

JOHN MOSS: CONSCIOUSNESS AS CONTEXT

SCL/ÉLC Interview by Christine Hamelin

John Moss's Enduring Dreams is "an essay as landscape," a personal and philosophical exploration of the Arctic. Moss distinguishes between geography—an artificial means of establishing perspective and control—and landscape, all there is to be perceived except for the perceiving itself. A professor of Canadian Literature at the University of Ottawa, Moss weaves together prose and poetry, autobiography and history, in his new book. I spoke with him when he visited Kingston recently.

CH When did you first go to the Arctic? Were you always interested in it?

JM While I'd read a lot about the Arctic, and was really interested in it, I didn't go until 1986. I first went up because I'm a long-distance runner, and I heard about the run at the north end of Baffin Island, where you can do a double marathon, an 84 km marathon. And so my wife Virginia and I went up there together and ran, and were just totally overwhelmed by the Arctic experience. That was the beginning of it. Since then, I've been up a minimum of once a year, sometimes twice a year.

CH Do you feel that the Arctic is your home now?

JM Yes and no. No matter how often I go there, I'll be an outsider. I can't really participate in Inuit reality. I can look at it, I can try to understand it, I can admire it. But I think you still perceive and experience reality in a different way. It's a fundamental thing; you can't really become an insider.

I know people who have lived there most of their lives, and they're still outsiders. But that's one of the fascinating things about going there; you learn to be comfortable as an outsider. So to say I feel "at home" in the Arctic, and I do feel very much at home, is different than feeling that it is "home."

CH When you were little, did you read Farley Mowat's books?

JM Well, Farley wasn't writing his books when I was little. But I read comparable books—R.M. Ballantyne, a nineteenth-century writer who wrote about the Arctic; and Jules Verne. So I grew up on those kinds of books, and my dad was a fanatic sailor with a wonderful library, and I read his sailing books, including the Arctic books. And of course, I read *National Geographic*.

CH You are quite critical of Farley Mowat and Yves Thériault. You say they impose a southern perspective and a Western literary tradition, and end up misappropriating the Arctic experience.

JM It doesn't bother me so much that they appropriate, but that they are read as if theirs were the authentic versions. I'm not critical of Mowat or Thériault as writers—I think they're both fine writers. What I have trouble with is the fact that they present themselves as authorities on the Arctic. Mowat speaks for the people, without really knowing an awful lot about them.

Thériault sold himself as a native person, which he wasn't. He worked in the Department of Indian Affairs, claiming he had native blood. What I'm concerned about is the way all writing distorts the Arctic. I'm concerned about the way *all* writing distorts. But the beauty of considering this problem in connection with the Arctic is that the Arctic landscape has stayed, for the most part, exactly as it was 100 years ago, even 5000 years ago. The landscape of any other place varies and changes, but the Arctic landscape stays relatively constant.

CH But when you write your book, how do *you* avoid also imposing a southern perspective and a Western literary tradition?

JM I don't, but I acknowledge the problem. That's how I avoid it. Though I don't really avoid it at all.

In the part about Historiography, I give examples of my own personal history, and I end up with the sequence of poems where I create my own little mythology. I also talk about Virginia making *her* history. We write history; we make it what we want.

CH So when you acknowledge that all writing distorts, does that make *your* distortion different in kind than Mowat's?

JM Absolutely. In a sense, you're touching right on what the book is about, because it's about me being aware, going to the Arctic and seeing that my own experience and what I had read were parallel realities that didn't really intersect. I developed a fascination for the connection between the landscape and the written word, and narrative procedures.

CH Where did you get that idea of distinguishing between geography and landscape?

JM I think out of my own experience. And to some extent out of writing. One of the things that fascinated me, working through this book, is how writing writes itself, how landscape writes itself. I look at the landscape and write other people's writing, because people have been writing about the Arctic, creating conventions of description. There are terrible clichés that have nothing to do with what's actually there, you know?

The notion of landscape and geography is really where I started this project. In realizing the difference between my own experience and what I had read, I started thinking about the way we impose convention. There was no way I could write about the people very much—I'm neither an anthropologist nor an Inuk. If you're an anthropologist you have to acknowledge that you're a scientist, an outsider imposing structure. If you're an Inuk, obviously, you're writing from your own experience. In the process of writing, I realized that there is this model, and that what I was responding to personally, in a lyrical way, in a metaphysical way, was landscape. This is what the book works through; it defines a metaphysical response to landscape. What I was encountering, and reading, was conventions of literature and of geography, because literature comes from another place and draws on the conventions geography imposes on things. Literature starts out saying, this is a long way from Greenwich, this is a long way from home, this is far north.

Geography represents the whole structure of knowledge, of society, for me, and I'm taking it on, critiquing it. The only way I can do that is to acknowledge my own participation in it.

CH Can those conventions or codes help you see the landscape better sometimes? You wonder at one point what you would have seen up there if Lawren Harris had never gone up north.

JM Lawren Harris helps me to see the Arctic. I think what's important is for me to recognize that what I am seeing is shaped by Lawren Harris, by Doris McCarthy. But then, it's fascinating to go the next step—I'm therefore influenced by Matisse and Picasso. In other words, I'm seeing out of my whole civilization. But then there's the purity of the Arctic experience, which allows you to see the direct continuity. I can see that I'm seeing those hills through Yeats's eyes, but I also connect them with Matisse; I connect them with my whole culture. In a way, it helps to bring your whole culture into focus.

Another way it brings it into focus is that the Arctic is not a place of middle distance. I think we, in our culture and society, live in the middle distance. Things are human-proportioned: houses, works of art and trees relate to human size. In the Arctic, things are very small—you look at tiny little beautiful flashes of flowers—or very big, the magnificent vistas where you see 50 miles. And this means you look at your own human world from an entirely different perspective. There, it is a transcendent experience, in that you necessarily focus on the things smaller, the things larger, because things human-sized are often fairly unattractive; a lot of the landscape is gravel, is bleak, and yet the people who say it's bleak have usually been conditioned not to see the tiny beauties or the great vistas.

CH It must be strange to go back and forth.

JM Yes. But it doesn't take very long; it isn't a wrenching thing. Last summer I spent a couple weeks on my own, just on the Meta Incognita Peninsula, and it took a day or two to change over, and then I began to feel so incredibly at home in the world; I felt I belonged.

I talk a lot in the book about endurance sports. What I love about long-distance running is that after you run for 7 or 8 hours, you forget your name, and you become the act of running. But you also become the place you are doing the running. You're acutely conscious that you are an extension of the landscape you are running through. So in some ways my experience in the Arctic is much the same as my experience in this kind of sport.

CH The book is a really intellectual response to the Arctic. I want to know who you wrote it for. Sometimes you are very personal and direct, then you withdraw into the metaphysical terminology.

JM Well, I think this book is both. I have a standard literary answer: I wrote it for myself. But what I want to do is share—and writing is sharing, unless you're writing a diary—with people for whom reading is an adventure. In a way, the Arctic provides my canvas, and maybe the pigments. I'm still painting for people who like painting. Doris McCarthy paints the Arctic beautifully, but she's not painting for people who have a passion for the Arctic. They may also like it, but she is painting for people who have a passion for painting. And I'm writing for people who have a passion for writing.

CH But there are some good writers who wouldn't be able to understand this book at all.

JM Agreed. I would love to say that the naive reader can get something out of it too. I think the naive reader can, but only here and there, in bits and pieces.

CH Were you tempted to make it more accessible? Or is it easier to use the terminology?

JM No, oh no. In the Preface, I say this is the book I always wanted to write. This is the book I started writing when I was 19. I'm uneasy talking about this. There were things I wanted to say; I had to work out my relationship with myself, with my family, with time, with my country. I mean, this is about Canada. And I could only work these questions out in this book.

Two things happened which made me begin to write, after a hiatus where I focused only on academic things. I went up to the Arctic, and I bought a computer. The Arctic gave me a landscape that has a purity. I can go through land in the Kuujuaq valley, and a hundred generations have lived in that valley, and to me, it's far more of an achievement than all the pyramids in the world to find I can walk where a hundred generations walked and the landscape is not marred, is not harmed. So I began to open up to myself.

The computer quite literally changed my relationship with language. I began seeing language spatially; I started to play with language, not in terms of evasion, but in terms of articulation. At one point, I say, sometimes words are like walnuts you hold in your fist, and you crush them and the shells break, and you're left with shards of meat, but blood on your hand. And I think that's what I'm doing with language. In this book, the poetry is much

more accessible. It's in the prose that I want to seduce, I want to possess, I want to obsess my readers.

CH Do you care how many people read it? Is it more important to you that some people read it and get something out of it?

JM I have mixed feelings. One part of me wants it to be read widely. But there is also a recognition that it is demanding. But I don't think I'm writing to as restricted a readership as you do; as I was writing, I read from it in Nanisivik to 50 runners. These are people from all over Canada, the States, and Britain, none of whom were trained, as far as I know, as professional readers, and they loved it.

CH There is a huge range of levels in it.

JM Yes. I've assimilated what I know of contemporary theory, but while I've done some theoretical work, I'm more comfortable writing as George Woodcock, as the public critic.

CH You talk at one point about how theory can colonize . . .

JM Several times I poke fun at theory. I use words like autochtonic, but then I immediately turn around and play games. I don't mean to pick on Mowat, but I want a different kind of reader: a careful reader, not one who's going to read for the transparency of language, to get right into the narrative itself.

I want the marathon readers. I want people to get in there and work at it. Three or four thousand hours have gone into writing and rewriting and playing and polishing—I want you to become involved in what's happening with language. Farley wants you to utterly forget his language, and get on with the story.

CH Did the book change how you live your life? Are you a different person now?

JM I am different than I was this morning! I've certainly changed. It's interesting—I don't know if the writing of the book changed me, or documents changes I was going through. I think it's a bit of both. I moved towards some kind of reconciliation with my mortal condition, I guess. I think the book documents the process and also is part of the procedure.

CH Did you use your field notes from trips in writing the book?

JM Yes. But field notes often have to do with whether the bannock burned, or whether your sleeping bag is wet or dry. These act as markers when I go back through it at home, and I remember all that. I need the perspective that being at home, and the computer and everything else gives me. I start thinking of the bannock, and an image will come of me curled around the little fire, and I can feel the rain, and I start to relate to the whole world around me, but maybe all I have in the note is, “damn bannock burned tonight.”

CH Did Virginia give you a lot of feedback?

JM The feedback with Ginny wasn't so much from reading her notes, as it was watching her write. My notes are not all that important; it's the process of writing them. I don't go back and check my notes a lot. Ginny's notes tend to be objets d'art; she mounts dried flowers and maps; they're just wonderful. But what fascinates me more than the content is the process. I've shared a lot of this with Ginny, but in some ways the book is very personal. I don't think I'm just writing it to myself, but it's a very personal expression.

When I was a small kid, when anyone would say, 'what do you want to be when you grow up,' my response was always, 'I'm going to live a life of adventure.' And this became the standard family joke. And now, I live many different lives, and I think that in this book my different lives came together.

CH When you say different lives, do you mean the academic life, the creative life, family life and so on?

JM Yeah. On the one hand, I work in the academic world, but on the other hand, I built my own house by hand. On the one hand, I read a lot of books and work with texts, and on the other hand, I ski and run marathons. I know people from all these different worlds. I go to the university and I work there, and I come home to Bellrock, and walk across my bridge onto my island, and I'm in a different world entirely. Then I walk back across the bridge, get in the car, go to the university. They're different worlds.

CH Are you living a life of adventure?

JM Oh, you're damn right, yeah. For sure.

CH So your childhood wish came true.

JM Yes, and it's *coming* true, still. It comes out of enthusiasm, it comes out of passion. Enthusiasm is a trivializing word, passion is perhaps an overwhelming word, but I'm somewhere in between. I lead different lives, and sometimes there's conflict.

I think I'm living the life of adventure that I wanted. It's not the way I thought it would go, but then life never is. I think I live perhaps a safer life than I thought I'd lead.

We had two kids and we were both graduate students. We didn't start out with a safe life. When Bellrock started out, we were just building a place where we could feel at home. As we slowly got our academic careers and credentials, it became, and still is, a bit of a retreat. Most of our friends tended to be writers and creative people, rather than academics; I've never been terribly comfortable with academics.

I've discovered that there is little correlation between academic stature and intelligence in the world. I'm uncomfortable with people who are intellectually pretentious, because I find so often that underneath the vocabulary of the discipline, the conventions and pretensions, they're intellectual cream puffs.

CH Do you like your job as a professor?

JM There are times when I'm teaching and I just love it. It's just like skiing a great trail. The words come, and I can see the eyes of the students, and there's a response. I'm in the landscape, and the landscape is these minds.

I think for someone like me, being a university professor is a perfect job. What I do is write, is work with words. And I teach. The University gives me more freedom of time than any other job I can think of, except maybe beach bum.

Friends of mine who are professional writers do a lot of scrambling to make a living. It isn't all sitting and working on a novel. We have friends who are potters and I often think of this expression: you have to make the coffee cups. My friends are beautiful potters, but a lot of their time is spent making coffee cups, and teapots, because you've got to pay the rent.

Frankly, I'd rather spend my time teaching than filling out Canada Council grant applications for funding. The university gives me good money and a lot of time to call my own, and keeps me vital.

CH Is this book fiction?

JM It's interesting, several people have referred to this as a novel. It's really difficult: what is it? I think the best term is creative non-fiction, but in fact, there's a lot of fiction in it. If I'm making stuff up, I'll usually say, I'm making this up. Occasionally, I reshape family history for

I could never have written this without postmodernism, without the licence to collapse generic conventions. I like the idea of calling it a novel, and then to define it further, as creative non-fiction.

CH A novel can be non-fiction?

JM Well, this is what I'm beginning to think. It occurred to me on a personal level to think of this as my novel. Maybe it is a novel. What is *Running in the Family*? What is *Memoirs of Montparnasse*? Because they're good enough, they transcend genre. I would love to be in that position, where I'm outside the genres. But I have no idea what to call my book.

I'm not a storyteller. When I tell a joke, I get to the punch line, and people look at me and say, yes, and?

What holds this book together is the narrative personality. Now, it's not necessarily mine, and this is going back to our use of the word novel, and your use of the word fiction. This narrative personality that holds it together is an invention; on one level, of course, it's me. But on another level, I create a certain consciousness as context that I share with the reader.

CH Are you bracketing or projecting personality in this book?

JM I think they're almost the same thing. I just used a phrase that I kind of like—consciousness as context. In fusing the two, my consciousness becomes the consciousness within the text, it becomes the consciousness you share. So in a way, I am defining myself, because I am putting consciousness into text. In some ways I'm exploring personality, trying to understand myself better, and at the same time I'm opening up personality, I'm writing out of personality, and it's the canvas, in a sense.

I believe in this book totally. I've never believed in anything else like this. Always with me, once a thing's written I begin to wonder how I might have written it otherwise. With this book, it simply is.