

*As If By Magic:
World Creation in
Postcolonial Children's Literature*

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Sgt. Norman: Too many things to answer there. I'll try one at time. First, an Aboriginal friend told me the hand could have been worn as a good-luck charm. Quite common to wear part of a loved one around the neck or carry bones or a finger in a "charm bag." This was supposed to keep away evil spirits.

GARY CREW, *Strange Objects*

WESTERN CHILDREN TODAY live in societies characterized not simply by difference but by a consuming passion for it. Likewise, they live in a period in which they are more or less free to consume fictional and fantastic worlds not as forms of difference situated within a homogeneous theological paradigm but rather as heterogeneous secular worlds, and to consume these enthusiastically wherever they find them. Adults in Western society register their agreement with this philosophy of ontological pluralism not least by encouraging early engagement with contemporary media forms, television, video, computer generated visual images and written text, and so on; such forms Jean Baudrillard has linked with the growth of the "hyperreal" (2-3). Baudrillard's "hyperreal" is a world of the reproduced real, the generation of real "without origin or reality" (2), which dissolves previous categories of social theory into simulation models and codes. For Baudrillard, the hyperreal is exemplified in the relationship of Disneyland to the America which surrounds it.

If, as Baudrillard implies, the American model has a paradigmatic influence on Western childhood, then it is worth noting that a recent edition of *Parents Magazine* listed under "Indoor Entertainment" for American children "books, videos, software

packages and music recordings" (155), and included both an electronic replay of Homer's *Illiad*, in which Morgan the Chimp takes on the role of Odysseus, and a book of poems by African-American writer, Langston Hughes, described elsewhere as "perhaps the most significant black writer of the century" (Parker 55).

It is tempting to agree with postmodernist theorists that the world of Western childhood is a world of superabundance, of disconnected images and signs, of intertextual references, pastiche, and eclectic nostalgia, fragmentary sensations, promiscuous superficiality, numbed and flippant indifference, bricolage, and aleatory disconnection. And yet, it is no less true today that children live in a shared world of critically ordered sensory experience; that they are involved in the passing on to others of knowledge gained about the natural and social worlds (which presupposes a shared meaning); and that they are encouraged to join with adults in the classification of the things of the world (that is, to make identifications of similarity and so on). In fact, here is an ontology that is consciously progressivist and alerts children to the condition of adulthood, seeks authenticity in the present and celebrates possibility in the future, an ontology, which by this definition, has a modernist ethos.

The dialectic between postmodernist pluralism and modernist futurism opens up any analysis of postcolonial children's fiction. Children's literature is, after all, both the literature of enfranchisement and literature for the disenfranchised. It is rarely written by children and almost never published by them. For the writer, it provides access to the past as well as an opportunity to interpret an observed present, while for the child consumer (whether reader or listener), it is the literature of the experienced present and, most significant, of the yet to be experienced future. How similar these conditions are to the contextual history of colonial and postcolonial literature.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonialist or colonizing children's literature provided Western children with access to the future New Imperialism explicitly promised. Through the narratives of adventure stories, for example, British boys entered Africa alongside their fathers. As Patrick Brantlinger has pointed out,

since imperialism always involved violence and exploitation and therefore never could bear much scrutiny, propagandists found it easier to leave it to boys to “play up, play up, and play the game” than to more mature, thoughtful types. Much imperialist discourse was thus directed at a specifically adolescent audience, the future rulers of the world. (209)

Indeed, such literature helped to define “Europe (or the West) by offering contrasting image, idea, personality, [and] experience” (Said 1-2). No doubt it is superfluous to mention that this “contrast” involved the use of stereotypes, such as those of “African” children presented in Helen Bannerman’s *Little Black Sambo* (1899), Florence and Bertha Upton’s *The Adventures of Two Dutch Girls and Golliwog* (1895), and Ellis Credle’s *Across the Cotton Patch* (1935), and the transposition of European literary attitudes onto non-European environments, invoking the Romantic notion of nature as an elusive metaphor such as in the mysterious lives of May Gibbs’s *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (1918) or in Jessie Whitfield’s *The Spirit of Bushfire and Other Australian Fairy Stories* (1898), both of which emphasize not only the irrational but the emotional dimensions of the Australian bush. Finally, this contrasting of image, idea, personality, and experience involved specific classifications and weightings of story, theme and motif—both abrogation of local narratives and appropriation, in varying degrees. The work of Patricia Wrightson, from *The Crooked Snake*, published in 1955 and taking the form of a conventional adventure novel, to *Journey Behind the Wind*, part of a trilogy featuring the Australian Aboriginal hero Wurrun, published in 1981, provides historical reference to one author’s changing understanding of colonialism.

Of course, these examples cut across both settler and invaded societies, for which the histories of displacement, denigration, constraint, alienation, transformation, and subversion are by no means singular. In fact, the rejection of Eurocentrism involves, first, the recognition of the multiplicity of colonial experiences and, second, the realization that the definition “postcolonial” itself privileges European settlement and invasion as the ontological foundation for non-European societies.

Given these reservations, it is nevertheless possible to approach anti-colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality as

contemporary influences on Western children's literature. However, the word "postcolonial" is best used only as a mnemonic shorthand for the many examples of cultural syncreticity, hybridization, ethnicity, and resistance that have entered Western children's literature in the late twentieth century—though certainly not all by one route. "The post-colonial," after all, "is an open-ended field of discursive practices characterized by boundary and border crossings" (Pieterse and Parekh 11).

For postcolonial societies, these boundary and border crossings are not the consequence of living in an eclectic Disneyland, but the result of incorporating the modernist ethos of progressivism, the Enlightenment ideals of freedom and equality, and the celebration of new or alternative histories. To read postcolonial children's literature closely, it is necessary to acknowledge not the hollowness of the hyperreal, a reality that purports to be more than reality, but the complex cardinalship of actual worldmaking. This act of worldmaking helps to illustrate that children's literature is not a separate entity from adult literature but a component of the same cultural, linguistic, and conceptual matrix.

"Worldmaking," Nelson Goodman writes, "always starts from worlds already at hand; the making is a remaking" (6). Goodman's five processes—Composition and Decomposition, Weighting, Ordering, Deletion and Supplementation, and Deformation (7-17)—provide an exemplary heuristic method for approaching postcolonial children's fiction, because they rely on an organic metaphor of emergence and fructification, an identifiable postcolonial trope. For example, two works of postcolonial adult fiction, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), exemplify the five processes that Goodman outlines. Interestingly enough, while *Midnight's Children* and *The Famished Road* are not works for children, they are works about children. In both cases, the authors use the conceit of the uniqueness of a child born at a particular time in history as a method to take control of history and give it shape. The time of birth is, of course, the arrival of national Independence.

In Okri's novel, Azuro is a spirit child who moves through the "dreaded gateway" (5), between the world of "the fauns, the

fairies and the beautiful beings" (4) and the world of fathers swallowed by holes in the road and mothers dangling from the branches of trees (7). In Rushdie's novel, Saleem Sinai, the narrator, joins the children "who were only partially the offspring of their parents—the children of midnight (who) were also the children of the time: fathered, you understand, by history" (118). *Midnight's Children* and *The Famished Road* use internalized narratees to draw attention to the component features of postcolonial childhoods, to highlight and combine their distinctions and features into new complexes and make new connections. Exemplifying the act of composition and decomposition, their narratives are narratives of both an individualistic and a culturally holistic childhood.

In a similar fashion, Margaret Atwood's novel *Surfacing* (1979) returns a young Canadian divorcee to her childhood home where, immersed in childhood memories, she enters a mystical natural world from which she ultimately returns renewed. Nature here is not the elusive metaphor of the European Romantics but an attainable metaphysical foundation located in childhood. Likewise, in Nurrudin Farah's *Maps* (1986), the child Askar is possessed by strange qualities, "burdened by the violent and passionate world he lives in and dispenser of wisdom and insight that only an adult should possess" (249).

The composition and decomposition of cultural events, the deletion and supplementation of accepted truths and historical facts, the weighting and ordering of narrative and stylistic forms—it is through these that postcolonial societies, though disparate, acknowledge their role in a shared world of critically ordered sensory experience. These are methods of passing on to others knowledge gained about the natural and social worlds of postcolonial life. Such classifications of similarity and, most important, of difference can be seen in a number of contemporary works of children's literature.

"Everything is in order, and numbered, just like history is supposed to be" (175), writes Steven Messenger in the conclusion of Gary Crew's novel for older children, *Strange Objects* (1990). Messenger's comment, of course, is heavy with irony. The ironic mode is predominant in postcolonial literature (New

3), and this form of declaration, a discourse between public history and self-identity, is identical to that which drives the novels of Rushdie, Okri, Atwood, and Farah.

In *Strange Objects*, the disappearance of a fictional sixteen-year-old schoolboy named Steven Messenger is connected to the discovery of the underwater wreck of a seventeenth-century Dutch vessel, the *Batavia*, off the West Australian coast. The actual story of the *Batavia* is one of the most horrific stories in Australian maritime history. The ship, with 316 passengers on board, 12 chests of silver, and a priceless casket of jewels, was wrecked 40 miles from the Australian coastline. Unbeknown to the captain, the supercargo (the officer in charge of the cargo) had already been planning to mutiny and seize the ship's treasure. After the captain departed in search of help these mutiny plans were put into play, and Jeronimus Cornelisz, the leader of the mutineers, oversaw the murder and rape of some 125 people, including many women and children. Eventually, Cornelisz was outwitted, and he and his fellow mutineers were tried, sentenced and hanged. Before he was hanged, however, Cornelisz had both his hands cut off to signify his role as ringleader.

Strange Objects begins with a report on Steven Messenger's discovery of some highly valuable maritime relics—these include “an iron pot (which became known as the ‘cannibal pot’), a leather-bound journal and a mummified human hand” (Crew 2). On a thematic level, *Strange Objects* places at the centre of its narrative the dangers experienced by colonial pioneers, the attendant violence of isolation, and the implicit suggestion that physical distance can produce moral displacement. More than this, however, it links this same spatial and moral displacement with implied violence bred in the isolation of contemporary Australian settler society. Steven Messenger writes:

I remember the time a client suicided in one of the motel rooms, slashed his wrists in the shower and bled to death on the bed. Katz got to know about that well before Sergeant Norman or the ambulance arrived. I happened to be in the Roadhouse Cafe (getting a Coke) when he came in and told me the body was there, and in which room. I had never seen a dead body. (73)

This is not an overt political declaration such as we might find in certain works of South African children's fiction of the same period. For example, *Strange Objects* was published in 1990, a year after Beverley Naidoo's *Chain of Fire*, which fictionalizes protests against the homeland laws of Apartheid, and a year before Norman Silver's *An Eye For Colour*, in which Basil Kushenovitz, a white South African Jewish boy, examines the contrasts between the physical beauty of his country and the far less attractive political reality which confronts him. The concern of Crew's novel is not the decomposition and deformation of history but its supplementation, the bringing into the present of the acts of the past, an anachrony which can only work if we challenge the weight and order of history's composition.

All three of these works are postcolonial narratives from within settler rather than invaded communities; unlike the novels of Naidoo and Silver, however, Crew's novel provides the added dimension of being an experiment in narrative shape and form. The novel progresses through a series of Messenger documents; that is, the documents Messenger has previously collected into a project file and forwarded to Dr. Hope Michaels at the Western Australian Institute of Maritime Archaeology. These documents, or "messages," include not only newspaper clippings and Messenger's own narrative of events, but also transcripts of audio-tapes, reports prepared by Dr. Michaels, translations from the journal of a young man who was on board the ill-fated *Batavia* when it ran aground, advertisements and quotations from books about shipwrecks, and even photocopies from a dictionary of legends and the supernatural, annotated with drawings by Messenger himself.

While this might be a postmodern turn towards ontological insecurity,¹ also at play here are epistemological questions concerning the knowledge of past events, what kind of knowledge that might be, how it is acquired, and how that knowledge persists into the present. The driving force of *Strange Objects* is not the destruction of truth or the sidelining of the real but an examination of the political as well as the textual character of the authenticity which surrounds the production and reproduction of fact. In the end, Crew's novel encourages the reader to believe that "Someone knows. . . . Somewhere" (188).

The novel tacitly suggests that this someone might be a member of the local, indigenous or invaded community. Indeed, postcolonialism frequently involves a dialogue between settler and invaded communities. As Pieterse and Parekh argue:

The decolonization of imagination involves both the colonizers and the colonized. The decolonization of the *Western* imagination means reviewing Western horizons in the light of the collusion of empire and colonialism, and with the ongoing asymmetries of global power. (3)

This asymmetrical global power is not necessarily confined to the economic; it can also be spiritual. In Glenyse Ward's autobiographical stories for older children, *Wandering Girl* (1987), and the more recent *Unna You Fullas* (1991), this spiritual dialogue takes place between the sisters in charge of an Australian Aboriginal mission and the mission children. Ward's mission children live a hybridized life in which the Australian bush rings out with the yodelling of Swiss mission nuns.

Sister Erika would tell us of her homeland, the Swiss Alps, and of snow. I understand how she must have felt when she stood on the rocks at the mission and yodelled for us. There must have been real longing for her home, and it would have seemed strange to her, having tall redgum trees, blue skies, singing birds and dark-skinned, snotty-nosed kids jumping up laughing and shouting for joy around her. (19)

For Sprattie, the mission child, the irony here is not solely in the recognition of the mutuality of colonial displacement, but in the hybrid condition of language. Speech and song, of course, are not realms of independent existence, but aspects of a multi-faceted network of social relations (McNally 14). Sister Erika's songs ring out strangely over the rocks and gullies of outback Australia as Sprattie learns to rise each day to the sound of Sister Ursula's cow bell and to laugh at the Mother Superior's comically accented English. Nevertheless, it is not the mission sisters' English which is unacceptable but the English of the mission children. As Mr Pitts tells them: "Another word I do not want mentioned in Mr Foley's class or mine is the word 'unna.' What sort of language is that? A sort of language that has to be stopped" (114). Of course, despite the strict routine of the

mission, it is not stopped. *Unna You Fullas* in fact means "Isn't that right, you fellows?" and this call to confirm fact, to engage in epistemological discussion, to commit to worldmaking, not least through the subversion of colonial authority, reiterates that cultural hybridization does not lead to inauthenticity and that colonial destruction myths are ideologically spurious.

The linguistic complexities of much postcolonial children's fiction are overtly indicative of the conditions of polyglossia or diglossia, displaying an orality that suggests multiple entryways and multiple exits. Linguistic representation, however, is always learnt piece by piece, word by word and therefore, like the move from child to adulthood, suggests linearity. By way of comparison, it is worthwhile for us to consider how pictorial representation in recent children's literature has dealt with the postcolonial condition.

Judith Lechner has said in her work on the images of African Americans in children's picture books that "because picture books send two images simultaneously, the impact they create on young children is long and lasting" (75). Unfortunately, Lechner is misrepresenting here the language of visual texts by compartmentalizing their reception into a binary. In pictorial representation, systems of language are learnt all at once and it is this fluidity, this totality, rather than a binary or duality, which is the starting point for a discussion of two very different picture books for young readers: Peter Pavey's *One Dragon's Dream* (1978) and Jeanie Adams's *Going For Oysters* (1991).

Once Dragon's Dream was published some 19 years ago, in a period in which magical realism was reaching its peak (that is, with the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature to the Columbian magical realist Gabriel García Márquez, in 1982). Magical realism, of course, combines the fabulous and the fantastic with the narratives of objective realism and originates in the visual arts where it was applied to the mildly surrealist, smoothly painted pictures of figures and objects reminiscent of the neo-classical art of Italian artists such as Felice Casorati. In literature, magical realism is characterized by "two conflicting but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an 'enlightened' and rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of

the supernatural as part of everyday reality" (Chanaday 21). Its popularity in Latin America is "based around the idea that Latin American reality is somehow unusual, fantastic or marvellous because of its bizarre history, and because of its varied ethnological mark-up" (Swanson 4).

Accentuating the playful pictorial elements of this mode, Australian author Peter Pavey presents a dream narrative in which a phantasmagorical dragon, in falling asleep, dreams of "real" animals, some of which, by their frequent appearance in children's literature, have become culturally non-specific (that is, turkeys, tigers, monkeys), and others, such as kangaroos, koalas, numbats, and flying foxes, which emblemize the Australian environment. Although *One Dragon's Dream* adopts the generic shape of a "counting book," Pavey continues the illustrations after the numerical text is complete and concludes metafictionally, with a picture of a window in which the reader can observe characters from the dream disappearing from view. *One Dragon's Dream* is also a story of incarceration:

One dragon had a dream—that two turkeys teased him, three tigers told him off and four frogs seized him. Five cranky kangaroos hopped around and fenced him in. Six stern stalks tried and sentenced him. Seven slippery seals off to jail they juggled him. . . .

(1-14)

Magical realists have made a point of acknowledging the influence of European modernist experimentalism and the stream-of-consciousness dream narratives associated with James Joyce, not least in *Ulysses* with its search for psychic purity.² In a connected way, Pavey's *One Dragon's Dream* presents complex, eclectic, and self-referential illustrations (often displaying the paints and brushes of their own making), which exploit the calmness of European metaphysical painting in order to exceed by far the linguistic parameters of the written text that accompanies them. Pavey's eventful, surreal illustrations don't "ward off the real world" (Hunt 187) but reference the extra-textual dimension of postcolonial psychic unease (Ashcroft 148), which itself is kinetic.

This relationship between written and pictorial representation in Pavey's work can be fruitfully compared with that employed by

Jeanie Adams in *Going For Oysters*, set in an Aboriginal community in Queensland's Cape York Peninsula. In *Going for Oysters*, Adams's illustrations display a far higher degree of fluidity and a lack of linear definition; they depend more on the written text for clarification. Her breaking of frame and line extend to the relationship between writer and reader. At one point, the reader observes the Aboriginal community as if floating in the sky above it. In contrast, Adams uses a first-person narrative and a homodiegetic child narrator. The effect is to place directly into the child's world view the signs, symbols, and traditions of Aboriginal Australia. By frequently using her illustrations to re-position the mediation between narrator and implied reader, Adams shifts a high degree of intimacy onto the written narrative.

Significantly, the language of the written text in *Going For Oysters* is colloquial, close, and casual. As in Glenyse Ward's work, language serves as a place of intersection between Aboriginal and English lexicon and syntax. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin have suggested that "in one sense all post-colonial literatures are cross-cultural because they negotiate a gap between 'worlds,' a gap in which the simultaneous processes of abrogation and appropriation continually strive to define and determine their practice" (39). This argument for the notion of "a gap" between worlds is not supported by works such as *Going For Oysters* which depend on a sustained dialectic within the same epistemological and ontological field, between linguistic enfranchisement and disenfranchisement, and which explicitly reference the relationship between child and adult world that is a progression or plot rather than a counterplot. This is extended to the narrative itself as the child narrator both acknowledges and transgresses adult control and authority:

We crept up on the pelicans. We dived into the water, making plenty of noise to frighten the crocodiles. We pretended we were in an old-time skinbark canoe. And when it leaked we patched it up with sticky mud.

After a while that got a bit boring. Cousin said, "Let's row to the east side." I forgot all about Grandad's warnings, and we all climbed into the dinghy and pushed off. (20)

The act of worldmaking in *Going For Oysters* is certainly, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin point out, the interconnected acts

of abrogation and appropriation. However, the importance of pictorial representation in these acts is that it calls up the same recognitional capacities that children use in observing the real world. Performance and reception in pictorial systems, in being naturally generative, is much less rigid (Schier 2) than performance and reception in written systems and therefore is much more closely linked with conditions of postcolonial oral literature that constantly crosses the borders and boundaries of communication, being grammatically intricate but lexically sparse, lacking solidarity and offering a mode of being in process not product.

In each of these works, the postcolonial world is one that is being made rather than one which is already established. It is certainly true that by designating any literature "postcolonial," imperialism becomes ontologically privileged. However, as a mnemonic the term references a certain kind of worldmaking, one that involves definite processes of composition and decomposition, weighting, ordering, deletion and supplementation, and deformation. Postcolonial children's literature enters the media-saturated West through the global ethos of postmodernity. Its importance, however, is that the worlds it creates are, like childhood, evolutionary, celebratory, and inhabited by possibility.

NOTES

- ¹ Brian McHale argues in *Postmodernist Fiction* that "the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological. How can I interpret this world I am a part of? . . . The dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological. Which world is this?" (9-10) According to McHale, postmodernist fiction, with its recursive structure, proffers changes in ontological level, "changes of world," and emphasizes techniques of embedding and nesting. This is distinct from the structures and formal notions of modernist fiction. McHale's attempt to cleave modernism from postmodernism on the basis of a rift between the ontological and the epistemological is arbitrary (failing to acknowledge that 'ways of knowing' and 'what is known' might be considered as part of a holistic philosophy so that solutions to the problem of method and solutions to the problem of ontological dimension are parts of the same dialectic). However, he does make the significant point that the game plan of fiction often labelled "postmodern" is to emphasize and exploit movement: accentuating contrast, issues of parallelism, interaction, addition and subtraction between different diegetic levels. Post-colonial magical realist fiction is also notable for this.

2 Gerald Martin writes:

Since my view is that this is the century of Joyce in Western literature, and that the "Ulyssean" design is especially relevant to Latin American fiction, this critical journey is one which risks shipwreck at the hand of both the English literature traditionalist and Latin American nationalists . . . not only do I believe that Latin America's development of a "Ulyssean" fiction springs largely from its writers' own experience, but I also believe that the Latin American contribution to Modernism has been decisive in its later evolution and in the process of communication between First, Second and Third world cultures. (129)

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