

# MARIA COMMUNICATIONS CAROLA

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JOY NICHOLSON, AUTHOR OF *THE ROAD TO ESMERALDA*

*Maria Carola: You travel a lot between Los Angeles and Mexico. What first drew you to Mexico?*

Joy Nicholson: I moved to Mexico by pure default. It could have been Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua—all places I considered. I'd just met my husband, who was, thankfully, game to quit his job, and drive, wherever the road took us. The craziness of Mexico appealed to my inner numbness: I needed to crash-land in a place where I didn't know the language and culture—to maybe physically 'jump start' my feeling of being alive.

And, to be honest, I was irritated and tired of the materialism that drives American culture. In my naïveté, I was certain a poorer, 'wiser' 'warmer' 'sexier' culture would hold the key to my dissatisfaction. Maybe I was desperate for a sense that life had meaning, and believed that if I just drove far enough, if I just could give up enough creature comforts, I might be able to find that meaning.

*MC: In **The Road to Esmeralda** you brilliantly describe life in the Yucatan Peninsula. I have read that largely due to its extreme remote location, Yucatecans traditionally communicated more easily with parts of North America, the Caribbean and Europe and in addition to Spanish-speaking residents, the Yucatan has North America's largest indigenous Indian population, the Mayans, who still speak their own language. What a fascinating place. Was the book shaped prior to being there or was it born out of your time in the Yucatan, in Mexico?*

JN: The book changed so much as it went along. The initial notes were quite romantic, written during the time I lived in a small house on the Caribbean in the Yucatan. The house was cold water, powered by solar and wind, and was remote from the nearest town. There were a few scattered neighbors—some locals, some ex cons, a few expatriates involved with odd and illicit things—one didn't ask! There was no phone, and after a while, the craving for a phone went away. My husband set it up so my computer could work off of a bank of car batteries, and crafted a really nice 'fabric office' so I could write without being eaten alive by insects. It was paradise at first: I got in to a routine—swim, write, swim, read, that began to spin a lovely, hypnotic cocoon around me.

*MC: How did things change over the course of writing the book?*

JN: I wanted to write about nationalism/land-grab conflicts (war) but felt the Israeli/Palestinian issue was too loaded. So I set a similar situation on the beach in Mexico between American hotel corporations and Mexican drug dealers. Similar religious/money/ideological ideas exist. As I wrote the book, 9/11 happened, and I decided to include experiences I'd had as an American. Because I lived in a small Mexican town where many, many foreigners lived (Europeans, South Americans, North Americans, Lebanese, Japanese, Chinese) was quite poor, and somewhat learned the local language, I was privy to discussions/situations most expatriates are not. I was able to see the U.S.A. in a different way—both for better and worse.

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I only experienced my inescapable, perplexing 'American-ness' the second time I moved to Mexico, and this experience started inserting itself into the book. I was fairly fluent in Spanish the second time I lived in Mexico, and so was able to absorb a lot more of the feelings and emotions that Mexicans (and others) directed my way. I was in for quite a shock! The romance was over. I was going to have to face what I represented to others, instead of only being preoccupied with my own self-centered problems. The book began to reflect that uneasiness. And then 9-11 happened.

*MC: It must have been surreal being in such a remote place and learning of the 9/11/01 attacks. What was it like for you to be abroad during that time?*

JN: I was working in a dog shelter, exhausted, overwhelmed, with little time for anything else except my job. The first time I went to town and somebody told me about planes hitting the World Trade Center it, honestly, seemed a fairly trivial event compared to the poverty and suffering I was seeing every day in Mexico. Twenty-four hours later, I watched the image of the planes hitting the buildings and was filled with such a sensation of dread and horror, it was difficult to breathe. I felt at once terribly sad for my country and terribly afraid of the inevitable reaction. There was a martial, wildly erratic brand of patriotism in the air—even over a TV screen. The anti-Americanism in my town increased, probably tenfold in a month, after 9-11.

*MC: It's one thing to be aware of anti-Americanism and another to be directly confronted with it. I think many Americans were not prepared for the negative post-9/11 reaction towards America.*

JN: Because I was being met with open hostility for the first time, I suddenly started connecting the dots between the American expatriates paying eight hundred thousand dollars for a colonial home, while paying their maids and gardeners forty dollars a week (for a back-breaking six day week) and the humiliation and outrage that caused so many locals to cheer-on Osama Bin Laden. I began to listen to political conversations closely and even to initiate them: There had been a tremendous Latin American outrage when John Negroponte had been appointed ambassador to the U.N., for instance. There was a sense that America had had its boot on Mexico's face for a long time, and that the bully was finally getting some payback. That belief persists today. Many Latin Americans consider the U.S.A. a very flaky, somewhat devious and untrustworthy 'ally'. Oddly, people here in the States think we're the object of envy and desire. That all of Latin America looks up to the U.S.A. as a paragon of progress and virtue is not true.

*MC: You mention that you began writing **The Road to Esmeralda** before the 9/11 attacks. There are several current and forthcoming novels that address the effects of 9/11 and its aftermath. I am curious – did you feel a sense of responsibility as a writer, as an artist, to include 9/11 in the novel?*

JN: No. Not at all. I moved to Mexico, and therefore was writing 'about' Mexico, as a way of distancing: of avoiding the confusion, gratefulness, and guilt I felt about being an American. But while living there, I felt my insides becoming a cauldron, a sort boiling mass of conflicted points of view about my nationality. The only way I've ever been able to work out my own feelings is to distill them down to their simplest components. For me, writing is distilling. Actually, re-writing and re-writing and re-writing until I can feel and, therefore, understand.

*MC: How was it for you to return to the U.S. after living in Mexico? How, if at all, have your views of America, of Los Angeles changed?*

JN: I came back knowing that in order to have meaning in life, it doesn't matter **where** you live, it matters **how** you live. I've come to know there is no sacred land anywhere in the world; the land beneath your feet is sacred depending on how you act. If you go to paradise, but bring venality, racism, condescension, materialism with you, you will destroy paradise. I think there are a percentage of really good, involved, awake, non-hypocritical people everywhere in the world. They are in Mexico as certainly as they are in Los Angeles. Still, I no longer believe there are better people in the art world, or in the third world, or the expatriate world, or the yoga world, or any such representative possibility. A materialist lemming is still one, even when they are a lemming with ironic distance, a passport, and a yoga mat.

*MC: Advance praise of **The Road to Esmeralda** has been terrific. David Ulin calls it a novel that "charts our inability to escape ourselves, suggesting that destiny may be as much a matter of where we come from as who we are." Do you agree?*

JN: Nature and nurture. Certainly the two co-join in destiny. I can't speak for everyone, but in my own case, without the profound numbness and shock leftover from an anesthetizing childhood, thrill seeking might not have been so necessary for me. I might not have been drawn toward extreme circumstances like, say, just driving to El Salvador to see if I would die or not. Then again, my inner nature—that is my natural love of being alone, and natural reliance on intuition rather than logic, and a certain amount of profound naïveté and love of life, probably made my travels possible and fruitful.

It's the same with the U.S.A. and her policies. We can't escape our founding fathers' desire for freedom, peace and democracy—that's built in to our constitution—where we come from. Then again, by nature Americans are human and limited and sometimes truly hideous. Our human nature is going to make the next hundred years a wild ride, indeed. I wonder if we'll regress or progress?

*MC: You are establishing a nonprofit animal rescue organization, **One Dog at a Time**. I understand that this was inspired by your time living in Mexico. Can you talk a little about **One Dog at a Time** and its genesis?*

JN: In Mexico, I spent all available money, and all available credit loans, on trying to do something about the animals suffering and dying there. The problem was endless, terrifying and unbelievable in its scope. The more money I spent, the more I needed—it was like a horror movie, except real. The blood, the pus, the laceration, disease, the cruelty, the suffering is unimaginable. I don't think my little efforts really made a dent, but I'm not sorry to have tried. Coming back to the U.S.A., I faced heavy, heavy debts. Of course, 'helping' gets under your skin—it is truly the only real purpose in life. You start out thinking you're being selfless and good, you're 'eating your proverbial vegetables' but soon discover the joy and meaning that had been lacking all along. If this is being poor—give it to me over my 'rich' days anytime!

*MC: In a recent **New York Times** Op-Ed piece, Maureen Dowd addressed the current lack of female newspaper columnists. Why, in your opinion, are there so few female writers addressing politics and current issues?*

JN: Women are simply too preoccupied with sexiness and looks and prestige and money and fashion and image. Women are too preoccupied with how men validate them. I like sexiness and men validating me, and good looks—and even fashion—but there are a lot of things I like a lot more. Looking for the truth: I like that. My friends and I saving lives, relieving suffering, I like that. Women have to not only look for the truth, we have to face that truth. Women have to face inner cowardice, prejudice, and pettiness just like men do.

*MC: Your first novel, **The Tribes of Palos Verdes**, was extremely well received, especially by young women. The Los Angeles Times called the heroine “a female Holden Caulfield.” Having written previously a first-person narrative from the perspective of a fourteen-year-old girl, what was your experience writing now in the third-person? How was it to write from a male perspective?*

JN: I wrote **Esmeralda** in third-person as a challenge. It had been relayed to me—via a rather piquant critic—that ‘real writers write in third.’ I wondered if I could do it, but was not sure how. So I spent a very long time getting to know Nick and Al in my head, and studying all the men around me, and reading all the books written by Robert Stone (who is astonishing in his ability to lay bare the male mind.) I studied the men I worked with, my husband, and my neighbors. I studied Robert Stone again. I studied it all in third-person. In reality, I found it very comfortable writing as a man. Very direct and simple. I don’t really agree, having done both, that third-person is any more macho or intelligent. It’s just different. Less primal.

*MC: **The Road to Esmeralda** has been compared to the writings of Barbara Kingsolver and Sue Miller in addition to Graham Greene and Malcolm Lowry. Who were some of your inspirations in writing the book?*

JN: Robert Stone is THE major influence on **Esmeralda**. I took apart his books, literally with scissors and a corkboard, to learn how to write, with immediacy, in the third person. It’s amazing to see how Robert Stone makes transitions, and how a ‘dead’ voice like third person can be made lifelike and pulsing in his hands. I was also influenced by Susan Minot, Paul Bowles, Jane Bowles, Alex Garland. Reading has a very direct effect on my writing, probably the same way porn has an effect on sex. I could never write without books stacked up beside me. I read. I get excited and then it starts its own thing in my body. I’m off and running.

*MC: What do you hope people will take away from the book?*

JN: I try not to hope or expect too much. I don’t really have a ‘reader’ in mind when I’m writing, except maybe my agent Betsy Amster, whom I feel very much symbiotic with. Having a looming, unknown ‘reader’—wow—it’s too unknown. Maybe later I will find the comforting mental image of readers who like my story, but for now, I remain wary of the idea. I write what I feel and remember, without engaging the consequences. I just write and try to include the feelings and issues that concern me, even if they scare me half to death. And I always have a ‘next idea’ in mind to research. So I have a mental safety net. I’m always researching something new. That way, I always have the opportunity to be alive and think and feel.

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Joy Nicholson’s second novel, **The Road to Esmeralda**, is being published this June 2005 by St. Martin’s Press. Her bestselling debut novel, **The Tribes of Palos Verdes** will be made into a movie in 2006. Joy Nicholson lives in Los Angeles, California.