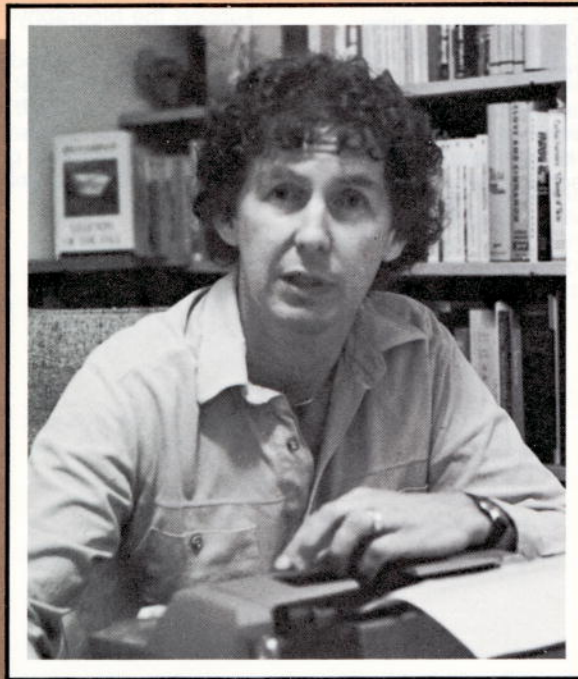


**A Study Guide for the Film**

# **OUT ON A LIMB:**

***An Introduction to***

*Jack Hodgins*



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## Film Synopsis

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In *Out on a Limb*, up and coming Canadian author Jack Hodgins allows us, through the eye of the camera, to explore his landscape, home, influences and ideas about writing.

We learn how this author of two major novels and award-winning short stories practices his craft and what he hopes to accomplish as a writer. Woven through *Out on a Limb* is Jack Hodgins' love of books and fascination for the magic within their covers.

Jack Hodgins follows an important axiom for good writing: "Write about the familiar." By using Vancouver Island as his setting, his fiction gains a powerful sense of place. Through this film portrait, we learn that Hodgins creates fiction out of the ordinary people who are so much a part of him: the loggers, fishermen, train engineers, and farmers. In a discussion of *Spit Delaney's Island* and *The Invention of the World*, Hodgins reveals how he creates character and what he believes about people: he is willing to allow each character to discover that they are capable of doing much more than they ever dreamed.

Jack Hodgins' long apprenticeship as a writer and his experience as a teacher have given him the ability to articulate the process of writing. In *Out on a Limb*, we hear some important ideas for people interested in pursuing a serious writing career.

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## Suggestions for Film Use

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This film can be used as:

- an introduction to the study of one or several of Jack Hodgins' works. Ask students to note images from the film that add dimension to his writings.
- part of a regional studies project. Ask students to observe the landscape, the people who inhabit it, and the literature that arises from it.
- part of a Canadian studies project. Ask students to note the similarities and differences between their region and the west coast's Vancouver Island.
- part of a creative writing class. Ask students to take note of Hodgins' comments on the process of writing.
- part of a study of filmmaking. Ask students to note the elements of this film biography. What is said about Jack Hodgins? What is said by him? By someone else? How are various images used to support the biography?

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## Quotations for Discussion

“One of the defining aspects of any frontier, I suppose, is the necessity to do the physical things first; to cut down the trees and kill the bears and throw up the houses, and you don’t waste time with fancy things like writing books and music until a couple of generations have gone by.”

“I suppose the vision that I bring to my work is the fact that I am willing to allow each character, as I allow people in the real world, to discover that they are capable of doing much more than they ever dreamed.”

“Each story has to be told in the way it demands to be told. I don’t decide ahead of time that it is going to be written in a certain style or it’s going to take a certain form. When I have my characters, when I have my raw material gathered together, that has to dictate to me whether it’s going to be a short story, a novel; whether it’s going to be a straightforward narrative in chronological order or whether I’m going to try something different.”

“Every time I begin a book, I begin it with great terror. If it’s worth doing at all, it’s terrifying because I’m not interested in doing anything that’s safe; I’m only interested in doing things where there’s a huge risk of failure. I love the feeling of being way out on the end of a limb and hearing the saw sawing away behind me. That’s when it’s exhilarating.”

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## Suggestions for Further Study

- Biography is said to be the purist form of fiction. Screen *Out on a Limb* again. Identify places where the director or cameraperson has made an interpretive decision. Try writing a biography of someone you know. Afterward, discuss the problems of writing an accurate portrait.
  - Choose a story from *Spit Delaney’s Island* and read it as a filmmaker might. How would you portray the story on celluloid? What images would you represent visually? What dialogue would you include? Who would tell the story? Write a film script for one of the stories. Which actors would play the characters?
  - Jack Hodgins’ island characters are isolated from the mainstream of urban life. Explore the kinds of attitudes that emerge from this kind of physical constraint and restriction. Discover other forms of isolation and compare them to the isolation described in Hodgins’ cosmos.
  - Jack Hodgins talks about failure — failure in his early attempts to be published until he developed quality and style, failure of people coming to the frontier seeking utopia. Discuss the candor with which Hodgins speaks of failure. Compare this to your own experiences with failure.
  - Jack Hodgins says that his writing comes from three different sources: materials gathered and polished, an outgrowth of history, and uncontrolled magic (see bibliography: *Transitions II*). Look at several of Hodgins’ works to further analyze his sources of fiction.
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## Biography

Jack Hodgins grew up on a stump ranch in the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island where, in his early days, like everybody else he wanted to be a logger, fisherman and fireman. He also wanted to be a diplomat and, though he never became one formally, he has added Vancouver Island to the map of Canadian literature.

Hodgins attended the University of British Columbia where he sought out Earle Birney, who had just founded the Creative Writing department. After graduation Jack Hodgins returned to Vancouver Island as a high school English and Creative Writing teacher where, for eighteen years, he struggled to develop a writing style, publish short fiction, and raise a family.

Finally in 1976 came a breakthrough with the publication of a collection of short stories, *Spit Delaney's Island*. By 1981 there were four books to his name. In addition, Hodgins' work began to be represented in west coast, regional, and Canadian anthologies and to gain recognition and respect. Among his many awards was the 1980 Governor General's Award for Fiction for *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne*. Recognition also came in the form of invitations, from Simon Fraser University in 1977 and the University of Ottawa in 1979, to be Writer in Residence.

Hodgins' stories weave mythology, history and folklore with the lives of the ordinary people in rural towns on Vancouver Island. *Spit Delaney's Island* is a series of portraits of loggers, farmers and small-town women. *The Invention of the World* centers on Donal Keneally's attempt to create an island utopia in the early 1900s by convincing an entire Irish village to follow him to Vancouver Island, promising them safety from the cataclysmic end of the world. *The Resurrection of Joseph Bourne* is a more surrealistic portrait of island life and history. His most recent book is another collection of short stories, *The Barclay Family Theatre*.

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