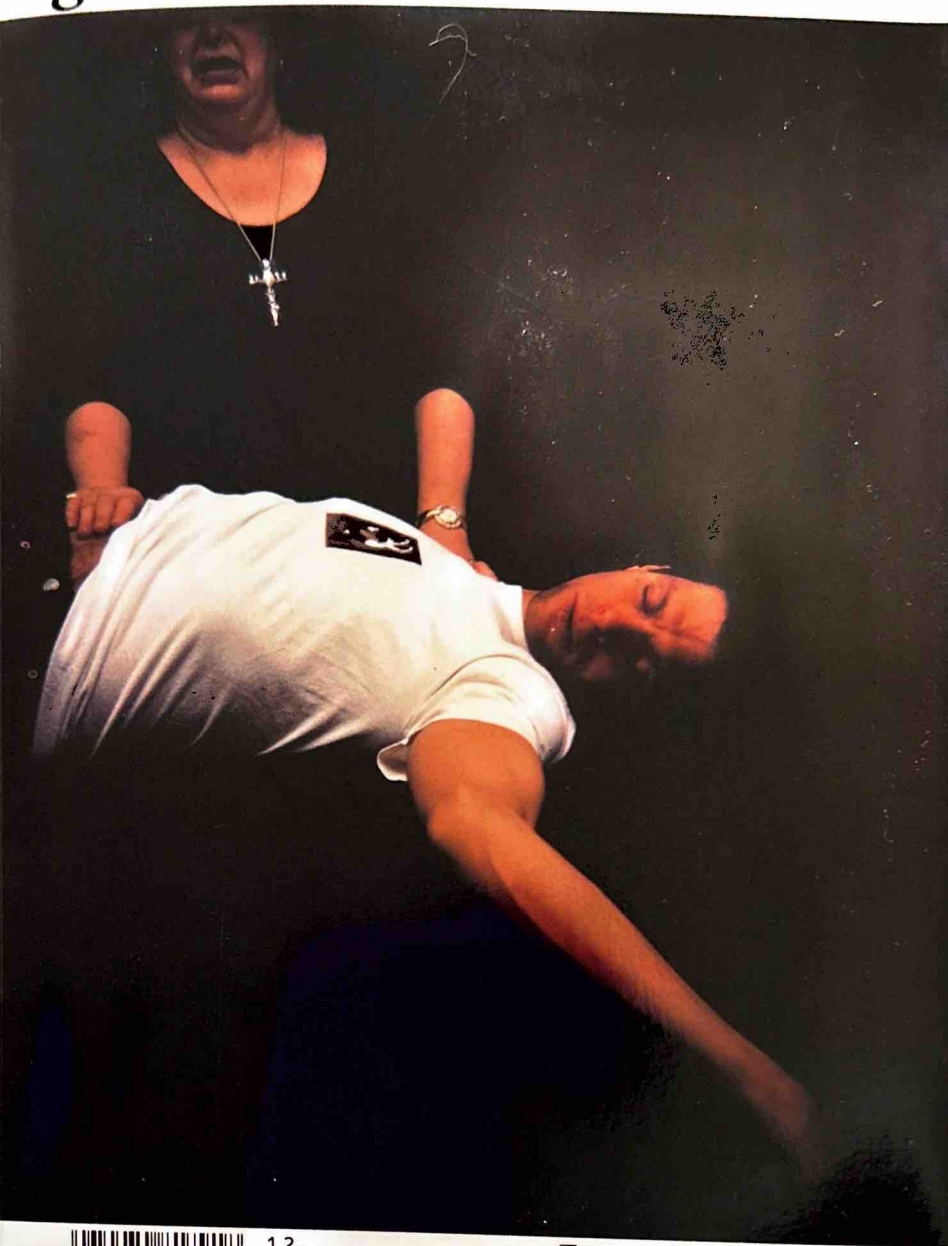


green MOUNTAINS

REVIEW



conjuring
the other

Green Mountains Review

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Fall/Winter 1999-2000

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Conjuring the Other:

What Is Literary Ethnography Anyway?

This issue, devoted to “literary ethnography,” began to emerge years ago out of talk between anthropologists with literary leanings and creative writers with yearnings toward the exotic. At last I made the call, culled through many excellent submissions, and sent a few to the typesetter. Yet the object remains elusive — in both form and content, this emergent “genre” defies definition. But then why not? For if the genre exists at all, it has been generated out of the near impossibilities (or at least the suspect nature) of trying to know and represent others. Still, something must be said on the subject — an introduction to this volume, if not an entire movement.

In the beginning, “ethnography,” the traditional output of cultural anthropology, was neologized to mean: the writing about human cultures. In recent decades, many anthropologists have resisted the received format of social scientific enquiry in which data is treated as fact and fact as correlative to objective truths. Instead, these ethnographers have been seeking new forms for articulating otherness, for fingering the seams between our differences. Eschewing the search for overarching structures and a generalizing agenda in which select examples are used to prove theoretical points, these authors have instead immersed themselves in the particular and personal in an effort to understand how humans construct their individual and collective identities.

Anthropological writers of this ilk have drawn on the ploys long practiced by poets and novelists in their imaginative attempts to explore human sensibilities, interactions, and communities via suggestive detail, narrative stress, graphic characterization, dialogue, and emotional contour. Recently too, many traditional works of social realism have been reinterpreted as heteroglossic through the postmodern lens which questions the primacy of the text, the authority of the author, the fixed and unitary nature of the self, and the objectification of the Other. This cultural movement has further grayed the boundary between literature and ethnography as many writers (not just anthropologists) now engage in structural and linguistic play, experimenting with voice and point of view, in an effort to explore contacts with people identified as “other.”

In the present volume, I have placed at the front one of the oldest forms of other-representation — the published folktale — and then explored the process of collection and translation with someone who has successfully transformed himself from folklorist into novelist. Following this come narratives and poems about the anthropological fieldwork experience — the tensions and (sur)realities of endeavoring to enter into and interpret another cultural community. Interspersed with these are works by teachers, translators, and other non-anthropologists who have inhabited unfamiliar or multicultural terrains long enough to feel they understood something about the place and the people, or at least their own interactions there. Some authors make a leap (of faith...or imagination) into an alien worldview, while

others peer backwards into their parents' self-constructions as immigrants in a strange and sometimes hostile land. There are attempts to cross boundaries — cultural, sexual, generational — via the vision of a lover and other attempts using the eyes of a child. Finally, there are poetic reconstructions of ancient travelogues and reportage, as well as creative renderings of present-day transplantations.

But what all of these writers share is the longing to experience, while avoiding the presumption that what they have done is "know," the other. Within the artistic frame, characters reach across social divides constructed out of age, sex, race, and culture — making contact in many ways and with varying degrees of success, looking for license yet acknowledging distance, savoring difference while still seeking some underlying commonality. In all of the works, imagination is applied to fact in such a way as to break the frame — inciting intersubjective relationships between reader, narrator, and other, and so resisting the objectification of any of us.

— Kate Riley

To Describe the Telling of a Story: An Interview with Howard Norman

This interview took place on August 31, 1999, at Howard Norman's "writing shack" behind his farmhouse in East Calais, Vermont. Norman was racing to pack, having just returned from Breadloaf and being due back in Washington to start teaching by the end of the week. What was amazing was his ability to create a still moment in his hectic schedule to reflect back upon and articulate snippets of interactions long past, some of which took place in remote locations and difficult dialects. Like the storytellers to whom he had apprenticed himself, he related tales of friendship, storytelling, translation, and writing, using both explicit detail and suggestive allusion.

KR: In this interview I'd like to explore how, from early on in your life, you were drawn to crossing boundaries, those between languages and cultures as well as between genres.

HN: Well, I think the biographical facts might sound more exotic from the outside than they were close-up. I'm fifty now and as I look back, I realize that to some extent I must have been counteracting a childhood claustrophobia, not only the kinds of restrictions that all kids feel, but particular to my family which was pretty dysfunctional (as they say these days). So on some level I probably desired open spaces to counterbalance whatever inwardness I was feeling there in the Midwest. But certainly I wasn't conscious of it at fifteen when I joined my first cousins who lived outside of Toronto in taking the kinds of summer jobs that were available then for young men in Canada — working for fire crews and brush crews. I had no conscious knowledge of native peoples or those languages when I set out, but a good fifty percent if not more of those crews were native people — either Chipewyan, Cree, or Algonkin. And when I first heard those languages I thought, "Oh, well, that's a whole different world." I don't think I articulated it to myself then, but later I read Paul Eluard, the French surrealist, and he has a line: "There is another world, but it's in this one." I thought, "Well that's what that was." Only later I began to think about the need to reshape the way you looked at the world through somebody else's language. And up until about age 29 or so, that's pretty much what I was doing, but doing it to make a living.

KR: So how did you begin to learn the native languages?

HN: I picked up a basic vocabulary just through working with people, in Cree especially, but it was very practically based. There were a lot of racial tensions and segregation on those fire crews. Later when I started working for museums and for film crews — being placed in language-intensive locations — some of the language came back to me. But not a lot. Mostly, at that later period, the way I learned was rather hands-on, through that process of being infantilized, being reduced to five or six years old in terms of language acquisition. And when I got up into Inuit areas around Hudson Bay, when I was in my twenties, then my level of engagement was much higher and the level of regard I had for the language took on a different, more serious dimension because I was being paid to translate. I was working on behalf of tribal groups and villages and publications that were coming out.

KR: So at what point did you conceive of yourself as a writer, writing literature?

NH: Well, to begin with I was writing about remote places, natural history and language, but I was somewhat academic in my embrace of these experiences — these were not literary enterprises, but ethnographic, geographical, linguistic. Only later when I started actually translating in my early twenties did I see it as a kind of literary apprenticeship. It was then that I met Jerome Rothenberg who published some of my first translations in *Alcheringa*. They were Cree Indian narratives. It is difficult to overstate how much I was encouraged by Jerry's interest in my fledgling efforts. One always wants to be more influenced by one's mentor than one is actually capable of being. His knowledge is vast; his work continues to evolve in absolutely unforeseen and vital ways. So, the world of "ethnopoetics" was the first welcoming place, literarily speaking, for me, and the sense of encouragement is still quite immediate. It was from this apprenticeship in translation that I began learning how those traditional literatures structured stories and how they differed from each other. The sheer prodigiousness of the storytelling in any given community is mind-boggling really. These boxes here that you see — six or seven of them — are all stacked with dozens and dozens of stories from Athabaskan and Inuit areas, and I've only written up about one one-hundredth of them.

KR: How did you collect them? With tape recorders? Or did you feel fluent enough to take them down by hand?

HN: Sometimes I taped, sometimes in notebooks. But I never have felt fluent. I felt competent enough to get help with the original, and with a couple of Inuit dialects I feel relatively fluent. That is, if I was back up there for three or four weeks, I think I would be eased back into a relative competence. The Quarmirmiut dialect spoken around the west coast of

Hudson Bay I'm pretty good at in part because I'm working with it now — it's what Mark Nucaq spoke. But for real fluency you need to spend years and years in a row in an essentially monolingual context because it takes a certain level of unconscious preoccupation as well as conscious linguistic attention to get all the nuances. Besides things vary from village to village. I would never claim and I've always been suspicious of people who have claimed fluency in native languages because they're tremendously difficult. Not that there aren't people who are that fluent. Michael Krauss out in Alaska probably is the best example of somebody who is very very fluent.

KR: Do you have a natural gift for learning languages? Or was it a matter of perseverance?

HN: I really am not good at Romance languages or anything like that. I think it is perseverance. It's also just the luck of being in a native household, of really being willing to set your ego aside. And then the rewards are tremendous. The languages, and especially the folktales, are so uncanny, so different and so unusual in their structures that you could spend a lifetime working just with those. I chose not to do that, though I am now putting together collections for children. With them I'm trying a kind of anecdotal linguistics, along the lines that Jaime de Angelo did out on the West Coast at the turn of the century, describing the telling of a story. With the introductions to some of these children's books, I'm trying to describe what it was really like to work with people. It's not romantic, never an easygoing situation. No "I was adopted by such-and-such a tribe..." I've never known that to be true of anyone.

KR: Not by a whole tribe anyway.

HN: Nor even by individual families — very rarely. On the other hand, what do you expect? They were very aware of what you were doing. You weren't stealing anything...it was pretty much up front, but.... The problem was getting over the self-consciousness of being so inept as a speaker. But if you were willing to keep working at it — "stay up through the winter," as they say — you were able to gather things. And always the turning point for me was when that inevitable conversation came: "What is it here that you are looking for?" Putting it in terms of historical dimensions, I always said: "You know, you don't need what we talk about. But me, and the culture I come from, needs it. We need to know how you think. You are living in this world we know nothing about really." And that always was an interesting philosophical discussion because they had their own longings for television and for modernity of various sorts. But at the same time, they were maintaining an integrity that, to put it in a cliché, keeps them close to a very ancient sensibility. And once we started talking like that, oftentimes a whole other feeling would open up.

KR: So how do you feel about the thirst, the hunger among Westerners?

HN: I think it's very interesting. For instance, in Europe — Germany and Italy — there's a big faddishness about Native American peoples, like a nostalgia for a time and place they never lived through. It would be a great accomplishment in Western culture to develop a kind of descriptive ethnography or linguistics that didn't involve Western preconceptions and biases, squeezing their work into our paradigms. That's a very hard thing to do, but more and more lately, with people being allowed to speak for themselves in these tribal areas and with publications coming out (*Alaska Quarterly* just published a whole oral literature volume that is just magnificent), we'll have more models to do that with. Because part of the generosity of those cultures is that they keep providing models for us. We just have to pay attention to them.

KR: So you think we shouldn't feel shy or guilty about going into the "other" and trying to record and even represent?

HN: "Shyness" and "guilt" are not much use in this context. I do find a curious colonial instinct still at work in contemporary linguistics. On the other hand, languages are going fast around the world, so it is also a somewhat altruistic impulse to record and get things down. I think if you work out a situation in which the reciprocities are clear from the beginning, and if you ask permission and explain the purposes and then ask how your work together can serve whatever community you're working with.... Can you bring money into it? Can you provide publications? Can you provide money for literacy programs and oral literature programs? Half of any money I've ever made in translation or books goes up to native language centers. Can you be up front with that and really spend the time working? If those parameters are set up clearly, translation can be very vital to both people. But if in doubt, just provide support and stay away, which is kind of a platitude, but the politics of this are very sensitive.

KR: Can we look now at your relationship with the Inuit storyteller Mark Nucaq and the politics and process by which you collected the story we're publishing in this issue, perhaps as you're doing for the children's stories?

HN: I don't think one relationship is exemplary, nor is it a kind of quintessential experience. But I've been working on this project which consists of stories by Mark who was this wonderful storyteller living at Eskimo Point and in Churchill, Manitoba. He told any number of stories about the same character, the shaman Tiuk. I've also been working on a piece about a woman named Helen Tanizaki who also happened to be in Churchill in 1977-78. We were both working with Mark, who was in his sixties at the time. Helen was translating the work into Japanese, and I was translating it into English. She called it a "strange linguistic duet" — she was very pleased by that term, and I was too. She was very ill — stomach cancer —

then. I learned a tremendous amount about Japanese literature and culture from her, and I've been trying to write about that. But Mark loved Helen; he loved working with her. She was ten years older than me — I was 27 or 28 — and he and I were at odds from the very beginning. I don't think he liked me much. He cared a lot for my stubbornness, but he ran me through the mill. He was cantankerous and drunk a good deal of the time, and very very difficult. He was the most singular, idiosyncratic and remarkable raconteur I've ever met. One of the reasons was that he ransacked biblical literature and would reinstate it in Inuit structure and interweave it with Inuit traditional themes. So he appropriated what he needed to tell these stories about biblical figures: Noah and his ark and other people like that.

In a two-month period we took down together about twelve stories. That was twenty years ago and I'm still struggling to get them right. You can always get help with the original, but the question of translation is to try to find equivalents in your own language, and not substitutes. It depends on how inventive a writer you are. I can get help with the vocabulary — "What is he saying here?" — and I can play the tapes back again and again. But a couple of stories about shamans, especially Tiuk, were amazingly complex. Not that they weren't straightforward tales with a certain chronological and narrative line that's easily discernible. They were complex because of a kind of fluctuation in mood and emotion that is hard to absorb into the story and into the translation.

I'll give you a quick example. There's one story I've been trying to work on about a shaman who is so angry he tries to find something large to injure, to cause pain in. So he injures an entire coastline. There's a phrase in Inuit that says: "He injured the coast." But to say "he injured the coast" would create a kind of seismic quality, when actually he didn't do it that way. He did it incrementally. And the injury is really not to the coast because the coast is an inanimate thing — it's to people's conceptions of how to move along that coast that is injured. I have translated this sequence of five variations on this tale probably 200 times, and I can't get it right. It's not that I'm a perfectionist; it's that I can't quite find the language yet. So what's the hurry? If the story's derivations are essentially hundreds of years old, and the updating is from the 1970s, what's the hurry? You do it till you get it right.

An example in music is Glenn Gould's "Goldberg Variations" that he recorded maybe thirty years apart; he just went back to the original stuff and interpreted it again. I think I'm pretty close, but there's still a lot of contrivance and convenient choices. It's wonderful — I feel very happy to have these to work on. In the next year or so I need to go back up to Churchill and talk to people. Sometimes in a conversation over coffee somebody will say something and everything will come clear. The translation will then be complete.

KR: Is Mark gone?

HN: Yes, he died. He had a lot of childhood respiratory illnesses. And he drank, and lived a very difficult life in that period of time. And from the early part of the century on, there were all sorts of cultural and psychological transitions — all hard to get through.

KR: In the course of his life, did he go from being a subsistence fisher-hunter to being involved in a cash economy?

HN: He worked probably up until he was 45 or 50 in and around the Hudson's Bay Company economy, but it's seldom talked about and I never asked how he earned a living. He was paid to provide these stories, but he gave most of that money away. He wasn't some grandfatherly, generic Inuit wiseman — he was just a real person. Whatever wisdom or intelligence he had was most generously and succinctly resident in the stories. And they were magnificent to hear. He was an intense storyteller.

KR: Would he tell you these stories one-on-one?

HN: Sometimes, but usually he liked to call in some people and have some kids around. Listening to the tapes now, you hear coffee cups clinking, kids running in and out. You hear his wife reprimanding him for something — all the cacaphony of day-to-day life. Once in a while he would come over to the Beluga Motel where I was living and he would say, "Okay, get out the tape recorder." Often when he did that, he was too drunk to tell them. When he spoke with Helen it was always one-on-one, and I think there was a tremendous amount of flirtatiousness there. But with me there was never a perfectly even-tempered, easygoing session in two and a half months. On the other hand, it was never melodramatic — he was just cantankerous and somewhat didactic.

KR: Do you think he was doing it for the money with you or did he see some purpose in recording these tales?

HN: I think he understood full well everything that was going on, on every level. He also delighted especially in telling those shaman stories because built in were such sly and subtle and sometimes very bold indictments of Western culture. They weren't ostentatiously metaphorical; they were behavioral, creative and inventive. They didn't entirely derive from an inherited sensibility; they arrived in a way that any wonderful writer comes up with, when you ask not what he said, but how did he come up with that in the first place. I don't want to elevate him in a way which makes him seem like a visionary. The craft of his stories was hard-wrought; he worked tremendously hard — practiced and rehearsed them. On the other hand, there was often a spontaneous element to them as well.

KR: Had these shaman tales been told for hundreds of years in some form or another?

HN: Well, shaman stories per se have been told for centuries, yes. I found these ten or twelve stories about this particular shaman Tiuk so compelling because they form a kind of biography of a somewhat mythological figure, though really he seems very much of this present physical world — “once you get to know him,” as they say. You can trace his travels from place to place on a map — they’re very real places. And yet they’re full of surreal and wild images which require suspension of disbelief, even if you’re well-versed in Inuit folktales. Inuit folk stories are full of fear and violence — tremendous violence. They’re not watered down things that attend to a gentle sensibility. They contain tremendous hardship and physicality, and Mark’s stories were no exception. People die; people are born; people are deceived; tremendous lies are told; small things lead to big damages. The things you think are solacing turn out to be lethal. You can’t predict what will make a shaman happy. But they are stories that you want to keep working on because the rewards are so great — for me, at least.

KR: Do most of the stories include some attempt to deal with Westerners as does the Tiuk one we’re publishing?

HN: Yes, that story has to do with the first hotel in Churchill where the rooms are stacked up on top of each other — the verticality of which is very menacing. Churchill becomes the centerpiece, representative of the suddenness of a whole new culture and sensibility. So yes, some of them deal with Western images, but others are from far before that.

KR: In trying to translate and represent these tales, do you ever think that you need to add a lot more cultural background — whole sentences, paragraphs, or footnotes?

HN: I have, but the process of translation is an evolving one. The way I translated stories when I was twenty-five is very different than how I would now. But some techniques remain the same. For instance, there are times in these shaman stories when I have added a clarifying sentence rather than providing a glossary and footnotes for each one. After all, these are designed for an English-reading audience, so there’s a kind of acquiescence at times. I can give you a quick linguistic example. In Inuit there’s a phrase that means the feeling of being lifted up off the ground before you’re actually lifted up off the ground. So the feeling might be seen in English as a rehearsal for the actual event, but actually it provides a kind of nostalgia. You know what it already feels like and you start to remember the feeling, long for it, so that when the real thing happens you’re happy. But if translated wrong, it would seem like the actual event of being lifted off the ground would be something you could avoid because you already know what it feels like. So how do you get that feeling into English?

KR: Also, your example of trying to translate "hurting the coast" sounds as though it could have been in part a problem with tense and aspect, but also much more broadly with explaining how much people's lives are changed by a change in coast. But that means the reader needs to know about the people's lives...

HN: Also, if someone comes in and says "Tiuk has injured the coast," that sets up a tremendous terror because if he can do that, imagine what else he can do. A lot of the power of these shamans comes from constructing a kind of credibility, and then the threat goes a long way: "You've seen what I can do. Now if you don't give me what I want, I will do it again, or I will make it worse." Something like that is constantly going on in these shaman stories.

KR: But his threats didn't work with the whites in the hotel because they were culturally ignorant?

HN: The repercussions are usually fairly swift. Not always; sometimes grudges are held for tremendously long periods of time. That sets up a tension on the land because you never know when they will be enacted.

It's hard always to summarize, and even very precise anecdotes are sometimes only applicable to that particular story. An attempt to characterize a cultural sensibility via a deconstruction of one story is an attempt to distill thousands of years of a culture down to one manageable articulation. Jaime de Angelo, the Spanish linguist who was out on the West Coast and in the Southwest in the early part of the century, is to me an exemplary figure for a number of reasons. First, he actually knew languages and could speak them (but would be the first to admit his own limitations as a speaker). Secondly, he liked to describe a story as part of an entire enterprise, and not take it out of context; although he did do that on occasion too. Thirdly, but first and foremost really, he never, never tried to misrepresent the flaws of the people he was working with. They were always very, very human. He never romanticized — never sentimentalized — he had a fierce, fierce loyalty toward those things. Lastly, he was willing to say when and where those folk stories influenced his own writing. So I always turn to him to be rejuvenated in terms of the possibility and lack of self-consciousness about working with tribal languages and folklore. Basically you do the best you can and stand by what you do. Don't lie about it — how much you know; don't lie about your experiences. You run into people who claim to be very fluent in certain native languages and you know that that may be a fantasy because they identify spiritually, or something like that.

On the other hand, there's work by people such as Percival Everett, a wonderful novelist and short-story writer. He's been working with the Cheyenne, dealing with sun dance stuff. Percival's main thing is to write down stuff before it dies out. That's a completely different enterprise; he's working with an Indian guy in English and just trying to get down cultural history, sun dance processes — the actual logistics of sun dance. By contrast,

mine are works of translation and transfiguration — bringing something over the best I can from one language to the next. Both, I think, are of equal urgency. There are people working with native languages all over the world, and I think the more the better as long as the exchanges are right out front and the tribal people benefit in some way, either in their libraries or their archives or their schools.

KR: But there's some work out there now that you don't respect?

HN: Well, I'm judgmental, as I expect people to be judgmental toward me, and they have been. For instance, I have a set of children's plays based on some of the Inuit stories that the Mermaid Theatre Company in Nova Scotia is touring all through the Maritimes and will then bring up to the new Inuit nation. A young woman, twenty-two years old, is one of the cultural consultants on it. I'm very anxious to go up there and see these performed. You have to be willing to put yourself out there and hear people say "I liked this" and "I didn't like that." People can tell when your intentions are not selfish.

KR: I'm wondering now how your interest in collecting and representing folktales was transformed into writing fiction. I hear you resisting the ethnographic impulse to generalize about whole cultures, to allow instead for that to be filtered through a personal and particularizing lens as happens in the best fiction. I know that you've spoken in other interviews about how it took some emotional courage and settling down with your wife, the poet Jane Shore, to begin work on fiction. But was there really such a disjuncture between your work as a folklorist and your becoming a novelist?

HN: I hate all the "wonder-of-me" stuff that goes on with writers in interviews. To tell you the truth, I think I got older. And traveling — for whatever psychological, personal, financial, or work-related reasons — to that many places over that period of time produces a kind of exhaustion. I saw a lot of people drifting further and further north and even started taking assignments myself up in Greenland and Repulse Bay. You have to figure out ways to assess what you want in your personal life. I did want to write something different — at the time I didn't know it was fiction. Anyway, at the time you're going through things you don't think biographically. You just think: "What am I going to do next?" There's a lot of fear involved in leaving something familiar.

KR: So you were going further and further out and that created an impulse to come way back in?

HN: I think there was a kind of boomerang effect. I have thrown myself very far out psychologically and geographically. But there's a point where you hope you'll spin around back toward something, maybe just a deeper engagement with the thing you're involved in. For me it was a three- or

four-year period of a little bit of this and a little bit of that, but I was moving away from the travel writing and ethnographic writing. Oddly enough, after these novels and the screen writing, I'm starting to take assignments again working for magazines such as the *Smithsonian*, writing on birds and such. In part, it's more functional — it allows me to take my family places — but also I've never lost the love of writing about those places. I simply didn't want it to be so featured. I had come to the point where I thought I'd better take another turn. I was quite lost for a couple of years. I thought that I had made a huge error by switching horses in midstream and trying to write fiction. I've often wondered if that first novel hadn't had some small recognition, would I have had the kind of momentum and stamina to do more. Because it's not my background — I studied zoology, and I didn't come from a literary family, to say the least. But I was fortunate with Jane and other people really being supportive, but tough. So I find it kind of ironic that of late I've been thinking of working again for the *Nature Conservancy* and other magazines, going places and writing small essays. I like to go to these places, but now also it's involved with the idea of constructing memories. You can tell when you're going to be in a place that something might strike you as interesting for a novel.

KR: Your first novel *The Northern Lights* was based more on your own adolescent experience of going up into the outback?

HN: Partly it's autobiographical — more tonally than literally autobiographical. For instance, there's a little section in which that kid Noah goes out into the woods and his itinerant father shows up. When I handed it to my editor that section was probably sixty or seventy pages long. She called me up and said: "Howard, did you read this?" And I said, "Let me read it again." I was astonished. Clearly I was taking this point of opportunity to yell at my own absent father. But after I read it again in the context of this book, it ended up being about a paragraph long. So I think in that sense too, in the stuff that wasn't published in that book, it was very much a transitional piece of writing. I haven't read it since and I don't know that I will.

KR: So you haven't in fact published anything about the experience of being more of an ethnographer and linguist?

HN: No, and I am working on that. When this present novel is done I'm going to try to complete a non-fiction book about Helen and about that time with Mark. I don't yet know what form it'll take, really.... I'm publishing little sections of it, and I find it very compelling that stuff from twenty years ago is coming back with such clarity. But again, the book about Helen is really about a friendship. The premise is that, given certain circumstances — a compressed amount of time — and if there is a willingness, you can learn an awful lot about a person, pack a lot of knowledge about each other, into two or three months. But since she was so ill, I want

to try to avoid any sentimentalizing because she hated that. She got into some strange theories of reincarnation that I knew were desperate and hallucinatory. Instead the book focuses on the day-to-day — I have an easy way to contrast what she was doing with what I was doing. In a way its structure is more novelistic.

On the other hand, this person was dying, and given the recent cultural propensity for memoir and our insane tendency to congratulate ourselves just for having a memory, I think that I am nervous about this. I'm trying to scrutinize that genre. The best memoirs are written with a sense of the almost painful difficulty of moving from private to public. That's a hard thing to calibrate, but you know when it happens. A memoir like *A Romantic Education* by Patricia Hampl about going to Czechoslovakia is a great example of writing out of a personal sense of investigation into life and spirituality. Because it's so intimately written, it becomes intimate to a reader. It is not based on the notion of shared experience, which is the death of the spirit — shared experience in the sense that: "We all have suffered in the same way," "We all were abused," or "We all have repressed memories" — a sort of twelve-step literary program to writing a memoir.

KR: Part of the challenge for you must be that step into creative non-fiction, being neither autobiographical fiction nor ethnographic folklore?

HN: Right. One of the freedoms, of course, of fiction is that you can assign your characters all your most deeply felt opinions — you're writing ventriloquilly.