

JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON: AN INTERVIEW*

JEAN W. ROSS

[John William Corrington was interviewed by Jean Ross by telephone, September 4, 1981, at Corrington's home in New Orleans. The interview was published in a bibliographical reference series entitled *Contemporary Authors*.]

CA: *You began your college years as a music student. Did you plan at that point to be a musician rather than a writer?*

CORRINGTON: Yes. I had planned to be a big-band trumpet player, but just about the time I graduated from college the big bands vanished. But I always loved music; it was my first love, and I expect it will be my last.

CA: *You told Contemporary Poets that your early work in poetry gave you "a far greater sensitivity to form and style than an apprenticeship in prose fiction would have produced." Did you plan in the beginning to move from poetry to fiction?*

CORRINGTON: Yes. It seemed to me that since poetry is shorter, you could execute even a fairly long poem reasonably quickly and concentrate on the individual words, the lines, the rhythms. You just couldn't undertake to write a novel when you were under the pressure of being in graduate school. You're not going to be able to hold that much in your head while you're being interfered with by literary history and criticism courses and that sort of thing. It was a very deliberate decision because I figured, look, why not start with the shortest and most intense form with the ideal of one day writing a page of prose so that is somebody threw open my book at page 301, they'd say, "Hell, what a page." You master the smallest units then you don't have to think about them any longer. You can afford to think about the longer form because you know through your self-training in the short form that the small units are taken care of.

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CA: *Why did you choose to go to England, to the University of Sussex, for a Ph.D.?*

CORRINGTON: I wanted to study with David Daiches, and furthermore I was sick and tired of the American graduate system—the endless English courses one takes that one either doesn't need or doesn't believe in and the refusal to allow one further courses in music, history, and philosophy. The farther I went in the American system, the narrower it got. I was forced to take more and more courses in areas that I had no interest in and which I could've picked up careful reading anyhow. In England you simply write a dissertation; if it is considered publishable in its present state, you go up for examination. There are only two examiners: an interior examiner who'll be your dissertation director and an exterior examiner from another university. I had Matthew Hodjart of Cambridge on my committee, and he and Professor Daiches examined me. When you go up you don't go only for a D. Phil. They evaluate your writing, evaluate your oral examination, and then give you one of three degrees. You could get a bachelor of literature, a master of philosophy, or a doctor of philosophy; and I got the D. Phil.

CA: *So it really is dependent on your doing good work.*

CORRINGTON: Yes, instead of all this classroom time. They figure it's up to *you* to determine what you need, but when you get up in front of them, *they'll* determine what you've got.

CA: *You've cited Eric Voegelin as an important influence on your writing. How did you come to Voegelin's work?*

CORRINGTON: Well, Professor Voegelin had taught at LSU when I was an undergraduate there,* but I didn't know him. When I went to LSU as a faculty member, I was reading manuscripts for the LSU Press. They couldn't pay you money so they gave you books. The director of the LSU Press at that time, Dick Wentworth, offered me the three volumes of *Order and History*. I was very much interested in Southern history then and said, "Ah, Dick, I don't want these." He said, "Listen, everybody says they're great; you ought to read them." So I went home and I read *Israel and Revelation* and thought it was the greatest book I'd read on any subject, and then read the other two and spent the rest of my time

* Editor's Note: Corrington received his undergraduate degree from Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana. He attended LSU as an undergraduate his sophomore year.

finding everything I could by Professor Voegelin. I would say his work is probably the greatest influence on my intellectual life.

CA: *What was Voegelin's primary influence on your life and work?*

CORRINGTON: It's very hard to say, really. When I finished *Israel and Revelation*, I had the distinct feeling that Professor Voegelin had shown me how God did it—through the Jewish people, the symbolic structure, the representation of reality in the Old Testament, the cosmological empires, and the rest. It was just that the world looked different, less arbitrary and more intelligible. And it has stayed that way.

CA: *That kind of influence doesn't often come along.*

CORRINGTON: No, it doesn't. I think you have to be prepared for it. But Dr. Edward Murray Clark of Centenary College had prepared me by excellent courses in the scripture, and I prepared myself by reading Latin and Greek classics. I was more ready for Voegelin's work than most people since nobody gets a decent classical education anymore; you either luck into it or you just don't have it. Since I happened to be ready, his work pulled together all the things that interested me: theology, literary criticism, symbolic studies, even psychology—everything I knew a little bit about fed into and was made coherent by Voegelin's work. And it's still going on.

CA: *You've been called a Catholic writer and, not just a Southern writer, but a traditional apologist for the South. How do you feel about those labels?*

CORRINGTON: I really don't think about them much at all. I figure that history will determine what I was, and I needn't put a label on myself. Those who do that generally want to set up something they can attack. I am Catholic and I am a Southerner; I love my country—the South—and if that constitutes a justification of the labels, fine. As a critic I never found it necessary to create labels because the works stand by themselves. I don't think anybody would spot a syllable of Catholicism in my most recent novel, *The Man Who Slept with Women*,* which is going around to the publishers now.

* Editor's Note: *The Man Who Slept with Woman* was published under the title *Shad Sentell* (New York: Congdon & Weed, 1984).

CA: *You've been working on that for several years?*

CORRINGTON: Actually, ten years of thinking and four months of writing. It's produced a nine-hundred-page novel. It's so vast that anything I'd say about it would be a cartoon of the book itself. I'm happy with it and proud of it.

CA: *There are writers who resent having any mention made of regionalism in their work. I gather from your work, your comments about it, and the comments you made in the preface to Southern Writing in the Sixties that you don't feel it's necessary to apologize for that.*

CORRINGTON: If someone said, "Are you an American writer or a Southern writer?" I'd say very clearly, "I'm a Southern writer." I have no desire to represent or even fiddle around with New York and California or the rest of it. They appear in my work simply because I've been there and I've had encounters there and the experience is useful. But I would maintain I am a Southern writer, and if nobody else wants to be, that's fine; then we would have only one: me.

CA: *Most of the critics consider The Upper Hand your best novel. Do you agree?*

CORRINGTON: No, the best novel I ever wrote is *The Man Who Slept with Women* [Shad Sentell]. By the way, a number of characters from *The Upper Hand* show up in *The Man Who Slept with Women*. It was fun to evoke them again after fifteen years.

CA: *In The Bombardier you presented, through the six main characters, a look at the diversity of American society and the violence that permeates our history. How did this book begin in your mind?*

CORRINGTON: That book was really almost a philosophical meditation. It was dedicated to Barbara Steinberg and my students at the University of California because I was there in 1968, pretty much at the height of all the activity of the '60s. I had gone there with the full expectation of having to defend myself with a machine gun because I disagreed with every single idea I thought they had. I didn't like dope, I was absolutely opposed to the anti-Vietnam business, and I figured it was going to be a rough term. To my astonishment, they loved me. And I loved them. I remember Tom Parkinson, who was a professor of English at Berkeley, came up to me at the end of the semester and said, "Is it true that you have had three standing ovations in your lectures on modern

literature?" And I said, "Yeah, it was really spooky." And he said, "Well, that's one more than any professor at this campus has ever received." It was a strange time. Many of my students were screwed up emotionally, they had no sense of history, no sense of humor to speak of, but they were brilliant. If intellect alone made a human being, they would have been supermen and superwomen. They were incredible kids, but what they lacked made them miserable. They saw in me (and ironically, in my Southern past) serenity and a sense of a deeper knowledge than all their intellect could provide. One of them told me, "God, I wish I'd been born in the South." And I said, "Son, I'm not sure you mean that." Because it takes a certain kind of person to be happy here. You've always got your Tom Wickers and your Willy Morrisses trotting up to New York to kiss somebody's fanny and get paid for denouncing their own country. Then where're the rest of us like Faulkner and Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor and me. Hell, I wish I had a buck for every time I've been asked to go to California or New York. In fact we got an offer last night and I said no again. It used to be that I just didn't want to go, but now I'm getting kind of proud of saying no. *The Bombardier* was my attempt to explain the present as it rose from the past—for my Berkeley students. And perhaps, through Boileau, to explain part of myself to me.

CA: *You became a lawyer in 1975. What led you to the decision to study and practice law?*

CORRINGTON: Well, I was sick of academia, so I got out of that in '72 and started law school at Tulane. I think part of it was the fact that my dad had been a lawyer and had always wanted me to be one and I had always said, "No. I'm going my own way." But then I had a little bit of spare time and we were financially OK and why not do that for him, even if it was posthumously? There was one other reason: when I told my father I had a job at LSU, he said, "Well, son, teaching at LSU for awhile is OK, but when are you going to get a job?" He didn't regard teaching school or writing novels—or doing movies, God knows—as serious work fit for a responsible and bright man. But when I became a lawyer, you see, I had a place in the social order just like everybody else.

CA: *And then you could write in your spare time.*

CORRINGTON: That's right. And that's fine, because, remember, Faulkner always said he was a farmer whose writing was a hobby; that was because people understood what a farmer was, and if a farmer had a crazy and eccentric hobby, that was all right.

CA: *What kind of law do you specialize in?*

CORRINGTON: Well, because we write for television I haven't been able to practice for a couple of years. But I may go back to it one day. My favorite work is appellate work; that's where you go before the appeals court to argue either to defend a case you won or to overturn a lower-court decision if you lost. I feel this is where I'm really at my best because I can marshal the facts and present oral argument and written argument perhaps at a more sophisticated level than the average working lawyer who, after all, is not a specialist in legal thinking, philosophical thinking, or in writing. So it just seems that what I like best and what one would presume would be my best area came together.

CA: *You and your wife, Joyce Hooper Corrington, have collaborated on several screenplays and have written for television for several years. How did the collaboration begin?*

CORRINGTON: Jo worked with me from the first. Roger Corman, who used to be called the king of B-movies, wanted me to do a screenplay on Baron von Richthofen, who, as it happened, I really knew a lot about. Jo is a superb organizer so we got together and organized and wrote that one, and one led to the next. Then along came the TV stuff, and once again her first-rate organizational abilities and the fact that she is a good writer, too, helped. Even though she has her Ph.D. in chemistry, she had taken writing courses in college and is pretty much a natural writer. She doesn't have the same drive toward it that I do, but if she wanted to write you a movie script, or a novel, boy could she ever do it.

CA: *Does the television work require you to travel much?*

CORRINGTON: We've never left our home, wherever we were living with the children. We never set up shop in a place outside Louisiana. But, for example, when we were working regularly in television we would go up to New York about every two months and stay three days or so. Actually, it's all right to go to New York five or six times a year for a few days. We'd go to the opera, we'd go to a couple of plays, we'd look in the book shops and the record shops and go to nice restaurants and see friends. It was a real party. But I would never want to stay in New York more than a week. When I'm away from the boys more than three days or so I start getting worried and concerned and unhappy.

CA: *How old are your children?*

CORRINGTON: My eldest is nineteen, my next is fifteen, and my baby is fourteen. It's hard to believe I have a child nineteen because it seems like yesterday I picked him up at the hospital. I refuse to allow myself to become sentimental about this because it could really make me very unhappy. Some people say, oh boy, when our kids are gone we're going to do this and that or the other things. I say when your kids are gone you're going to look around and you're going to be dead. I don't want my kids to leave. I know that they have to; I know it's proper that they do so; but I'll still miss them every single day for the rest of my life.

CA: *Do you find it difficult to switch back and forth between writing fiction and writing for movies or television?*

CORRINGTON: No. There's an absolute difference. Joyce says it's funny because when I write for television or movies I always use a typewriter. And when I finished my latest book, there before me were 1,982 pages of handwritten manuscript. There's such a difference. *The Great Gatsby* was written in 1925; they've made three movies of it (the middle one was pretty good). All are out of general circulation, and nobody except on a late-night program would even consider showing them, but the novel is selling very well, thank you. I didn't start out to make money; I started out with the express purpose of being one of the finest American writers of the twentieth century, knowing that I would never know if I had won or not. The movies and TV are a way to keep eating. Nobody pays for quality writing today.

CA: *It takes the perspective of time, doesn't it?*

CORRINGTON: Sure. I love to ask people who was the best-selling novelist in England in the nineteenth century. The unsophisticated say Charles Dickens; the more sophisticated say George Meredith or Thackeray, and then you can name the Brontës and Jane Austen and everybody. And I say, "No, I'm sorry, the best-selling novelist in England in the nineteenth century was Lord Bulwer-Lytton. You may know of one of his books, *The Last Days of Pompeii*." Seriously, he sold more books than anybody—Trollope, Disraeli, and of the dozens of names you could come up with of really top-notch nineteenth-century British novelists. Bulwer-Lytton was the Harold Robbins of the nineteenth century, and nobody has reprinted one of his books since he died. Except possibly *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

CA: *You've proven yourself able in many fields. Has it been difficult to decide where to concentrate your energy?*

CORRINGTON: Yes. Not early on, but now. I'm getting tired, and I can tell I'm getting old because it used to be I was like a young gunfighter—not only was I going to win, but the other guy probably wouldn't even get clear of the leather. When you get older, you find out you can't expend yourself in so many directions. Maybe the reason is I was uncritical when I was young and just producing whatever came into my mind, but as I got older and learned more, I stopped letting something get out of hand the way I used to.

For example, I just got some reviews of my new book of short stories, *The Southern Reporter*. The *Washington Post Book World* review was the best review I have ever gotten on anything. The review concludes that if you want a masterpiece, you want *The Southern Reporter*. And the fact is, I wasn't terribly happy with the book in the sense that I felt at least the title story, which is the one that the reviewer liked a lot, was really unfinished and needed maybe six months of thinking and fiddling with before it was satisfactory.

Well, hell, maybe as I get older, I'm holding things too long or trying to get a measure of perfection which won't even matter—now or later. It's very hard to know because unfortunately I am not a genius of Mozart's order. All Mozart had to do was sit down with a pen and write whatever came into his mind and it was a masterpiece, period, and everyone knows it. But most of us would be pretentious fools to try that. It's not that I'm getting scared or doubting my capacities as I get older; I've just perhaps become wiser to the fact that this is a very heavy game, and the heavier I realize it is, the more I've got to take my time.

CA: *You want to do it better.*

CORRINGTON: Yes, I want to be better. But better for me is not necessarily better for an audience. What audiences want today seems gibberish to me. My fiction is almost never translatable into a film. I think it speaks well for the books as fiction because any book that translates immediately into a film is obviously garbage. Not because there's something wrong with film but because the book must be simpleminded if you can do a really first-rate film of it. For example, take *Heart of Darkness* by Conrad; you can't make a film out of that because you must see Kurtz, but you mustn't see Kurtz. That's one little technical problem. But this goes on and on. To me Conrad's greatest

book is a novel called *Victory*, a dynamite, wild adventure story that reminds me of *Sanctuary* by Faulkner, but you couldn't turn it into a film. Only the lurid part would be filmic. The part that matters is in the hearts of the characters, and it would be hell to try to reveal this. If they want to do a film of my new novel, it will be fine with me, but it'll be a completely different thing. The farce elements and the yokel jokes would be the primary stuff, and somebody will say, "Hey, this is a 200-IQ version of the 'Dukes of Hazzard.'" And this would be true—you'd lose the central story. You'd think of it only as a different, alternate form of entertainment, metaphysical and spiritual contemplation for imbeciles.

CA: Are there future projects you'd like to talk about?

CORRINGTON: I'm always looking forward to the next thing. Right now I've blocked out one new novel; I've sort of blocked out a couple of short stories, though I haven't yet gotten the call to sit down and write them. I'm very much hoping that we'll be in a financial position for me just to go ahead and devote full time to the writing now. I feel like this decade, my fifties, is *my* time, and if I can find time to do it, I swear I could turn out at least ten novels. Well, if it's going to get done, now is it because I'm not going to get any smarter to speak of and I'm certainly not going to get any younger.

