NINO RICCI: A Big Canvas

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Mary Rimmer

Nino Ricci was born in Leamington, Ontario, and holds degrees from York University and Concordia University. His first novel, Lives of the Saints *(Cormorant, 1990), won the Governor General's Award for Fiction and numerous other awards, and became a national best-seller. He has also published stories and articles in a variety of magazines and journals, and taught English literature and Creative Writing in Canada and elsewhere. His second novel,* In a Glass House, *which is also the second book in the trilogy that* Lives of the Saints *began, was published in 1993.*

Nino Ricci now lives in Toronto, and is a full-time writer. I spoke with him after his February 1993 reading at the University of New Brunswick.

MR *Lives of the Saints* is the first volume of a trilogy. For a first novel, or a first group of novels, that seems a very daunting format. Are there problems involved with working on such a big canvas? Do you lose track of things?

NR Well, the biggest problem is committing yourself to that much work and that long a time, having no idea at the outset whether you'll ever be published, whether the work has any value, whether it will ever see anything other than the inside of a drawer. Certainly I wouldn't have started this project if I'd known I'd be working at it for this long—it was mainly foolish innocence that kept me going. I was working with Terry Byrnes at Concordia University when I began, and I remember telling him around 1985, "Terry, I think it's going to take me another year to finish my trilogy." He thought I was being a little optimistic.

Apart from the length of time, it is hard to hold that much material comfortably in one's head all at once—it's hard to carry through strands of imagery, motifs, and themes. I'm trying to let it work as memory might. I didn't re-read *Lives of the Saints* until a few months ago, and I hadn't read it for almost three years at that point, so I was working a bit in the dark on the second book. Yet there were things from the first book which stuck out as salient to me, and I tied those in and referred back to them. That seemed a useful way of doing the writing: I took whatever came to the top of my head, both aesthetically and thematically, instead of imposing things that didn't seem to arise spontaneously. So far that seems to be working.

My biggest fear, when I was moving from the first book to the second, was about tone. The tone has changed substantially in the second—though there are all sorts of justifications for that. I hope that someone reading the two will still be convinced that the narrator is the same person. If I had been able to write all three of them at once, and then make them consistent, perhaps that would have been better, but as it is, I'm stuck with the fact that I was at a certain stage in my writing in the first book, and I'm at a very different stage now—and will be at still another in the third. But I've conceived a way to work that process in: the narrator as he writes the story will become more understanding of it, and as he does so he will become more complex—and more difficult to understand.

MR Of course, Vittorio does presumably age, as character if not as narrator, so we'd expect a somewhat different voice to emerge.

NR Yes, and there will also be a change in him as narrator. At the end, there will be an epilogue where he talks about the writing process, what he's gone through, and so on.

MR *Lives of the Saints* reads a bit like a *bildungsroman.* Even if you don't intend to make Vittorio a writer or an artist, do you think that's part of the way the book works? Can we read it as the portrait of a young artist?

NR To an extent, yes. Initially that was exactly where it was going, and it was partly because of the advice of my adviser at Concordia that I removed that. Vittorio was going to be a writer in adulthood. Removing that freed me up a lot—it meant I didn't have to have all paths leading to one clear goal, and to reduce everything to that. But that said, there are a lot of issues that can still tie into that motif. I was very much influenced by *Lives of Girls and Women,* which is a portrait of the young artist, and a lot of the issues which come up in Alice Munro's book come up to an extent in my second one. So I would say yes, the *bildungsroman* idea is there in a sense, but I didn't want to limit it to the creation of a writer. The sense of being an outsider, or on the margins, is often how the artist is portrayed— it is also applicable to many other situations—that of being an immigrant, for instance. I wanted to play across the field on that one.

MR *Lives of the Saints* won you lots of awards, of course, including the Governor General's Award for Fiction. What if any effect has winning those awards had on you as a writer?

NR It's hard to say. I take myself more seriously than I used to. I do feel a greater sense of legitimacy as a writer—although one always wonders about these awards and what they really mean. It's three people sitting in a room, and usually it's a compromise decision. They choose the one book that nobody *dis*liked, although they all had their real favourites, which nobody could agree on. When the award is presented they always say the winner is "the best book of the year," but you have to remember those three people in that room. So I've tended to look at the award practically, instead of seeing it as a final judgement on my writing. And practically it's been a great boon, partly because the Canada Council has now made it their mandate to promote the award, and the winners of the award, and to make the public aware of them. So I think it's made my life as a writer easier, in terms of getting readers, getting publishers, and knowing that I'll be able to continue doing that.

MR That may have something to do with the fact that after a decade of teaching, studying, and writing, you now describe yourself as a full-time writer. What are some of the rewards and problems of writing full-time, without a back-up occupation?

NR Well, the rewards are that I can do what I want to be doing every day, which is a luxury very few people seem to have. The beauty of that is that it's much less stress-provoking to sit down and write every day when I know that if I don't get it right today I've got tomorrow and the next day. When I was trying to write in little chunks of time, there would be a tremendous anxiety— "If I don't get it out now, then I have to do such-and-such and the time will be gone." It's opened up my writing process to have that space to explore every avenue, and finally arrive at the right thing.

day and thought, "Well, I really did what I wanted to: I got the book published, I won this award, and everything's going well, and I've achieved my goals, so what else is there? This is the rest of my *life* now?" So I think there's a real danger of stagnation. I keep thinking about a comment that somebody made about Genet, who was a criminal and did all sorts of interesting things before he started writing. But he never had anything to say about his life after he started writing. Nothing interesting happened to him after that.

MR In *Lives of the Saints* the young Vittorio recounts his experience up to the point of his arrival in Canada. As someone born in Leamington, did you find it hard to use him as a narrator? Was it difficult to think yourself into his mind?

NR I think initially it was—initially, because I started with the idea for a different book (the third book). I was resistant, first of all, to going back to a child's point of view, and to spending much time on that village. I could handle everything else, but these two things I thought I couldn't do very well—perhaps that's why I ended up doing both! So I spent a lot of time trying to get that right. I did have a certain background to draw from: I'd been to my mother's village, which Valle del Sole is based on—I was there when I was twelve, when my mind was still fairly impressionable, and I took away a lot of images from that trip. I also went back a number of times after that, and I'd been part of a research project that involved interviewing a lot of Italian immigrants from that area. So I had a sense of the general sociological context, and since I was raised in a town with a fairly large Italian community, I also had an intuitive sense of the dynamics of a village like Valle del Sole. I wasn't sure how intuitive that would be when I started writing, but in the end it worked and I went with it.

There's a lot of material that was eventually cut from the book. Where it starts now used to be about page 72, and the first 71 pages were just description of the town, and historical background, that sort of thing. Once I had learned all that material, it was possible to get rid of it, because it was present in the story—but I had to go through the process of writing it out and getting to know it.

MR In their reviews of *Lives of the Saints*, Tom Marshall and Constance Rooke both suggest that Cristina is conceived along feminist lines. Would you agree with that assessment, or did those comments come as a surprise?

NR No, they didn't come as a surprise. At Concordia I had to do courses in literary theory, as part of the academic side of the degree, and what interested me most in that was feminist theory, simply because, much more than a lot of postmodern theory, it was trying to engage with the world and to restructure the way we live. Feminism is causing quite a significant change—it's bringing about one of the largest revolutions we've experienced in a couple of thousand years. I wanted to find a way to deal with that in the book.

That said, I couldn't make Cristina a feminist, because she wouldn't have had access to that ideology. But my own experience contradicted the stereotype that people tend to have of Italy, particularly Southern Italy, as being a very macho culture and very repressive towards women. That's one aspect of Italian culture, but I think it's largely there because that society has been so poor, so that men have traditionally not had much power in it. They've often been oppressed by governments; they've been forced to leave home and find work, and have often had to stay away for months at a time. Long before the emigration overseas started, they would leave to work in Northern Italy, say. And then with the emigration overseas in the twentieth century, that absence could be for five years or more. Before World War II the tendency was for men to leave, work for several years, come back perhaps for a winter, go back, work again, and come back home again. So they didn't have control over their wives or families. A lot of the misogyny that we see in those men comes from fear of the power that their absence gave to women. A tradition of very strong women developed: at least within the narrow domestic and village spheres, women had a lot to say, and a lot of power and control. That was something that I wanted to deal with, because it conformed to my own experience of Italian women—in my own family and among my relatives.

MR Did the choice of Vittorio as narrator have anything to do with needing to legitimize the handling of Cristina? Because we are getting her through the obviously naive eyes of her son, no one's likely to accuse you of trying to "do feminism" from a masculine perspective.

NR I may have been trying to do that. Every boy has had a mother, after all, and so there is a certain legitimacy in the voice of a boy reflecting on his mother. The son's perspective also made it easier to see Cristina as a humane and sympathetic character, because we have such strong associations with the mother-child bond. She obviously does cause problems: the grandfather loses his reputation, and her son also goes through difficulties. Her actions do have negative consequences, and there's nothing strictly altruistic about the way she behaves. But having that strong relation- ship provides an emotional counter to the more negative aspects of her behaviour.

MR What my last question touched on, of course, is the appropriation of voice issue. Is it appropriate for an author to write from the perspective of another gender or culture—or is that even possible?

NR Yes, I think it's both appropriate and possible, and lots of writers do it successfully. I don't think I would—and I haven't. We don't enter the mother's head in *Lives of the Saints*. In earlier drafts, I did have a few chapters where I tried to but I couldn't—I could have faked it, but it seemed truer for me to stay outside her mind. And I think I would be very wary as a writer of entering characters whom I didn't feel I knew well. In the second book there's a section that takes place in Africa, where I lived for two years, and the same issue might arise there. I was in Africa long enough to get a fairly good overview of the culture and to have a sense of it, but I don't think I would be able to write credibly or responsibly from the perspective of someone who was born and raised there, based on that two-year experience. Still, as I said, I think some writers do that sort of thing very well. For instance, Thomas Pynchon in Gravity's Rain-bow moves across a whole spectrum of different cultures and perspectives, and generally does it credibly— although not with women, actually. Women are his weakest spot. But I don't see anything immoral about doing that. It seems almost a basic freedom of expression issue: you shouldn't fetter the imagination.

MR What motivated you to choose saints' lives as the mythic structure of your first novel? I know it's been hinted that *Lives* is imitation Robertson Davies (though it didn't strike me that way as I read), but from your perspective, why the interest in saints' lives?

NR Well, I certainly was influenced by *Fifth Business*, and probably some of my interest in saints goes back to that book, but it also comes out of my own Catholic background. Oddly though, being raised as a Catholic in Canada, you hear very little about the saints. We had mainly the standard biblical stories, and after Vatican II not even much of that. From my experience of Italy though, it seemed that Catholicism there had a much more Pagan base than it tends to in Canada or in other countries. That's manifested through the adoration of the saints, whose stories tend to play a much larger role than the biblical ones do. So the saints' lives in the book are partly an attempt to enter into the mentality of that world, and to find a correlative in it for the formative influences on my own imagination. Whereas for me those influences were the story of Christ, and wanting to be a priest, it seemed that in an Italian village the same imaginative energy would go into the saints' lives. Once I had decided that, there was all sorts of material to draw from, material that tied into other issues as well. When I was doing my undergraduate degree I was influenced by Northrop Frye's idea of the monomyth which underlies all narrative, and by various other mythical interpretations of literature. Writing *Lives of the Saints*, I was looking for ways to integrate that level of myth, and the saints' stories were one way of doing that.

MR Ally McKay suggests in her review that Cristina is fundamentally different from Santa Cristina, even though she resembles the saint in certain ways (being surrounded by a community who despise her, for instance). To McKay, Cristina's actions are individualistic, are not aimed at improving the community, and finally lead her away from the community, into something like a retreat. Was that difference between Cristina and her namesake part of your conception of her—or does she have an impact on those around her after all?

NR I think it's hard to give a clear schematic breakdown of that. The saints' stories are presented as didactic stories with clear morals. You know who's in the right, and you know the lesson of the story. In fiction and in life—that is, in good fiction and in life—it's never that clear. So obviously there are ambiguities in Cristina's situation that we don't see in Santa Cristina's. The saint's story is presented as a sort of alternate reading of Cristina's life. On the one hand, in the strictest technical terms of the religion that she forms part of, she is the sinner. On the other hand, as the rebel (and saints always tended to be the rebels) she's behaving more in the spirit of sainthood than the villagers are; they are simply following the dogmatic rules of the society that they belong to, as were the people around Santa Cristina.

There are of course moral ambiguities about the way Cristina behaves, but then, when people live in that sort of repressive environment, they don't start out thinking, "How am I going to change the society?" They start out thinking "What are my options here? What can I do? I need some avenue of self- expression." And in that kind of community your options are fairly limited. So for Cristina to take a lover was a rebellious act within the rules of her society. Granted it's not an altruistic, other-directed act like Santa Cristina's, but it's what she had available as a means of rebellion. I would say that when someone actively rebels against and questions a narrow moral structure, there will be an effect on that structure, even if that is not the intention. The community will have to find a way to either accommodate or expel that person, and will be changed in some way. But I don't think one can draw a clear dividing line between what is morally right and morally wrong.

MR Or between what's saintly and what isn't.

NR Yes.

MR Cristina's ability to laugh, at the priests for example, seems to be one of her strengths. Is that one of her gifts to her community, as well as something that helps her survive?

NR Yes, I would say so. It's certainly an aspect of her rebelliousness, and perhaps the most constructive one because it's good-spirited.

MR It's sad though that she can't seem to pass the laughter on to Vittorio; he is "so serious," as she says.

NR Yes, he's pretty messed up.

MR And going on what you read from *In a Glass House*, it seems that the seriousness stays with him, and gets worse.

NR Yes—he becomes his father's son. His father's very morose, and conflicted, and somehow he manages to pick up much more of that than of his mother's qualities. His half-sister, who has never known her mother, picks up much more from Cristina.

MR Is it significant that the baby born to Cristina just before she dies is a girl? She's always been in such a masculine world, despite the absence of her husband. Is the girl-child another legacy, a part of Cristina that will go on?

NR Very much so. The mother was given birth to by the daughter, in a sense; the daughter was the first character I had, and there is going to be an obvious continuity between the two. And the daughter of course will live in the modern world, and have access to feminist ideas. I wanted to have a chance to play with the differences and similarities in their situations, and in how they confront those situations— and I wanted to carry through the spirit from the first to the second book.

MR I've noticed that your fiction tends to centre on isolated figures, such as Vittorio, and the narrator in the short story "Going to the Moon." These characters seem to feel that they're marked out from others because of their experience, ethnic origin or language. Would it be accurate to say that isolation is a central preoccupation of yours?

NR Yes, I guess so—in my life and in my writing. In my life, it started out as a sense of being marginalized. I perceived it as being marked out for my ethnicity or for being an immigrant, but it quickly expanded into other areas: very soon I was marked out for many other reasons! So it's certainly something that comes from my own experience, and it inevitably crops up in my writing, although when I first started writing I didn't deal with the issue—as for instance in "Still Life," my story in *The Fiddlehead*.

MR Yet even there I felt the same sense of isolation, although it's not the horizon-to-horizon alienation that a child can feel.

NR Perhaps there was more avoidance of that in earlier drafts. But even in the final draft, the characters are stripped of ethnic origins: that whole aspect of them just isn't there. Coming to *Lives of the Saints*, I did want to deal with what the feeling of alienation grew out of in my own background. On the other hand, in *Lives of the Saints* the characters' outsider status isn't the result of ethnicity, or immigration, but rather of a situation which could happen in any community. In more general terms what interests me about isolation is its connection to the formation of the artist:

typically the artist is someone who stands outside the community and therefore sees it in starker, perhaps more realistic terms than those who are inside it, and don't question its rules. I think it's almost necessary in a good work of fiction to have an outsider character, who is being forced to test those rules by negative experience, or is in some other way set apart from the community, and sees things from that perspective. So maybe it's just a technical thing after all.

MR *Lives of the Saints* was originally your M.A. thesis. Given the book's success, that sounds like a great advertisement for creative writing programmes at universities. Do you think that's a good way for prospective writers to go—to think of doing a creative writing degree?

NR The wisdom seems to be divided on this, and it's hard to say whether people who come out of a programme doing well wouldn't have done as well or better without it. Certainly for me the writing workshops provided a supportive community, and it was helpful to have advice from professors and working writers: I went through a tremendous improvement in my writing and in my understanding of writing. Programmes like that also give you an environment in which you develop the discipline to write. I had almost two years in which I was more or less free to write, apart from occasional work as a teaching assistant, and in the world at large I don't think anyone would have given me that much space. On the other hand, the value of the workshops themselves may be more questionable. First of all you tend to look only at short works, like short stories, and second you tend to fall into a certain "workshopese," into easy, empty phrases that can be very intimidating, because they sound authoritative ("I'm not sure you've earned that cliché," for instance). It may not be healthy to pass people through this mill, so that they all end up writing the same way. I didn't find that was really the case—perhaps because there was a wide mixture of people coming in, and there were several different professors teaching. Given that, it was impossible to completely repress people's native instincts, at least in eight-month workshops.

So, on the whole I think Creative Writing programmes are positive. Yet I remember something that Ann Copeland said to me: she feels that they produce false expectations. People go into them expecting to come out and be writers, or to teach writing. It can be a self-perpetuating system: the graduates all go out and become creative writing instructors, teaching other people to go out and be creative writing instructors. Perhaps not much actual writing gets done, because there's no time for it. I can see a danger there, because our society is not at a point where it's willing to support many writers. Inevitably a lot of these people are going to be frustrated. But—they're adults.

MR If workshops are one possible way of learning to write, what about reading? Should writers start off their careers reading a lot, immersing themselves in books?

NR Yes, I think that's important. I'm sure there are lots of exceptions out there who can do without it, but it was important for me. When I was young I read a lot, and in fact in university the courses I did in literature were more useful to me than the writing workshops: I probably learned more from Shakespeare than I did from my peers. But students going into Creative Writing programmes often don't realize that reading is crucial. That was the sense I sometimes got teaching Creative Writing. I'd bring in short stories, say, by real writers and the students would ask "Why do we have to read this?"

MR Did you always want to be a writer, or was that something you came to later on in your life?

NR Well, it's possible to go back now and construct a story . . .

MR As in a classic *bildungsroman*— !

NR "It started in Grade Two . . ." I do have my own little story, but there were various things I wanted to do when I was young. I did have a facility for writing though—it was something that got noticed, and because people paid attention to me for it, I did more of it. I actually wrote my first novel in Grade Five, though probably lots of people wrote novels in Grade Five, novels just as bad as mine was. But being a writer was an idea that was there, and I think I was working towards it from that age in some way. As other things fell away, it was the thing that remained.

MR You're currently a director of the Canadian Centre of PEN International. Could you comment on your concern for writers who are subject to political persecution?

NR Sure—but I should start out by saying that although I'm on the board, I haven't been very active recently. I think it all goes back to my Catholic upbringing. When I was in Grade Three I promised God in church that I would be a priest one day. I wasn't able to make good on that promise, but the indoctrination left its mark—it certainly left me with the impression that one's purpose in life was to do something useful for the world. That's why I went to Africa to teach for two years when I graduated from university, though I'm not sure I did anyone any good there.

MR Except perhaps yourself.

NR Yes. But those years kept alive the interest in larger issues. In fact, the founder of the school that I worked at was arrested by the military régime in a coup shortly after I left the country, and was adopted as a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. So I started working for them at that point, and then when I published the book it seemed a natural transition to get involved with PEN.

MR There's been an assumption lately that censorship is a shrinking problem in the world, with the fall of communist governments and so on. From your perspective is that accurate, or are we dealing rather with a growing problem?

NR We're dealing with an increasingly complex problem. It's true that there are suddenly great chunks of the world that we used to consider the primary problem areas which are not so now, but that's made us aware of all those other problem areas which didn't used to seem headline news material. It's quite chilling when you see all the documented cases of serious abuses of human rights and freedom of expression in different countries. China remains the most outstanding example, but there's also Burma, Iran, and many others. Iran has been a big issue for PEN because of the Salman Rushdie case, and because Western governments have been so slow to react in any meaningful way. But apart from that, there are hundreds of thousands of others in Iran who are being oppressed daily—and within the Islamic world in general we get lots of reports of writers who are being accused of blasphemy, assassinated, or arrested. The issues are complex, because first of all it's not always clear who's doing the oppressing. For instance in Egypt there are hit squads that assassinate writers who blaspheme against Islam.

The government doesn't take responsibility, and in the end one suspects that it's implicitly accepted that these things will go on. Iran is similar in some ways. They claim it's a charitable organization which has offered the reward for Salman Rushdie's death, and yet this organization is legally constituted in the country and the government has never challenged them on the reward offer. And members of the government often speak in favour of the reward.

Those are the more obvious examples, but then you come to countries like Mexico, where it gets very murky. Journalists in Mexico are very poorly paid, so they're vulnerable to bribery. The press agent for a company involved in a news story, for instance, may give a journalist an envelope, with money in it—which inevitably influences the story that gets written. There are all sorts of other subtle influences. For instance, the government controls newsprint, so if it disagrees with a newspaper's story it can hold back the newsprint supply. It also controls distribution: a story critical of the government may be printed, but then the paper or magazine will just happen not to appear at the main distribution spots. Often there are implicit understandings: if a particular writer insults the President in print, the President isn't going to say "Kill that man," but a person in one organization may let it be known to someone else that probably nobody would mind if the man disappears—and so the act can never be traced back to the source. These more insidious forms of oppression are going on through ownership of the means of expression, and through more subtle leverage. As human rights organizations like PEN and Amnesty International learn how to exert influence, the people they're trying to influence are becoming more subtle in the way they dispense with their enemies. There's a growing trend in many countries not to arrest people but just to have them disappear, so that there's nobody to blame. You can't ask for them to be released from prison, because nobody knows where they are, or what has happened to them. So I would say censorship is still a major problem. PEN has something like sixty or seventy countries in which it's monitoring abuses.

MR Of course we tend to think of Western countries and Canada in particular as having "clean" censorship records, at least recently: would you say that we do, on the whole?

NR No, but I find this question hard, because it does seem to me that we can publish pretty well anything we want. . .

NR And nobody's going to shoot you.

NR Exactly. But a lot of the work that PEN has been doing has focused on Canada. One of the things that we took up was native custody of communications. Something like eighty or ninety percent of the funding that the federal government was giving for native communications was cut. It wasn't even a large sum of money—about six million dollars—and so it wasn't going to make a big difference in the budget. There seemed a clear political motive for the cut: it was around the time of Oka. A lot of native newspapers and small broadcasting stations closed down for lack of funding. So we lobbied against the government, arguing that under international human rights law, they had an obligation to support indigenous culture. We managed to save some, though not all of the funding. But that was one issue within Canada. There's also libel reform, and "libel chill": there have been several high-profile cases where people with a lot of money to hire lawyers prevent certain things from being printed in books or articles, more because they can afford to than because any real damage is being done. The libel laws are so complex that they don't always serve the cause of truth. We've been working to get those laws reformed.

MR One last question: I've noticed in both *Lives of the Saints* and "Going to the Moon" that "America" is an important concept, and Canada tends to be seen as rather vaguely as a new part of America, or where you end up if you don't reach the real America. That's a vision of Canada which Canadians tend to think of as inaccurate, but reading *Lives of the Saints* made me wonder whether the distinctiveness we prize so much is significant, or even recognizable to people other than ourselves. As a writer, is it important for you to be a Canadian rather than a North American?

NR Yes. It's important for me to say that I live in a Canadian context and speak out of a Canadian experience; that is an influence on my writing, though there are a lot of other influences as well. I do see a clear distinction between Canadian and U.S. culture. People in *Lives of the Saints* do not make those distinctions, but that's simply because they have no experience of that difference, and America is all one to them.

Certainly within my own upbringing, the American influence was very strong. We lived close to Detroit, rooted for the Detroit

Tigers, and watched American television. We only watched our one Canadian station for the American sitcoms that played in syndication in the afternoon. So there was a palpable sense of the great empire to the south, and when I was young I was much more aware of American politics, say, than of Canadian politics. But one of the things I was trying to do in "Going to the Moon" was also to deal with the disillusionment with "America." The Detroit skyline in the story represents a dream, but it's one that doesn't ultimately deliver. As a Canadian, I find it valuable to be on the outside of a big empire. One of the things I like about Canada is that it doesn't try to impose a clear sense of nationalism or national identity. . .

MR Because we've always been conscious of living on the outside of somebody else's reality.

NR Yes, and I don't think that's a bad thing. It's more of a strength.

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As this was going to press, In a Glass House *came out. In order to bring the interview up to date, I asked Nino Ricci to answer a few more questions about this book and the critical responses it had received. He generously agreed, and I spoke with him again on October 11, 1993.*

MR In his *Globe and Mail* review of *In a Glass House,* Bill Dodge suggests that the novel fails as a *bildungsroman* because "the narrator's experiences seem void of any structural significance." How would you respond to that?

NR Certainly while I was writing it, everything did have a significance, but maybe that didn't come through. The apparent absence of structure reflects the novel's situation: *In A Glass House* is a story of arrivals and dislocations. In *Lives of the Saints* there is a meaning system in place, based on the church, the values of the community, family relationships, the lives of the saints, and so on. That structure is challenged, but it's still there. In the second book it fails outright, leaving the narrator searching for something to put in its place.

Saints' lives usually move from conflict, through insight and revelation to resolution. A similar pattern governs many other kinds of stories, and so shapes the expectations readers bring to any narrative. But that pattern is part of what the narrator has lost in the second book, and so there may well be a sense that something's missing. *In a Glass House* finds him looking for patterns rather than inhabiting them. He looks in television and movie stories, for instance—he wants his family to be like the one in *Lassie.* He flirts with socialism, and experiments with therapy as a substitute for confession. But none of his searches are successful, and they don't bring revelation. Of course even in *Lives of the Saints,* he never really arrives at a revelation, but there his mother's death seems to have provided readers with a sense of closure.

I think there's a problem of expectation here. We say we live in a post-modern world, where we question teleological imperatives, but we still tend to look for the same patterns in stories: for closure, or for the moments of insight that provide resolution.

MR Dodge's review, and Charles Foran's in the Montreal *Gazette,* both charge that the Africa section does not fit the rest of *In a Glass House.* What is your sense of that section's role in the novel?

NR To begin with, there's an Edenic element, but of course Africa doesn't turn out to be a simple idyll. The Africa section also continues the new world and arrival motifs that figure in both books. In fact the *In a Glass House* departure for Africa and the *Lives of the Saints* departure for Canada occur at structurally similar points in the two novels.

As far as the narrator's concerned, leaving home and being away from his country and his family allow him to enter into a different type of relationship with them. Africa also brings back some of his imagination and sense of wonder. He loses those in the second book, and Africa is where he begins to recover them; it echoes the world he's left behind him in the Valle del Sole. And of course, this second entry into a new world leads him to not only to reflect on the location itself, but also to see the immigrant experience from a new perspective.

MR Does Vittorio over-analyse his experience in *In a Glass House,* as reviewers have said he does?

NR Well of course, he *is* overly analytical, and that does distance him from his experience; he's not a well-adjusted person. The difficulty is to write successfully about characters who do this.

One of the things I was trying to do with *In a Glass House* was to get inside a character's head—something that wasn't really possible in *Lives of the Saints,* because the character's simply too young there. In the second book, I wanted to capture the psychological nuances of a character, and to follow the situation of the first book— the trauma that he's been through—to its logical conclusion.

MR Somehow I don't think we'd have believed it if Vittorio had turned out to be other than a morose and not especially likable character after *Lives of the Saints.* The uplift in that book has a lot to do with his mother, and it seems logical that after she dies the "always so serious" part of him should take over, as indeed it does in *Lives of the Saints* much of the time.

NR And then there's the influence of his father, who turns him even more that way.

I'm not sure whether ordinary readers, as opposed to reviewers, will react negatively to the tone of *In a Glass House.* Just from talking to people about it, there seems to be a split between older and younger readers. I've had some vehement reactions from older readers about the narrator's suicidal episode, but younger readers seem to be more positive—and less vehement.

MR Perhaps because it's less likely to hit home with younger readers. Does the vehemence show that the writing is working—that it's getting through?

NR I'd like to see it in that light. When I'm writing, after the first few drafts, what I'm concerned with is to get the thing right, and not directly with the effect it may have. Somehow it seems to me that if I do that, there should be something uplifting about the writing, however dark the subject. Maybe it doesn't have that effect for readers though: the subject may take over. But I hope that in the end people can get beyond that and evaluate the novel for what it is trying to do.