this doesn't hold at all true with, lest us say, nomadic peoples, who slash and burn, and that's a rotten technique of agriculture. Already they are becoming technocrats, I suppose, in a sense by developing agriculture. And of course, there is no way we could have stayed back in that pure and simple state.
JONES: But for your mythic purposes what you see happening is that the one group takes life as a gift and the technocrat takes it as a right.
HUGHES: Yes, a right and a challenge. In other words if they don't like what they see, they're going to change it to suit the "I," that Renaissance person at the centre of the stage.
JONES: So there's always a manipulative aspect?
HUGHES: Yes.
JONES: Olwen Pendennis is in touch with her land. Did you consciously structure that geography symbolically? At the highest level is the pure planet of Isis on which only she can live. In the middle ground is the technological connection from which she transmits information. At the lowest level, down in the valley, are the men who come, and in one scene you actually have them marring, scraping, and hurting the land itself. Are you conscious of a symbolic use of landscape there?
HUGHES: Yes. That was deliberate. Having decided I was going to have this person alone on the planet and then it being invaded by other people, I wanted her to have some advantage, because if she had none, she would literally be taken over. They would swamp that planet, and she would just be absorbed. I wanted her to have one thing going for her and the only thing I could think of was the power, the freedom, of the planet. So I designed a place that was going to have a slightly more radiant and more active star than our sun, so you would get the problem with the ultraviolet and probably a working off of little more of the atmosphere at the higher levels, and yet a powerful enough gravity that the oxygen would stay down there. Then she had this advantage. I didn't sit down and imagine her as being transformed in my conscious mind. That was not a conscious plotting decision. After I had made this decision that she was going to have freedoms that the others did not, I found that she was changed. A sort of metamorphosis occurred.
JONES: She goes up. The Renaissance concept is that going up is much better than going down.
HUGHES: I hadn't thought of it in terms of heaven or hell or in terms of

the medieval universe before the concept of a round earth. I didn't think of it in those terms, though it fits beautifully. A lot of what happens in plotting, I find, is that you are fighting facts; quite often if you are writing science fiction, you are fighting scientific facts. You have to make decisions that are based on realities. You cannot just say that she could go here and they could not because I chose it to be. Obviously it had to do with atmosphere and radiation: as she went higher, she was exposed to more radiation and to lower oxygen levels, which she could tolerate but the others couldn't. That was just because of the ways lands are shaped. There's a moment in my plotting in which I think, "Yes! that feels good." I don't usually go into why.

JONES: In *Beckoning lights* you do the same thing. You have the girl and her Indian companion go up to find the space ship while the cowardly boy who doesn't believe in telepathy goes down into the valley to find the police.

HUGHES: Again, of course, this fits the fact that the cave had to be high up in order that the water would come from it. Now there the water was the clue of the fungus on the cave wall. I do find that mountains are very spiritual. I don't like living down at the bottoms of valleys. So there's probably just a personal spiritual reaction to the idea of mountain and valley, but it's not a deliberate mythical laying out of the place.

JONES: You aren't a deliberately didactic novelist?

HUGHES: Oh, no. I don't think so. I love some of those AngloSaxon words, "Word hoards" and "treasure chests," words for what's inside your head, or "grab bag." I have this huge grab bag full of my entire life — everything I've ever written, seen, done, and thought, everything that's come up — and down at the bottom is common unconscious. You put your hand in it and, Good Lord, you don't know what's coming out, and out of that I form novels; I make a pattern which is the plot. A theme arises — I never say I'm now going to write about prejudice, let us say —

JONES: But you have said on a number of occasions that a newspaper clipping about a boy named David who had to be isolated in a plastic bubble because he lacked an immune system started you thinking about the meaning of isolation and thus led to the writing of *Keeper*.

HUGHES: That was a very peculiar one because it took me actually five years to realize what the theme was. It may seem somewhat obvious, but reading that story of David I just felt emotion. I kept that cutting for five years before I realized that I wanted to find out the difference between being alone and being lonely. Is loneliness an essential part of being human? If you do not have that dimension, you can not be fully human. This, of course, is reflected later on when Guardian tells her that he can never be lonely. *Keeper* was unique in that I got the thematic material first. But funnily enough, it is not my thematic material that teachers pick up. What

they pick up is that it is a story about prejudice. That arose totally by accident in the course of making the plot work.

JONES: Prejudice, especially ethnocentrism, the sense that one's culture is the only culture, the only set of values, runs throughout all of your books.

HUGHES: Oh yes. The personal prejudice of disliking a person because of his physical appearance has apparently proved very powerful in classrooms, but it was purely an accident that prejudice turned out to be one of the themes, that knee-jerk reaction to physical appearance, that sort of thing.

JONES: Somebody once said that this book tells the truth of Kermit the Frog's song, "It's not easy being green."

HUGHES: Yes, yes, yes! Oh, lovely! This is true.

JONES: Is Olwen Pendennis very spiritual? She lives and, of course, communes upon the top of the mountain.

HUGHES: Not at the beginning. I think she's a very ordinary person. In fact, I think her sense of self and her whole spirituality is not developed at all because she's had no challenges. Guardian has given her everything she's ever needed. She's never had to question anything. It's a very nice life, but she's totally immature. It seems to me that the spirituality develops in Olwen at the moment when she chooses to leave the settlers to go on with their own ways although that means condemning herself to total isolation for the rest of her life.

JONES: And now, knowing what isolation means, she makes a genuine spiritual sacrifice?

HUGHES: Yes. Before the *Pegasus* landed, she had always been alone. It was the way life always was. You can only be lonely once you've experienced what it is not to be lonely.

JONES: Olwen doesn't slay dragons, but she still seems heroic. Is there a difference between a female hero and a male hero?

HUGHES: This is a thing I'm struggling with. I would say the feminine qualities are the nurturing qualities as opposed to making, wisdom as opposed to intelligence, caring and intuiting as opposed perhaps to finding out and thinking. I'm almost making a chauvinist statement by saying that. But by large I find it so. Now, in a sense, one can apply those feminine characteristics to those abstract indigenous people and the masculine characteristics to the Renaissance person, the technocrat. Karl Stern's book *The flight from woman* places the state of the world is in today with the choice of men at the Renaissance — that centering on self-losing touch with that feminine part. The whole world is veering towards this masculine side and the feminine is being left out. You will find the feminine element in these indigenous people. Particularly I find it, I find a sympathy, in much of Indian writing — the way of talking, in the visions they have. It is very

feminine having visions, even if it is not in accord with the way they conduct their daily lives.

JONES: Olwen is a hero, then, not only because she leaves but in some ways she also does what we're talking about as the female trait — she cares about them, and she is a nurturer. You've used the kind of female role in other books. Daughter-of-She-Who-Came-After is the healer. Do you see this as a primary function of the true female?

HUGHES: When I sit down to write a story I don't. In other words, it definitely comes out subconsciously when I plot a story. For instance, *Beyond the dark river* evolved from a simple incident of a power outage and deciding how long we were going to be without it and thinking what would happen in Edmonton if the lights never came on again. Who would survive? Only the Indian, only the Hutterite. Now I was not trying to use sexually stereotyped roles at that time, but I could not imagine a female Hutterite hero. It seemed to me that it had to be the male because it's such a male-oriented society. I could have easily had an Indian boy, but almost automatically I found myself thinking "woman, healer," particularly with the cultures I had intended to display. I also wanted to have a male and a female hero because I wanted to interest the kids. I wanted to make sure that there were people that they could relate to in the story. Of course, if you get different personalities you tend to get more sparks flying, which makes the story interesting.

JONES: What about other female heroes, such as Caro Henderson in *The tomorrow city* or Lisa Monroe in *Ring rise, ring set*? How do they function?

HUGHES: They come out of the technological culture, both of them, and are very ordinary people, I think, without very strong biases one way or the other. They aren't very strongly feminine or very strongly masculine in their basic attitudes to life. Caroline, in a sense, is victim. She does not directly cause or does not mean to cause the problem. She is merely hurled into the problems of *Tomorrow city* and does the best she can. So she is merely — not that that in itself is insignificant — a female hero who copes with what has to be coped with instead of sitting down wringing her hands. One of the things I do like to get across in my stories is that we *are* in charge of our destiny even though it may not always seem so. Not totally, but there is always something that you can do and sitting down and despairing is not a useful way to go. That is definitely one of the messages I like to get across. Lisa is thrust into the old feminine role back in the kitchen, and I wanted to make a strong point, again, that in times of stress, all our fine ideals about equalities between the sexes go by the board. It's happening even now when it is said that we can't afford to have equal opportunities. It's got nothing to do with ethics at all. They say we just can't afford it. And so her move is a powerful, almost a masculine move, to get out of the kitchen and be her own person outside.

JONES: So you have a couple of major themes working here. You've got the concern for ethnocentrism. You see this in the way that the Earth settlers think of their vision of beauty as the only vision, their vision of order the only order. You get this with the *Bruderhof* in *Beyond the dark river*. The second thing you've got is this whole concern for the tension between individual freedom and social duty or social responsibility.
HUGHES: Right.
JONES: You move people through a mythic pattern. They begin as citizens, creatures of society, and become individual human beings. Take, for example, *Devil on my back*. Are you there creating a myth of the new person?
HUGHES: Yes, I think so. One of the things that concerns me very much in today's society is that we are so totally dependent on the infrastructure which that Renaissance Person developed, yet which is so very easily threatened. One has to be a futurist. One has to think of the possibility of the Earth becoming much more desertified, for instance, or the possibility of nuclear war or some other hazard destroying the things we take for granted. What then happens to people? We are thrown into the jungle, into that place that is totally unkind because we can't talk to it anymore. We then have to find ourselves as individuals and start to build up another society and develop it with a bit more caring. So there's the finding of the new person under new circumstances away from that supportive infrastructure and then coming back and building a better society. But at the same time this is a myth of kids growing up, isn't it? First, they have the home, which is in some senses secure but is also very restrictive. Then they come to adolescence, that time of throwing themselves out into the jungle and sometimes behaving like savages. Finally, they come to a sense of duty that "centres" them and makes them whole.
HUGHES: The birth, the rebirth — that part of it — was quite deliberate. Of course, in the other sense it was the only way he could go. Rivers only flow downstream! It's always lovely when your symbols work or, if you like, when your realities are symbolic. I mean, when I sent him whacking down than sewer into the river I didn't at that second choose to do it because it was going to be a birth and then a baptism. But as it happened, I thought, "Wow, he's being reborn, isn't he?" You know, it's one of those lovely things that just happens by chance.
JONES: In so many of your science fiction books, computers have taken over and society is regimented. Are you still an optimist?
HUGHES: Yes.
JONES: What makes you optimistic?
HUGHES: A belief that God's not going to let us go down the tube without a fair shake at getting ourselves back. I mean we have free will, which unfortunately has got us into a lot of problems. But I still believe that, over all, pattern will emerge out of chaos.

JONES: Yet, with the exception of *Beyond the dark river*, God and religion don't appear in your books. Why?
HUGHES: I want my books to be accessible to as many people as possible. Not everybody accepts God in a particular way. I want them to be able to reach the idea of God without necessarily naming it. You automatically cut off a whole bunch of readers, I think, if you become too definite in some areas. Now I may find that I want a story in which a specific religion is necessary. It just happens that I've been able to use a wide enough scenario that I haven't had to write it in.
JONES: Would you say then that the indigenous peoples — especially the Ekoes in *Ring rise, ring set* and the Indians in *Beyond the dark river* — but also Olwen in *The keeper of the Isis light* and even the escaped slaves in *Devil on my back*, represent this spiritual dimension that you are talking about?
HUGHES: Yes, but remember, at that level of the story I'm speaking in generalities.
JONES: If the time ever came that one of these closed cities that you write so often about had to be built and only one Monica Hughes novel could be included in the library, what would it be?
HUGHES: What would it be? Oh gosh, that's rotten! I mean, if I could have three it would be O.K. Could I have a science fiction one and a non-science fiction one?
JONES: Well, we're not going to be as stern as the Lord Bentt. Sure.
HUGHES: O.K. Then I would have *Hunter in the dark* and *Sandwriter*.
JONES: Why?
HUGHES: Because they're the ones in which I think the characters came closest to this sense of God, this sense of the pattern of life, what it's all about, the meaning. I suppose I have to backtrack all the way to when I was seven-years-old and finding E. Nesbit — I found a magic, a meaning of life, which I later found in astronomy and theology, in anthropology and psychology. I think any creative person is all the time agonizing for a meaning. You look around for a pattern, and you feel happy whenever you find a pattern. And I think that the closest to finding a true pattern happens in *Hunter* when Mike goes home understanding that death is simply a necessary part of life, without which life would be meaningless, boring, sterile, going on forever. And *Sandwriter*-there the old shaman is in touch and therefore brings the reader in touch with a lot of truths about our planet and about the difference between wisdom and intelligence. It worked really well. It's one I'm happy with. It was a strange story because it was, in a sense, founded on spirituality. I had seen a very interesting program on Israeli art and at one moment the camera panned across some wonderful sculptures that were set up outdoors. They were very tall, beautiful sculptures — sandstone, I think. There was a kind of sandy back-

ground. And into my mind jumped this totally irrelevant thought — that must be the entrance to one of their houses. Well that's the sort of thing that's the key to a book, so I wrote it down at once. Later, when I was looking for something to write, this idea intrigued me, so I went down to the library and started to read about deserts. I thought I was going to write a book that was totally ecological, a moral lesson in what we'll do to our planet if we keep on being so stupid in cutting down the rain forests and so on. And then I came across a wonderful book by a woman journalist who had climbed Mount Sinai at night in order to watch the dawn. She started thinking about the importance of deserts. I'd always thought of them as ecological — moral lessons to humans. But she was seeing them as places where the prophets went, where people go to meditate, all this whole Judeo-Christian history of the desert. And into my mind came the figure of the shaman, Sandwriter. Then, of course, I had to build up a story to fit what I'd got. So the story was based on this idea of the desert as a very profound place.

JONES: Once again, we're back to your connection to the land.

HUGHES: There are two ways of seeing it: if you belong to it, and if it's an enemy. I was just astounded by some of the quotations I read, by Bedouins who live close to it and by Europeans who see it as this God-awful thing you've got to cross. I didn't want to work from the Sahara or anything like that so I designed a world that is somewhat like Earth. The desert island on it occupies the same sort of place that Northern Africa does on our planet and the other continent is rather similar to North and South America, very blessed with water and vegetation. There are also a few islands scattered around.

JONES: What is the role of the female here?

HUGHES: The main protagonist is female. She is the journeyer. Somebody said to me, "Why does everybody go on journeys?" I don't know. Life is a journey, I suppose. It's a common idea. It's hard to say, "Why not?" She journeys from the rich continent to the desert continent and then comes in touch with all this. I always like outsiders. Outsiders see with clearer eyes and can also explain things to the reader. It's very difficult to write about a place in which everybody knows everything that's going on.

JONES: You said earlier that you usually begin with the plot and thematic material evolves from it. Where does characterization come in?

HUGHES: It differs. *Tomorrow city*, for instance, was simply, "I wonder what it would be like if Edmonton were run by a super computer." Interesting; nothing is going to happen. Let's pretend the computer turns into a monster. O.K. We'd better think of a logical reason for it turning into a monster. Then, when I worked out how Caroline was going to give faulty input to the computer by saying, "You go right ahead and do your best for the city," click! I realized I've got my theme. We cannot allow computers

that do not know the human input of loving and caring to make decision that are human decisions. It came at that moment in the course of plotting. I had a lot of problems with *Beyond the dark river*. I didn't even get my theme clear until they met the crazy librarian and, bless his heart, he wasn't even in my plot; he wasn't even on my list of characters. I opened the door to the library and there were footprints in the dust. I do write a plot outline, but in this book chapters eight, nine, and ten were awfully empty. Then the crazy librarian jumped out from behind the stacks. I thought, "Who are you?" But he was so alive, so in charge of his lines, that I let them have this conversation. Out of what he said, I realized that the kids were not going to be able to go back and find any truth in this destroyed city, that the only truth was in rebuilding from scratch. Out of the dead tree grows the new sapling, and so on. This why I wrote "The End" before describing the destruction, the slow deterioration of the city; and at the end of the book I wrote "The Beginning," which in the French edition they cut out, thereby destroying the wholeness of my theme, the circularity — yes, we do repeat, but hopefully we don't repeat our mistakes.

JONES: You keep coming back to the notion that knowledge is a dangerous thing.

HUGHES: Yes.

JONES: This leads to the obvious symbolism in *Devil on my back*: Lord Bentt must look down to the ground instead of up to the stars. Is this what we've done to ourselves? We've got knowledge that weighs us down and doesn't allow us to see the spiritual values that the indigenous people find in nature?

HUGHES: Yes. And doesn't even allow us to think for ourselves. They even have the life pak that keeps them going and tells them to make sure they get enough vitamins and nurse-maids them through life. I see technology as having that possibility. And I certainly see education today as being very, very close to this narrowing centre.

JONES: If you were able to ask yourself one question that you wished somebody would finally have the insight to ask, what would it be?

HUGHES: I don't know. You've already asked me many. I don't think I could. Maybe I wouldn't even want to. I'm even disturbed by some of the questions you have asked because I'm afraid of finding too much about what's going on inside, about the way I write, about being too much in touch intellectually with what's going on.

JONES: Writing is rather a spilling out for you, is it?

HUGHES: Yes. There is a lot of subconscious activity going on then. I'm a little afraid of having a critical person inside my head saying, "Oh yes, I see what you're doing now," as a result of some of these rather penetrating questions.

JONES: Do you write on a computer?

HUGHES: No, I write by hand.
JONES: Longhand?
HUGHES: Longhand. Not with a quill pen, an ink pen on lined paper. I find that if I write on a typewriter I'm not in touch. I suppose this goes back to...
JONES: Your pastoralism!
HUGHES: Yes. It's odd, isn't it, to be a technical pastoralist because I find the technical world fascinating. I've always been fascinated by astronomy, but perhaps by a romantic astronomy, the frontiers.
JONES: What can readers in Canada be looking forward to from Monica Hughes next?
HUGHES: *Sandwriter* should be out this month. *Blaine's way*, which is a non-science fiction book set in the 1930s in western Ontario, will be out next month.
JONES: What kind of a plot are we dealing with here?
HUGHES: We're dealing with a pattern. I realized that there was an extraordinary pattern in my husband's life. He lived on a little farm, and the railway from Buffalo to Detroit ran right behind the place. It was a romantic train going places but was actually irrelevant to the life of rural Ontario. It was a short cut; it belonged to the States; it wasn't even ours. Then he moved to another farm. There was another railway there, a little one this time, a local one, with three level crossings in the area close to the farm. And it was a killer. People were always getting killed on the level crossings. Now it seemed to me that the first railway was escape and the second was death. I realized that the only way that kids got out of rural Ontario in the Depression was through the War, and then I remembered all the war memorials. The novel starts off in 1932 on the farm by the big railway and finishes up just after Dieppe.
JONES: Is this novel still designed for children?
HUGHES: Hopefully. That was the big problem. It was the one I had to write. There was no question about writing it any other way; the pattern wouldn't work. I'm hoping that it will appeal to junior high and high school, and I'm hoping that it will appeal to adults.
JONES: Are there other things in the works?
HUGHES: *The dram catcher* is the sequel to *Devil on my back* and is about another of these Arks. Remember, there came out of the university the decision to try and maintain knowledge as the monks did in the Dark Ages in the face of disaster. Ark Three is based on extrasensory perceptions. The people are totally empathic with each other. Their ark is founded upon the belief that they will be able to avoid the problems of the previous society, which thought that knowledge was all. It is totally the opposite of Tomi's computerized world. Obviously, they make their own mistakes. Any time you try to dichotomize like that instead of being holistic, you make mis-

takes. That's what we're doing today.
JONES: This goes back to the *Beyond the dark river*, in which the *Bruderhof* is limited to the word passed down, the Book.
HUGHES: Right, right.
JONES: In *Devil on my back* you have the whole idea of an alien source of information. Now you're trying the intuitive approach.
HUGHES: Which is similar to the Indian one. It's a lovely way for a tribe to live, but a civilization cannot grow out of it. Somehow we've got to mesh the two, and that's the message. *The dram catcher* is the answer to questions that are unfulfilled in *Devil on my back*. What happened when Tomi got back? What is the relationship with his father, which was ambiguous?
JONES: So the intuitive thing is the dreams that he is making up at the end of *Devil*?
HUGHES: Exactly. They are caught by the one girl who can't mesh in this wonderful empathic society. She's the outsider, again. Out of her dreams comes the belief that there must be another telepathic colony sending messages through her dreams. They go off on a physical journey again — as well as a spiritual one — to ArcOne, where they find a totally destructive society inside while the ex-slaves are starting to build a rational society outside.
JONES: So we're not going to end with a whimper or a bang?
HUGHES: No, we're going to end with a fairly thoughtful growth society, with everything coming together.

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