

MARGARET
MAHY

**Surprising
Moments**



THE INAUGURAL MARGARET MAHY AWARD LECTURE

Margaret Mahy is one of New Zealand's best known writers for children; in fact, she is known throughout the world for her picturebooks, novels for children and young adults, and her hundreds of school readers. Her books are translated into many languages and her humour and compassion are outstanding elements of her work.

*Born in Whakatane in 1936, Margaret Mahy now lives in Governor's Bay near Lyttelton. She has won the NZ Library Association Esther Glen Award in 1970 for *A Lion in the Meadow*, in 1972 for *The First Margaret Mahy Storybook*, in 1983 for *The Haunting*, and in 1985 for *The Changeover*; the Italian Premier Grafico Award 1976 for *The Wind between the Stars*; the Dutch Silver Pencil Award 1977 for *The Boy Who Was Followed Home*; the British Library Association Carnegie Medal in 1983 for *The Haunting*, and in 1985 for *The Changeover*; and the Observer Prize 1987 for *Memory*. Along with Dorothy Neal White, Margaret Mahy is patron of the New Zealand Children's Book Foundation.*

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Margaret Mahy
The Inaugural Margaret Mahy Award Lecture



New Zealand Children's Book Foundation
Te Maata Rikapuka o Aotearoa

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The Inaugural Margaret Mahy Award Lecture
presented by
Margaret Mahy
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'Imagination has brought mankind through the Dark Ages to its present state of civilization. Imagination led Columbus to discover America. Imagination led Franklin to discover electricity. Imagination has given us the steam engine, the telephone, the talking machine and the automobile, for these things had to be dreamed of before they became realities. So I believe that dreams - daydreams you know, with your eyes wide open and your brain machinery whizzing - are likely to lead to the betterment of the world. The imaginative child will become the imaginative man or woman, most apt to create, to invent and therefore to foster civilization.'

This optimistic speculation by L. Frank Baum, best known as the author of *The Wizard of Oz*, is not the most profound statement on imagination I have ever read, though it is remarkable for a kind of early twentieth-century idealism where cars and talking machines are concerned, an idealism that gives it a curiously old-fashioned quality in these days of Telecom and of urban guilt over the pollution implicit in the automobile. However, I thought I would start off by quoting it, not because of what it is in itself but because of where I read it. It was printed on a packet of herb tea, a packet of twenty-four tea bags that were described as 'an adventurous blend of real strawberries and fruity herbs'. On other occasions I have exclaimed over the literary nature of certain tea packets. Of course there is no reason why tea packets shouldn't be the means by which deep thoughts are broadcast to the world, and I don't want anyone to think I am being elitist about this. Nevertheless, there is a sort of oddity about it which brings about

a curious jolt in the flow of one's expectations that the world will behave in a calculable fashion, a moment in which one's certainty about the universe hesitates and quivers as if it might be about to break into an entirely different form. Actually the jolt is not in the universe itself but in oneself, though of course each of us is to some extent the measure of the universe. On occasions like these we are shifted rapidly from one system of expectation to another. For a moment we inhabit a discontinuity, a crack in reality, as we try to find a system that adequately contains what we are being shown. In the micro-second between one's first astonishment at some odd juxtaposition and the moment when one has found a place to contain the oddity, one is busily adjusting the world, well, one's own world at least. Even when we may have a category that adequately contains both the tea packet and the quotation, we still have to make lateral connections with the previous tea packet file and perhaps a 'Quotations on Imagination' file that is already in existence, and, as any neurosurgeon will tell you, these files are on opposite sides of the brain. I could even argue it seriously, tea packets are *spatial* units, particularly when empty they are mathematical ... quotations on imagination are to do with language. They are intuitive. There you are! A typical right-brain left-brain opposition. No wonder there is such creative tension in a literary tea packet. And what potential for drama: 'I'm sorry, Mrs Rumbucket, your son has fallen on his head from the balcony during a rock concert. I'm afraid - I don't know how to tell you this - the quotations on imagination section of the brain is severely damaged.' 'Oh, Doctor - Doctor - don't say that! I've worked my fingers to the bone for him. And now this!' 'I know, my dear, I know. Don't despair. They can do wonders these days with implants from good reference books.

It's not the same but ... ' `Oh, Doctor ... What about the tea packet section of the brain?' `Thank God that's safe. He'll be able to make cups of fruity herb tea for years to come.' And so on and so on!

All unaware, we are overwhelmed by the baffling moment. One deals with it. Everything falls into place. We think, 'How strange to be standing here reading deep thoughts about imagination on a tea packet.'

And then things go on almost but not quite as before.

I have come to value these moments of inappropriateness, partly because they are the sign of possibilities hitherto unguessed at, and partly because I believe in the circumstances of which they seem to be reminding us, that we are always skating over mystery. We are bound to act as if the universe is orderly and predictable, but if we believe it too dogmatically we do so at our peril. Incidents like looking up from the kitchen sink and seeing a short essay on imagination on the side of a tea packet, by collapsing ill-assorted categories such as domestic work, philosophical speculation, and disconcerting literary signs into one another, remind us that the categories we set up for ourselves are frail and temporary constructions, and though the example I have quoted is trivial enough, it is also strange and suggests that even stranger and more profound discontinuities and collapses might exist.

This may seem like an odd starting-point from which to begin speculating on aspects of writing for children, and on fantasy in particular, but it is one which is meaningful to me at least, since stories for children accumulate round another sort of discontinuity. We long for children's books to be free of instruction, so that children are able to be entertained without being secretly lectured. At the same time we also long for stories that will give positive messages according to

the perceptions of the time. Most of us still want stories to exemplify something that real life often fails to set down clearly enough for our taste, not necessarily a blissful ending, but certainly some sort of triumph rather than a defeat, the triumph of the creative spirit over the destructive one, the triumph of courage, the triumph of the kind and generous heart over the mean one, the possibility, against all odds, that the characters will win through to a sort of happiness. After all, such triumphs sometimes occur, and I find myself objecting to the philosophy which insists that a happy ending is necessarily untruthful. However, even triumphs are usually ambivalent, and seldom final. There is life after the triumph, and that may be less than triumphant. Nevertheless, stories persist in maintaining that in the area of secondary creation, at least, happy endings are possible, and speaking as a reader I think there is a good reason for this: the happy ending leaves the reader not merely feeling better about the world, but somehow more powerful and more able to achieve similar good results for him or herself, able to change statistical probability in the right direction.

One of my dictionaries, the nearest one, the *Word Book Dictionary* defines fantasy as 'a play of the mind; product of the imagination'. If this is a true definition I think one can argue that all stories are fantasies, and, when the fantasy is debatable, we don't quite know how to react to the story. Thomas Keneally's book *Schindler's Ark* won the Booker prize amid some doubt that it could be classified as a novel at all. Some people felt it was really non-fiction. Rachel McAlpine's recent book on Kate Sheppard has been subject to strong protest by at least one person, a disciple of Kate Sheppard's, who argues that many people are going to regard the fictional elements in the novel as part of a true account of Kate Sheppard's life. She objects to what she sees

as a distortion. Real life is the spring of fantasy just as it is the spring of realism, and the more remote from its human centre fantasy becomes, the harder it is to take an interest in it. Not only that, any story, no matter how factual, has to be edited, has to be shaped, and I tend to think that the shaping of an event or a life, the selection that gives the impression of a beginning, a middle and an end, the way in which certain qualities of action may be isolated and displayed, and events simplified so that a special theme can be clearly seen to develop, is certainly fictional in a way and possibly even fantastic, though we cease to regard it as such because we are so used to these structures of storytelling which seem to precede invention. Fantasies, games with the mind that is, invade our lives in a number of ways, some superficial and obvious, and some primeval. In the beginning of *To the Is-land* Janet Frame writes, 'From the first place of liquid darkness, within the second place of light and air, I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction always towards the Third Place where the starting-point is myth.'

This seems to me an honest account of autobiography, but it has led some commentators to speculate about how reliable the record is. By honestly admitting to myth, Janet Frame can be seen as suggesting something other than the accuracy which a biography should exemplify. Biographies are supposed to skirt very cautiously around such shifty areas. Obviously I would want to say that the inclusion of myth actually makes the account truer, though not necessarily more accurate. But I am speaking from a specialized point of view on this occasion, and I do believe that acceptance of this viewpoint confronts one with intricate problems, more intricate than most people really

want to cope with. And within the genre of acknowledged novels, is Tessa Duder's *Alex*, for example, less a fantasy than Caroline Macdonald's *Visitors*, or one of my own stories, say *The Tricksters*? Both *Visitors* and *The Tricksters* come into a category that is commonly described as fantasy. 'Fantasy' in this context doesn't mean simply a game in the mind. It is what the *Word Book Dictionary* defines as 'strange wild fancy'. Telling people about *Alex*, I often add that the author was herself a competitive swimmer, sounding as if I think it is important for people to know that, as if I thought the book would be enhanced by that knowledge, or gain an extra authority beyond its own imaginative statement. So it is, I suppose, and so it does, but only in a peripheral way. I would be interested to know such things myself, but not vitally interested. Often as I volunteer this information I wonder if I am not doing the book a disservice. By emphasizing the potential basis of *fact, the specialized personal knowledge* that informs the story, am I suggesting that it is either less creative than stories which are more obvious fantasies, or for that matter more real? The author works from a basis of reality, but in the end *Alex* is a story.

Of course we do regard stories that give accounts of things that have happened, or that we all believe might happen, as being closer to reality than fairy tales, and rightly so, but the fact is, that quite real-seeming events are often inventions. I once heard William Mayne, on being questioned as to the whereabouts of the setting for one his stories, I think *Max's Dream*, explain that he had made it up, and then add, 'We're allowed to do that, you know.' Angela Carter last year at the Writers' and Readers' Week in Wellington was asked about some aspects of Russian history present in her novel *Nights at the Circus* and answered, as closely as I can remember, 'You have to be careful. I do

make things up: Of course, *Nights at the Circus* is indeed an obvious fantasy, or an example of magical realism as fantasy for academics is called, but the question was being asked about the book's factual background. I am sure the author did indeed know a great deal about Russian history, but, confident in her knowledge, she played games with what she knew, she invented out of that reality, she fantasized. Later in Writers' and Readers' Week, Angela Carter read a story about a wolf girl, and listening to it, I knew from my own reading on the subject that she was well-informed where feral children were concerned. I asked her afterwards if she had indeed read the classic studies of Amala and Kamala and the wild boy of Aveyron and so on, and she said she had read everything she could find about them. That reading gave her a place to stand, as it were, but the story that resulted was fantasy, fantasy with the texture if not exactly of reality then certainly of truth. In an essay in the book *Innocence and Experience: Essays and Conversations on Children's Literature*, Laurence Yep comments on *Huckleberry Finn* in the following way, after saying that the most uncompromisingly realistic novel is still a manipulation of reality. He points out that the characters talk and act more like real people than do the sentimental heroes and heroines of novels of the time. 'And yet,' he says, 'I doubt if any boy on the Mississippi frontier even in the 1840s could have found six bodies in just a few days and heard tales of several other violent deaths. If you take a body count of *Huckleberry Finn* it seems like a series of violent fantasies. Samuel Clemens had to be true not only to a physical reality but also to an emotional reality. And the emotional reality was that Samuel Clemens lived in a violent universe against which his cynicism and his sense of humour were his only defences.'

Angela Carter's place to stand (and always remember that these are my words, not Angela Carter's) and the emotional reality that Yep suggests Mark Twain is addressing, relate to Janet Frame's 'Third Place' where the starting-point is myth and also, I think, to the incoherent moment between two points established in what I have learned to call, rather slickly, 'consensus reality'. Myth is usually seen as preceding humour or jokes, though there are mythical jokers or tricksters whose jokes are not always funny in any light-hearted way. Elsewhere I have gone on record as saying that I believe laughter to be more spiritual than is commonly understood, and I believe that though myth itself is a state that precedes laughter, a state where laughter or lack of it may be irrelevant, laughter may also be a way of entering myth. It is not the only path, but it is one of the paths, and too seldom acknowledged as such. Humour is a sort of surprise, even when we laugh partly out of recognition, and it can collapse our protective barriers.

At one important level at least, the one in which I am giving this talk, everyone knows more or less what the real world is ... I mean the real material world with which we interact as real material people with all that that implies. I don't agree with the platonic separation between the physical world and what we nowadays call the spiritual, or with the idea that the physical world is somehow inferior to the spiritual one. My own belief is that the separation of the two realms is a device which has come to be perceived as a truth, another case in which we have invested our tools of management with a fundamentalism that they don't really contain. Having created these two realms and set them apart, we stumble along the blurred borders because we are moving blindly, and often erroneously, finding our way

with all sorts of symbols, signs and stories, studying the shadows, listening for the echoes that come back from those stories. Frequently people chart places they cannot enter by listening to echoes, watching shadows, lines of condensation in cloud chambers that mark the marriages and separations of particles. Sometimes it seems to me that our stories investigate reality in rather the same way.

When I was a small child I knew, for example, that *Peter Rabbit* was a story, which meant it was not true. On the other hand, when I read in one of my father's childhood books, Arthur Mee's *Encyclopaedia*, that the earth had once been a fiery ball and that it had dropped off the sun, I knew this was true. I knew it because of the sort of book the information was to be found in. The encyclopaedia was true, and *Peter Rabbit* wasn't. I was thrilled with the fiery ball, and knowing it was true was part of what thrilled me. Sometimes I tried to make other fictional information true in the same way. I can remember maintaining to a cousin of mine that the events in *King Solomon's Mines* had really happened, though I knew they hadn't. I was trying, by powerful assertion, to drag the mythical story through into this other area, the one occupied by the fiery ball and everyday life, but it wouldn't go. Nor was that the only inappropriate attempt that I made to bring a marvellous fiction through into the real world, to get general agreement that it was true as history and science were true. From the time I was seven until I was about ten, after seeing the film *The Jungle Book*, I insisted to other children that I could talk the language of the animals. I couldn't bear that that particular story should remain in what I perceived as the half-life of fiction. Well, nobody believed I could speak the language of animals, and other children refused to give credence to a world in which they would have had

to give me more admiration than I deserved. Of course, part of the frustration of those who disputed my claim was that they couldn't quite prove that I was lying. Nobody, including me, believed that the invented gibberish that I tried out on passing dogs conveyed anything, but it could not be completely disproved, there on the footpaths of Whakatane. Nowadays I think how sensible other children were to suspect me.

Oddly enough I was subject to an equal derision, on one occasion at least, for asserting that the earth had once been a fiery ball, and would, one day, come to an end. I excited as much resentment for speaking what I did believe to be a literal encyclopaedia truth as I did for acting out fiction, although, just to make the situation a little more complicated, nowadays no astronomer believes the earth was ever a fiery ball that fell off the sun. What I learned as truth back then was apparently not truth, not even a fact. It was not a story either, though it had some of the dramatic qualities of myth. It was a *mistake*. Still, it fixed my attention, and tied me to the astonishment of non-fiction and to a certain sort of truth as inexorably as if it had indeed been true.

This is not the first time over recent years that I have recalled these odd battles with truth that took place between my seventh and my tenth year. I must say that a lot of other things went on at school. If I was to look at a time chart of my school days and mark the time that these various conflicts took, I would find they took very little external time. However, when I recall my primary school days, my first and most instinctive memory is of these confrontations. *That is what my primary school life was like*, I think, rather as we remember the Christmas holidays of our childhood as being day after day of sunshine. It is these memories that I have thought about most

and quoted most over the last five years, so they are partly constructions, though they are the memories that seem most intimately my own, constructed by being put into words, by being edited, by having form imposed on them. Besides, at some level I was arrested by these experiences and though I have grown around them, part of me has stuck with them, and has never moved on, so I think this says something about the nature of childhood and the things that happen to us as children.

A Lion in the Meadow is a very simple story. It looks as if it would take five minutes to write. However it took longer than that, because in the beginning it was really two stories.

I began by working on a story about two people writing letters to each other on behalf of two other people. After working on this tale for about a week I finished it early one evening, and found I had pushed myself into a particularly excited mood. I wanted to go on writing, so after a few restless minutes I immediately began another story, began almost without a pause, began a story barely knowing where the opening had come from and with no idea of where it was going, an extremely *short* story. It needed very little correcting. I got it right almost at once.

When I read the two stories a week later I found it was the second one, *A Lion in the Meadow*, which I liked the best. Nevertheless I'm sure I could not have written it if I hadn't written the other story first. Somehow, writing these stories had been a bit like pole-vaulting. When people are pole-vaulting they need to take a long run before hoisting themselves up in the air. The long run is part of the vault, part of the act. I think writing the first story was like taking the long

run, and *A Lion in the Meadow* was like the leap into the air.

I don't want to make what is after all a slight playful story bear the burden of too much interpretation, but I think I can say that from my point of view, *A Lion in the Meadow* was disguised biography and in a way more complex than I could ever have imagined at the time I was so impulsively writing it. Writing is a vain profession and writers, particularly writers who are asked to talk about their books, often think intently about what they have written. Some of you will have already heard me talk about the day when I decided to attempt as far as possible to read *A Lion in the Meadow* as if I was reading it for the first time. I know I have publicly described on several occasions the various transparent devices by which I tried to fool myself into believing that I didn't know that such a book existed, succeeding to such an extent that when I opened it and read the line, 'Mother, there is a great yellow whiskery lion in the meadow' I found myself tumbling into one of those ambivalent moments that I invoked at the beginning of this talk. In that moment I suddenly remembered a story my father used to tell me when I was very small, the first story I can ever remember hearing. What I remembered was the first line of the story which had been repeated without variation over and over again. 'Once upon a time there was a great big black-maned Abyssinian lion ...' I had not thought about this story for years, yet now it came rushing up out of memory. I stood there in my bedroom, holding the book open in front of me, transfixed by arrows of astonishment and memory, immediately convinced that the lion of my first published book and the lion of the first story I could ever remember were the same imaginative hieroglyph. Of course that makes a satisfying fictional pattern, a personal myth, but as far as I can tell it is also a true account.

However, it also seems to me significant that *A Lion in the Meadow* concerns a struggle between reality and the power of the imagination. The child in the story successfully does what I had never been able to do, pulling an image from imagination into pragmatic everyday life where it achieves an established reality. The boy in the story fulfils the misplaced attempts and longings of my own childhood, succeeding where I failed. The lion materializes and hides in the broom cupboard. It is real, well, real enough. His mother has to recognize it and change her own behaviour to accommodate it.

The two areas, myth as opposed to consensus reality, do depend on one another if one is to give a full account of our lives. They affect one another, they need one another, but the place in which they cross over legitimately is in stories or metaphors. The two areas are connected by the code, the set of symbols we call language and the uncomfortable moments when the pragmatic world breaks down to admit myth, when the figurative world floods everyday life, signalling its presence by various kinds of astonishment, mysticism, by religious feelings about existence, and sometimes tautology.

One day some years ago I was in Great Britain, in New Zealand House, listening to some flattering things being said about my work. I was consumed with gratification and at the same time by dismay, since not only my upbringing but my rationality prevents me from believing the flattery in the unconditional way I would like to, in the way that instinct seemed to be prompting me to accept it. You know what it is like. Just as at one level, part of you is listening and thinking 'How true! How true!' other more sensible strands are telling you, 'They have to say that,' or, 'What about all the things that you know are wrong with your story?' Looking furtively sideways at the shiny

wall, some sort of marble, I seem to remember, I saw a whole company of dark reflections standing apparently on the other side of the reflecting surface, listening intently, reproducing almost exactly our own attentiveness. I say almost exactly, because there was something menacing about the reflected featureless crowd which was certainly not present in the actual one. I was reminded that Jorge Luis Borges' *A Dictionary of Imaginary Beings* tells, in a section called 'The fauna of mirrors', that a creature called the Fish could be occasionally glimpsed in the depths of mirrors. (One must bear in mind that his account may be apocryphal because Borges is not only an astonishing scholar, but makes a literary point of inventing scholarship which has all the appearance of being genuine.) Once, he says, apparently quoting a Cantonese myth, there was a time when the images in mirrors did not imitate us, and men and women could come and go even more freely than Alice through the looking-glass surface. However, a battle developed between the world of men and the world of mirror people. In the end, the reflections were shut behind glass and obliged to repeat, 'as in the actions of a dream', the actions of men. One day we will see an essence called 'the Fish' in the glass, a very faint line of no describable colour. From that point on our reflections will start to rebel, little by little they will begin to move in their own ways. They will break out through the glass, water creatures will break out through the water, and battle will be joined again. Staring at the reflecting surface there in New Zealand House I wondered if I was possibly about to see the Fish there among the dark listeners. It was at that point that I began to think of the story subsequently published as *The Tricksters*. I am sure my ego, replete with the energy of praise, began darting around, searching for a way out, and ran off on its own through the

familiar escape route of a story. I was aware of the story because of stories I had already read, and out of the stuff of these stories and out of what I was seeing I began to construct another story and hide in it.

At first I had the idea of people coming out of a picture, but not because they were painted in the picture, which I imagined as an oil painting of a countryside, painted with a dark shiny surface. Reflections of people in the real life of the story would pass over the surface of the painting. They would live briefly in the painted landscape and give possible forms to life coming out of it, the residual energy of the painter maybe. It was not an original idea, of course. I had read stories that touched on possibilities like these for years. Once, as a child, I began writing a book about a reflection that came alive, though I never finished that story. Once the reflection had come alive, once that fearsome moment of transformation was past, my interest faded. Our reflections and shadows are often candidates for an extended or haunting life that is part of our own lives, yet separate too. *The Picture of Dorian Grey* is a notorious tale of a man living in a particularly exploitative relationship with his painted image. Vampires do not have reflections. In a way they are already reflections among us, yet belonging to the other side. In this first speculative version of *The Tricksters*, characters came off the surface of the picture once shapes were provided for them. They came, because they were desired. They were desired by the most powerful of all desirers, a reader, a reading girl.

As I wrote the book changed, the picture vanished, though the reflecting surface remained. It became the surface of the sea, the big reflecting skin of the world. I see the sea every day I am at home. The water of Lyttelton harbour is still water, and is a particularly vivid reflecting surface. I have often commented on the fact that it has been

hard for me to write a story set in New Zealand, and that when I began to do so in *The Changeover*, the story was set in a city, an environment which has many universal qualities rather than local ones. *The Tricksters* was the first book I had attempted in years which came directly from my immediate surroundings, and it was possible because those surroundings, though real enough, suddenly took on a fantastic dimension. I was able to mediate with my environment through fantasy, the zone into which I had been projected in childhood. I re-entered Lyttelton harbour, the same but different, via London, via reflecting surfaces, via remembered stories. In the end I wound up at home again. The desiring girl swims and puts her hand through the reflecting surface, draws through an essence that exists passionately, longing for form. It is incorporated in a fragmented and melodramatic way, which gives the girl the chance to be a romantic heroine, and also the chance to discharge a family secret which she longs to tell but must not tell. In the end she burns her book, transmuting, I suppose, the spirit which had been a water spirit into one of fire, a spirit of heat, an energy that can't be reclaimed. But before it leaves it has entered her, she is fertilized by it, I suppose, in the way that women in tribal myth and folk-tale can be fertilized by natural forces taking on the appearance of a man.

Of course from my point of view the story became the vehicle for many things. Harry, the desiring writer, is the middle child of a family, looking with envy at her older sister and being looked at with envy by a younger one. *The Tricksters* always seems to me a moral story because compassion and forgiveness triumph over betrayal. In the end it is the older sister Christobel who manages the heroic act. Though Christobel half laughs at herself for inviting Emma over for New Year,

and reveals that her act of forgiveness and her wish to do a good act are flawed (if that is the right word) by vanity, she is genuinely determined to force happy endings out of disaster and brave enough to begin to do so. She begins self-consciously, doing something that her ego also rebels against. Her friend Emma has after all betrayed by usurping Christobel's own father, and indeed assuming knowledge of him that is forbidden to Christobel herself. Christobel however persists. She rings Emma and invites her to join the family for New Year, only to find that something from the other side of another imperfectly reflecting surface, from the other side of morality if you like, advances to meet her. It is something connected to ego, perhaps, but greater than ego. She is surprised to find she is more sincere than she realizes. And sometimes this can be done, take my word for it. It is part of the perceived reality of children's books to end with hope, but that doesn't mean such endings are impossible. Self-sacrifice or, if you like, the suppression of one's own ego is not particularly fashionable at present, partly because it was so damagingly insisted on in the past, particularly in the lives of women and the poor. Now it sometimes seems like a false myth, or sometimes like a myth insisted on by one part of society in order to command another. Nevertheless, it is part of my direct experience and therefore I insist on its possibility, just as Tessa Duder might suggest the possibility of a certain atmosphere, a certain mental discipline immediately prior to a race. It is adult reality, built on guilt as well as experience, that suggests such endings are necessarily cop-outs.

In his celebrated essay 'Tree and Leaf' Tolkien speculates as to why Andrew Lang turned his adult study of myth and folklore into a series of stories for children, and suggests that Lang may have felt that the

teller of marvellous tales to children was entitled to exploit the possibility that it is less easy for children to distinguish fact from fiction. I suggest that in terms of our mythical, our most instinctive response, the difference is less than is commonly supposed, indeed at times there may be no difference. I am fairly certain that the reasons I was so thrilled by the fiery ball that had fallen off the sun, and by Mowgli speaking the language of the animals, relate to an identical engagement. My first response to either category was what we would describe as an imaginative one.

Of course, confusions do occur. I remember the first film to which I had ever been taken, at the age of three or four, *Mickey Mouse's Birthday Party*. At one point in this epic Peg-leg Pete stretched Pluto to such an extent I was sure the dog must be suffering and wept aloud. However, when my mother whispered that it was not real, I understood very quickly that this must be so, indeed in a way I already knew that, but I was a child strongly affected by my own theories of animism, to such an extent that many years later, when I was given a new quilt for my bed, I rolled the old one up and slept with it in my arms so that it would not feel discarded, though of course it was. I was distressed when our old caravan had to be pulled to pieces, but dreamed in the night that its spirit would somehow travel with us, in the pieces of it we salvaged.

I am not totally free of such primitive responses to this day, though I think I recognize them for what they are. And I think I do know the difference between fact and fiction. Over recent weeks I have received news on the Gulf War differently from the way I received information from the World Wrestling Federation programme, though superficially, and certainly not in terms of style, they have certain things

in common. Both tell dense, violent stories of rivalry and revenge. Both are initiated by ritual boasts and threats of the damage that will be inflicted if the opponent does not back down. If the choreography of WWF is more dramatic in terms of individual combat, the group movements, the choruses, if you like, of the Gulf War have superior drama, reflecting no doubt a bigger budget. The science fiction dress of the war belongs to a more convincing genre, more Arthur C. Clarke, less sword and sorcery. Both have curious sub-texts. In the case of WWF, the two contentious commentators Jesse and MacCann fight a war of words, abusing one another and criticizing one another's standards of fair play, while the ring is filled with strutting chest-thumping heroes, with thuds and gesticulations in the ring, and other dramas too. I am sure you all gasped with horror as I did when the Blues Brothers pettishly beat up the Bushwhackers with guitars. In the Gulf War one sub-text at least was also to do with the commentators. The media did a lot of navel gazing - that's N A V E L - they did both kinds, but it is the more introspective navel that interests me at present. They constantly discussed their own role in the war, the nature of their own presence, their value as witnesses, and their right to keep the people informed, and so on. The war had the quality, not so much of fiction perhaps as of a peculiar sports event, alarming at times, not so much because of the good traditional reasons for being alarmed by war, but because it seemed to adapt so naturally to a sports programme type of presentation, particularly when it was sandwiched in between cricket. One moment you were with the young guns, the next moment there you were transported to the Gulf, or to some segment of rugby league. However, I am wandering from the point. In spite of similarities I don't think any one really regards WWF as real and the Gulf War

as fiction. In the first case I stare, with my mouth slowly falling open, but my only serious anxiety is on behalf of the serpent which Jake the Snake Roberts throws at Andre the Giant. The snake, unlike the wrestlers, is not necessarily a willing participant in this game. It is a live creature with a nervous system, and in nature intended for a very different sort of life, whereas Andre the Giant and Jake the Snake Roberts have found their niche. It comes as no surprise to hear that Hulk Hogan is to star in science fiction films. Sword and sorcery no doubt! It's the proper place for him. Both the news and the wrestling make use of fictional structures, but I know that one shows people who are unwilling to be hurt truly being hurt, the other is a rare show in which people are choosing to act out certain mythical roles. If children copy the wrestlers, in the playground, they are doing something similar to what I was doing when I drank from puddles, trying to give themselves roles in a thrilling fiction. The difference is that the wrestling fans have more agreement about their fiction, and there are more starring roles. What I did was not something that required sensitivity, insight, or originality. I only needed to be a child, or more truly a human being. It just happened I was the only one playing my particular game.

The original engagement with content, fact, or fiction, relates to what Tolkien describes when he talks about 'appetite for marvels'. He says of himself, 'I had no special wish to believe. At no time can I remember that the enjoyment of a story was dependant on belief that such things could happen or had happened in real life. Fairy stories were plainly not concerned with possibility but with desirability. If they awakened desire, satisfying it while whetting it unbearably, they succeeded...'

Harry in *The Tricksters* is what I have described as a desiring heroine. The book she writes fulfils her longing not so much for a lover, though that may be part of it, but for a heightened and passionate imaginative life which most of us long for, for transformation. She has not yet learned that real life can yield everything she needs, because she is tricked, as many people are, by the surface of familiarity into thinking her own immediate surroundings have no power to transform her. Yet in the end she is transformed, in a familiar swimming place, by watching light moving on water. Fertilization by fantasy has given her the more mature power of achieving transformation through involvement with her real world.

It now seems to me that *The Tricksters* and *A Lion in the Meadow* have the same plot and spring from the same experiences. The little boy in the picturebook and Harry in *The Tricksters* both imagine or desire so strongly in their respective stories that their belief or desire makes a connection and alters reality. Of course we know that both *A Lion in the Meadow* and *The Tricksters* are stories and, being stories, are accounts of imaginary events, but they are not just about our relationship with metaphor but are metaphors themselves for one aspect of the human relationship with the world of ideas which is, in turn, part of the empiric world. This relationship cannot be detected by the five senses, but we can try to describe its effects. In these stories the uncertain moment is extended, is finally absorbed and accepted in *A Lion in the Meadow*, and is surrendered in *The Tricksters*, surrendered so that it can be more profoundly relocated in real life. Perhaps when Harry, made newly fertile, writes, 'Once upon a time ...' in her notebook at the end of the story, one can take it that she has given up eating grass and maintaining she can talk the language

of the animals. Now, when she longs to bring something of that other area into consensus reality, she will do so through her writing. In that case, this part of *The Tricksters* is once again autobiography, though that is certainly not what I intended when I wrote it, and I would hesitate about attaching too definite a meaning to it now. It is a part of a story, and the story, by using my own experience, changes the experience into something different from what it was originally. It gives it a shape, force, and direction it never really had.

The Canadian writer Robertson Davies writes, in a book of essays on reading, that reading should be approached in a less passive and more interpretive spirit, then goes on to say, 'Interpretive, you will observe: not creative. The word "creative" is used now so carelessly that its real meaning is being rubbed away. The reader cannot create; that has been done for him by the author. The reader can only interpret, giving the author a fair chance to make his impression: It made me wonder if I had been wrong in suggesting that reading is a creative process, and since reading this essay I have thought about reading all over again. However, it seems I am too fond of the idea of the reader as being creative to surrender it. When you interpret you reform something, even if only to a small extent. It seems to me that the reader, when reading, certainly should be giving the author a fair chance to make her or his impression, but at the same time, by reconstructing his or her own ideas, by bringing in things which the author could not have guessed at to enhance the story, perhaps by fitting the story into a structure, an assemblage of stories other than those the writer was aware of, and selecting contours of thought within the story in a way the writer would not have done, it seems to me the reader is actually doing something creative in the full sense

of that admittedly abused word. And writing a story sometimes seems to me to have a great deal in common with reading it, only the process is more laborious and uncertain. One has to build the story to find out what it is. I certainly find it hard, in my case, to draw a strictly separating line between writing and reading, particularly as I see reading and writing as part of the same network from which I write.

David Novitz in his philosophy book *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination*, constructs what he describes as a 'romantic epistemology' which proves to his own philosophical satisfaction at least that fanciful imagination is one of the ways we gain and develop empirical knowledge. He suggests that our very first learning experiences, which cannot be inductive or deductive, are part of an imaginative function.

Aidan Chambers, in an essay in *Booktalk*, says that we do not learn from experience but from the stories we tell about our experience. I may be echoing both these points in various aspects of what I have said tonight, talking about aspects of fantasy. What I suggest is that imaginative encounter not only reinforces our experiences but is the primary part of them. It is after such encounters that we start to control the world by forming stories about it, stories that concentrate on some elements and exclude others in order to make their statement, stories which are structural devices which help us to control our information about what sort of world it is and where we fit into it. Within the field of story, fantasy has a part to play if only because it restores us to something of an initial state of astonishment with the world, something that is part of an honest confrontation but which day-to-day experience forces us to forego.

Recently I saw the film *Awakenings*, which I thought was a good and unusual film. When I got home I took my copy of the book and

reread the account of Leonard L, for the film focuses on one story, whereas the book gives general case histories of twenty. One thing remained true however, that for a period of time Leonard was entranced with the commonplace things around him: ‘...during these two weeks Mr L was drunk on reality ... on sensations, feelings and relations that had been cut off from him or distorted for many decades. He loved going out in the hospital garden: he would touch the flowers and leaves with astonished delight and sometimes kiss them or press them to his lips.’

I believe this is a true response to the world, to the relationship that intelligence and imagination creates when it encounters and understands something of what is going on. If we could afford to live with truth all the time, we would always be in this state. Yet it is equally true that we are not composed to bear it for long. We are protected from it by the masking effects of familiarity. It is as disconcerting and terrible to live with as some of Leonard's other experiences which are less relevant to mention, except to say that the film was more of a fantasy than it seemed, and some of the things that happened to him were more terrible than the film showed. It wanted to give us something approximating to a happy ending. Leonard had other true things to say which are not mentioned in the film, perhaps because they would alter that particular story too much.

Story and fantasy have many functions in our lives, but one of the functions is to mediate between us and naked existence, to nudge us back into a state of astonishment from which we can also easily retreat, as well as providing places to stand, strong places in an overwhelming world. And when, pushed by no matter what sort of force from outside, we fall into the cracks in the structure, we immediately start to compose

stories to bridge the crack or fill it in so we can walk out of it safely. Of course, not all the cracks are profound ones. Some we experience as jokes, which brings me back to the quotation on imagination and the tea packet.

Frank Baum probably did not intend that anyone reading what he had to say about imagination should read it on a tea packet. Nevertheless I read it there, and no doubt I am not the only person to have done so, because, though it is in small print, it doesn't take long to read. Anyhow, Baum's thoughts on imagination must have been printed there with the idea that people would read it. Somewhere there are editors deciding what good thoughts are going to go on tea packets ... herbal tea packets incidentally, which suggests that people who drink herbal teas are more literary than others. Certainly, when you see Bell Tea advertised on television there is no suggestion that it is worth getting because of the good reading the packet supplies. It is odd to think, though, that possibly more people have read Baum's thoughts on imagination on tea packets than in his original essay. What others do with it, with such ripe and rich fruity incongruities, I don't know, but I do know that I make use of them in inward and outward ways and the outward way is often a story, and often a fantasy. In New York in late January I saw a painted permanent sign that read, 'Ears pierced. With pain or without pain - your choice!' For a fraction of a second, mid-stride, I thought the message was not about ears being pierced but something much more metaphysical, the power we have to choose pain or to refuse it, the way some stories often give pain romantic status and allow it to have power over us, while other stories allow us, ultimately, to have some sort of power over pain. With these thoughts I climbed up out of the crack, lived through the ambivalent

moment, finished my step, took another and another, went on to a lunch appointment, and went on beyond that to write a story built around that sign, though it is not a children's story.

Statements often suggest their own audience. These moments are real enough, but they are fantastic too, and link one into fantasies so vast, so profound, they seem to be speculations about our own nature and the nature of the world, seem to be myths, seem to be mysteries, seem to be the source within ourselves which we feed with stories and out of which stories come, directing us towards astonishment, even as we develop some sort of a technique for coping with the perpetual surprise of living in the everyday world.

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