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**OF NOVELS AND THE NOVELIST:
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELLEN DOUGLAS**

JERRY SPEIR

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

Ellen Douglas has been writing novels for more than twenty years. Like many women writers, she was only able to devote herself to her craft after her three sons were old enough to go to school.

Since then, she has produced five novels and a collection of stories, won the Houghton-Mifflin Fellowship Award, received a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship grant, and been nominated for the National Book Award. Twice her books have appeared on *The New York Times*' list of the five best fiction titles of the year.

Her childhood was spent in Arkansas and Louisiana—where she recalls her father's difficulties with the Huey Long administration over road-building contracts. But her real roots are in Mississippi, where she can trace both sides of her family back into the eighteenth century.

She spent her college days at the University of Mississippi (to which she now returns one semester each year as writer-in-residence) and was once president of her sorority (Chi Omega) there—a fact which she says her sons wish she would quit telling people.

After college, she was off to New York, where she clerked for a time in the celebrated Gotham Book Mart and rubbed shoulders with literary lions from Allen Tate to Henry Miller. During World II, she worked variously as a disc jockey and an interviewer at a military processing center. After the war, she married her college sweetheart and settled in Greenville, Mississippi.

Her latest novel, *A Lifetime Burning*, was released in October, 1982, by Random House. *The Washington Post* called it "startling and entirely impressive...a splendid piece of writing." *The New York Times* said, "Ellen Douglas has all the qualities a reader could ask of a novelist: depth, emotional range, wit, sensitivity and the gift of language." Her fellow Mississippian, Eudora Welty, termed it "a rare novel [where] the mystery of ordinary life...is hair-raisingly and most satisfactorily present." Cast in the form of a diary, *A Lifetime Burning* is the story of a sixty-year-old mother's poignant and persistent attempt to tell the truth, to fathom the murky depths of her personal

rage, to perceive the limits and power of her own sexual obsessions, and to pass this hard-won, fragile wisdom along to her children. I am curious about the book's genesis.

SPEIR: What launched you into *A Lifetime Burning*?

DOUGLAS: Well, I've been interested for some years in the business of obsession, and I suppose that one is interested in a psychological or moral problem or a human fact because one sees a lot of it. It seems to me that obsession, and maybe even *possession*, a kind of demonic possession, is a fact of our time. And when I got to thinking about that, I began to pull very disparate fragments of observation and experience together. Then, of course, it changed and grew. Actually, with my last two books, *The Rock Cried Out* and this one, I've been very much concerned with the nature of jealousy and possessiveness, and I think that they're very powerful and destructive and irrational emotions that masquerade as love.

SPEIR: Is there any sense in which this novel is autobiographical?

DOUGLAS: I certainly see the artist, in general, as obsessive in the same way that in the past obsession has been poured into religion. We're like the religious in other periods, I think. And, yes, I think I'm obsessive.

SPEIR: Does age really bring "passion, more passion, obsession, fury, frustration, as if one lived again through an adolescence that would open out not into maturity, but into oblivion"—as your narrator suggests in this novel?

DOUGLAS: Yes, but is that necessarily bad? Would it be better to sit down in a rocker and wear a groove in the porch floor? It's my profound conviction that people of fifty or sixty or seventy or eighty feel very deeply the human passions that they felt at fifteen, twenty-five, and thirty-five. The human passion is there until you die.

SPEIR: Speaking of human passion, I'm curious about your use of homosexual affairs in *A Lifetime Burning*. Did you include those for some "shock value," or what was your intention?

DOUGLAS: I think the reverse really. Certainly it was not introduced for shock value. Rather, it seemed to me that the "emotional freight," which an ordinary heterosexual affair wouldn't have, gave both the affairs an intensity that I felt the book needed for Corinne to have been driven to the kind of deception and lying that she was driven to. Aside from that, it also seemed to me that it was useful to say clearly that human passion is human passion and that, in that sense, whether it's heterosexual or homosexual doesn't matter a lot. That

would be the only sense in which I think homosexuality as homosexuality would have a bearing—the reverse of *shock*—but rather the making ordinary, in every life, of human passion.

SPEIR: I suspect that people who know you—as a “normal,” “happy,” “honest,” woman of sixty—may wonder why you want to write, as you do in *A Lifetime Burning*, about a woman of sixty-two who is very unhappy, tormented by obsession, entangled in a web of lies and involved in a very bizarre relationship.

DOUGLAS: Well, my own life—and I think this a *serious* generalization about any artist’s life—is not necessarily relevant to the “art problem.” I perceive or observe fragments of character, fragments of themes, places that intrigue me and that seem significant, and maybe I’m not even sure at the time why they seem significant. What happens to the individual sentence and paragraph as you write should obviously be as conscious as possible, but what makes you put sets of material together and invent particular things to go with those sets of material is much more mysterious. But over a period of years, maybe, or months or weeks, those fragments begin to coalesce so that you have sets of perceptions that seem to work together. And that’s the way, for me, that the beginnings of a book or a story come about. Aside from that, it’s just simply true that the inevitability of old age and death and the failure of love are universal human themes and that it doesn’t matter much whether the artist’s life at a particular moment is one way or another. They remain universal human themes, and there are always specific instances of comedy and tragedy that you can use to realize them. If you wanted to put what I’m talking about as extremely as possible: Faulkner didn’t spend forty years sleeping in the bed with a corpse, you know, and neither did he kill himself because of his incestuous love for his sister. So I think that the artist is intrigued by a theme or a character or a story, and it doesn’t necessarily have anything specific to do with his personal life.

SPEIR: Why do you think you’re sometimes perceived as an “old-fashioned” artist?

DOUGLAS: Well, the general statement I would make about art is that art—my art, anyway, the art of literature—is a kind of fulcrum between the past and the future that seizes upon the past and attempts to capture it in the present to give it to the future, not in the literal sense, but in the sense that Susanne Langer speaks of as a “virtual” past or an “as if” kind of history. But I can also appreciate the point of view of the more “experimental” or “modern” artist whose chaotic or

nihilistic works grow out of a concern that the future is going to vanish, that the whole human world may vanish—not just our society. And I think that’s a valid perception, too. But I suppose I’m just not temperamentally able to believe that the world will die. I have to assume that there is a past which I in the present can attempt to give to a future that will exist. And I think I’ve said that over and over again in my stories. The narrator in this new book says it, too, because what she’s doing, of course, is attempting to give her life as if it were a gift, however explosive and unwelcome a gift it might be, to her children, to make whatever use they can of it. It’s an active act of communication, whatever the cost. And, in this connection, I think it’s also true that writers of tales like Dinesen and Mann and Conrad—who seize the past in its formal aspect or in its mythological aspect, in its fairy tale aspect or its political aspect, and attempt to give order to it and give it to the reader—are the kinds of writers who interest me most. And that’s a deep concern of mine in all my work. I also think that my works are unified by the need to make my characters move out and affirm, in some way, a humanity larger than they thought themselves capable of. But be very careful to remember, now, I’m talking about my fiction. I’m talking about myself as a writer and what I put into a book, not about my self. Whether I’m capable of doing that is irrelevant, utterly irrelevant.

SPEIR: Your earlier works have been very much acclaimed for the realism with which they deal with race relations. What can you tell me about your early experiences with blacks and racism?

DOUGLAS: I have very strong memories of powerful black figures from my childhood, particularly the old woman who was the model for the black woman in “The House on the Bluff,” who lived in the household of a family with whom I was intimate. One of the most vivid memories of my childhood was that you kissed her when you came for a summer visit, just as you kissed your aunts and your grandmother, and that set her in an extraordinary category, you know. I think she’s the only black person I touched in that way when I was a child—in an intimate, affectionate way—and I’m sure it had a strong effect on me. That’s the way you recognize humanity—by embracing people. It was very fortunate for me, that I had that relationship and several others with powerful black figures.

When I first remember thinking about racism seriously would be about the time when you start thinking, for example: What is all this about bootlegging and whiskey being illegal—and Father’s got this

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bottle of whiskey in the pantry? At the same time, you're thinking: What is all this about Sunday School and "loving your neighbor as yourself" and "keeping the Sabbath day holy"—while the cook is fixing the Sunday dinner? And all that happens, I think—with me anyway—when you're about thirteen or fourteen, and by fifteen it's become a large question. I remember having *serious* arguments with my father about the morality of prohibition in those years: "You're always telling me about the *law*. What are you doing with this bottle of whiskey in the kitchen?" Not that I had any objection to anybody's drinking whiskey, even as a child, but how can you talk about the *law* if you live in a world in which the law is consistently broken—by you, by everyone?

SPEIR: What did your Father say about that?

DOUGLAS: Well, he was a very gentle man and an unshakeable man, and he'd seen a lot of the world, and he just mainly listened and let me run up and down the room and holler.

SPEIR: I understand that your great-great-grandfather, Thomas Henderson, wrote something called *Tom Paine Confounded* that was the first book printed in Mississippi. Is that right?

DOUGLAS: So I was told by my parents anyway.

SPEIR: What do you know about him and folks of that era?

DOUGLAS: Well, he was born, I think, around 1770, 1775, and he would have been in Natchez by 1800 anyway. So, he was very early.

SPEIR: That's on your father's side?

DOUGLAS: Yes. And he was a big Presbyterian. He was one of the founders of the Presbyterian church in Mississippi, although he was not a minister. He was a presiding elder. They were very devout, very devout Presbyterians—and slaveholders, of course. His son was one of the people involved in General Wilkinson's attempt to upset the government of Cuba and annex it to the U. S. as a new slave state. So, I judge from that that they were real slaveholding "fire eaters," although that's not true of a great many people in Natchez and various others in my family—because Natchez really was a Whig town. Probably part of the reason it wasn't destroyed was that it really didn't want to secede in the first place, although everybody down there tries to forget that now.

SPEIR: What about on your mother's side?

DOUGLAS: My mother's family was very mixed, as a matter of fact. Her mother's mother and father were English-Irish and Presbyterians. But her father's family was Spanish-French-Creole. They came

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into Mississippi maybe even before the Hendersons did, during the period of the last Spanish occupancy and the last part of the French. Her great-great-grandfather, Jose Vidal, was the last Spanish commandant of the fort there.

SPEIR: The fort at Natchez?

DOUGLAS: Fort Concordia, right across the river.

SPEIR: I continue to be amazed at the extent to which Mississippians can trace their family histories.

DOUGLAS: Well, one thing about Mississippi that you may not have taken into account is that nobody had any money. They couldn't go anywhere. They hardly had enough money to buy a train ticket. Unless they had somebody who worked for the railroad to give them a pass, they stayed at home. And if you stay home, you know who your grandmother was; she's still hanging around. And she knows who her grandmother was; she was still hanging around. A great many people, in fact, are still in houses like the one my father's great-grandfather bought in the country out from Natchez in 1808. There are lots of old letters, old day books, his medical records, the commissary records, odds and ends like that, including shells engraved with Bible verses and old pairs of spectacles and pince-nez and old false teeth. You name it; it's out there.

SPEIR: Most people, I think, would argue that *place* is a major part of your fiction. But I wonder if you agree, or is it just that stories have to be somewhere? Your narrator in *The Rock Cried Out*, in fact, asks: "Do you think there's someplace in the world that's different from here?"

DOUGLAS: I think *place*, in the sense of the specific, is absolutely essential, but I don't think *a place*, you know, is what I'm talking about when I say "place." If I had grown up in Birmingham or New York City, the place would still have been immensely important because novels are specific and they are made out of bricks and people. Therefore, place is important. I don't think *regionalism* is important. *Place* in the south is important, too, as a moral climate, or was when I was young, but not as houses and bricks. Houses and bricks are everywhere, and the novelist is simply concerned to evoke them specifically.

SPEIR: What do you mean by "a moral climate?"

DOUGLAS: Well, I mean that, when I was growing up, the race question was something that one dealt with every single day in one way or another and that the world was absolutely formed by relations between black people and white people. And that was not true in cities where—although white people *saw* black people, black people *saw*

white people, black people *worked* for white people—everybody went home and didn't know each other any more. But in a small town in the South, relations were much more intimate and the racial climate was much more pervasive. And it was a very specific moral climate in which people professed—and, of course, myself included, I'm not making a judgment—to one set of standards and lived by another set of standards with regard to black people. And then, too, this pervasive self-deception among white people about what their own behavior was and what its significance was, and the elaborate structure of beliefs about what black people were like—a structure meant to serve our own self-deception—created a sort of ghost world, a wholly unreal vision of the lives of the very black people we lived so intimately with. Every now and then I read a black writer who grew up in and writes about the world I grew up in, and his version of his life is as different from the version I would have received of it as a Chinese scholar's view of Confucianism would be from a Presbyterian missionary's.

SPEIR: Yet, despite your reputation for dealing most realistically with race relations as a major theme, this new book has essentially nothing to do with that theme. Do you have any response for critics or readers who are expecting that sort of thing from you?

DOUGLAS: The relationships between black people and white people were just not relevant to this story—in any large way. I think you have to remember that the writer is always concerned with a particular story and its demands and requirements. That doesn't mean I won't think of another story where it will be relevant again. That's not to say, either, that the problems of race don't still exist, because, of course, they do, and they are still threatening. But things have changed in the last twenty years and that particular regional obsession with guilt has become a national problem. Perhaps Southern writers don't any longer have to be exclusively obsessed with it. A few other people can take it on for a while, maybe. And, of course, it's also true that black writers do, as they should, deal with it more and more strongly, and perhaps better than we can.

But I think *A Lifetime Burning* is very close to the rest of my work. From the beginning, I have written mainly about the ordinary life of ordinary people—their losses and betrayals, and murderous rages, and humor and heroism, and lust and greed, about people who live in middle-sized houses with yards around them—and in this book I don't move into another world. I simply look with more obsessiveness and more intensity into the life that I've always been looking at. All those

passions are there in ordinary lives.

SPEIR: *The New York Times* reviewer of one of your early books, *Black Cloud, White Cloud*, said: "To be Southern and relevant is to be obsessed." Is that still true?

DOUGLAS: Maybe, in some sense. But it may not just be Southern writers. Certainly, just the overwhelming need to come to terms with the problems of race in the South was obsessive with Southern novelists and writers for a long time. But it may just be that artists are obsessed in general; otherwise, you'd be out making a lot more money doing something else.

SPEIR: I also perceive in your work a perpetual concern for such matters as how to tell the truth, how we come to know the truth, how the mind works, and the fragile nature of consciousness and understanding. And, in that regard, I wonder what you mean when you say, as you have, that you're "not an intellectual" or not a "novelist of ideas."

DOUGLAS: Well, I'm just *not* an intellectual, you know; I'm *not* a scholar. I have no systematic grounding in philosophy—or even literature. I read what comes to my attention—*next*. And then I look in the bibliography in the back of the book if it interests me and I read that, you know. I'm not an analytical thinker. I'm a craftsman, a *maker*. And my exploration of the nature of consciousness and of the distortion of truth, so-called—the reason that I'm concerned with it is that it's been stimulated by my observations of the human world, not because of any particular following through of philosophical or psychological theses. I would be much more likely to be influenced, for example, by something like a movie, like *Rashomon* or *Providence*, than I would be by the methodical reading of psychology or anything like that, although I do a good bit of reading in areas other than literature. I've certainly been influenced by the reading of Proust, and Proust is very much concerned with the way character and personality are metamorphosed in the passage of time and people become their own opposites. Another influence on my work, and this has to do again with whether I have a systematic or intellectual approach, which I don't, is Susanne Langer, a philosopher of art whom I mentioned earlier. When I say she was an influence, I mean that the way she lays out the nature of what the artist does is true to my own feeling about what I do and what other artists do. She makes a fine distinction between discursive thought and the kind of thinking that the maker or the craftsman or the artist does. And all those things—Proust, Con-

rad, certain movies, my observations of human behavior and of my own behavior, the work of Langer, and to a lesser degree Cassirer and people who've been concerned with those subjects—have interested me in the transformations of consciousness that you're talking about. And this latest book certainly is a metaphor for those kinds of transformations—I hope.

SPEIR: When did you begin to think of yourself as a professional writer?

DOUGLAS: I've been writing really since childhood. I may be wrong about this, but it does seem to me that the interest in writing has to do with—something—maybe genes, or maybe just family habit, but with an interest in the language that you get very, very early. And that, it seems to me, came to me particularly through my mother and through my father's mother at a very early age so that I always cared about language, about telling stories. So, I was doing that all through grammar school and high school and did a little of it in college, but in college you're so busy writing papers that you don't think about writing in imaginative terms, and you really haven't time to do the kind of reading that a novelist does later on—at leisure. Or, at least, I didn't. Then, I began to write again as soon as I finished college, during the time when I was working as a disc jockey, for example. It was grand being a disc jockey. You had those great big old eighteen-inch discs and you put one on and you made an announcement and read the ads at the beginning of the half hour, and then the disc played for the whole half hour. You had maybe twenty-five minutes when you were just sitting there, and I did a good deal of writing while I was doing that. Then, when I went to New York, I did try to sell a couple of stories, without any success. So, at that age, at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three, I was already thinking in terms of selling stories.

SPEIR: What can you tell me about your New York experiences? You worked for a time at the Gotham Book Mart, did you not?

DOUGLAS: Yes. At the time I worked there and for the preceding fifteen or twenty years, the Gotham Book Mart had been the headquarters for avant-garde literature in the U. S. Miss Steloff, who ran the place, who *was* the Gotham Book Mart, had the most extensive collection of little mags from the twenties and thirties anywhere in the world probably. She had whole sets, *lots* of whole sets of *Transition*, with the Joyce work-in-progress that had been coming out then. She had full sets of *Poetry*, full sets of all the old *Partisan Reviews*, everything, everything from the twenties and thirties. And people like

Pound and Marianne Moore and Kenneth Patchen and William Carlos Williams and Henry Miller and Tennessee Williams—you name it, that was where they came when they came to New York. She had her own little press. She printed books by people who couldn't get their books printed elsewhere, if she wanted to bet on them. For example, she printed Anais Nin when nobody else would print her. She printed Kenneth Patchen when nobody would print him. She, I believe, brought out some one-act plays of Tennessee Williams before anybody else printed him. She used to sell Henry Miller's paintings. They were hanging all over her walls, and she sold them for five and ten dollars apiece so he'd have enough money to eat on. She had all the Miller—*Tropic of Cancer*, *Tropic of Capricorn*—under the desk, because this was before you could sell them over the counter, and Miller was in there often.

SPEIR: Do you have any famous-people stories from that experience?

DOUGLAS: Well, if anybody was in town, Miss Steloff would have a party for them. And while I was there, the party that I enjoyed most was the one she had for Allen Tate—another Southerner. No doubt, I was a little bit homesick. Miss Steloff was a vegetarian and a non-drinker of alcoholic beverages, so she always had this huge samovar with lots of tea in it. But Mr. Tate brought his bourbon, and it was a nice party.

SPEIR: What are your recollections of Henry Miller?

DOUGLAS: You couldn't believe what a nice fellow he was. Gentle. I suppose he would have been in his—I thought of him as an old man, you know; I was only twenty-three years old—he must have been fifty, fifty-two or -three years old. He was already pretty bald, and just had a fringe of white hair. But he would just come in and wander around and look at books and talk in a very quiet voice. Very polite. Of course, I'd already read the *Tropic of Cancer* and the *Tropic of Capricorn* by that time, so the contrast of the man with the work was startling to say the least.

SPEIR: And, then, after New York?

DOUGLAS: Then, I got married and had three children fairly quickly and was too busy to do any writing, to have the amount of time I needed to have to myself. I say that, but I think another thing was involved too, and this is probably truer of women of my generation than it would be of men of any generation—and that is that I was inexperienced in the world. I didn't think that I was equipped by my life to have very much to say about the extremes of human emotion,

about the world at large. I had been a sheltered young woman, and that made it very difficult for me to feel that I was equipped to do that. I was, however, during those years, doing some editing which was very valuable to me later on. Kenneth, my husband, was doing some writing, and I was re-typing and discussing and editing his work, which gave me a kind of course in structure and realizing character and writing that I wouldn't have had if I'd just been hanging around the house raising kids. So, I had that under my belt six or seven years later when I began to write again. I had spent many, many hours doing that sort of thing. I had also been reading consistently through a great deal of the body of English literature, particularly through modern literature—and some earlier. I had been reading James and Conrad and the Russians, had read Proust and Joyce and Faulkner and others. And then, when my youngest child went to kindergarten and I had the house empty in the mornings and silent, I began to write again. That was when I was about thirty-three or thirty-four. At that point, I started doing it simply because that was what I wanted to do. I didn't have any specific professional ambitions at all and had probably pretty much abandoned the notion that I was going to be a famous writer or anything like that. I just did it because it interested me, and so I fiddled around with that first novel for five or six years because it interested me. Then it sold.

SPEIR: Do you spend much time organizing before you actually start writing?

DOUGLAS: A *lot* of time. Maybe six months to a year—very often as long as that. I construct family trees; I draw maps of whatever place I'm setting things in. I write brief character histories. I know, even if it's not in the book, you know, where they went to school and what kind of accent they have, what their past is like. It's very hard to make up a convincing character unless you have a firm notion of what the past life has been like—no matter whether you use it or not.

SPEIR: I gather you go through several drafts. Does that rewriting take any particular pattern?

DOUGLAS: Well, several different things happen. One is that the first draft is sketchy; and as drafts go along, they accrete; they gather to themselves materials that I didn't think of the first time. So they get larger. Another major thing that happens is that you re-write very specifically for sentence structure and language and intensification. And then sometimes, not so often, but sometimes, major structural changes. Something just seems absolutely wrong, and I take it out and

put it somewhere else or get rid of it altogether—even a whole character.

SPEIR: You once said that “The habit of mind of a writer is to detach himself. And the curse of his life is that he is detached.” What exactly did you mean by that?

DOUGLAS: Maybe that would only be true for a person who tends to be a romantic. But what I meant was that, on the one hand, one *wants* to be swept away by passion—whether its political passion, sexual passion, or whatever—and, on the other, the essential for the writer is *not* to be swept away. And while one is being swept away, by whatever it is, even a flood, one had better be busy observing exactly what it looks like, sounds like, smells like, and feels like, or else one’s not going to have it when the time comes to write about it. So, those two desires, the desire to be swept away and the desire to observe everything as clearly as possible, are always battling with each other.

SPEIR: In *A Lifetime Burning*, Corinne uses her writing, her diary, to “contain” her craziness, in a way, or to try to deal with it. Otherwise, she apparently leads a normal life to everyone else’s eyes. Does writing serve any such “containing” function for you?

DOUGLAS: I’m not sure that’s a relevant question. Keep your eye on the fiction. It only matters what the fictional character thinks and says, not what the author thinks and says about similar questions. I think that whatever work structures one’s life tends to fend off chaos—and not just for writers.

SPEIR: I was also curious about the California sequence in the book which serves, obviously, to take Corinne “out of herself” and out of her environment, to show her relationship with her son, and, of course, it introduces her to Alice, with whom she has some self-revelations, and it provides a certain parody of the modern world. I wonder, I suppose, if you had any more grandly “symbolic” things in mind there?

DOUGLAS: Well, whatever’s there is there. I think what you’ve said is valid—that’s an outer world that’s a reflection of the kind of inner world she’s been struggling with. I think that her narration of that makes an ironic comment on her character, made by herself, which in itself, again, is an illumination of her character. In short, it gives you a sense of her capacity for detachment—in which she sees in the paranoia of the other woman the same kind of thing that she’s seen in herself, even though she’s incapable of acting on her detachment. And, of course, everybody in this book is driven by one obsession or another: the son, Alice, the husband, Corinne, Mrs. Crouch.

SPEIR: We're a fairly obsessive species, are we?

DOUGLAS: In this book.

SPEIR: In this book. I don't know, people want writers to make more general statements, I think.

DOUGLAS: Yes. But my really, really strong conviction is that that's not the writer's business. He makes his statement in the book. And then he might want to make another statement in another book, you know.

SPEIR: Plotting, you've said, from the point of view of craft, is what fascinated you in *The Rock Cried Out*. What aspect of the craft was maintaining your attention in this latest novel?

DOUGLAS: Well, maybe I felt that I had hit upon a very strong metaphor for the doubling back on itself of the ego, that irresistible need for self-justification, and the battle between self-justification and the need to reach out honestly toward other human beings. So, it was a working out of that metaphor that interested me most, I think. I don't know. I enjoyed writing this book and a lot of things about it interested me. The structure of it was interesting to work out, too. In artistic terms, to try to pull off a form that is as symmetrical as the form of this book is certainly risky. I hope it worked. In more general terms, it seems to me, and again, a lot of this comes out of Langer, that human lives have organic forms. They exist in time with beginnings and middles and ends and crises and repetitions. To borrow a term from transactional analysis, you might even say that there is a script by which one lives one's life, and in every relationship, one re-enacts whatever one's script is. The forms of novels and the forms of stories are not arbitrary. They are deeply rooted, or so it seems to me, in the organic forms of human life, the way human beings live their lives.

SPEIR: I know that, before you settled on *A Lifetime Burning* as a title; you considered calling the book *The Stone and the Thread*, and I was very much taken by the thread image and metaphor, but I wonder if you might enlighten me a bit on what you had in mind with the stone.

DOUGLAS: Well, in the epigraph, the phrase "old stones that cannot be deciphered" casts another light on the stone metaphor. I think that, probably, what the narrator considers the stone—she says, in fact, "it's the stone of my life, and I will not carry it." So, in that sense, the stone is all the unmalleable material in one's life that one has to deal with. But also, of course, it's the stone of the past, the stone of other people's lives, the stone of the cemetery with the grandmother's name

on it and the mysterious circumstances of her life which are *there*, an unmalleable fact out of the past which is undecipherable.

SPEIR: One critic has argued that your fiction is concerned primarily with perpetuating the “ethical norms of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.” How do you respond to that?

DOUGLAS: Well, I think people ought to try to be decent to each other. But I don’t know, that’s a heavy-duty question and maybe not relevant. It’s relevant, of course, in the sense that there’s a ground out of which your work rises, and obviously the ground out of which my work arises is a childhood in a Presbyterian family who took their religion seriously. But, when you write novels, it doesn’t seem to me that perpetuating norms is one of the things you think about.

SPEIR: I’m impressed that your novels seldom deal with perhaps the most over-worked of modern themes, that of *alienation*, except as it sometimes affects certain male characters. Is alienation more a male problem, more a theme of male writers, do you think?

DOUGLAS: To me it seems more a male problem. Somebody like Joan Didion, for instance, would probably disagree radically with that point of view. I think just the biological fact that women bear children makes them less likely to think of themselves as alienated—certainly from the physical world—than men are and that the necessity of caring for children, the loving and cherishing of children, ties one to a very strict reality. There isn’t any reason why that might not disalienate a few males too as far as that’s concerned. I think that Nat Stonebridge in *Where the Dreams Cross* is probably as close to an alienated character as I’ve produced.

SPEIR: Do you consider yourself a “women’s novelist?”

DOUGLAS: No. I think that Southerners are cursed by reviewers who dismiss their books as being Southern. You never, never see books from California being dismissed as: “Oh, this is another California novel. This is another Ohio novel.” In the same way, women are cursed by reviewers who say, “Well, this is another woman’s novel.” And I think it’s just something that’s easy to say. If somebody is identified as being from Mississippi or as being of the female sex, it fills up a piece of the paragraph in a book review. So, I think writers, in general, who have that happen to them—and I’ve had *both* those things happen to me—tend to resent it. Probably it’s true that my first novel would have appealed more to women than men. But I don’t see that that should necessarily be true of the later ones. Of course, this new novel is, to some degree, about female rage, and that tends to

make some men uncomfortable—which is not surprising. But that’s just one of the *many* things it’s about. It’s also very much about the impossibility of telling the truth. So, no, I don’t think I’m a “women’s novelist.” I hope not, anyway. I just don’t like labels, although I certainly see the need for men and women to look into each other’s eyes and see each other as equals. And I don’t think I’m a “Southern novelist,” either. I hope not.

SPEIR: But you’ve also said that you’ve “tended always to think of women as being realists and less likely to delude themselves” than men.

DOUGLAS: I think that that realism is a kind of biological realism, you know—that one’s life is tied much more closely to the biological realities of birth and the child-bearing years and menopause. Men can fly off from those things more easily than women can. They can certainly fly off forever from child-bearing and menopause.

SPEIR: And that quote went on to say: “Survival is essential in order to deal with the sort of ideas that are being promulgated by the Southern man.”

DOUGLAS: Well, now that’s another matter altogether. I suppose what I was thinking about then was that—and maybe *realist* was the wrong word—that women can’t afford *idealism*, or couldn’t, any more than, say, blacks could afford idealism. How can I say what I mean? If you live in a world in which you see very clearly that it’s essential to lie a good deal of the time in order to keep people who are in control of the society you live in reasonably comfortable and get from them the things you need, then you can’t think of yourself as an idealist. You have to think of yourself as a realist. And that’s the kind of society that women and blacks have lived in in most places for quite a while. So, I think that women are realists in that sense, as well as in the biological sense.

SPEIR: And the “ideas that are being promulgated by the Southern man?”

DOUGLAS: Well, now. Maybe things are better now, you know. But when I was young, my mother said to me, realistically, you can’t let men see that you’re intelligent or you’ll not be able to find a husband. You’ll be a threat. And so, therefore, you must conceal your intelligence, and these are the ways that we take care of men and help them to be what they need to be. They’re very fragile creatures who need women to tell them how smart they are and to support them. And my reaction to that was to look around far and wide to find a man that I

didn't have to do that with. It occurred to me that life would be *pretty rough* if you did that. She didn't really mean that I should do that either. What she meant was: Unless you make yourself appear to be what men expect you to be, you'll never get to the places where it's essential for you to get in order to find a man who won't expect you to be that. You see? You've got to work your way through this thicket of lies in order to find somebody with whom you can live. And that was true to a degree in that world. I think it's less true now. There are men and women who seem to do a little better.

SPEIR: Well, obviously, times have changed and are changing. Surely the women's movement has had something to do with that.

DOUGLAS: Yes, it has. But times change faster in most places than in Mississippi, I think.

SPEIR: How do you see yourself in relation to the tradition of women writers?

DOUGLAS: Well, I don't know that I think about myself particularly in connection with a "tradition" of women writers. It's just not the way I think of myself. I think of myself as an American writer who's read a lot of American and English fiction by both males and females. I would be hard-pressed to put together a tradition of female writers; they're so different from one another. But I've learned a lot from a lot of them—and should have learned more from some. I really like George Eliot and think I've learned a lot from her. I like to read *Wuthering Heights* over every now and again: that's a wonderful book.

SPEIR: You've also been quoted as saying, "I think the process of writing fiction is the process of learning what you mean." Have you learned what you mean?

DOUGLAS: Oh, I think you learn what you mean in every book. You only learn what you mean in *that* book, and then in another book you mean something else and you have to learn what you mean in that book. If you're lucky. If you're unlucky, you decide you already know what you mean, and then you just keep repeating yourself.

SPEIR: Let me try to deal more specifically with what you meant in *A Lifetime Burning*. Though the book does not end despairingly, exactly, and Corinne claims to be "open" in the end, it does seem to argue for a rather gray, if not black, vision—namely, that, despite one's individual willingness and hope for connection, it's virtually impossible.

DOUGLAS: That's a general statement about the whole human race at all ages that you're making. And I'm only writing one book about

one couple at one period in their lives.

SPEIR: You want to keep this down on a small scale, do you?

DOUGLAS: I'm not making such an enormous statement as that about *all* human connections, you know. I just finished writing a book before I wrote this one [*The Rock Cried Out*] in which the young man who's the hero is sure that he'll move on into connections that will work for him. And I felt that he was right, that he would.

SPEIR: People try to blow writers' books up to too grand a scale, you think?

DOUGLAS: I think possibly at sixty a narrator would be more pessimistic about the possibility of connections than she would say, at twenty-nine, but that doesn't mean all those connections in between weren't there.

SPEIR: You think one gets more pessimistic as one gets older?

DOUGLAS: That's another book.

SPEIR: Well, in your youth, you took a degree in sociology and then later insisted that you were "not a sociologist." But, on the other hand, you've also said: "I think the function of the novelist in general over the past two or three hundred years has been to criticize society." How do the sociologist and novelist differ?

DOUGLAS: Sociologists deal in statistics and novelists deal in specifics, individuals.

SPEIR: So, you're not trying or expecting to reform the world?

DOUGLAS: Oh, my goodness. No! Mercy!

SPEIR: What effect do you hope to have? Or, what do you hope to be remembered for?

DOUGLAS: I would be glad if people would continue to like to read my books—for a while.

SPEIR: I wonder if you'd forgive a turn to "politics," in a broad sense, for a moment. I realized, reading over the passage again this morning, that this may be a little unfair, but nevertheless, what I *remembered* from the ending of *The Rock Cried Out* was the idea that, until you can do without gasoline and paper, you can't criticize International Paper and Exxon.

DOUGLAS: Until you can do without gas and paper, you can't present yourself to yourself as a person who is so pure that he is not involved in these things. Alan's problem throughout that book and the problems of a great many young people growing up is that he thinks there's an ideal way to live in which he'll be free from complicity in anything evil. And the process of growing up teaches him that, in fact, there is

no way for a human being to be free of complicity in many evil things. But, in general, it doesn't seem to me that I have the erudition or the experience to talk sensibly or valuably about global politics. I see that things are complex and bad, and I try to make my own personal political decisions as sensibly as I can on the basis of immediate circumstances and immediate people. Maybe I ought to be a martyr to the cause of serving mankind, but clearly I'm not going to do that. I'm a writer, and I write novels. I suppose if I were to stop writing novels and devote myself for the rest of my life to working for a cause, the cause would be nuclear disarmament. But I wouldn't be absolutely sure, ever, that I was doing the right thing for my own cause because I don't think you can ever be sure that you're doing the right thing, even if you're sure the cause is right. And I guess the only time I'm reasonably sure I'm doing "the right thing," in quotation marks, is when I'm putting Band-aids on children's fingers or reading to them or trying to write as good a book as I can. And trying to write as good a book as I can is what suits me temperamentally. Reading to children suits me sometimes. And putting Band-aids on fingers is necessary.