JAN MORRIS, TRAVEL WRITER EXTRORDINAIRE,
IN CONVERSATION WITH PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER:
AROUND THE WORLD IN 50 YEARS

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I would also like to encourage you all to join our email list so you might be able to know the kinds of events we're doing in the future. For instance, we are going to have a celebration of Magnum, which is turning 60; three events with PEN: one tribute for Ryszard Kapuscinski; and the season will end with Gunter Grass on June the twenty-seventh. And now, I would like to introduce Jan Morris to you. But I have a much better idea than myself introducing Jan Morris. Why don't I ask someone who knows Jan Morris infinitely better and for so much longer than I do: Simon Winchester.

(applause)

SIMON WINCHESTER: Well, this is an enormous privilege for me. I have known Jan for a very long time, and I'll be as brief as I can, but I want to tell you how we first encountered one another. I was a geologist working in Uganda in 1966, and I was working in the Ruwenzori Mountains, on the Congo border. And I was there largely because I was interested in mountains, and I was living in a tent in a village called

Kyenjojo, in the middle of nowhere. And every month I would go to the British Consul library, in a place called Fort Portal, to get any books that I could about mountains and mountain climbing. And one day in, it must have been August or September 1966, I got a slim blue-covered volume published by Faber & Faber in London, called *Coronation Everest*, by James Morris. And I took it home to my tent that night, and I read it cover to cover in one sitting. And it was an extraordinary story on two levels. It was a story of this young fellow, this reporter for the *Times*, who had been given this wonderful assignment of being the correspondent on the expedition that ultimately succeeded in getting to the top of Mount Everest, Hillary and Tenzing got there on the thirty-first of May, 1953. And it was an exciting story in and of itself, not least because James Morris had barely climbed a mountain in his life before, and managed to get up to twenty-one or twenty-two thousand feet, which was a sterling achievement. But it was exciting on another level too, because it was the story of how this young reporter, employing all the rat-like cunning for which Fleet Street is renowned, managed to get the news of the success of the climb back to London such that it was published in the *Times* on the morning of the second of June, 1953, which was the day of the Queen's coronation. And I remember as a little boy waking up to the—for a young baby of the empire, it was a very pleasing day, but to have jam and cream on top of it, this last imperial hurrah, the successful climb by a British expedition of the world's tallest mountain, was a marvelous moment. And it was a great journalistic scoop. And so this was a story on two levels: a wonderful adventure story and an amazing journalistic coup.

Reading that book changed my life in an instant. I didn't want to be a geologist, I wasn't a very good geologist, and I thought that rather than going around the world hitting rocks with a hammer, I could go around the world with a notebook and a pen and be like James Morris. And so I wrote to him, care of his publishers, Faber & Faber, 3 Queens Square, London WC1:

"Dear Mr. Morris, I am a twenty-one year old geologist living in East Africa. I've just read *Coronation Geologist*. Can I be you?"

And he might have ignored it, but he didn't. Two weeks later came this dove-gray envelope with a letter inside which said:

"Dear Mr. Winchester, Thank you so much for your letter. If you really think you can be a writer, then it is one of the most wonderful jobs in the world it's possible to have. You'll never get formidably rich, but you will have a fascinating time. So my advice to you is, if you think you can write, go into the office of your employers in Uganda today—not next week, not next month, but today—resign, come back to England, get a job on a local newspaper, and write to me again."

That's exactly what I did. Six months later, I was on a newspaper, wrote again to James Morris, by which time I had read all of his then-published books—*Venice*, *The Presence of Spain*—realized I was dealing with a heavy hitter as a writer, and I said, "Well, I've done it. I'm now a reporter on the *Newcastle Journal* in Newcastle upon Tyne. What now?" And in the reply, you could sense the gulp of "You took this advice?" **(laughter)**

We have been the firmest friends ever since. Now, of course, as Jan Morris, we've written a book together, we were three weeks ago in Shanghai, four weeks ago in Hong Kong. This person has changed my life more than anyone I have ever known. I owe her everything, I am enormously grateful to her, and so it's with very great humility and gratitude that I introduce to you all my great friend, colleague, and one of the finest writers I know, Jan Morris.

(applause)

JAN MORRIS: After that warm-up, by dear old, what's-his-name **(laughter),** I want to do a warm-up too, because I'm frightened by reading about previous people who've been on this stage with Paul, because they've been so terribly learned and intellectual and I'm not at all. So I thought I'd begin with a funny story, if that's all right with you. And I was reminded of this story because in the green room here, there's a book that people who come to speak sign, and they put witty things in about how wonderful it is. I could not

think of anything to say just now. So I said, just, "Dear Paul, Thank you for having me." And that reminded me of this story, which concerns a party at Buckingham Palace. Good beginning, isn't it? **(laughter)** It was a party for writers thrown a couple of years ago, and motley crew we were, I can tell you. But anyway, we were all turned out and the Queen was there, and the duke, and miscellaneous princes, and it was a very good party, we all enjoyed it. But I like to go to bed early—that's a subtle way of saying, don't go too long tonight. **(laughter)** I like going to bed early, and so I looked around for a bit, to find somebody to say thank you to, because I was brought up to say, "Thank you for having me," when I've been to a party. And I couldn't see the Queen or a duke, anybody. **(laughter)** So I thought, the hell with it, I'll go. So I went out, but at the gate to the palace, there was a cop sitting there. And I said to him, "I've been brought up to say thank you for having me when I've been to a nice party but I can't find the Queen or any duke or anybody to say it to, so I'm going to say it to you now. Thanks very much for letting me come to your nice party." **(laughter)** And the cop replied, stylishly I think—this is what he said. "Not at all, madam. Come again." **(laughter)** That is a funny story, isn't it? **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think so. I would say, "Come again and stay for awhile." Jan, it is absolutely wonderful to have you here. I've read you for half of my life, which amounts to about a quarter of a century, and you've been an incredible inspiration to me as well. And I remember when I rang you up a year ago or a bit less, and said I would love to invite you for no other reason than to have you here on this stage for New York to celebrate your eightieth birthday, you said to me, "Well, what shall we talk about?" And I said, "Well, that's precisely why I'm calling. I'd like to come up with some kind of an organized web of obsessions that we can evolve a conversation around." And you said, "Oh, please, Paul. As long as we don't talk about sex and travel, we'll be fine." **(laughter)**

I wanted to say something funny too. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: And you did. You succeeded.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What I said, which is funny, is from you. It was just a quotation, really. So I thought, in that spirit, I would start by asking you something I'm sure everybody wants to know, which is, why do we travel? Or rather, why do you travel? What do you expect to find when you travel? Do you travel to escape, do you travel to learn something new? What is the urgency to travel, and how did it all start?

JAN MORRIS: That's just the sort of question I was afraid of. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay.

JAN MORRIS: Why did it all start? It started simply because His Majesty, at the time, told me to go abroad in his service. And so as a very young person, I was eighteen, I was sent first to Italy and then to Palestine and the Middle East, and that put the bug in me, of travel. And I've had loose feet, yes, ever since.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I'm actually talking about the different form of travel that began even before Her Majesty asked you to travel, which is as a very, very young person, the very first book you wrote was about a telescope.

JAN MORRIS: Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You were barely seven or eight years old, and you were already writing stories about going away, about traveling.

JAN MORRIS: It's true, I was fascinated by the scene that I grew up in, which was on the shores of the Bristol Channel, looking across the Wales, my father's country. And those mountains that you can see quite clearly over there were for me like a sort of Elysium. You know, I thought—it's the easiest thing in the world when you're young to imagine what's happening in distant places, and I had all sorts of fancies about those mountains. And I did begin to write a book about the thoughts that it inspired in me, and

because I used to like looking at them through a telescope, I called it *Travels Through the Telescope*, which wasn't a bad title, was it, really?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Not bad at all.

JAN MORRIS: It isn't printed yet. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But you might? Do you have it?

JAN MORRIS: I think not. I have it, yes, but I don't think I'll print it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How long is it?

JAN MORRIS: It's about eight pages. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You and my father share the same birthday, on October 2. My father is eighty-eight years old, and when people ask him when he will retire, he says, "I'm too old to retire." And when he is asked why he travels, he simply says, "Because it's there." And I wonder if you have those feelings about places, you go there, you go to them because they're simply there, and you are curious to see them.

JAN MORRIS: Yeah, I think that which is the very good, evasive answer, because it's there, isn't it. Like Mallory used the phrase, when they asked him why he wanted to climb Everest, and he didn't know why he wanted to climb Everest really, he wanted to be famous, I suppose. So he replied mystically, "Because it's there." And that's what your father does.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Very much so. And in a way it keeps him young, simply because it keeps him curious. About two hundred years ago, Humboldt wrote this line, and I'm wondering how you feel about it. "I was spurred on by an uncertain longing to be transported from a boring daily life to a marvelous world."

JAN MORRIS: Well, I've never had a boring daily life, to tell you the truth, so I haven't been transported to anything more exciting than I had in the first place. But I have had the impulse, which comes from nowhere, which does say, out of the blue, come on, let's go have a look, let's go and see the other side of the hill, you know, you know the feeling, which we all have I'm sure. And once you've succumbed to it, and managed to make it your profession, then of course if becomes an addiction which lasts the rest of your life. Until this moment. Because I've today decided I'm not going to do anymore traveling.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Have you said that before?

JAN MORRIS: No, never. **(laughs)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We're witnessing a moment.

JAN MORRIS: This is the first time. **(laughs)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So is there such a thing then, too much travel?

JAN MORRIS: Well, I think it depends on your physique, then, doesn't it. In my case, I enjoyed every minute of my travel until I had an operation on my head a couple of years ago, and it's become more of a strain since then, and now I believe the nature of travel now has become just too much for somebody in their eighties who isn't quite right in their head. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Tell me this, travel has changed so much throughout the years. Could you tell us some of the very first trips you took, and I think particularly the one that Simon was alluding to, your trip to Mount Everest, and as you called it, "the scoop"— you just said to me, "the only scoop."

JAN MORRIS: Yes, the one and only scoop. Well, it was by no means my first journey, of course, because I traveled a lot in the army, and I'd been to Oxford, and the *Times* had sent me on other assignments before that. But it was the first allegorical journey I did, it meant more than simply going and covering a story, didn't it. As Simon was saying, it had a historical meaning, and did have a sort of allegorical meaning, too, because it represented the end of an era, not only for the British, but for the world in general, I think, really. And it's amazing what an effect it had on people at the time. For years after, until really the other day, when I traveled wherever I went in the world, people would say to me, "Oh, you're the person who sent the news back from Everest in 1953, I remember it so well, I was standing in the Mall and the Queen came by..." All that, you know. It caught the world's imagination in a way—a sort of more intimate, humbler way—than the moon people, the moon landings did later. That seemed so remote, but these were just an ordinary lot of people climbing a mountain, which everybody's done in one degree or another. It just happened to be the highest mountain in the whole lot, which had been tried so many times to climb before, so there was a sort of poignancy to it all. And for the British, of course, there was an added poignancy because in the back of all our minds in those days was, this is the last imperial exploit. That last great imperial adventure. The end of the whole lot. The end of hundreds of years of adventuring, rightly or wrongly, good or bad. Nevertheless, it had stature and style and grandeur to it. And this was the end of it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And the grandeur was the grandeur of the British Empire.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, it was. Well, it was the grandeur of an island nation, which, by the exertion of its own talents, and chutzpah, and greed, and ruled a great deal of the world. In many ways, ruled it well. Of course, badly in some ways, but in many ways good. And to the British at that time, the conviction that they had done a great part, a good part, in the world, was very firmly implanted in the nation's mind.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you set out to write the books you have written, the travel books in particular that you have written, what is your aim, what is your goal? Are

you writing in order to make people go to the places you describe? Are you trying to give them a sense of place so that when they go they can live, as it were, in your footsteps?

JAN MORRIS: No, I don't give a damn for them. **(laughter)** I'm writing entirely for myself. Always a purely selfish act, always has been. I've written forty books, and they've all been autobiographies, every one of them. **(laughter)** I'm always at pains to tell people, this is not what you're going to find in a place, this is just the effect of a place on my particular sensibility. It would be quite different for you, you have a different—I assume—a different sensibility than me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I actually want to be you, right? Because we had the story before.

JAN MORRIS: Oh, God, not another one! **(laughter)** Yes, so that's...where did we get to?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm not sure. But you know, we said we would digress. Digression is the sunshine of narrative, as it were. **(laughter)** Where were we? Yes, because I—go ahead.

JAN MORRIS: Only that I don't for a moment pretend that what the reader is going to see in a city or country is what I saw. I don't want them to think—I'm not trying to brainwash them. They're probably much better at it and know more about it than I do. This is just one person's response to a place, or to a period of history, for that matter.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One—I have at least four different questions which come to my mind, after hearing your response here. One of them is that certainly one of the predominant feelings I have when reading you—when reading your magnificent book on Venice, perhaps one of my favorites, or your magnificent book on Oxford, which is an early book, or the more later book, which we'll talk about, which I think you are very fond of, as am I, your book on *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere*—one of the

overriding feelings I have, passionate feelings I might say I have, is a sense of unmediated, unadulterated joy and pleasure, the pleasure you have of being there and describing with utter, nearly a tactile sense that nearly makes you feel inebriation of the place you are describing, be it Oxford, or be it Venice, or Trieste. And I'm wondering, this sense of pleasure, isn't that what you think that in some way will become a motivating factor to make people want to go there?

JAN MORRIS: Oh, I'm sure it does, yes, of course. The reason the books are happy books is that I've had a simply marvelous time writing them. You know, I've enjoyed every minute of it, it's been simply wonderful. And I do think that these aren't terribly intellectual books, you know, they're emotional books. And the chief emotion that runs through them is a sense of pleasure. I admit it, I think it's a nice thing to have your books remembered for. And I'm particularly pleased when people write to me and say that *Venice* in particular seems to have given people a lot of pleasure all down the years—it's been out forty or fifty years, it's still around, and people still take it with them when they go to Venice and write to me and say what joy it's given them. And I always write back and say, "Well, I'm awfully glad, but all that's happened is you're sharing my pleasure, that's all. We had the same pleasure forty between the two of us, but it's the same pleasure." And I love the feeling, and I sparked it off with you, and it's what sparked me off with dear old Simon Winchester.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Simon, yes.

JAN MORRIS: Because I enjoyed going up Everest.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, what is interesting is you responded earlier by saying, "I write entirely for myself, and everything I write is autobiographical." But it's precisely because of this, what one might call an informed subjectivity, that you're able to share it with a huge number of people. So the very individuated form of writing you choose is what in fact gives a lot of people the possibility of sharing it. In the introduction, in the forward, you wrote, I think in 1995, you say the following in the book

about Venice. You say, "It possesses a particular sense of well-being that comes—this book that I've written—if I may be immodest, when author and subject are perfectly matched. On the one side, in this case, the loveliest city in the world, only asking to be admired; on the other, a writer in the full powers of young maturity, strong in physique, eager in passion, with scarcely a care or worry in the world. Whatever the faults of the book—and I do acknowledge two or three **(laughter)**—nobody could deny its happiness. It breezes the spirit of delight."

JAN MORRIS: Mmm. That went well, didn't it? **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It really did! It really did. So, I shouldn't ask you, but I'm curious, because it struck me as a wonderful parenthesis in this wonderful sentence, this one sentence, is, "...and I do acknowledge two or three."

JAN MORRIS: That's just fun. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay, I thought so. As we were going through a list of topics we might address, when you gave me that wonderful response I spoke about earlier, we have a whole list and I'm sure all of you have seen it in the announcement for this event. And since you mentioned one word already at the very beginning and now again, it's the word "intellectualism," and when you wrote to me about what you would like to say about intellectualism, you said, "Yuck." **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: (Laughs) I did—excuse me. **(Drinks water)** Oh, that's a good idea.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Should I have some too?

JAN MORRIS: Gin! **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Cheers. Cheers.

JAN MORRIS: Thank you. How thoughtful of you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Mine is vodka. **(laughter)** So. What is it in intellectualism that so perturbs you, or disturbs you, or makes you feel it is yucky?

JAN MORRIS: (laughs) Yucky. I don't like the company of intellectuals because I think their intellect—of course, this is a ridiculous generalization, there are heaps and heaps of intellectuals I'm very fond of—but as a whole, as a sort of class or caste, I think their allow their brains to take command of emotion too much, they don't allow enough instinct to enter into their thoughts and their conversations and therefore, I say, yuck.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But intellectualism rather than intellectuals. It's intellectuals who take themselves serious, or who take their seriousness serious.

JAN MORRIS: Well, intellectualism, to my mind, suffers the same faults. That it takes itself too seriously and doesn't allow enough humor, or enough satire, or enough irony to enter into conversations. Or into passages.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: In that regard, I'm wondering if we might not quickly move towards your experience of America, where intellectualism may not be as prized as in other parts of the world. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: I'm not so sure, I'm not so sure.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay.

JAN MORRIS: I remember years ago when I was in a Nelsonic period, I'd fallen in love—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: When you were in...?

JAN MORRIS: A Nelsonic—have you heard this?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No. You see, I'm not enough of an intellectual. Tell me what it means. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: (laughs) Nelsonic, referring—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Oh, Nelsonic!

JAN MORRIS: Yes, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What does that mean? **(laughter)** No, go on.

JAN MORRIS: I don't know. But you know, and I know, too. I was in a Nelsonic period. I'd fallen in love with a dead admiral of the Royal Navy, and anyway, I loved everything about the Nelson story, you know. And that period of British naval history is something that's always moved and stirred me, as it still stirs millions of Americans to this day. Anyway. I was with an American woman here in New York, and she said to me that her son was in the U.S. Navy. I said, "How wonderful, is he a regular officer?" She said, "Ugh, dear me, no, he's a young New York intellectual." **(laughter)** Ha-ha! I thought Nelson would turn in his grave. Not to mention my lover Jack Fisher, admiral of even more robust sensibilities.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You wrote a famous book called *Manhattan '45*, and I'm wondering, since one of the subjects of our conversation tonight might be fifty-three years of visiting New York, if you might tell us a few moments, a few important moments, in your several—hundreds, perhaps—of visits to New York, and how you have found the city to have changed. I'm just reminded the other day when we met at your hotel, one of the very first things you said to me was, "From my hotel room, I can see the place where I've stayed the longest except for the Mandarin in Hong Kong, which is the Mayflower, which is now disappeared." And I sensed in that comment, a sense of

wistfulness and nostalgia, maybe for a different kind of New York that now you see vanishing, but perhaps I'm wrong.

JAN MORRIS: Well, you're half wrong. But as a matter of fact, what strikes me, and always has struck me most about New York, is that really, it changes less than almost any other city I know, except perhaps Venice, for different reasons, of course. But New York changes physically, of course it does. But it seems to me that psychologically, or spiritually, or whatever the word is, it remains exactly the same as it was when I first came here. I'm writing a piece about it, as a matter of fact. And I thought—I took a car from the airport up to my hotel—and it was exactly the same experience that I had when I first came to New York and took a cab from the airport back in the fifties, whenever it was. The man seemed to be the exactly the same man, as a matter of fact. **(laughter)** He came from Azerbaijan, or somewhere like that, you know. He didn't know how to put the ticket in to get out of the car park, you know, put it in the wrong way round, and he swore a bit, and he said all the usual things about America, how it's a great place, there's no national health service, you know, all the same things that American cab drivers have said to me all these years. And we parted, as we always do, friends. I've always liked them, they've always been kind and good to me, and I've always shaken hands and we've parted friends.

That was one experience at New York that persuades me that essentially, basically, whatever happens to the old place, it remains very much the same. Because its people are much the same. Its preoccupations are much the same. But physically, of course it's changed a bit, but not half as much as other cities in the world, has it? Really, if you think about it. It's quite true that when I look out of my window in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, I can see a skyscraper going up where the dear old Mayflower was all those years, which I only went to first because they told me I could take an animal there. Not many hotels in Manhattan, in those days anyway, would accept animals, and they would accept cats. I hadn't got a cat, but I was so impressed that I could've taken it. **(laughter)** I remember saying, to a very swanky hotel, in Hong Kong, it was, I said, "I wish you

allowed people to bring cats, or better still, I wish you would provide cats." **(laughter)** They said, "Of course, what breed would you prefer? Next time I'll arrange it!"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What do you like most about this country?

JAN MORRIS: I believe in simplicity, I'm a great believer...I wrote a book about an imaginary Wales, a Republic of Wales, an ideal republic. And the governing principle in this republic was the principle of simplicity. Everything had to be as simple as it possibly could be. And it's an odd thing that in America now—I don't mean in New York, really, I mean in the countryside—there's a sense of simplicity I get, which is almost lost in Europe. And probably never existed in Asia. But there still is a sense of being close to the soil, and close to the sky, and simple conversations and family life, things like that which I know can be sentimentalized and romanticized, but which I still think are a very powerful strain in the American psyche, and which I always, always, enjoy.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You mentioned Wales, and you've written two books about Wales, I believe, and I'm wondering if you can talk—I mean, you've lived in the same house for how many years now?

JAN MORRIS: Forty.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Forty. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about your love of Wales, and why Wales, since the word allegory was mentioned before, seems to you the perfect place?

JAN MORRIS: It is potentially the perfect place, but then, everywhere is potentially the perfect place. But to my mind, Wales gets nearer to being—so far—gets nearer to being the ideal republic I described in that book, than anywhere else I know, so far. Because it has managed to retain its own very individual character over many centuries, despite terrific opposition from the people next door, you know? **(laughter)** Difficult neighbors, one way or another. But it still remains Wales. Everybody I know in Wales is proud of

being Welsh, they don't always live up to the ideal of Welshness, as none of us do. I've never met a Welshman and I say to them, "Are you proud of being Welsh?"—I've never met anybody who'd say no. Of course I'm proud of it. But, it's being whittled away, you know, by the world's erosion, as everywhere else is.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What is being whittled away?

JAN MORRIS: The character of the people, really. But the character of the people of course is affected very largely by the character of the landscape. That doesn't change. That remains true. But the character of the people who have been for so many centuries true to themselves, rather isolated—my part of Wales, I'm talking about, I'm not talking about the industrial valleys, I'm talking about north Wales, which is a very rural part and has remained really relatively unchanged until my own time, until my own memory. Now it's changing, we have to say, partly because so many people are coming to live in Wales from elsewhere, and therefore are forcing young Welsh people out because they can't afford the rising prices of houses, which is a story true of almost anywhere in the world, really, nowadays, isn't it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm wondering how you feel about languages, so many languages in the world now disappearing?

JAN MORRIS: I think it's one of the saddest things that one can see in the world now, because a language seems to me almost the most beautiful thing that man has created, if man did create it. It's one of the loveliest things that man has conceived and developed over the years, and the more there are, the better. It's a miracle that Wales, more successfully really than almost any other minority country with a minority language, has succeeded in keeping their language. That's one great success story. Compared with, for example, Ireland, which was very keen on its language until it achieved a degree of wealth, and now that they are rich, and are joining the mainstream of the world—not just of Europe, but of the world—then their own particular language does seem to be fading away at last. And I fear it may be true of nearly every other minority language too.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And is this the effect of globalization in the world?

JAN MORRIS: I suppose it is, yes. But it isn't necessarily globalization, is it, it's just the one powerful culture taking over from another, doesn't mean to say it's globalization. I mean, an example is Corsica, really, and the Corsican language. It would be true of Catalonia, except the Catalan language has survived so brilliantly and so forcefully. I don't think it's necessarily globalization, it's just the presence of a powerful neighbor.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You feel that the word "patriotism" is not a bad word.

JAN MORRIS: Well, I like patriotism in some ways. I'm against nationalism, that's what I'm trying to say.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, there's something about that. And the difference, maybe the distinction in your mind, between nationalism and patriotism.

JAN MORRIS: Well, I'll tell you what the difficulty for me is about that. And that is that patriotism, for me, is keeping alive a culture and a tradition, and a way of life and a way of talking and of thinking. Patriotism, for me, is keeping that alive and standing up for it and being proud of it. But in the modern world, it seems to me, it doesn't work, alas, without nationalism. In Wales, we couldn't have achieved what we have achieved without constantly fighting against the idea of Britishness. So that we've now got an assembly of our own, not with very complete powers, but still, infinitely more than we had even fifty years ago. So that I fear that patriotism cannot live without nationalism as a greater force behind it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You managed to do it once, though, didn't you, quite wonderfully, when you didn't actually celebrate Diana's marriage. I remember, you—could you tell that story? I just adore it.

JAN MORRIS: (laughs) There was all that gush about Diana's marriage, and the whole of Europe—the world, really—was glued to their television sets.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What did you do that day?

JAN MORRIS: Well, we found some almost forgotten battle of Welsh history against the English, back in the Middle Ages somewhere, and we found the mountain it was fought on. I forget who was fighting who. Maybe even been two Welsh princes fighting each other, I'm not sure. Anyway, we decided we'd go and celebrate that instead. So while everybody was down in the mountain, down below the mountain, watching it on the television, we were up on the mountain, and in a drizzle! Being brave and being patriotic and saying we don't want anything to do with weddings, until it was time for us to rush down and catch the end of the television program! **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Your love of Trieste. You speak of the "Trieste effect." What does it mean?

JAN MORRIS: Well, I must tell you about me and Trieste. I told you it was all autobiography anyway. But Trieste is the most autobiographical of my books because I believe that I am Trieste.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You are.

JAN MORRIS: Yes. Trieste doesn't know that, by the way. **(laughter)** And would be surprised to hear it, I'm sure. But I think of it as a mirror image of myself.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: An alter ego.

JAN MORRIS: Yeah, that's right. Or a mirror image, as we say in English**. (laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: True, true.

JAN MORRIS: You damned intellectuals! **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I should now think, yuck, yuck. Let me have some vodka after that, here. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: But anyway, I went to Trieste when I was very young, I was eighteen, as a young officer in the army. And I was immediately—it was my first city, really, that I'd ever lived in. And it was—my mother had been educated in Germany, and so I grew up with some romantic ideas, Weimer-ish ideas, of a lost Europe. And a lot of that, seemed to me, when I arrived in Trieste, to be still there, in Trieste. Because it hadn't been terribly badly damaged in the war, and it was a great mixture of different peoples and different origins and different traditions. I liked that very much, and I immediately felt at home in Trieste, and have ever since. And the reason is, it's always on the edge. It used to be, of course, a great port, of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but it was also on the cusp between different cultures—between Teutonic and Germanic cultures, the Latin cultures and the Slav. All three meet there, and it's a bit of all of that, it all got mixed up, some hate each other, of course, as cultures always do, but they're still there. And that mixture of being several personalities in one, of course, I think of as being me. That's why I say I'm Trieste. Not that I'm Slav in the least, but all the rest of it, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Where did this, this capability you have of remaining tolerant, so tolerant, come from?

JAN MORRIS: Well, that becomes—that takes on to the matter of kindness.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It does. It could

JAN MORRIS: Because I believe—well, it will. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: If you have anything to say about it.

JAN MORRIS: Because I have come to think, over the years, that the only principle, really important principle, that matters, that we can all subscribe to, is to be kind.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What does it mean, how does it take effect?

JAN MORRIS: Oh, God, I knew that would happen. **(laughs)** Well, you know it means, we all know what it means, that's a silly question**. (laughter)** That's half the point of my argument. My argument is that we can none of us know the truth about any of the religions, can we. It's no good trying, really, we all know agnosticism is the only intellectual—the only respectable, intellectual position to take, really. So there's no good going on this mumbo-jumbo about Creationism and all that stuff, forget it. We'll never find an answer, nobody ever has, the best brains on Earth have been worrying it since the beginning of time and they still don't know what the truth is. So forget it. But behind it, anyway, behind all the great religious thought, is the idea of kindness, which is the idea of treating other people as you would like to be treated yourself, really, basically, isn't it. And we all know what that means, and if only everybody, at every level, would guide their conduct by a principle of kindness, to view everything they do on some level, a gauge of kindness. Eighty degrees kind, excellent. Forty degrees kind, not to good. Ten percent kind, rotten. You know. And we can none of us always be eighty percent kind, but we can try, if we just had that idea. I must tell you, I was in Edinburgh, a couple of years ago, with a friend, sitting in a pub. And we were a bit pissed, to tell you the truth. (laughter) But I was on my kindness spiel, I was big on it, and I was spouting all this stuff. And there was a waitress standing nearby, and I said to her, "You don't realized that one day, there'll be a plaque on this bend here, and it'll say, 'On this bench was invented the Church of Kindness."' **(laughter)** "Oh," she said. "Will you have another whiskey?" **(laughter)** And she was right, because there won't be a plaque.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But, what—to go back to my question, which I hope is not too silly—what in your upbringing actually permitted you to continuously think that

kindness was a guiding principle? Was it in your upbringing, or was a certain way in which you traveled and kept open to the world?

JAN MORRIS: No, I don't think it was either of those things. It was because I really failed to get any sense out of organized religions. You know, it didn't seem to me worth trying to sort them all out. And the more I read about the absurdities of the different churches squabbling with each other, petty matters of ritual—I adored church music. I loved Anglican services, I loved the words and everything. So I liked the idea of religion, but the whole rest of it seemed to me baloney. And therefore, I thought, what could one do instead? We could have the beauty, if we wanted to, of religion, without the mumbo-jumbo. And gradually, I resolved that into the idea that it was just kindness. It's not me—I saw in the obituary in the *New York Times* yesterday of Kurt Vonnegut, that he was an early advocated, wasn't he, of the universal idea of kindness. And so, of course, is the Dalai Lama, who has a sticker on the back of his car saying, "My religion is kindness."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Paul Theroux, in the wonderful collection that has been put together for you recently, said that travelers, by nature, are optimists. Do you agree with that statement?

JAN MORRIS: Yes, I do, really. I do, because we're always expecting to find something new, and we usually do. Because we expect to, and then we get it. I can't honestly claim that during the last four or five years I've been an optimist. I'm losing my optimism. But that may just be a matter of age, or even, it's a matter of the state of the world.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What in the state of the world makes you feel less optimistic? What in particular—because it's something that has happened recently to my own father, I used to say that my father was one of the only intelligent optimists I met, and recently it's changed. I've sort of taken on that role, trying as much as possible to be optimistic, and he's become quite bleak. And I'm wondering what in particular, throughout your travels in the world, makes you worry most about the state of the world?

JAN MORRIS: Well, I think, sort of subconsciously, it's because they're too many people in it. It's just that everything has got so congested, so crowded—overcrowded. And that's congestion in a more than physical sense. It's a sort of a spiritual sense, isn't it, that everything's too cluttered and crowded. Wherever we go we bump into something or somebody, and none of it seems to be sorting itself out at all, it just seems to be going on worrying and worrying more and more, and as soon as you get rid of one fear another one comes along. We're in a state of doubt and uncertainty, are we not, in general. So it is rather hard to be optimistic just at the moment, I think.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wonder if this has anything to do with your early dislike of concerts. **(laughter)** You know, you wrote in a book that I don't think enough people read, *Pleasures of a Tangled Life*, you wrote a wonderful essay which I've always loved, on concerts. It's called "On Music." Do you mind—would you like to read the first paragraph?

JAN MORRIS: Yes, especially since I've forgotten it. **(laughter)** I'd like to see what it says.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You did—no, it is, Jan Morris, *Pleasures of a Tangled Life*. **(laughter)** And it is—

JAN MORRIS: I trust you, Paul.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Really? I was beginning to worry, but—no. Just if you could read—well, as long as you'd like to read.

JAN MORRIS: All right.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's called "On Music." **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: "The most boring moments of my life, almost bar none, have occurred during concerts." **(laughter)** Need I say more? **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Maybe just the first paragraph.

JAN MORRIS: "I've dreaded concerts, always stuck there in a chair, hour after hour, whether or not one likes the music, unable to read a book, let alone make a cup of tea or whistle the melodies. The experience seemed to me so dismal, that when I was young, I assumed everyone else in a concert audience to be as unhappy as I was. The poet Pope thought just the same." Did you know that?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No.

JAN MORRIS: Oh, he did. Says so here. **(laughter)** So there we are. That's interesting, this. **(laughter)** But that's it—I hate being stuck there, compulsory, made to listen. I love music, you know, and I love it at home. I love it on the record player. But I do very much dislike having to sit there and listen to it. Even if I don't want to, I want to go away, off for a bit, you can't do it, it goes on and on and on and on. Oh, it's so awful!

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And people are coughing.

JAN MORRIS: Well, that's a relief! **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But I was wondering if it's also just being with so many people. You know, you were talking about the sense of density and congestion—

JAN MORRIS: Yes, but that's—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And that in some way, the pleasure you might get is the pleasure of being along and solitary, listening in an intent way, the way you would like to, to the music.

JAN MORRIS: Not necessarily intent. But in a private way. I mean, I like to switch off every now and then and go and have a cup of coffee or something. But it is partly, because I don't awfully like as much in fact being with a lot of other people. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I'm sorry.

JAN MORRIS: On the other hand, I'm glad there's some here. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Me, too. Believe me, for me it's a sense of relief. I really am happy that all of these people came though, I didn't oblige them. They came free and willingly to hear you tonight.

JAN MORRIS: I don't believe it. **(laughter)** You bribed them, or...

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Give that we are in—I think we're in a library. And above us we have seven floors of books, I don't know, tens of millions of books in this library. I was particularly struck with your twelfth chapter in your book on Oxford written in the name of James Morris, where you describe, marvelously, the library—the Bodleian and other libraries—and, if you don't mind, I'll just read one small passage here. A couple of passages leading to it very quickly:

"For Oxford is built upon books, books being read, books being written, books being published, books in the dozen bookshops of the city, books littered through a labyrinth of libraries." And then you go on, and a bit later, there's this wonderful notation. "In the early days of Oxford, university books were so coveted that they had to be chained to their shelves. To see how the currency has declined, you have only to glance at one of the requisition trays at the Bodleian. I once looked idly through the content of such a tray to see what books readers were wanting this afternoon. And the first four volumes I found were *The Toys Picnic Painting Book*, *Das stumme Spiel im deutschen Drama*, James Hestler's *America and the Weimer Republic*, and an analytical index to the series of

records known as *The Remembrencia*, preserved among the archives of the city of London, 1579-1664."

I think this gives a wonderful sense also of how acute you—how in your writing you really give a sense of the place.

JAN MORRIS: Well, it also gives an idea what a university should be, doesn't it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: That is to say—

JAN MORRIS: The range of all that knowledge and interest is wonderful, I think.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You said earlier that all your books are autobiographical; in what way is *Oxford* one of those books that would be autobiographical?

JAN MORRIS: Well, Oxford has meant an awful lot to me. I was there as a boy because I was a chorister in the choir of one of the colleges—of which I am now, I am proud to say, an honorary fellow. So in the intervening, how many years, seventy years, I've never been separate from Oxford. I've written about it over the years, I often go there, I've been a member of another college as well. So it has meant a great deal to me in every sense, over the years, and I still believe in the old Oxford values very much so. Not least the respect for eccentricity, which I always loved as part of the Oxford ethos, and dwelled too much on in that book, really. And even more in a book I did, an anthology, called *The Oxford Book of Oxford*. **(laughter)** A lovely book which is full of eccentrics.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you think that eccentricity is in danger of disappearing?

JAN MORRIS: Well, they've said that for hundreds and hundreds of years, haven't they, especially at Oxford. "There are no eccentrics like there used to be." Now, they still seem to be there, I'm glad to say. I think people, as a matter of fact, have grown more fond of eccentrics over the years, don't you? I think uniformity has become so boring,

conformity, political correctness, all that junk has gotten so overwhelming that people like an individual every now and then. And the more there are the merrier, in my view.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, I heard it said that you don't particularly like good boys.

JAN MORRIS: **(laughs)** I said that to him! **(laughter)** No, I prefer rough edges, you know, in people as in cities.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: So not well rounded.

JAN MORRIS: Rough at the edge, yes. With flaws, you know. Nobody likes anybody perfect, do they.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No. **(laughter)** When preparing for a book—well, actually, do you prepare for a book? Do you go and use a library, do research on a place, before you go? Do you like libraries?

JAN MORRIS: I love them in the abstract. But I never have used them very much, because I've always preferred to buy the books, and most of the books I have used are accessible or purchasable, and by doing that over the years I've built up a library of my own, which is one of my greatest pleasures. If I'd gone to libraries always, I would never have done that. I was, for a time, a member of the London Library, do you know about that?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No.

JAN MORRIS: It's a private library in London, a big library in St. James's Square, from which they will send you books anywhere. The most abstruse, remarkable books, obscure books, they'll find for you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Titles such as the ones I read.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, I'm sure they'd have those. Especially the first one. You forgot what it was, didn't you?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, I did. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: So have I. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I have they have the second one more.

JAN MORRIS: Maybe, right, yes. Anyway, these books the London Library will send you anywhere. If you live in Greenland, they'll send it to you. You have to promise to send it back fairly soon, but this is like having the Bodlean—a private Bodlean to yourself. Anyway, I didn't stay with them very long, because I preferred to buy the books. I still do.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think there's a point there, a connection there between your desire to write about cities and when you write about cities, you have said in several of your books that you feel as though you possess them.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, that's quite true, I do. I like that feeling very much.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Say something about that, I find it marvelous, a marvelous way of expressing that you're possessing it, I think in part because it just has given you such joy.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, partly that. Partly because, you know, I've lived a long time in writing these books, and I think about absolutely nothing else but the subject when I'm doing it. All my antennae are out for every aspect of a place. And so naturally I begin to

feel that I—not so much really that I possess it, but that is possesses me, as a matter of fact.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You're possessed by the city.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, a mutual possession, we possess each other. But I do feel that I have a sort of lien, if that's the way you pronounce L-I-E-N. Is it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Um, I don't usually pronounce it too much.

JAN MORRIS: Is it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah, I think so.

JAN MORRIS: I feel I have a lien on the place. Particularly, of course, Trieste.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which is the city you have least liked writing about.

JAN MORRIS: Oh, people don't usually say that. They usually say, "Which city do you least like?"

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wanted to change it a little bit somehow. **(laughter)** I just felt, you know, since—

JAN MORRIS: I want to stick with the old answer. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, you know what, how would you like me to phrase the question? I'll do it.

JAN MORRIS: Is there any city you particularly dislike?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes.

JAN MORRIS: All right? This is the question I was first asked—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Did I say that?

JAN MORRIS: —really, sixty years ago. I've never been back to the place since. But I've always said the worst place I've ever been to is Indianapolis. **(laughter)** Probably quite unfair, it's probably changed totally now. But it's—the name is funny, isn't it, slightly.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, it is.

JAN MORRIS: And the answer's funny. Especially when it comes out spontaneously when you say, "Which is the worst place in the world?" "Indianapolis."

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Right. And writing about?

JAN MORRIS: Writing about—I've seldom written about places I don't like, I must say.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Because you celebrate.

JAN MORRIS: Also, you don't want to spend five years or something thinking about a place that you don't particularly like. I don't anyway.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: You haven't written about Indianapolis at great length?

JAN MORRIS: No, not yet, not yet. I've—if not liked, I've been interested by it, always.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Let's play the game of these titles that we came up with, these subjects, these various aspects that have kept you interested throughout your life.

We've spoken about the dislike of concerts, I have no real notion of what "Norwegian Forest Cats" alludes to.

JAN MORRIS: You don't know about Norwegian Forest Cats?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, not very well. I mean, a little bit. But don't ask me.

JAN MORRIS: Right, well they were the cats that in the Middle Ages or earlier drew the chariot of the goddess Freya. They were giant cats and they used to pull the chariot and the goddess Freya was in it, but when the gods and goddesses came down to earth, the cats came too. And they became, for centuries, the regular farmyard cat of Norway. And every farm—or at least I'm told—used to have one of these cats. But gradually they've faded out, they became less popular. And they were almost extinct when after the Second World War, a few enthusiasts in Norway decided to resuscitate this breed. And they did, and they had it eventually registered as a breed, as a cat breed. A fate worse than death, in my opinion, because it usually means that they're going to be frightfully inbred and turned into something else, you know, like Siamese cats and Abyssinian cats have been already. I've loved cats all my life and I've had a lot of these breeds, and I have always been disappointed because the character I like in them has been bred out by over-breeding by unscrupulous breeders. But this has not happened to the Norwegian cat, who is still a rough-and-tumble, big old hairy big-footed outdoor fellow. And I like him very much. I have one, and he has an unusual name. Would you like to hear that name?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I think I would.

JAN MORRIS: Ibsen.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Ibsen! **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: And the other day—I write pieces every now and then for the *Wall Street Journal* on serious subjects.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How did that happen, that the *Wall Street Journal* asked you to write for them?

JAN MORRIS: Oh, they just wanted some intellectual. **(laughter)** I don't know. But I know why I did it, because the man who wrote and said would you like to write for us had such a lovely name. His name is Tunku. I don't know what it means, do you?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No.

JAN MORRIS: But I loved the name, so I said of course I will, yes. So I've been writing for them. Anyway, he gave up—Tunku has been promoted to be something more important. So he wrote to me the other day and said would I like to write one last piece for him, before he went upstairs, greater glory. So I did. I wrote a piece about Ibsen. And Tunku printed it in the *Wall Street Journal*, with just the one headline above it: "Ibsen." The cat was thrilled. **(laughter)** I can't tell you. And so was I. It was good, wasn't it? Incidentally, I did a piece for the *Wall Street Journal*, even more intellectual, really, which was about the exclamation mark. And the headline they put on that was an exclamation mark**. (laughs)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What was that piece?

JAN MORRIS: It was a piece about the exclamation mark. **(laughter)** Because I admire it very much, you know. I admire the look of it. I think it's the most graceful object. And I admire its flexibility and its geniality, its humor, its adaptability to any circumstance, and I violently disagree with editors who cut exclamation marks out of copy, which they very often do. And people who go to writing school seem to be taught not to use the exclamation mark. What a waste of a wonderful asset to the language! **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I remember, I think it was Gertrude Stein who spoke very beautifully about punctuation, spoke about commas as a place where she could easily hang up her coat, or some such thing, yeah.

JAN MORRIS: Yeah, that's true. But none of them has the aesthetic look, do they, of the exclamation mark which can go upside down of course in some languages, can't it. And it looks so graceful and slim. I love it. It's at the top left of my computer and it makes all the other keys look brutal and boring (**laughter**) and vulgar.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: No, I think we should resuscitate the exclamation mark.

JAN MORRIS: Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We'll take care of it here at the library as much as possible. **(laughter)** A movement towards the exclamation mark.

JAN MORRIS: Excellent.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Here sat—much like the story of kindness—here sat the man who wanted to resuscitate, after hearing Jan Morris, the exclamation mark. Such will be my legacy.

It is a subject you chose, so let's see how you respond to your own subject. Fifty-seven years of a curious friendship.

JAN MORRIS: Oh, well, yes. It is curious I suppose, because it is my lifelong friend Elizabeth Morris, to whom I was married fifty—how many years did you say? Fifty-seven?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, it says here fifty-seven.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, fifty-seven, it is, fifty-seven years. And we've remained through thick and thin, through change of gender, through all sorts of ups and downs of fortune, but have remained the greatest of friends ever since. And that seems to me a curious and rather wonderful sequence. So much so, that there is sitting in this very audience, somebody who wants to write a book about it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And?

JAN MORRIS: And what?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: And he's sitting here.

JAN MORRIS: That's all? **(laughs)** Yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Are you intrigued by that possibility?

JAN MORRIS: No, because I have a—well, I am intrigued by it and I am attracted by it in a way, but I don't think I'll do it because I already have on the thoughts a posthumous book.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes, I was going to—

JAN MORRIS: Can't do two of them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yeah.

JAN MORRIS: Sorry, what?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It's been attempted once before, but I don't know exactly in what form, to write the posthumous book. Musil once wrote a series of essay called "pre-posthumous works."

JAN MORRIS: He published them pre-posthumously, I mean, pre—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Pre-posthumously. When you told me the other day that you were writing a posthumous book, you said well, you know, I asked you at that point, a very obvious question, I said, "So, this will be a book you will publish after you go?" And you said to me, quite correctly, "Yes, that's what posthumous means." **(laughter)** And you know, us intellectuals are so easily fooled by words and so **(laughter)** at that point, you said it could happen tomorrow and we met day before yesterday, and I told you, no, no, no, you have to wait on, because we have to have this evening tonight. But I'm curious—what is it, what is this posthumous work, what is it made of? What might we—can you give us a foretaste?

JAN MORRIS: Yes, are you interested?

AUDIENCE: Yes!

JAN MORRIS: All right, okay, it's got two origins. One of them is that years ago, we had a child, a girl, who died when she was eight weeks old, something like that. And it's always intrigued and disappointed me to think that I never knew her, you know, she was part of me, and yet I could never exchange two words with her. And so I thought rather grandiosely and sententiously that I might write a series of letters from beyond the grave, addressed to this child. Rather like the Earl of Chesterfield, wasn't it?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Yes. To his son.

JAN MORRIS: Exactly. And so I did sort of rough of few things, and then I thought it was a bit too kind of pompous, self-conscious. And I sort of gave up on it, and then I thought, well, what I'd like to do is to write a book which expresses my feeling that nothing is only what it seems, do you see. That the child herself was more than just a child, for me, she I didn't know, really, but she turned into something more, into an idea,

or an ideal, really. And I've come to think as I go through life that life itself—this isn't a very original thought, I know—but so I'm putting together a book about all kinds of subjects, from the exclamation mark to empires, which express my feeling that nothing is as simple as it seems. Or wants to be, or should be. And I'm calling it *Allegorizings*. And into it I've inserted the letters that I was going to write to the child, if you follow me. So that's the book, it's called *Allegorizings*, which is a word I'm told by my publishers doesn't exist. Is there a word, allegorizings?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: There is now. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: There is now, thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: What is different about—what is different about empire than what it seems to be?

JAN MORRIS: Oh, it implies so many different things. It's almost synonymous now with exploitation and greed, isn't it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: But not for you, Jan.

JAN MORRIS: Not for me, because I, for one thing, I'm old enough to remember the empire, our empire, when it still existed. And for another, I recognize, having written so much about it, and thought so much about it, that among the people who made the empire, every sort of emotion was current, from the most honorable to the most despicable. It's a much, much more complicated emotional construction then historians generally allow. So that's why empire, the very word empire, has an allegorical meaning for me.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Is Wales a way of going back to a more primitive way of living—by primitive I actually mean it in the real, primordial sense of the meaning.

Simple, but also in a way of keeping the onslaught of what one might call capitalism or modernity away from your doors.

JAN MORRIS: Of course it is, I mean, ideally it is. That is my idea. But I recognize that this is an impossible thing. And so I am myself, I'm a European federalist, I would like to transfer to some higher power in Europe, maybe in Berlin or somewhere, all the boring things that have to be dealt with by a great power. Like high finance, defense, probably foreign relations, and leave to us, the people, the things that are genuinely ours. That's Caesar, these are gods. Like language, and the ways of life, and the way we think and talk—

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The eccentricity.

JAN MORRIS: Eccentricity in particular, yes, all those things are our business. And I personally would happily give all the other bit to the sort of people who like dealing with them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I wonder what role you believe nostalgia plays in your life. I once read that Kundera said that "a European is someone who longs for Europe," and just on the eve of the New Year, Paul Theroux wrote a wonderful piece in the *New York Times*, which if you don't have it, I'll pass on to you, where he talks quite precisely about the problem of the overcrowding, particularly, of America. That America, the United States, North America, now has 300 million people and there seem to be a big hurray, as if we should now be proud that we have 300 million people here. And he wrote, "William Burroughs notes in the 1950s, 'What I want most for dinner is a bass fished in Lake Huron in 1920.' It is futile to want the old days, but that doesn't mean one should ignore the lessons of the visitable past. Yes, it is just silly and foggyish to yearn for a simpler and smaller world, but one can ask for the past's better manners, the instinctive decorum, that has served to mitigate conflict." In other words, he's talking about the rudeness of the world. "A longing for a simpler world, for a glimpse of the past, is one of the motives of travel."

JAN MORRIS: I'm sure that's true, but nostalgia is a sort of—is the wrong word for it really, isn't it. Nostalgia's a weakening condition, it seems to me, an over sentimental addition—which I fight, you know, I feel nostalgic in many ways, don't we all? But I try to fight it because I think it weakens our convictions and our attitudes. But of course, yes, we were talking before about why I was no longer an optimist. Because those ideas, in my own cultural case, the idea of the stiff upper lip, for example, is gone. It's laughed at, it's been laughed out of court by its own people, as we've seen the last few days by the Royal Navy people in captivity in Iran. The ultimate end of the stiff upper lip, it seemed to me. But I admired that, I thought it was good, it was a pretense, because people were afraid, and they were pretending not to be afraid, but in a good cause, a just cause. All those things—restraint, in particular. These are things that the English especially used to pride themselves on and no longer do. Restraint. To close one's emotions instead of revealing one's emotions. I believe in that, I always have done. But they're gone, and I think all that adds to this coarsening of the world and of the nations and of the peoples in them.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: How does one protect one's self from it? Can one?

JAN MORRIS: Only by being kind. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Self-deprecation is possible, though, and it does continue in the English culture, much more, I would say, than in the United States.

JAN MORRIS: Self what?

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Self-deprecation.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, it does, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Which is another firm of distancing one's self and not taking one's self too seriously.

JAN MORRIS: Yes. That can be carried too far, I think, and has been carried too far among the English, in my opinion. But I agree with you, it is a touch of ironic self-deprecation is no bad thing, is it.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Well, I always find that in the two decades or more that I've lived in the United States, irony is often given a visual content. When people are ironic, often in this country they go like that **(makes "quote unquote" gesture)** to make sure that everybody gets it in some way. **(laughter)** Have you noticed that?

JAN MORRIS: Yes, I have seen it, yes.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Do you—how do you take to that gesture?

JAN MORRIS: I particularly dislike it. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Me too. Kindness—and I have asked you before we got on stage here, I've asked you to read from a book that might not be your favorite, but I think in the last page of *Conundrum*, you speak quite beautifully both about kindness and kindness in older women, and you speak already in 1973 about a topic which I think that has stayed with you throughout the years, which is allegory. And in closing and before, maybe, if you're willing to take a few questions, maybe, from the audience, if you wouldn't mind reading this very last page and a bit. Starting maybe here, "I have myself achieved," to the end of the book, I think it reads beautifully and gives a sense of your style.

JAN MORRIS: All right, but before I do that, I'm going to tell you another funny story. **(laughter)**

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Okay.

JAN MORRIS: I only know two. **(laughter)** You've had one.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: One at the beginning and one at the end.

JAN MORRIS: This is the other one. Yes. This also concerns a sort of party. And it was about Mount Everest, the climbing of Mount Everest in 1953. Simon's heard this story eight hundred times. After we came back from Everest, trailing clouds of glory, we were all invited to a banquet by the British government in Lancaster House, the official entertainment place. And I happened to sit next to the old gentleman who was arranging the function. And opposite me sat Tenzing. Do you remember Tenzing? Does everybody remember Tenzing? Anyway, we were sitting there. The old boy was on my right, and Tenzing was over there. Tenzing had never been out of Asia before. He was a wonderful figure, you know, a truly heroic figure, most glamorous. Anyway, early in the evening the old boy on my right turned to me and he said he hoped I would enjoy the claret that we were going to have. He thought it was possibly the last example of the vintage anywhere in the world, certainly in London. And so I drank the stuff, and of course, was very impressed indeed, it was lovely wine, I enjoyed it. But I looked across the table, and on the other side was Tenzing. He'd never tasted any wine before, let alone the last vintage of claret of— **(laughs).** And he certainly was enjoying it, he was pouring back, the lackeys were filling up his glass, it was glorious, he was radiant with pride and pleasure and satisfaction, as he jolly well should be, you know. It was a lovely thing to see. After a bit, the old boy turned to me again, and he said, "Oh! How good it is to see—" he talked in an old Edwardian silvery English. "How good it is to see that Mr. Tenzing knows a decent claret when he has one!" **(laughter)** That's a good story, too.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: It is a good story.

JAN MORRIS: When I first came to America, in 1953, I told that story here in New York, and when I got to San Francisco, somebody told it to me! **(laughter)** Now, then.

Right. We're back on identity and stuff, aren't we? And I'm reading what Paul has asked me to read.

"I have myself achieved, as far as is humanly possible, the identity I craved. Distilled from sacramental fancies of my childhood has come the conviction that the nearest humanity approaches to perfection is in the persons of good women. And especially, perhaps, in the persons of kind, intelligent and healthy women of a certain age, no longer shackled by the mechanism of sex, but creative still in other kinds. Aware, still, in their love and sensuality, graceful in experience, past ambition but never beyond aspiration, in all countries, among all races, on the whole, these are the people I most admire. And it is into their ranks, I flatter myself, if only in the rear file, if only on the flank, that I have now admitted myself."

(applause)

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you very much.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: We have two microphones on—no, actually, we only have one microphone, I think, on that side. I would much appreciate if you would go up, so that we can hear you.

Q: Your interest in exclamation marks, I wonder whether you know the work of Victor Borge. **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: Yes, I do.

Q: And so you know of his interpretation of the exclamation point.

JAN MORRIS: Oh, no, that I don't know.

Q: Oh, he has a wonderful piece in which he does verbal punctuation. And the exclamation point as I remember it is something like, "Pssht-prk!" **(laughter)** And he also has quotes, like irony, I don't remember those. I just wanted to tell you that there was a story about kindness. The Rabbi Hillel was asked by a pagan if he could recite the entire Bible while standing on one leg. And he said, "Yes, it's simple—do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The rest is all commentary." **(laughter)**

JAN MORRIS: Ah.

Q: Hi. I read *Trieste* in Trieste last year, and was very taken by your description of the city and as it being the capital of kindness. And of course, I also felt it to be a city that you really got a sense of sadness and melancholy and lost grandeur. And I was wondering if you thought that what you felt about the idea of kindness and the idea of sadness, and if you felt that kindness always contains sadness, or if they are in fact separate, and what sort of relationship you would characterize that as.

JAN MORRIS: Well, I don't think sadness is sorted in my mind with kindness, but I think melancholy is. But then, melancholy seems to me to be an inescapable part of nearly all art, or nearly all great art, really. Mixed up with up other qualities too, but it's always there somewhere, I think. And certainly in my notion of kindness, there must be melancholy too, because we love people, and we're going to lose those people. So melancholy is bound to enter our emotions too. And it would be weaker without melancholy. I love melancholy myself. I brood on melancholy. **(laughter)** That's one reason I like Trieste, that I do find that sort of wistful melancholic atmosphere very attractive indeed.

Q: Thank you.

Q: I just wondered if you still have a picture of Jackie Fisher on your wall.

JAN MORRIS: My God, yes, of course.

Q: Thank you for coming.

JAN MORRIS: I have—Jackie Fisher is the admiral I'm going to have an affair with in the afterlife. **(laughter)** I wrote a book about him, and the jacket was a famous photograph of Jack Fisher at his most grandiose, most self-satisfied, as a young captain. And when the book was published, my publisher, who was then Penguin Books, sent me a huge blow-up of this picture, this magnificent man sitting there, full of himself, all gold braid and medal, ribbons. I love it, and so I put this picture up on an inside door of my wardrobe in my bedroom. And everybody who comes to my house—if ever you come, I'll do it to you—I take them into the bedroom and I say, "Watch this," and I fling open this door, and there is the admiral. My God! **(laughter)** It's a great, great moment in everybody's life. **(laughter)**

Q: I just wanted to say thank you for—first of all, because my life has been changed because of you. I read your book on Venice about seven years ago and decided to become a travel writer and I've traveled to about sixty countries in the past five years, writing about places, with, I hope, the same passion and feeling that you do. So I wanted to say thank you and to express how you've changed my life, and I'm sure you've changed many, many hundreds of people's lives, and also to ask you about Venice—if you've felt, since you've been there over the years, that Venice transforms itself with you or that the city is changed in your experience with you as a person. And what's the last experience that you've had with that wonderful city?

JAN MORRIS: I've been through a whole gamut of emotions about Venice, really. Of course, I was just, like everybody is, simply overjoyed by the place. And I loved the melancholy of it too. And then the melancholy dissipated a bit, and over the years it did get a bit too crowded, you know, and it got sort of vulgarized and everything. And then a moment of change came for me when they took down the golden horses from outside San Marco, you know, and put them inside and put some sham ones outside. And then it seemed to me that Venice had reached a turning point, it was no longer really a grand,

real city such as it had always been. Now, it had recognized itself as being a sort of museum. I mean, a showplace altogether. And I adjusted to that with it, and I tell myself that when they're these vast crowds swarming through Venice night and day, it's only what happened in the Middle Ages when Venice was in its heyday, really. And I've always liked Venice, as a matter of fact, on a very hot, crowded summer's day when you can hardly move and you're cursing at the crowds in one half of you, and in the other half, you're thinking, this is what it should be. This is a great city showing itself a bit like Jack Fisher in my wardrobe. **(laughter)** I like that part. And so I've changed with the city, certainly. And the times when I've been disillusioned with the place, I've grown out of it, you know. I've always gone back, and every time I go back, I realize I'm wrong to have changed my mind about it, and I love it more than ever.

Q: It's a continual love affair, it continues for you.

JAN MORRIS: Yes, true.

Q: Thank you.

Q: I think Bertrand Russell wrote in his autobiography that he learned to write by reading writers and then summarizing paragraphs into a single sentence. In the way that you've approached your own craft, and the creation of the music of your prose, how much of that did you do yourself? By just tinkering over time, and how much was through the influence of other writers?

JAN MORRIS: I've only ever admitted being influenced by one writer. And that was Kinglake, the author of *Eothen*. Do you know the man I mean?

Q: I do not.

JAN MORRIS: Early nineteenth-century traveler who wrote a book called *Eothen: Out of the East* about his travels in the Middle East. And I was very struck by this book when

I was young, I liked its pervading humor and its observations. I didn't consciously copy it, but I do accept that it sort of influenced me. But no other writer, I don't believe, has influenced me. The very great ones I don't aspire to try to be as good as, and the ones who aren't so great, I'm not influenced by. So no, I don't think—mostly, it just comes out of my mind.

Q: Not even Ruskin?

JAN MORRIS: Not even what?

Q: Not even John Ruskin?

JAN MORRIS: Ruskin?

Q: Yes.

JAN MORRIS: Certainly not. **(laughter)**

Q: Thank you very much.

Q: Could you share with us your thoughts on current travel writing? Any authors you prefer? Do you read it in newspapers?

JAN MORRIS: I'm sorry, I couldn't hear. I've got a bubble in my ear.

Q: Your thoughts about current travel writing, do you read any current authors, do you read newspaper travel sections, do you enjoy reading others at this point?

JAN MORRIS: Not really, I've never enjoyed the newspaper travel writing, you know, I've never done it myself and I don't think much of it. There are half a dozen great travel writers of our time that I always read, try to always read, with admiration. And two of the

greatest are Colin Thubron, who I believe to be the greatest poetic travel writer perhaps there's ever been, and the other is dear old Patrick Leigh Fermor, you know, who wrote his books about journeys across Europe. Those, and half a dozen others, I always read with pleasure. But by and large, travel writing is not my favorite genre. I don't consider myself a travel writer, and it isn't what I would pick up and read. I've just picked up a book, I was sent a proof copy of a book by an American lady and the awful thing is, I've forgotten her name. It's about going down the Nile in a canoe, which sounds to be the sort of book I certainly would not want to read. But, having been sent a copy of it, I opened it in bed the other night, and read the whole lot. I think it's a wonderful book, it's American travel writing of a different kind, more of a European tradition, really, I think, very beautifully done, very brave and funny. If only I could remember the poor lady's name, I could give her a plug. But the journey is called, I think, *Down the Nile in a Canoe*.

Q: Well, what is that different European tradition from American tradition in travel writing?

JAN MORRIS: I don't know, but I only know that this writing seemed to be more like Europeans write about travel than Americans do.

Q: Thank you.

JAN MORRIS: But what the differences are, I honestly don't know.

Q: Hi. I read your memoir *Condunrum* last year. It's still one of the best memoirs I have ever read. But at the same time, you had mentioned in the book that when you went for your change of sex you had to get a divorce because at the time they didn't recognize same-sex marriages. So I'm just curious, thirty years later, what do you think about that?

JAN MORRIS: I'm sick to death of it. That's my answer.

Q: Thank you.

Q: You remarked that you thought the author who took a trip down the Nile in a canoe was brave. Do you consider yourself brave?

JAN MORRIS: No, I'm certainly not as brave as she is, I can tell you. She's alone in this boat going down the Nile at nighttime with all sorts of awful things happening—strange people coming by in other canoes, it's a horrific journey, really. I certainly wouldn't be brave enough to do what she's done. No, I've never been a very courageous traveler. When I have been in danger, it's only because I couldn't get out of it. **(laughter)**

Q: Thank you.

JAN MORRIS: And now I think it's time.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: Thank you very much.

JAN MORRIS: Thank you.

(applause)