



“REFLECTIONS

ON A SCREEN”: JOHN EHLE AND FILM

BY TERRY L. ROBERTS

Perhaps more than any other North Carolina writer's, John Ehle's life and career have been involved in the film industry. During his tenure (1963–64) as special assistant to Governor Terry Sanford, Ehle participated in the creation of the North Carolina Film Board, which was designed to encourage documentary filmmaking in the state,

as well as at the North Carolina School of the Arts, which has developed a celebrated and influential film school. In addition, he has been married since 1967 to the celebrated stage and screen actress Rosemary Harris, and their daughter, Jennifer Ehle, followed in her mother's footsteps as an actress after attending the North Carolina School of the Arts. Not only has Ehle lived in close personal contact with the film community for many years, but also he has played a direct role by adapting his fiction into film. Two of his novels, *The Winter People* (1982) and *The Journey of August King* (1971), have been made into feature films, with Ehle himself writing the screenplay for *August King*. Finally, Ehle's 1974 novel, *The Changing of the Guard*, is an important novel about filmmaking itself.¹

The extent to which Ehle has both influenced and been influenced by the world of movie-making is illustrated by the dedication of *The Changing of the Guard* – to playwright and screenwriter, Bella Spewack, “who makes almost all things possible.”² Besides introducing John Ehle to Rosemary Harris, according to Ehle, Spewack suggested that he should “write a novel (preferably an amusing one) about the theater or about the making of a movie, since he had acquired so much experience as an off-stage, off-screen observer.” This experience

ABOVE LEFT **Rosemary Harris and her daughter, actress Jennifer Ehle, during the filming of *Winter People***

ABOVE RIGHT **John Ehle with his wife, Rosemary Harris, and *Winter People* co-stars Kelly McGillis and Kurt Russell on the film set**

ABOVE BOTTOM **The set of the film *Winter People*, Avery County, NC, 1989**

¹ John Ehle, *The Winter People* (New York: Harper and Row, 1982); *The Journey of August King* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); *The Changing of the Guard* (New York: Random House, 1974). Quotations from *The Winter People* and *The Changing of the Guard* are subsequently cited parenthetically. *Winter People*, adapt. of novel by John Ehle, Dir. Ted Kotcheff, Perf. Kurt Russell, Kelly McGillis, and Lloyd Bridges (Castle Rock Entertainment, 1989); *The Journey of August King*, adapt. of novel by John Ehle, Dir. John Guigan, Perf. Jason Patric, Thandie Newton, and Larry Drake (Miramax Films, 1995).

² Bella Spewack, with husband Sam, wrote the screenplay for *My Favorite Wife* (1940) as well as the screen adaptation for *Boy Meets Girl* (1938), which starred James Cagney.