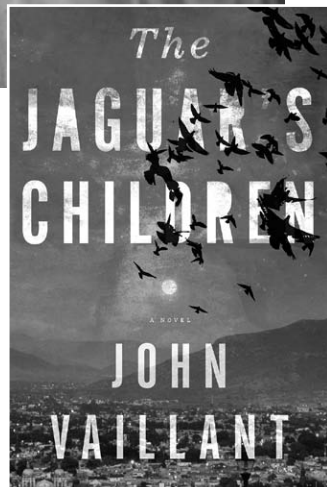




John Vaillant. Photo: John Sinal



## *Scholar-Practitioner Q & A . . .*

### An Interview with John Vaillant

Bill Reynolds  
Ryerson University, Canada

In 2005, John Vaillant became an overnight success. His first book-length work, *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed*, sold well and won awards, including the Governor-General's Award for Non-fiction and the Pearson Writers' Trust Non-fiction Prize in Canada. Yet forty years of living and working various jobs had to pass before Vaillant could reach that plateau. Raised in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he studied creative writing at Oberlin College. Upon graduation, he spent the next decade and a half bouncing from job to job—fishing off the coast of Alaska, doing social work and playing blues guitar in Philadelphia, teaching English in the Czech Republic.

By age thirty-five, Vaillant thought it time to focus. He began writing features for the now-defunct *Sports Afield*, a working-class *Outside*. He pounded out story after story, 1998–2000, refining his style. The stories varied from pumpkin catapult competitions to a journey on an ice highway to Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories, to entering an obscure competition called the Primitive Biathlon in northern Vermont. In 1998, Vaillant followed his wife to Vancouver where she was doing post-graduate work at the University of British Columbia. The next year he landed his first *New Yorker* feature, “The Ship That Vanished.” And, in 2002, he wrote a travel piece for *Outside* called “Paddling in a Ghost World,” about kayaking in Haida Gwaii off the coast of B.C. That's where he heard the story of the one and only golden spruce and its demise. He began reporting, researching, and refining a letter for the *New Yorker*. “The Golden Bough” told for the first time in long form the story of the radiant freak of nature tree and Grant Hadwin, the forest surveyor who chopped it down.

Vaillant signed a book deal with W.W. Norton in the United States and Knopf in Canada, and expanded it to an 80,000-word manuscript. Instead of profiling the alleged eco-terrorist who took a chain saw to the magnificent eco-miracle, he created four thematic poles—Hadwin, the golden spruce itself, the Haida people, and the forest in which the golden spruce sprouted and thrived against steep odds.

After the great success of *The Golden Spruce*, Vaillant wrote in a Facebook blurb, “I am fascinated by the ongoing collision between human ambition and the natural world. How we manage our collective appetites and ambitions will determine the fate of our children, our species, and much of life on this planet. This, I feel, is the story of our time, and I try to address it in all my writing.” His celebrated book certainly fit the bill, but he needed to find something new. At the 2006 Banff Mountain Film Festival, in Alberta, he caught Sasha Snow’s film, *Conflict Tiger*, which focused on a poacher, the Amur tiger who killed him and the man who tracked down the big cat. To Vaillant, it seemed to contain all the attributes he required for a deeply researched nonfiction story. Snow gave Vaillant the nod to pursue his own vision of the tale of the man-eating Amur tiger.

The result, *The Tiger: A True Story of Vengeance and Survival* (2010), was an eco-murder mystery that Vaillant has called a mixture of investigative journalism, social history, geography, and natural writing. It won British Columbia’s National Award for Canadian Non-Fiction, and a translation was awarded France’s Nicolas Bouvier Prize. The author became a 2104 Windham Campbell prize winner for his nonfiction.

Vaillant was then inspired to try fiction. The result, *The Jaguar’s Children* (2015) became the catalyst for this Scholar-Practitioner Q+A, which focuses on how a nonfiction writer moves to fiction. The story, which could be ripped from headlines, is about a desperate group of Mexicans who pay unscrupulous coyotes to transport them across the border, inside a sealed water truck. On U.S. soil the truck is abandoned and Hector, one of the unfortunate souls, chronicles what happens inside the tank on a cellphone.

I called Vaillant in Vancouver on October 14, 2015, from Toronto.

**Bill Reynolds:** So you’ve just come home from Calgary Word Fest, where I gather you were reading from *The Jaguar’s Children*?

**John Valiant:** Yeah, I had two events yesterday.

**Reynolds:** Here in Toronto there are all these book launches going on right now—Ian Brown’s *Sixty*, Siobhan Roberts’s *Genius at Play*, her biography of the mathematician John Horton Conway, Trevor Cole’s and Don Gillmor’s latest novels . . .

**Vaillant:** Yeah, it's pretty intense. That's the beauty of releasing a book in January. It's a very quiet time.

**Reynolds:** That's when *The Jaguar's Children* was published—January 2015?

**Vaillant:** Yeah, I got scads of coverage because there really wasn't that much going on.

**Reynolds:** I remember reading lots about how it was your first novel. I guess that must have been a good talking point for various media.

**Vaillant:** Very generous. I was really floored at how things went in Toronto and it's partly thanks to our most excellent Random House publicist there.

**Reynolds:** And here you are, still working the book at Word Fest, all these months later.

**Vaillant:** Well, I took the summer off. One more push over the next month and then I'm probably going to get back to work.

**Reynolds:** I'd like to talk about the mechanics involved in moving from nonfiction to fiction, especially after you've published two such celebrated works of nonfiction. And it's funny, when a bunch of academics, including me, launched this project called the International Association for Literary Journalism Studies, in June 2006, the impetus was a conference held the month before, in Nancy, France, on the centenary of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*.<sup>2</sup> In other words, we created a scholarly organization dedicated to the study of literary journalism, which is nonfiction, out of a conference dedicated to the centenary of a work of fiction.

**Vaillant:** Well, Sinclair's book is pretty close to the truth.

**Reynolds:** Oh yeah! I presented a paper on the differences between Ted Conover's "The Way of All Flesh,"<sup>3</sup> a magazine story about Conover working at Cargill Meat Solutions, a cattle slaughtering plant in Nebraska, and Sinclair's novel about the meatpacking district in Chicago 108 years earlier. I read a bunch of biographies of Sinclair and whatever else I could find and came to the conclusion that his methodology was no different from yours or mine when we're doing literary journalism pursuits.

**Vaillant:** That's true of a lot of fiction writers—a lot of them are really good reporters.

**Reynolds:** I'm sure there are others but there is one scholar, Doug Underwood, who has been banging at the gates of the truth barrier of nonfiction, trying to make it more inclusive, letting someone like Steinbeck, say, inside the gates, because he was a reporter originally and should be considered part of the canon.

**Vaillant:** David Simon, too.<sup>4</sup>

**Reynolds:** That expanded inclusivity is a bit radical for many of us—

making fiction writers part of the canon. We've had this back and forth, especially at the annual conferences, but ultimately many of us are rigid about that line. When I was reading Random House Canada executive publisher Louise Denny's interview with you, on the Penguin Random House site,<sup>5</sup> I noticed a section where you laid down the law on the truth barrier—when you're doing literary journalism you really have to stick to the facts. Does that kind of an uncompromising position in the arena of nonfiction affect the research and reporting for a work of fiction?

**Vaillant:** Yeah, I'm arguing that even though it's fiction you could still bring some of that reporting skill and that knack for detail—almost as if you were reporting.

**Reynolds:** That's the feeling I got with *The Jaguar's Children*. It's so layered with exactly the kind of writing that happened to be in your two previous books.

**Vaillant:** In some ways it's certainly coming from a similar place. It is kind of armed—the muscles under it are still fact—but I'm not sure what you mean because the style is quite different.

**Reynolds:** How so?

**Vaillant:** Well, it's written in a Mexican English cadence so it's not the way I usually work. Put the sentences next to each another from *The Golden Spruce* and *The Jaguar's Children* and there's no comparison.

**Reynolds:** I don't think I was trying to make that claim. I was seeing it more in terms of the methodology of gathering information in order to write a story.

**Vaillant:** Yeah, the facts are the armature. The raw facts: A, B, and C, the color of this and the size of that and the distance to the other thing, are the wires under the artist's model, and then the clay you put over it really shape it and give it form. That could be fiction or nonfiction, so that the drama, if you will, the narrative shape of the facts, is what gives it that lively feeling. And that narrative shape could either be composed of an existing nonfiction narrative, or composed of one you've conjured up. And, typically, one you've conjured up is based in some way on pre-existing tales. It is certainly a grey area, but I still think there's a distinction.

**Reynolds:** Looking back, three books in, how would you characterize the difference in methodology between your third book and the first two?

**Vaillant:** The first two were really systematic. The process wasn't always perfectly linear, but it was systematic in terms of having to reconstruct events in a way that was coherent and logical, and that justified gaps, absences, and omissions. With fiction you're much freer. I needed to have a baseline of information that I could assemble however I wanted to. If there were holes I

could just make it up, or I could just check, depending on how I felt about it. There are many scenes in *The Jaguar's Children* that are conjured up out of whole cloth, based on my accumulation of experience both in Mexico and out of it.

**Reynolds:** Did you enjoy doing that?

**Vaillant:** Oh yeah, it's really fun. Well, not always fun. Sometimes it's quite appalling. When you follow a scene through, depending on the situation, it can take you to some really dark places. In *The Jaguar's Children* things get pretty grim inside the truck, and that's stuff I hadn't really thought about before or let myself into. But I said to myself, 'Okay, well, this much time has passed, this is where people are at, this is what would be happening physiologically, psychologically, so how do I convey that?' I was kind of horrified by what I came up with. At other times, certain kinds of childhood memories, say, it was really enjoyable to drop myself into the mindset of a five-year-old kid wandering to a mountain village noticing what he might notice and doing what he might do. But again, those are not scenes that I witnessed and recreated and they're not things that I did as a child but some weird and quite wonderful melding of the two. That's what a lot of fiction writers experience and what keeps them coming back.

**Reynolds:** So, for instance, you were down in Mexico for a while. Did you do a lot of observing, watching children play or whatever?

**Vaillant:** No, not at all. We lived in Mexico for a year so I saw a lot but I didn't go anywhere to commit research, if you know what I mean. There were things I wanted to see, like that scene where the grandmother is dancing with that flaming firework on top of her head in a basket.

I'd heard about people doing that and when I'd heard there was going to be this dance performed, I went to see that, but partly because another friend was going to go too and it was fun to be with her. We were all friends, she and my wife Nora and a group of us, so we all went. The place was so interesting and so different that everything you did was research. I happened to be living there anyway, but I would see new things that would surprise me every day. I had a notebook, a camera, and my memory, and I would talk things over with Nora and other friends. And I would say, "Why did they do that? Where did that come from?" Just by virtue of my own curiosity and that proximity to all these resources, was I doing research or was I just getting to know the environment better? There was a lovely blurring of that and it felt much less like work. After spending a year in a state of pretty heightened alertness, I'd gathered a huge amount of material just incidentally.

**Reynolds:** What year was that?

**Vaillant:** That was 2009–2010. And I went back for six weeks in 2011.

**Reynolds:** And so, when I visited you in Vancouver in February 2011 . . .

**Vaillant:** It might have been just between . . .

**Reynolds:** I think you had your idea at that point but it wasn't clear that day that you'd amassed that much raw material by that point.

**Vaillant:** I don't think I knew because I hadn't written much yet. I didn't know how much I had. At that point I had 10,000–20,000 words. I had some opening scenes but I'd also had potentially a year's worth of untapped experience and knowledge that hadn't been explored or exploited.

**Reynolds:** When I teach your book *The Golden Spruce* I often talk about the logger Earl Einarson. You once told me these wonderful anecdotes about how you had the presence of mind to record the sound of one of these massive old-growth trees falling—like a 747 jet taking off is how you put it—and also to time its being cut down, something like ten minutes to wipe out a 500-year-old tree. But even with this visceral understanding of what you were dealing with you felt unsure of quite what you had, at least until you were out of the field and in your writing room trying to process all of this information, listening back to recordings, transcribing. And suddenly you're saying, wow, I didn't know I had this great material. And that's when the Einarson “jewel of a quote,” as you called it, jumped out. Back in 2005 you said to me, “The guy who's been logging for thirty years, who quit in the middle of high school, to have him say, ‘Well, I guess it's kind of an oxymoron isn't it, to love something and then go out and kill it.’ He was being so frank. The human dilemma right there—that's it! But I had to go into the bush to get it. To be standing there, the sawdust perfume in our nostrils and these huge carcasses lying all over the place and the saw rumbling away. He was so frank, unguarded, and real. That's the pivotal moment in the book—that's the point of the book. I don't feel like he was making an admission. I don't feel like I caught him out or anything. I felt like he was articulating a fact, one that he is more qualified to articulate than most of us. He's totally paid his dues and that gives it a kind of credibility for me.”

**Vaillant:** It's almost like getting punch lines without the joke yet and then you write it and you're setting up scenes and you realize, *Oh my gosh, there's a perfect clarifying insight*, one that sums up the conundrum and the contradiction of being a conscious full-time logger. But that's also the human dilemma.

Especially at this time in history we're doing things that we know are actively damaging to the environment, yet we continue to do them. And we're doing it for all kinds of reasons—because we can make a living doing it, or because it's a hell of a lot easier than bicycling through a rainstorm. I remember being struck by that Einarson quote and thinking, *Well, I'll use that*

*somewhere*, but I didn't know where because I hadn't written it yet.

It was the same with all these things I was seeing in Mexico. I had no idea how they would fit together—I just knew I was impressed by them.

**Reynolds:** So it's your curiosity being tugged.

**Vaillant:** It's even just the enthusiasm for it, if this idea has more significance for me than it may for anyone else, this notion, for instance, that the word for water (*agua*) fits inside the word for Jaguar. I just thought that's a really heavy idea—that the stuff of life, water, fits within one of the most powerful spirit beings and living beings in Meso-American culture and nature. So I just thought I had to explore that idea and see how it goes.

**Reynolds:** It's a great way of tying in the jaguar finding and the dig and the truck. All these symbols start to mesh.

**Vaillant:** That's the hope and they in fact do: in Mexican culture, and all through Central America, these symbols work at every level, from the most prosaic, sports-team jaguar print t-shirts to the most mystical and demonic.

**Reynolds:** Comparing *The Jaguar's Children* to your nonfiction, how long did the agony of the writing take place? Was it pretty much the same, or were there significant differences?

**Vaillant:** It unfolded in a really different way. I went to a writer's retreat in April and May 2011. I was there for six weeks and I wrote a whole draft. It was a really messy draft—it had lots of problems and I spent the next two years with two editors fixing it. You know I never could have blown out a nonfiction book like that just because the details are so specific in nonfiction. Think of a novel as a watercolor and nonfiction as more done with a drafting pen.

**Reynolds:** Yes, some chapters in both *The Golden Spruce* and *The Tiger*, the history chapters in particular, of the logging industry in North America, of the Haida peoples on the northwest coast, and, especially, the environmental history of Russia–USSR, must have taken many, many hours of research.

**Vaillant:** Interestingly, though, the total time for each book is roughly the same—between two and three years. But I spent the time very differently, much more editing with the novel. More drafts, literally years of just trying to shape it. After doing that initial blast at the first.

**Reynolds:** A lot more fine motor sculpting, I guess?

**Vaillant:** Yeah, whereas with nonfiction you do that as you go. I wouldn't write three chapters at once. I would write one chapter and get it really clean and tight before I would go on.

**Reynolds:** Fascinating. So the contrast in *The Tiger* is probably more marked than in *The Golden Spruce*. What I mean to say is the really heart-stopping narrative about the stalking tiger taking its revenge on specific hu-



mans is chopped up with deep historical information packets. When you're pinned back into the narrative it takes on a deeper meaning each time you come back.

**Vaillant:** Well, that's the hope. That was tough for some people because it was a sort of Melville-ian approach. He could have written *Moby-Dick* in a lot fewer words and had a really thrilling whaling story. And you could have written *The Tiger* in fewer words and had a thrilling tiger story, but I don't think we live in a time when it's responsible to write those stories anymore. Part of why one writes a story like that—and why it's crucial to read it now—is to help understand our relationship to nature better because our relationship to nature is in serious crisis. The stakes are much higher now.

When there were 100,000 tigers, Jim Corbett could write a hair-raising tiger hunt story in thirty pages and you could read it and say, 'Wow that was really exciting,' and just move on. Now, when tigers are counted in the hundreds or very low thousands and there's a very lucrative market for the remaining population, it takes on a different meaning. Anyone writing about it would be remiss not to acknowledge that. Lots of people say how endangered tigers are and how we need to protect them. I didn't want to be as on the nose as that, more like: what does this animal really mean to us, and what significance does it have in our world, physical and spiritual?

**Reynolds:** Some of *The Tiger* was indeed tough going but so, hey, too bad, reader.

**Vaillant:** That's sort of how I felt. I hope when people get to the end of it they see why.

**Reynolds:** There's another dynamic at work in *The Tiger*. When you get to that final scene, there's such a rush to it. You withhold the narrative repeatedly, until at some point the reader begins to sense that the finale is going to be hair-raising. Yet you keep holding back, holding back. You're forcing the reader to learn how the tiger got to be in such a dire situation—the political reasons, all these other cultural reasons. When you finally hit that last scene there's such a tension release, the string having been drawn back as far as possible before the arrow is released.

**Vaillant:** I'm glad. Um, finally, the guy got to the point! It was one of those stories where you knew how it ends at the beginning. When I started writing *The Golden Spruce* I thought, what do readers know, or need to know, what can I arm them with so they get the deepest possible understanding from the next scene. And that's kind of how I think about it.

**Reynolds:** Let's switch back to the fiction side. You must have the same point of view for the reader's sake. You might say how much information do I parcel out and how long do I take doing it from inside the tank.

**Vaillant:** Yeah, that's Hector's dilemma. He's trying to share his world with us, presumably American strangers, and he realizes this is his last chance to say his piece about who he is and where he's from and what it means. That's how I rationalize all the detail he includes. Also, most people know so little about Mexico, especially southern Mexico, it's really almost like describing a remote state in India. There's a lot that you have to get across to somebody—a steep learning curve. That presents a problem in terms of having a natural feeling there, a flow, as opposed to a natural history lesson or an ethnographic lesson. I just figured Hector is who he is; he's going to tell it how he tells it. If it doesn't work, you have to blame the author rather than Hector.

I thought about that a lot. How much could I describe scenes out of context and have them have any meaning? To describe the scene with the grandmother with the basket on her head and the fireworks exploding off of it—it's kind of a neat spectacle to describe but it doesn't have nearly the meaning until you know that she's worshipping this little tiny aboriginal Mary figure. This strange eliding of indigenous and the imported Christian—that's where the dynamic tension is, that's what's makes it so interesting, but the reader probably isn't going to know that until it's described in some way.

**Reynolds:** Obviously, you considered logistics about how much information being parceled out, how much of a suspension of disbelief does the reader have to have to believe that the cell phone will stay alive long enough to dispense all of this information? Did you worry about stuff like that?

**Vaillant:** I gave it a huge amount of thought and it troubles me that that's even an issue at this point because if you read that book aloud it takes nine hours. Plenty of cell phone batteries can last that long. And there is a scene where he describes when he pulls the phone out of Cesar's pants he sees it has an aftermarket battery called the Mugen. That's a Korean super-battery. Those things last for days. And we know that he is husbanding the energy of the battery very carefully. I didn't want to say this in the book but nobody's better at conserving cell phone battery life than rural Mexicans because they have so few opportunities to recharge and they have to pay for the charge so they really know how to get the most out of it. It was a technical issue that I certainly considered but I thought I'd solved it with hours to spare. And the battery does die in the end.

**Reynolds:** I noticed you received a bit of guff in some reviews.

**Vaillant:** It's irritating. I take my nonfiction and technical details really seriously. To even suspect that I'd screw up like that, it's an insult. It's also carelessness on the part of the reviewer just to think it through. Look at the pages, how long does it take to read a page? Do the math. It's nine hours. It's trivial. The much greater issue is about whether you can send a signal out of a

sealed box. He thinks some of the first texts go, but he doesn't know. Nothing comes in.

**Reynolds:** He's sitting at one bar.

**Vaillant:** You can certainly get a bar, but if you get two bars it's working. And then there was this lightning storm and he lost his bars. So who knows what's going on out there. He's right in the middle of a technologically policed zone on the US–Mexican border so there's all kinds of other potential technical interference that could be going on. It's too bad that it has to be a topic of discussion but for some reason it is.

**Reynolds:** Do you find that happens often, people getting fixated on things that are beside the point?

**Vaillant:** People do when the real point is uncomfortable. It's much easier to retreat to technical details and pedantry and nitpicking when it's a horrific, tragic, gut-wrenching story and it's playing out over and over again. Right now, today in the *Guardian*, there's a powerful story about Altar, which is the town where Hector and Cesar get in the truck.<sup>6</sup> This wonderful young *Guardian* writer based in L.A. wrote it. He may have gone to Altar after reading *The Jaguar's Children* because the headline photo in that article is a mural painted in Altar of dead bodies inside a truck. The article is almost unreadable because the shit that happens to people there is so appalling. You can see why people don't want to look at it. You can see why people might want to fuss over, 'Well, would a battery really last that long?' I have two words for that, especially in the face of what the story is really about and what the real stakes are.

**Reynolds:** What were you like to be around when you were writing this going to these dark places?

**Vaillant:** One of the tasks of the writer, of any artist, is to plumb the depths of human experience, and also our own characters lead us to certain types of stories. I do think there are themes that link *The Golden Spruce*, *The Tiger* and *The Jaguar's Children*. It comes down to betrayal and isolation, abandonment and misunderstanding. Those are all themes that recur.

**Reynolds:** I came up with: There's something wrong with our hardwiring and we're just starting to understand what it is and we might be able to fix it in time. That's just from teaching *The Golden Spruce*.

**Vaillant:** Well, we were wired for a different set of challenges and technological resources. We were never made to have guns or feller bunchers<sup>7</sup> and now that we have them we do things that are really inhuman and unnatural. We've always been harvesters and we've always been killers but to do it on this scale is wolfish. Wolves are known for going berserk in sheep pens and slaughtering wantonly. Weasels, ferrets, and those kinds of predators do it too. Killer whales also, and I listed a whole bunch of species that have been prone to do

it. We certainly do but for most of our history we had technological limitations on us so we could only go so far. There's only so much you can do with a spear or a club.

**Reynolds:** And there weren't so many of us.

**Vaillant:** Yes, so that's what we're coming up hard against: harmonizing our inventiveness with the Pandora's Box of inventions and superpowers that it has unleashed. We're also saving lives on a scale never before imagined—look at what the absence of smallpox has done over the past forty or fifty years. You could say we've saved way more than we've killed. I'm sure that's true, by far.

**Reynolds:** Any other thoughts on the writing process between fiction and nonfiction?

**Vaillant:** At some level there's a certain level of intuition and creativity that's required of both. And so some of the same impulses, whether it's to compare a tiger to a piano or comparing a tiger to a basketball team as a means of understanding how it works—these are the intuitive creative moments that occur and you hope they're useful. Likewise, in fiction you're taking some of these same impulses and putting them on an even longer leash, so that you're really letting your imagination move more freely, and yet you have to keep it on some sort of a leash because it has to be narratively coherent and it has to feel authentic to that character or else you're going to lose the reader. So, for instance, if Hector suddenly grows a sixth finger or suddenly breaks out in a rash that looks like jaguar spots you might be pushing it. Somebody could probably pull that off but it pushes you into this other realm. Yet his interest and affinity for the jaguar still has to be expressed in one way or another. So you do it through the mask or his grandfather's dance, as opposed to other places your imagination might kick in. It's like you have these two powerful energies, one is literal and factual, and the other is fantastic. Another way to put it, the flag on the pole, what gives the flag its power and beauty is the fact that it's tied to a completely inflexible shaft. And then you blow into it. But the pole just standing there without a flag it's just kind of a fact without any beauty or energy or color to it. And a flag without the pole is just a heap of cloth lying on the ground. You've got to bind them together.

**Reynolds:** But surely you can do that with nonfiction as well?

**Vaillant:** You can with description but it's a shorter distance. You can go into a colorful, imaginative description of a mountain or forest or tiger, but you're going to have to, at some point, come back to what's really happening. If you get too flowery or too abstract you're going to lose the reader or irritate the reader. But if your hope is to write serious nonfiction then it's got to stand up to the rigors of expert analysis both literary and scientific. You really

have to be disciplined in the choices you make, and the freedoms you allow yourself, the indulgences.

**Reynolds:** You've said this is the golden age of nonfiction because so many writers have learned to employ effectively the techniques of fiction in a nonfiction context.

**Vaillant:** Yeah, I would hesitate to say it's *the* golden age. I would absolutely say it's *a* golden age. We're in a golden age of television also. And it's really exciting to watch this quality of storytelling married to heavy, relevant subject matter. It's the perfect combination, I'd say.

**Reynolds:** The score is 2–1, nonfiction over fiction. What happens now?

**Vaillant:** I've got another novel that I'd like to do. I started it before *The Tiger*. I've been taking notes on that all this time. It's a historic novel. I have misgivings about writing it because a historic novel feels indulgent to me. Things in the world are dire enough and there are enough unseen and unheard stories unfolding right now that need attention, so that if I have any kind of platform at all, I should be devoting my energy to the unseen and the unheard. That's not a conscious choice but it feels like a moral choice and it becomes conscious when I think about doing other things that aren't related to that, like a historical novel, which can certainly have contemporary resonance if you write it right.

I should put on the record that I don't really hold anyone else to that standard. It's really an issue I have with myself and how I spend my time—and how I spend the reader's time. When I read someone else's fiction that's not an issue for me. I just want to read a good story. I just want to make that clear, that there is no moral judgment implicit in this. It's something I wrestle with internally.

Then again, I just had a conversation with a guy last week, in the Great Bear Rainforest, in central British Columbia. He told me a nonfiction story that I think has legs long enough to be a book. I haven't had enough time to really burrow into it, but when he told it to me, I was going through my personal criteria for what a story needs to sustain a book and it was meeting a lot of them.

So that was exciting. I don't know about you but I have a hard time being between projects. At the same time I don't want to rebound into one just because I'm not feeling engaged enough. I really want to do something that has substance and purpose and resonance for me.

**Reynolds:** Looking at the work you've done so far, I can see how you'd wrestle with that.

**Vaillant:** If this nonfiction story looks feasible and salable then I would put the novel off. But another thought I'd had was to give myself a month of

uninterrupted and judgment-free time to just burrow into the novel and see how far I got. If I was still excited at the end of thirty days of writing, well, that would give me some information.

**Reynolds:** When I was at New York University for six months, in 2011, Ted Conover was teaching that semester. He was a little cagey talking about current journalistic projects but he told me something about his methodology. What he tries to do is to land an assignment at a magazine, *Harper's* say, and doing the feature-length version is his test to see whether he can write a book or not.

**Vaillant:** That's what *The Golden Spruce* was. The *New Yorker* story was basically a market test. I was less concerned about being able to write the story, but more, would anybody care? That was my real concern. Did anybody outside of the lower mainland of B.C. and the Coast give a damn? I couldn't bear to write it if that was the case—to go to that much effort, especially on a first book. But I agree with Ted wholeheartedly. It wasn't necessary for *The Tiger* because I knew that story was just a bomb waiting to go off. It was just such an incredible story. Everybody I showed the proposal to went crazy.

**Reynolds:** Thanks for the chat.

**Vaillant:** Thanks for your interest over the years.

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### Notes

1. John Vaillant, *The Jaguar's Children* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).
2. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (London: Dover Thrift Edition, 2001).
3. Ted Conover, "The Way of All Flesh," *Harper's*, May 2013, 31–49.
4. David Simon worked as a crime reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* 1982–95. To date his most famous television program is the HBO drama, *The Wire*, which aired 2002–08.
5. <http://hazlitt.net/feature/john-vaillant-and-louise-dennys-conversation>.
6. Rory Carroll, "Altar, Mexico: How the 'Migrant Oasis' for Would-be Border Crossers Became a Trap," *Guardian*, October 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/14/altar-mexico-how-the-migrant-oasis-for-would-be-border-crossers-became-a-trap>.
7. A feller buncher is a machine that can cut through trees, limb them and stack them in one motion.

