

THE SEDUCTIVE WORLD OF JOHN FOWLES
John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds by Eileen Warburton

Reviewed by Rick Taylor

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On a search for a storyteller, a literary tourist ends up lost in a biography.

For 36 years John Fowles has lived on a jungly, hillside estate above an ancient breakwater in Lyme Regis, Dorset. It's the spot that played backdrop in the excellent 1981 film version of the English author's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*.



During a literary ramble on the south west coast of England, I found myself on the cobblestone lanes of the seaside village. Thanks to Fowles, Lyme is a destination for literary and cinema archaeologists. He is a member of a small tribe of charmed writers who have enjoyed critical, financial and international recognition. Aside from his better-known novels like *The Magus*, Fowles published *Daniel Martin*, *Mantissa* and *A Maggot*. He wrote a book of poems, a story collection and also nonfiction: *Shipwrecked*, *Land*, *The Tree* and *The Enigma of Stonehenge*.

Six years ago, he produced *Wormholes*, a superb collection of previously published essays and writings. But for most of the 1990s, he released nothing new: a stroke derailed his writing in 1990. And his wife of 36 years, Elizabeth, died of cancer.

During my visit in early May, sunbathers crowd the beach, and freighters and sailboats fill the English Channel. I make my mandatory walk to the end of

the breakwater where Meryl Streep turned from crashing waves to reveal her lovely face that was full of a haunting 19th century reproach. I look up the cliff to Fowles' writing room.

Looking out from his writer's workroom, Fowles finds inspiration in the same landscape that moved Thomas Hardy. And like the great 19th-century novelist and poet, Fowles mines dark attachments to place and succumbs to constant yearning. Withdrawn observers divided by centuries, each author revealed himself unable to enjoy life before first expressing it on paper.

At Lymelight Books, I speak to owner Nigel Cozens, a friend of Fowles. He says that Fowles remarried, but is now in a wheelchair and never leaves the house. In the good old days, Nigel used to send people up the road to Belmont House. "John's a lovely man," he says. "Marvellous sense of humour." Cozen then hands me a cinder-block-size new biography, *John Fowles: A Life in Two Worlds*.

Eileen Warburton was a graduate student from Rhode Island when she first met Fowles in 1974. More than 20 years later she approached the author about writing his biography. "There's only one way you can do it," he advised. "Tell the truth."

Warburton does just that in this first biography of a writer many consider a late 20th century master.

The publication of any "tell all" biography is freighted with perils for any subject, especially an eccentric recluse. But the opening of *A Life in Two Worlds* draws readers into the inner sanctum of Fowles beloved garden. The rest of the book opens the writer's soul.

At sea level where tourists in rented deck chairs gaze at the horizon, I leave behind the raging madness of an amusement arcade that sits almost directly below the Fowles estate. Farther up the steep hill, I discover the fortress-like Belmont House, a 200-year-old yellow villa with church windows.

I scout the perimeter of its 12-foot stone wall, then return to the lower end of the property where I fight undergrowth until I'm inside the labyrinth of Fowles' garden, which is said to harbour a half-dozen mammals, a dozen species of nesting birds and unusual trees, shrubs and flowers. Like some besotted fan, I squint through the foliage to the sunlit back of the author's

house. I imagine him outside in his wheelchair - unable to write - a self-proclaimed atheist at the end of life.

Later on my return flight to Canada I open the biography and discover that Warburton has actually produced a portrait of two people: John and Elizabeth. Among other things, the biography reveals the difficulties of being married to a writer.

One of the dismaying aspects of a biography is that it telescopes a life from the hopeful glow of childhood to the death of many illusions. Few could happily survive a biographer's scrutiny. *A Life in Two Worlds* discloses intimate details of Fowles' struggle to create the alternative worlds of his books. We are privy to his inner conflicts, insecurities, joys and depressions. Warburton explores the ambivalent relationships Fowles had with his parents, old lovers, editors, movie stars, filmmakers and friends. In the confusion that followed Elizabeth's death, the 64-year-old Fowles took a 21-year-old live-in lover. In 1998 he remarried - Sarah, a woman closer to his age. Today at 78, he remains inside the sanctuary of his estate.

Because Fowles is alive and still publishing, it may be up to future biographers to reveal insights into this complex writer whose existentialist beginnings blossomed into feminist and environmental concerns. Until then, to appreciate the seductive worlds of John Fowles, start with *The Magus* or *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. And then read Warburton's fine biography.

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