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TITOLO: An Interview with Nickolas Butler on *The Hearts of Men* (2017)

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# An Interview with Nickolas Butler on *The Hearts of Men* (2017)

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ABSTRACT In *The Hearts of Men* (2017), his multigenerational and controversial *Bildungsroman*, Nickolas Butler devastatingly peels back the layers of the American educational system by using the scout honor code, attempting to stick to its rules in a world where violators appear to hold sway. This 2020 interview with the author, which is presented here for the first time to an Italian public, seeks to dig into the novel's key insights grounded in the scout oath and law. It also aims to provide an inside perspective on issues ranging from the differences between scout law and a predominant militaristic worship to a core of morality which Butler's text variously interrogates, eventually looking towards a quest for forgiveness. Butler seems thus to describe an unavoidable downfall that is also a premise for catharsis, for a healing of the wounds of an America that finds it hard not to repeat the same old faults.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Nickolas Butler, scouting, religion and morality, America, militarism

Questo articolo è stato realizzato sotto la supervisione della prof. Laura Giovannelli, docente di Letteratura inglese, e della prof. Simona Beccone, docente di Letteratura inglese.

## Foreword

A brilliant characterization and a superlatively measured prose: these are the qualities that, according to *Booklist*<sup>1</sup>, put Nickolas Butler in the front ranks of contemporary American writers of literary fiction. Born in Pennsylvania and raised in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, this storyteller of rural America graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and attended the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop. His multifaceted stories grapple with the nature of masculinity, friendships, and nature. While his internationally best-selling and prize-winning debut novel *Shotgun Lovesongs* (2014) contains nostalgic musings on Americans, seen as simple people keen on playing music, dancing and sharing food, the more thrilling *The Hearts of Men* (2017), a finalist for the *Prix Médicis* and *Prix Femina* in France, builds on a sense of danger and tells a story of decline. Here, the former lyricism is swallowed up by the cacophony of war, with its blades, machine guns, and bodies piled up and torn apart. Moreover, sunrise at the Grand Canyon, which, even to unaware eyes, borders on religious experience – with the striated layers of the ancient, red and orange rocks being lighted up and the majestic, deep purple shadows meeting the yellow and green of the land that rolls on and on<sup>2</sup> – ultimately gets dark since America is darker, too: «Everybody's fucked up. Everybody's nailing each other's wives, stealing from work, cheating

<sup>1</sup> See Butler (2017b: 394).

<sup>2</sup> See Butler (2014: 52).

on their taxes. It's like, if you're not trying to cheat, you're a moron, a cretin. And what am I supposed to do, send you into that world unarmed?» (Butler 2017a: 52).

A superbly constructed *Bildungsroman*, *The Hearts of Men* hypnotizes the reader through the calculated force of its tone, plunging us headlong into a wild exploration of what becoming a man can mean. From the summer of 1962 to the summer of 2019, three generations are seen as chasing each other and eventually returning to the Chippewa scout camp. The story deals with absent, broken, and imperfect fathers trying to send their morally armed children into a world overshadowed by darkness, and with men who, once their adolescent fantasies have vanished, turn into adults who must come to terms with the secret recesses of their memories. Such memories are tainted by perpetrated and suffered horrors, and these men have to choose whether to succumb to the appetites of fierceness and betrayal, or to be true to their scout code and thus empower their spirit in the name of an oath made in front of God.

The story is mostly narrated by male voices, but not entirely so. Among the female ones, Rachel's firmly erupts as though fighting for recognition within a community that does not easily accept her. Being a woman, she is perceived as emotional and too frail to sleep in a tent or risk scratching her skin. Yet, her temper is such a high and mighty fortress that it appears to withstand any abject man's sensual and destructive desire.

«I became very afraid of what the future of American politics might look like. I was worried about basic principles and decorum [...]. I thought a boy scout camp might be a perfect way to write my own sort of *Lord of the Flies*»: these are Nickolas Butler's words from the interview that he kindly granted me in 2020 as part of the research for my three-year degree thesis, supervised by Professor Simona Beccone at the Department of Philology, Literature and Linguistics, University of Pisa. By way of contrast, one might here bear in mind the typical scout oath, which places duty towards God first, as a force capable of keeping a boy faithful to the noble values of the scout law: «On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the scout law; to help other people at all times; to keep myself physically strong, mentally awake, and morally straight» (Alexander 1911: 33-34)<sup>3</sup>. As a matter of fact, this oath is bluntly at odds with the narrative's ruling militarism, so that the line is blurred between, on the one hand, scouting duty towards oneself and others as well as reverence to God, and, on the other hand, obedience to nationalistic and authoritarian dogma. A consuming ideological power compels the characters to spiral tragically downward, while they are desperately striving to go upward.

In *The Hearts of Men*, people seem to lack the divine “spiritual fuel” and the moral compass that triggers the need for catharsis through forgiveness, so that the story is all the gloomier in its portrayal of a world of violence and chaos. At the same time, the reader catches a few luminous glimpses when looking at the chemistry between characters, as exemplified by Wilbur's love for the scouts he silently takes care of, by the peculiar but steady friendship between Nelson and Jonathan, or by a ruined clearing that nevertheless remains the most suitable place to feel a renewal of the tie between ourselves, others, and God. In other words, while mischief consumes itself in fire at Camp Chippewa, the law and the scout promise still blaze as everlasting and immutable value archetypes. And from those ashes, Butler draws the healing potential of writing, which, by exploring the underworld, can eventually lead to brightness and rebirth.

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<sup>3</sup> These are the twelve principles of the scout law: 1. A scout is trustworthy. 2. A scout is loyal. 3. A scout is helpful. 4. A scout is friendly. 5. A scout is courteous. 6. A scout is kind. 7. A scout is obedient. 8. A scout is cheerful. 9. A scout is thrifty. 10. A scout is brave. 11. A scout is clean. 12. A scout is reverent. See Alexander (1911: 27-28).

## Interview

The interview featured here spanned from September 20 to October 16, 2020, and starts by exploring the historical, political and biographical context that set the groundwork for the drafting of the 2017 novel. It unfolds according to a series of thematic nodes, i.e. *Butler's Creative Process*, *Beyond "The Hearts of Men": Scouting and the Love of Nature*, *The Quest for Forgiveness*, *A Spectrum of Morality*, and *Darkness and Light*. The interview closes with a final section titled *Chance and Career* and shedding light on Butler's ideas about his upcoming career and his views on how to tackle academic writing.

This interview helps familiarize the reader with some crucial issues that underpin Butler's novel, whose protagonists are seen as progressively falling apart on the psychological level and in terms of values. This is largely due to their country's culture and militaristic ideology, capable of affecting the public and private spheres of American society. Butler problematizes scouting to get under the skin of the American educational system, in which the wholesomeness of the principles outlined through the scout law are perverted by disvalues such as chauvinism, a glorification of masculinity, a blind submission to authority, and an apology of prevarication and savagery. Indeed, horror is ever ready to intrude to falsely claim the need for a moral renewal in contemporary U.S. society, while actually strengthening links with the wilderness.

### Butler's Creative Process

Q: As a student who loves literature, I'm much fascinated by the writing process. How do you approach it? How does a story come to life? Are there any standard steps you commonly follow?

A: Well, I'm a professional "working" writer. I don't have another job. My wife does have a good job with health benefits, and without her, I suppose I'd need to find what I call "a real person's job". But between my book-advances and her salary, we do quite well. Why is this important or germane to your question? Basically, I have to write a book about every 30 months or so, to understand and predict my income. So, at any given time, I have many different ideas for future projects. After I finish a book, I'll give myself 6-12 months of being pretty non-productive (in the world's eye) before I launch myself at the next project. Then, I'll work between 2-14 hours a day on the next manuscript. Working with that sort of intensity and focus, I can finish a novel in about six months, if I'm really working hard. Mostly my ideas come from my own life, or people I talk to.

Q: Another thing I've always wondered about as a reader is how to structure a character. Do you first imagine the physical appearance and, out of that, delineate the personality, or is it the other way around? Do somehow the two things appear to you as interconnected? If so, for example, what physical traits of the characters in *The Hearts of Men* can be associated with the moral ones?

A: I can only speak for myself, but I think generally, I'm trying to understand a character's spirit or personality before I delve into what they look like. In other words, I want to know who my protagonist is first, then who his/her supporting cast will be. After that, I put more and more flesh on the character. Wilbur Whiteside and Nelson Doughty were very funny characters to imagine, though, I have to say.

Q: How did you come up with the story of *The Hearts of Men*? Are there people who inspired you in the creation of your characters?

A: *The Hearts of Men* was written during the campaign for the 2016 US Presidential election, but specifically as I watched the Republican 72 candidates spar in various debates and on the campaign trail. I was appalled by their behavior, particularly Trump, who – at that time – no one really thought could become President. I would

watch the debates with my then seven-year old son, and I became very afraid of what the future of American politics might look like. I was worried about basic principles and decorum. Worried about even the pretense of decency, respect, truthfulness, and honor. At about this same time I read *Lord of the Flies* for the first time. This novel left a deep impression on me, and I wanted to do something similar with the plot of my book; I wanted to isolate boys away from the world and then report on their behavior. I began thinking of my own childhood. Going to boy scout camp every summer between the ages of about 7-17, I had seen improper behavior. I had, as a teenager, participated in improper behavior. I had watched fathers act inappropriately. I thought a boy scout camp might be a perfect way to write my own sort of *Lord of the Flies*.

## Beyond *The Hearts of Mer*: Scoutism and the Love of Nature

Q: You have a boy-scout background. Therefore, I would like to ask if Nelson's life as a boy scout and yours are related to each other and, if so, how.

A: The answer is basically – no. I had a wonderful experience in scouting, overall. I was a well-liked boy, and was never bullied. Certainly not in scouts.

Q: Has scouting influenced your way of living *vis-à-vis* nature or your way of perceiving it?

A: I am sure it has. As a child, I loved camping, loved building campfires, backpacking, and just generally being outside. I think scouting introduced me to nature and wilderness and I gained a confidence in the natural world. I am so comfortable where I live, out in the countryside of Wisconsin. I cannot imagine living in a city. Cannot imagine not looking up at night to see a sky full of stars, or deer moving through a pasture. I think many of our problems as a species are directly tied to our complete disconnect from the natural world. We don't know where our food comes from. We don't know what a wild landscape looks like. We've never seen a pristine night sky. If all you know, all you see is concrete and buildings, how can you imagine something like a redwood forest? Or a salmon run? Or even where I live, where deer, turkeys, eagles, bear, coyotes, and wolves run free.

Q: Do you think the scouting you have experienced, the scouting you talk about in your book and the one practised today are different in some way?

A: I don't honestly know, but I suspect that there are differences. I was very fortunate. Most of my scout leaders were dynamic, intelligent, organized, thoughtful men. This made for a wonderful experience. I had good male role models. It does seem that (at least in America) scouting is in great decline. The Boy Scouts of America recently filed for bankruptcy, and have begun a campaign to pay any victims of past sexual abuse. So it is clear that the organization I was part of, back in the 1980s and 1990s, was stronger in many ways, and certainly not stained by abuse, violence, and structural decay.

## The Quest for Forgiveness

A: At about this same time, I was reckoning with my own childhood, and in particular, the short-comings of my father's parenting. I wanted to delve deep into some painful memories. Not as a way of punishing or embarrassing my Dad, but actually as a way of forgiving him. Then I imagined writing a hero. I came up with Nelson Doughty, and decided to follow the entire span of his life.

Q: Assuming that there is a moral law and a divine power above it, the breaking of this moral code could somehow bind itself to the redemption of which Christianity speaks. For example, Wilbur does not seem to forgive himself for the horrors carried out and suffered while he was in the army, and so he tries to commit suicide; Clate

probably feels as if he failed with Nelson, and therefore he tries to re-establish a contact with his son by sending him cards; finally, even Jonathan realizes he was wrong about Rachel. Therefore, I would like to ask if somehow the story of your characters can be seen as a story connected with a quest for forgiveness.

A: Hmm... What a wonderful reading of the book. Well, I think it was certainly *my* quest to forgive my own father, so to the extent that the authorial intent of the book dovetails with that of its characters... Yes, I think forgiveness plays a role in the book. Maybe in all of my books. In my own life, I often feel bad for the moments in which I am judgmental. As a writer, I am fortunate to work through my own foibles, my own shortcomings. Maybe this is what I was doing in *The Hearts of Men*.

Q: If it can be read as a book written by a son to his father, can it also be read backwards?

A: That's a good question. Maybe I'll leave that one to the critics and readers.

Q: You said the book could be interpreted as your personal quest to forgive your own father. Then the question comes to me spontaneously: do you think the writing process can be a healing practice of re-languaging conflict in order to manage and hopefully solve it?

A: I can only speak for myself, but I would emphatically answer, Yes. For me, writing is very therapeutic. I'm talking to myself through my books. I'm not talking to critics or readers. Mostly, I'm trying to figure out my own world, my own life.

## A Spectrum of Morality

Q: At camp Chippewa, Nelson is not treated with kindness by his troop mates except for two people. What role do Wilbur and Jonathan play in moulding Nelson's character?

A: I think that, basically, I was trying to create characters that would become a spectrum of morality. Wilbur is just about the most moral person in the book (though he is also flawed.) Jonathan might be the most flawed. I liked the idea of young men (boys) having to choose role models as they age into men.

Q: In your book, there is a moral code which, like a compass, guides the characters' lives. Is there any connection between your characters' moral code and God? If you have faith and if you are a believer, how much has your faith influenced the writing of your book?

A: This is a good question, and difficult to answer. I was raised Lutheran, but over time, I have drifted towards agnosticism. I do believe my Lutheran upbringing still impacts my decision-making, still provides me with a very Western Judeo-Christian moral baseline. But I can't abide my organized religious structures and I find that I have too many questions about *The Bible* to be much of a Christian. As far as my characters are considered... I don't think religion plays much of a role for them, outside of the fact that they are probably like me: Products of Midwestern upbringings, and therefore exposed to "traditional" American Judeo-Christian beliefs... But I don't remember building those characters and thinking that really any of them were particularly religious. I hope I have answered your question.

Q: Often the book also talks about heroism with reference to Trevor. What is a hero to you?

A: I think heroes know what the right thing to do is, and they do it. This isn't as easy as it sounds. If we all made the right decisions, if we all acted as if to better our planet, and fellow humans – the world would be an entirely different place indeed. I think heroes make the right decision, the moral or ethical decisions, even when it is not

popular or convenient. He isn't so well thought of in America these days, but I think of a person like Ralph Nader. Or the journalist Amy Goodman.

## Darkness and Light

Q: In one passage of your book, the world emerges as divided between hungry people and people who are not hungry. In connection with this view and with what happens to Rachel, how can Dr. Platz be defined? What kind of hunger does he feel? Do you think his hunger can turn off the light that Trevor talks about?

A: Good questions. I think Platz is hungry. I once heard someone say that lust is a symptom of loneliness, and I think that might describe Platz to some degree. Inside, he himself is sick. So he preys upon other people (namely women) to satisfy this hunger. Yes, I suppose I see this hunger trying to eat the light.

Q: The rights of citizenship, secured by the government, make it the duty of every citizen to give patriotic service, but at what cost? How can one distinguish love for one's own country, connected with the sense of duty inculcated by the scout law, from chauvinism?

A: Hmm... Another good question. Though, I'm not sure that, at least in America, there is a clear-cut "duty" to give "patriotic service." If there was a duty, I don't think you would see much dramatic spread of COVID-19, disinformation, or even Neo-Nazism. In fact, I think there is a real dearth of "duty" in America. There is no sense of a communal goal; we are very much at odds with one another. Our politicians rarely, if ever, ask us to sacrifice anything. This, I think, is a real and dramatic problem in American society. I think, for American women, or American minorities, the sense of duty established by either scouting or chauvinism is much less real. My daughter, for example, watches television and announces when she sees sexism in a movie or TV show. She talks openly to adults about sexism. She is seven years old. I am sure she is subtly the victim of chauvinism every day, but I think our culture is changing quite rapidly – and for the better – in this sense. Also, the degree to which scouting plays a role in American politics or policy-making is dramatically different than what it was even twenty years ago. In the 1950s, American children proudly wore their scouting uniforms at school. I just don't think that really happens anymore. Even stating that you are a boy scout or an eagle scout is a bit of a joke or punchline. It means that you are antiquated, or somehow, morally simple.

Q: There is a link between scouting and militarism. It is like a snake that bites its tail: scouts learn useful lessons from their being scouts with a view to their future military life, just as the military people who, after completing their career in the army, become excellent scout leaders, and so on. Can warfare be regarded as a means of making men more peaceful in your book?

A: I certainly hope so. To some degree, I was trying to interrogate this very question as I wrote. I feel a little chagrined about my efforts though. I think that, generally, the book is showing how old soldiers should try to teach boys that in fact war is not honorable, but rather horrific. And yet, we repeat the same cycles, over and over again.

Q: I noticed the book starts and ends with fire. I would like to know if the final fire could be a purifying fire or if it destroys that moral code according to which everyone tries to live.

A: Another good question. I don't know that I will answer your question directly. This feels like a concept best left for readers or critics. All I will tell you, is that fire is a key component in all of my books, for reasons both personal and artistic. It might be my favorite image. I don't feel like I employ "symbols" consciously, but I do feel like this happens in a writer's work sometimes unconsciously. It is for the reader to identify these images or

symbols, and make of them what she pleases. Mostly, I concern myself with story, characters, and sorting through my own emotions for any intellectual questions.

Q: One thing that is definitely striking about your book is the darkness from which it tries to emerge, from time to time, through a glimmer of hope. Therefore, I would like to ask if hope can be an underlying factor of darkness, or if it is quite the opposite.

A: Well, I'm not sure how to answer that question exactly, except to say that I think darkness in art benefits from a little light. You can't actually see any darkness without a little light. My perspective as a writer – but maybe more importantly as a reader – is that an author has to be aware of plunging a reader into too much unrelenting darkness. I think an author can lose a reader; it becomes too much.

## Chance and Career

Q: How do you think your career is going to turn out now? Are you planning to deal with topics similar to those of *The Hearts of Men*?

A: I have no idea. I've been incredibly fortunate so far, and I often worry that at some point, my luck is going to run out. I hope it doesn't. So, all I can do is continue to write. I try to write the best books I can and I hope that I find an American publisher who will support me, and I hope to continue working with my core group of European publishers (England, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy.) But the writing-life is very difficult, and fickle. It is difficult to explain how very fortunate I've been. Most writers simply don't make any money on their books. They write one book, it gets ignored, and that is the end of their career. So far, I've sold five books, published four, and I really think the next decade is going to hold some exciting possibilities for my career. But so much depends on me just continuing to write no matter what.

Q: Since I have to write on your book and must approach an academic writing process for the first time, is there any advice you would give me?

A: Advice! Well, I'd say you have to have a little fun. Hopefully you enjoy my books enough that it isn't just an academic chore or hardship for you. When I was still in college, I was always excited to write about my heroes. It was never a chore. I do think good academic writing shouldn't be afraid to have a voice or be engaging. Academics are often jealous of non-fiction writers because they know how to make something academic accessible to readers broadly. I think most academics want academic papers to have the sort of boring tone found in an academic journal. I think this is foolish. Make your academic work sing! Make it intriguing and accessible to as many people as possible. But what do I know? I'm a novelist.



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