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## Reclaiming the Modern World for the Imagination: Guest of Honor Speech at the 19th Annual Mythopoeic Conference

Brian Attebery

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## Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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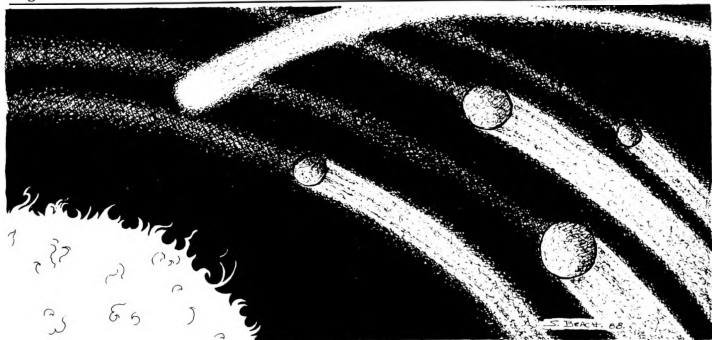


### Abstract

Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 19. Defines indigenous fantasy—fantasy in a contemporary, “real-world” setting—and illustrates its techniques as demonstrated in *Wizard of the Pigeons* and *Little, Big*.

### Additional Keywords

Crowley, John. *Little, Big*; Fantasy, indigenous—Definition; Fantasy, indigenous—Technique; Lindholm, Megan. *Wizard of the Pigeons*



## Reclaiming the Modern World for the Imagination

Guest of Honor Speech at the 19th Annual Mythopoeic Conference

Brian Attebery

Since I am here as the official representative of academe, let me begin by apologizing for the way literary scholars have largely ignored fantasy.

Most of us, unfortunately, seem to be comfortable only with narratives that keep a consistent relationship with the world of experience. You might think of these stories as planets with nice circular orbits around the real world. They have just enough narrative momentum to avoid falling into the center – collapsing into pure history or autobiography. On the other hand, they never get any farther from the source, either. The pull of reality brings them back, around and around. If they are not equivalent to the world of sensation and preconception and memory that we call real, the separation is so uniform that it can almost be ignored, as if the story were reality. What this means to literary scholarship is that a lot of attention gets paid to imagery, character drawing, and point of view, which have to do with correspondences between the real and the fictional, and not much attention to anything else.

But you don't learn about celestial mechanics by looking only at the predictable orbits. You need to look at the eccentric ones as well. A good fantasy is a comet, which swings into view from who-knows-what regions of space,

edges in too close for comfort, and veers off again on a new tangent, shooting off streamers of stolen fire.

That is why a few of us *have* tried to deal with fantasy. It's tricky. Those parabolic orbits are hard to follow. You have to keep changing lenses to keep the story in focus. But it is worth it when a new light appears in the sky – Comet Tolkien, Comet Le Guin – especially when it comes from a direction you haven't anticipated.

What we have had in the last few years in American fantasy is a comet swarm: a group of original fantasies that pose particularly interesting questions about the space between fiction and reality. Fantasies like R. A. MacAvoy's *Tea with the Black Dragon*, Orson Scott Card's *Seventh Son*, or Nancy Willard's *Things Invisible to See* challenge our notions about the ways literature can transform experience and about the limitations of fantasy as a genre.

Ordinary fiction, the kind that literary scholars notice, attempts to generate, as a primary response, *recognition*. If it succeeds, we feel we have been given an authentic glimpse into the human condition. Fantasy, though, is directed primarily toward a kind of response we call *wonder*. Wonder is connected with seeing things not so

much as they are but as they might be or ought to be. The unknown can generate wonder; so can the familiar seen in a new light.

The ability of fantasy to generate wonder is closely tied to both setting and story line. The *setting* is traditionally an enclosed Other World of magical beings and miraculous events: Narnia or Middle-earth. The *story* follows the fairy tale model: whatever happens along the way, the ending will come out right. We sometimes call this coming out right a happy ending, for short, but readers of the great fantasies know it is much more ambiguous and less trivial than that.

The setting makes the ending possible. A magical world cannot be confused with real life, and so the story is entitled to reach the most satisfying, rather than the most probable, conclusion. Frodo will reach Mount Doom and destroy the Ring. The conclusion, in turn, validates our response to the imagined world, our astonished delight at ents and elves and mallorn trees. A different ending might have reinforced experiences in Saruman's tower or Shelob's lair; it might have generated irony or horror, but not wonder.

But the recent fantasies I mentioned earlier, and others by Megan Lindholm, Charles de Lint, Sherri Tepper, Diana Paxon, Peter Beagle, and John Crowley, paradoxically attempt to reattach the wonder-generating mechanisms of fantasy to realistic-seeming settings and situations.

At this point I need a name for this group of fantasies, so I don't have to keep listing authors or titles. I might call them magic realism, since they parallel some of the techniques of a painter like Renee Magritte. I might name them after earlier writers who seemed to be working toward similar combinations of the impossible and the mundane: F. Anstey or Edith Nesbit or Charles Williams. But I think we have essentially a new phenomenon that deserves a new name, and I am going to suggest the name *indigenous fantasy*. That is to say, this is fantasy that is, like an indigenous species, adapted to and reflective of its native environment.

What characterizes indigenous fantasy is its avoidance of the characteristic other-worldly frame. Rather than taking place in Tolkien's Middle-earth or any such fairyland, indigenous fantasy calls its setting Ann Arbor or Seattle. This choice involves making two simultaneous and incompatible assertions: first, that the story takes place in the ordinary world accessible to our senses, and, second, that this world contains – contrary to all sensory evidence and experience – magical beings, supernatural forces, and a balancing principle that makes fairy tale endings not only possible but obligatory.

Indigenous fantasy is thus an inherently problematic form. It is also, by the same token, inherently interesting, for one wonders what strategies the author will adopt to

conceal or bridge the built-in conceptual gap. The gap itself reflects our different ways of knowing and responding to the world, the magical and scientific dimensions of thought and language. It also reflects the less evident gulf between story and history, our two ways of organizing time and placing ourselves within it.

The most rigorously realistic fiction emulates history in all its muddle and sprawl. Its mode of discourse is essentially reportorial, for history ultimately derives from the eyewitness account. We make use of that discourse every day in conversation, telling what we saw, what we did, what someone said to us. We usually make an attempt to arrange our account in chronological order, with the logical sequence of cause and effect providing the connections between events: "Then he got noisy again, so I hit him with the lamp."

So long as one sticks to the rules – tell what happened or reasonably might have happened, describe what one saw or might have seen, keep events more or less in order and causes evident – one can incorporate any incident or emotion, adopt any perspective or style. This kind of reporting is so adaptable and seems so natural that we tend to forget that it is not the only form of discourse available, even in conversation. There are also, for instance, tall tales and jokes, neither of which is arranged according to the rules of historical discourse. Fantasy shares with these other oral genres a certain contrived or constructed quality. Its characters are chosen and its incidents arranged to fit a predetermined pattern, which allows for the achievement of a particular effect: laughter in the case of the joke, the refreshment of vision called wonder in the case of the fantasy.

Defining serious literature only in terms of the discourse of reporting, as critics have done for the past century, ignores the human need to cast the events of one's life in story form, rather than exclusively in reference to history. Stories have heroes, whereas histories only have actors. Stories have beginnings and end, and an internal dynamic that moves them toward a particular goal. The form of a story is its chief meaning, whereas the meaning of history must be inferred through application to external values.

Other World fantasy more or less bypasses history by inventing a setting in which every object, incident, or motivation may be assumed to be in service to a preordained and comprehensible narrative pattern. The first hint the fictional world is not intended to stand for the world of experience tells us that we are not in reportorial mode, but in some other form of discourse in which chronology may be violated; in which causality is less important than teleology – the direction things are headed; and in which characters are defined primarily by their roles in bringing the story to its conclusion and only secondarily by their individual traits and interactions.

There was a time when this division, between story and history, did not exist or seemed unimportant. Italo Calvino has written a plausible reconstruction of origins of the earliest recorded magical narrative, which we usually call myth. He points out that the elements of a myth are the everyday realities in the life of what he calls the "tribal storyteller." Hypothesizing a South American background, though any other would do, he mentions jaguars and toucans as typical actors, chess pieces for the game of story. For possible actions, we might have hunting, flying, eating, drinking, mating, and dying – assuming only the jaguar and toucan as sources of inspiration. Then what Calvino calls the "combinatorial game" begins. Jaguar hunts, toucan flies, she-jaguar meets he-jaguar, toucan flies too close and dies. The storyteller gets bolder: toucan tries hunting, jaguar learns to fly, dead she-jaguar returns to haunt he-jaguar. The magic which is narrative possibility takes these simple facts and transforms them until eventually the teller achieves a narrative symmetry which is recognized by his listeners. They, then, are compelled to retell that particular story, refining it further, until it becomes what we call a myth.

The modern storyteller likewise can assemble actors and events and attempt to combine them into myth, but two key ingredients from Calvino's mythmaking scenario are lacking. One is the context in which storytelling could spill over into ritual and belief. The other, which is related to the first, is the availability of a whole set of game pieces without which the game lacks a level of combinatorial possibility.

The tribal storyteller's world included jaguar and toucan, and so he could readily transform their movements and attributes into narrative. But Calvino does not mention that the storyteller's world also included ghosts, walking trees, and ancestors who were both jaguar and human. These things were also parts of reality: ghosts looked a certain way, spoke a certain way. The storyteller knew: he had seen them. These elements did more than merely add to the storyteller's repertoire. They transformed everything else within it.

A simple tale was likely to explode "into a terrible revelation," as Calvino says (79), because toucan and jaguar and storyteller and listener were already connected in a web of kinship and transformation and magic, a web that was known through the stories but extended well beyond their boundaries.

Combining the familiar with the magical, which was also familiar, the tribal storyteller created a mythic discourse. The writer of indigenous fantasy is attempting to recreate that discourse from two now sundered sources. The magical web is no longer part of the discourse of everyday reality, and so our novels and histories do not explode so easily into myth. But the discourse of magic, which is roped off into fantasy worlds, has lost something as well.

The great advantage of the discourse of reporting is its property of extension. Once we know we are in a story in reportorial mode, we can extend the narrator's observations in any direction. If the story mentions London, we can assume Paris. We can fill in Tower Bridge and the dome of St. Paul's, whether or not they are invoked specifically. We can supply Henry VIII and Victoria, Samuel Johnson and Virginia Woolf. Even the least well-read can provide traffic and parks and shops and cinemas to fill in the background of what the narrator actually chooses to notice. Ultimately the world of the story extends in an unbroken path to the reader's own doorstep. Thus the reader does a lot of the hard work of bringing a story to life.

Occasionally, of course, our observations and the narrator's will fail to agree, but generally we can set these lapses aside. If snakes are described as slimy or Boise as east of Butte, we can blame authorial ignorance or narrator's unreliability and assume the rest of the fictional world corresponds point for point with our own models of reality.

What if, however, the narrator speaks of clouds colliding overhead, or describes a troupe of tiny people hoisting sail in a bathtub. The link with our own surroundings is broken: there is no continuous path from such a scene to our own space. We are forced to interpret such descriptions as statements in another mode of discourse: metaphors, perhaps, in a metaphysical poem, or hallucinations that will be disavowed later in the narrative, or metafictional trickery. If no such explanation works, then these sorts of incidents force our reidentification of the whole narrative into the discourse of the wonder tale or fantasy.

Once that identification is made, the principle of extension ceases to operate. No longer can we be sure that the fictional London is situated across the Channel from a fictional Paris or that its history matches any part of the history we know. We know nothing for certain until the narrator tells us it is so. Is the sky blue? Is the world round? Perhaps, but don't bet on it.

Yet the reader needs some way of filling in at least an approximation of the story's background, so that each item named does not emerge from empty space. Otherwise the storyteller's discourse will be overburdened with naming:

A man sat under a tree. The man was bilaterally symmetrical, made of flesh and blood, about six feet tall, with hair on one end and boots on the other. The tree was green-leaved and grey-barked. It could not speak. "Under" means touching the ground, in the direction of gravity's pull.

It is impossible – everything specified calls for further specification, so that no story could ever advance beyond its beginning point.

This is the reason that so many fantasies suffer from a

certain thinness even while they seem to be overdetermined. Most fantasy worlds are radically reduced from the richness of actual experience.

What a fantasist can do to compensate is direct readers to a storytelling tradition for filling in inessential background. Although fairy tales are radically discontinuous with history, they are in a sense continuous with other fairy tales. As a way of filling in the empty fictional space, narrators refer the reader to the European fairy tale and romance tradition. Instead of an absolute void to mark off as best they can, many storytellers settle for a familiar and coherent landscape in which clouds can possibly clash and fairies go sailing. In most cases this is essentially a simplified version of the Middle Ages. Writers are attempting to rehistoricize fantastic assertions by placing them within an approximation of the most accessible milieu in which such statements could have been made within the discourse of reporting. Unfortunately, most contemporary fantasists lack the depth of antiquarian knowledge that allowed Tolkien or Morris to roam freely in a reconstructed Medieval world. Nor do most fantasists, especially in America, have access to locales where fairy tale and legend are still a part of local culture, as they are in Alan Garner's Cheshire or Susan Cooper's Thames Valley.

For these reasons, borrowing a milieu from old stories is likely to result in settings that seem flimsy and flat, like cardboard stage sets. Yet, on the other hand, the magical web of relations that justifies a fairy tale's happy ending cannot be supported in a realistic narrative: it dissolves into coincidence and authorial intervention. The more carefully a writer shapes a narrative in historical mode, the more improbable it becomes.

In a fantastic tale, the deck is allowed – is even required – to be stacked in favor of the hero, for that is a hero's narrative function. The realistically conceived protagonist, though, has no such dispensation, and any sign of predisposition in his favor registers as sentimentality. An engineered resolution would imply that the story's outcome, like its characters and setting, derives from the real world, that the universe is ready to step in on the side of good, and we are no longer prepared to accept such a claim.

Yet a number of writers have attempted to find ways of combining – or rather recombining – these two types of discourse. Using American settings in which the mythic fusion of magic and everyday life does not linger even in memory, they have attempted to recapture the Medieval or tribal storyteller's ability to feed observation into fantasy. Those who have succeeded have constructed narratives in which the inevitable falling-into-place of fantasy governs a world that seems continuous with the reader's experience.

Megan Lindholm's *Wizard of the Pigeons* illustrates the

process. Like many writers of indigenous fantasy, Lindholm wrote *Other World* stories first and then turned to materials closer to hand, to try to integrate scenes and incidents from her home town of Seattle, Washington, into a wonder tale.

To do so, she had to find a way of convincing readers that her Seattle is indeed the contemporary West Coast city they have seen or read about and at the same time a fantasy world in which impossible events demonstrate a secret and wondrous order, which will govern the course of the tale.

The wizard of the title is a street person. He is one of those people with too many layers of clothing, who launch into improbable conversations with strangers or with the empty air, who make us uncomfortable without threatening us, so that our usual response is to avert our eyes and walk past. In that averting of eyes is the rationale for making such a claim. Why can't an invisible person be doing impossible things? If we were to see him, for once, and, more importantly, to see what he sees, he could indeed be a wizard, and the area of Seattle marked by the boundaries of the public transit Ride Free Zone a fairyland.

What Lindholm must do is encourage the reader to accept Wizard's view of things (his role is also his name). He must not be merely derelict or incompetent, and so the vagaries of his behavior are presented in such a way that they seem in harmony with his surroundings:

On such a day the cries of the gulls seem to drown out the traffic noises, and the fresh salt breath of the ocean is stronger than the exhaust of the passing cars. . . . The possibilities of the day tugged at Wizard's mind like a kite tugs on a string. So, although he had been standing for some time at a bus stop, when the bus finally came snorting into sight, he wandered away from the other passengers, letting his feet follow their own inclination. (2)

The description helps validate the point of view. Only after we have shared Wizard's pleasure in the bright October sunshine and listened to his internal guided tour of historic Seattle are we confronted by evidence that his thinking processes might be a little askew. Wizard has dropped into a curiosity shop to visit a friend:

"So how's it going, old man?" Wizard greeted him softly.

Sylvester gave a dry cough and began, "It was a hot and dusty day. . . ."

Wizard listened, politely nodding. It was the only story Sylvester had to tell, and Wizard was one of the few who could hear it.(3)

Sylvester is a mummy, "one of the best naturally preserved mummies existent in the western United States. It said so right on the placard beside his display case" (4).

Although we have doubts about a man who talks to mummies – and listens to them – the narrator counters our doubts with the idea that there is an unrecorded truth behind historical documentation.

The pamphlets accompanying the display told everything there was to know, except who he had been, and why he had died in the sandy wastes from a bullet wound. And those secrets were the ones he whispered to Wizard, speaking in a voice as dry and dusty as his unmarked grave had been, in words so soft they barely passed the glass that separated them.(4)

In this way, Lindholm establishes that Wizard is not merely an eccentric having delusions. He is somehow more in touch with both the physical presence and the historical background of the mummy than are either the writers of the pamphlets or the conventional people who glance into the shop. His life on the streets justifies a cock-eyed perspective on what is or is not physically possible, thereby bringing the discourse of the fantastic into play. At the same time, it also allows the narrator to lay claim to the chief validating mechanisms of realistic discourse: detailed description and reference to history. Wizard's special insight into history is translated into the discourse of fantasy when it is understood that its source is his receptiveness to the mummy's story: its transformation of mere event into a ritualized narrative directed toward an already known end.

From this encounter, the story moves toward more explicitly fantastic events, but always within the limits of Wizard's lifestyle and point of view. A mechanical gypsy in the curiosity shop slips Wizard a warning on a Tarot card. We learn about Wizard's special gift, which is to have things come to him unbidden. Knowledge of a stranger's affairs is simply there when he needs it, just as clothing, food, shelter, and sometimes small change make themselves available:

He had found a box of tea bags in the dumpster in the alley behind the health food store. The corner of the box was crushed, but the tea bags were intact in their brightly colored envelopes. . . . In a dumpster four blocks away, he had found two packets of tall candles, each broken in several places, but still quite useful. An excellent morning. The magic was flowing today, and the light was still before him. (13)

Details that could be arranged into a sociological study of the homeless, here contribute to the fantasy because they are interpreted as magical, which is to say as Wizard's power and fate working in tandem.

Wizard meets other wizards: Rasputin, Euripides, and the most powerful, Cassie. Cassie comes and goes through many Seattles, leading Wizard through doors that weren't there before she appeared, into the past or the city that might have been had there been no fire at the turn of the century. She never looks the same twice. Lindholm takes

evident pleasure in describing in great detail the physical appearance that would define and restrict Cassie in a realistic narrative, but here tells us only that we don't know Cassie's limits.

Cassie is, in a sense, the discourse of the fantastic itself. She is the one who explains the art of wizardry to Wizard, and her explanations always take the form of stories. She draws part of her power from children's rhymes, the simple narratives to which little girls jump rope. She is known to the reader primarily through her stories and through her role in this story, which is the one who tells truths the listener is not prepared to understand. She is both fictional and metafictional. After telling one vivid story about the bombing of Norwich, she is asked by Wizard if she was really there at the beginning of World War II. Her answer is, "That story is always told in the first person" (74).

With these clues before us, by the midpoint of the book we are able to spot Cassie in a rapid succession of guises. We recognize the battered vagrant, the neat white-haired woman, the short curly-haired Jewish woman, the stout little black woman, the slender Polynesian, the young student, simply because any person appearing at those moments, saying the kinds of things they are saying, *has* to be Cassie.

Through Cassie's stories and Wizard's gifts, we come to see the city of Seattle, its physical presence and its history, as fully encompassed by the magical tale. Even poverty, prostitution, and violence can enter into the ordering mechanism of story, as Wizard exercises his power to heal victims of these urban diseases.

Wizard's own story involves learning to control the relationship of present and past. His past is dominated by violence and despair: he was a sniper in Vietnam, possibly a prisoner of the Vietcong. At one point in the book that past threatens to reemerge and define him not as Wizard but as Mitchell Ignatius Reilly, emotionally maimed veteran. As long as that is the only past he possesses, he can only function by cutting it off, keeping the documents that would tie him to it locked away in a box in a trunk in an attic of the deserted building he has made his home. But the past still lurks, unacknowledged. The box marked with his initials becomes a focus for evil: the residue of evil from the war, the many small evils of urban life, the evil impulses that he has been trained to make use of as a soldier. All of these coalesce in a gray presence called MIR.

Wizard can defeat MIR neither by denying the past nor by resuming his old identity. He must find a new identity, which involves crossing over to a new narrative line. Instead of being Mitch Reilly, whose past is unbearable and whose future is hopeless, he must find a past and future for Wizard. Here Cassie can help, for her stories hold many past. All he needs to do is find a story, like the one of the

bombing of Norwich, that can be told in the first person, or rather that *he* can tell, truthfully, in the first person.

MIR tries to impose a story on Wizard. It throws him into a memory, a narrative about young boys killing a pet black rooster and at the same time learning a lesson in violence and indifference to cruelty. The only question is whose memory it is: which of the boys was Wizard?

But that question is a trap. Cassie shows Wizard how to break the chain of cause and effect and turn realistic narrative into magical. "I remembered being all those boys, as soon as the grayness showed them to me," says Wizard. "Yet having seen them I would not choose to have been any of them."

"Don't you see?" responds Cassie. "You were there, yes. But you were the Black Rooster" (75).

If Wizard could have been the Black Rooster, he could have had other lives as well. One story Cassie gives him early in the novel provides a particularly useful past if the identity he is looking for is that of a magic-maker and hero. It is about a young girl and an old man robed in blue who teaches her about herbs and magic. Wizard does not recognize himself in the story – he even makes fun of it: "And the old man was Merlin, and the little girl was Cassie. The End" (63). But the little girl *was* Cassie, and the old man may have been Merlin but was certainly Wizard, and it isn't the End.

When he learns that his true past lies in stories, Wizard is freed to fight MIR in the present, and his own narrative can hook up with the happy ending appropriate to a fairy tale. The episode of the Vietnam War, like that of the Black Rooster, is safely encapsulated as an episode, a necessary trial along the way, instead of an open-ended nightmare. The past can be harrowing so long as the whole has a purpose and a resolution.

Lindholm has constructed a narrative that says, by its very shape, that telling magical tales may be a way of taking control of an otherwise unmanageable reality. Other writers of indigenous fantasy similarly describe how the fantastic mode can take possession of realistic discourse, utilizing narrative strategies comparable to Lindholm's filtering reality through the eyes of an urban scavenger.

These stories share a particular concreteness that is the farthest thing from the vague settings of purely derivative fantasy. Lindholm's Seattle, Peter Beagle's Berkeley, Emma Bull's Minneapolis, and Nancy Willard's Ann Arbor provide firm ground and vivid detail to the narratives, a familiar phenomenon in autobiography or local color writing, but rather new to fantasy. One can feel the author's relish in placing magical incidents on real street corners and turning acquaintances into fairies and mages.

What is required seems to be a perspective close

enough to consensus reality to allow for a sense of continuity with the reader's world but at the same time open to impossible events and miraculous explanations. We may not believe, for instance, that Wizard's magic brings him quarters when he craves coffee or enables him to feed pigeons out of an inexhaustible bag of popcorn, but we believe someone like Wizard could believe it, and his receptiveness allows our temporary acquiescence.

The transitional point of view, however, need not be that of a true believer in the supernatural. It just has to be someone who can, like Wizard, *tell* the magical tale to us. In a curious way, John Crowley is able to use Smoky Barnable's skepticism to allay our own in *Little, Big*, and to generate through Smoky's perceptions a whole anthology of modes of discourse. At the same time, Smoky allows the reader to make use of that sense of continuity from which realistic narratives derive so much of their solidity.

Smoky is a sort of displaced person in the twentieth century. Educated by his father,

at sixteen, Smoky knew Latin, classical and medieval; Greek; some old-fashioned mathematics; and he could play the violin a little. He had smelled few books other than his father's leather-bound classics; he could recite two hundred lines of Virgil more or less accurately; and he wrote in a perfect Chancery hand. (6)

This education has effectively isolated Smoky, just as Wizard's war experience cut him off from the concerns of the ordinary residents of Seattle. Smoky, with no marketable skills, a very imperfect knowledge of current events, and no confidence in his own ability to make judgments about reality, is ready to be drawn into a group whose view of the world is, if odd, at least secure. This is the Drinkwater family. They maintain a set of beliefs dating from the middle of the last century the age of spirit rapping, reincarnation, and photographs of the fairies.

Marriage to Alice Drinkwater brings Smoky into the midst of a colony of heirs to the great nineteenth-century wave of spiritualist frenzy, now isolated but still thriving like sea creatures in a tide pool. His marriage also brings Smoky in contact with a number of eccentric and fantastic forms of narrative discourse, which help thicken the texture of the magic tale by giving us more ways to pour our own experiences into it.

We can credit the style of the book's opening to Smoky's upbringing. This is how he would introduce himself, drawing on those leather-bound volumes of his childhood:

On a certain day in June, 19--, a young man was making his way on foot northward from the great City to a town or place called Edgewood, that he had been told of but had never visited. (3)

Though the City is obviously New York and the un-



specified date sometime in the Sixties, Smoky never really lives in that setting, for it does not fit the language he has for describing reality. The only connection he establishes there is with George Mouse, a Drinkwater cousin, and the quality of their relationship is conveyed through Smoky's peculiar vocabulary: "by then he and Smoky had become, as only Smoky in the whole world it seemed could any longer say with all seriousness, fast friends" (9).

Through George, Smoky meets Alice, and soon thereafter starts his journey to Edgewood, a place where an expression like "fast friends" is the least extraordinary sort of utterance. One of the pleasures in reading *Little, Big* is to trace the models from which the language of Edgewood is compounded, from *Winnie the Pooh* to Madame Blavatsky to *Little Nemo in Slumberland*.

Smoky's language is so much at home in this place that he is willing to suspend judgment on the parts of Edgewood that don't fit his notions of reality, such as talking animals:

"You said someone told you . . ."

"Spark," she said. "Or someone like him."

She looked closely at him, and he tried to compose his features into a semblance of pleasant attention. "Spark is the dog," he said. (15)

Once established at Edgewood, Smoky is surrounded by odd and old-fashioned narratives, such as Dr. Drinkwater's children's books, Great-Aunt Cloud's Tarot readings, Sophie's recountings of her dreams, and Great-Grandfather John Drinkwater's theosophical musings, with which the later editions of his architecture books were encrusted. Smoky never realizes that these narrating voices surrounding him are all speaking literal truth and all of a piece. Even though Smoky never really understands or believes, however, he is content to *make* believe. His stance—bemused, delighted, accepting without entirely trusting—is the reader's. Then, starting from that acquiescence, the reader finds the intertwining discourses of Edgewood reaching out to encompass other places and times, even the great City. History is engulfed by story, as it was once before, in the Middle Ages, when a historical figure like Emperor Frederick Barbarossa could find his way into the legend of the sleeping king under the mountain. As if to show the similarity, Crowley brings Barbarossa out of his sleep and into *this* story as well.

Smoky's son Auberon Barnabe also brings the reader in contact with a more contemporary kind of history. During his stay in the City, Auberon becomes for a time a scavenger much like Lindholm's Wizard:

He had thrown himself on the City's mercy, and found that, like a strict mistress, she was kind to those who submitted utterly, held nothing back. By degrees he learned to do that; he who had always been fastidious . . . grew filthy, City dirt worked itself into his fabric in-

eradicably . . . By autumn his knapsack was a useless rag, a cerement, and anyway had ceased to be large enough to hold a life live on the streets; so like the rest of the secret City's epots he carried paper shopping bags, one inside the other for strength, advertising in his degraded person many great establishments in turn. (379)

In this description, with its precise and arcane vocabulary, we can hear Auberon's self-dramatization, and behind that the accents of his father and teacher Smoky. Though Auberon's period of dereliction is only episode one among many, it serves here the same function as Wizard's cutting loose from conventionality: it makes the impossible seem only unexpected, and no more unexpected at that than any of the meetings and acquisitions in a wholly unplanned life.

Auberon passes through his derelict stage and goes home, but like Wizard he has had the course of his life changed. He is now ready to take up his role in the story, and it is at this point that he is given *his* new name and fabulous past. He finds out for the first time, for instance, that his City misadventure, triggered by the disappearance of his lover Sylvie, was engineered by supernatural beings. They are the same supernatural beings, indeed, who turned his great-grandfather August Drinkwater into a trout, another new fact in a now unpredictable past. Auberon is given both facts by an evidently reliable source, the trout itself, who promises that there will be a gift in compensation for Auberon's woes. Crowley wonderfully captures the fishy and prophetic discourse of its thoughts:

Grandfather Trout's was not an affectionate soul, not now, not after all these years; but this was after spring, and the boy was after all flesh of his flesh, or so they said. He hoped anyway that if there *was* a gift in it, it wouldn't be one that would cause the boy any great suffering. (412)

Eventually Smoky becomes fully a function of the story, a fantastic being, Oberon to Sylvie's Titania. Other characters are similarly *narratized*. Their realistic attributes are simplified and intensified until they become pure narrative movements, which is to say mythic beings. Only Smoky retains the complexities and doubts that make him a realistic character, that keep him just on the threshold of the world of Faery, where he can look but not enter, neither believing nor disbelieving. He must stay in that halfway state if he is to continue to bridge the many sorts of discourse and thereby let us partway into the plot:

. . . Smoky was willing, willing to take on this task, to take exception to none of it, to live his life for the convenience of others in whom he had never even quite believed, and spend his substance bringing about the end of a Tale in which he did not figure. (531)

The substance Smoky has to spend is, in a sense, his discourse, which holds together so many strands of language and plot. The "others" whose convenience he has served are ourselves, the audience, as well as the unseen troupe of fairies. As to the last clause above, he does, of

course, figure in the Tale, for it has become his Tale even more than it is the Drinkwater family's, at least from our perspective.

When the story is all worked out, everyone dead or vanished or transformed, and even Smoky is no longer there to anchor the fairy tale in reality, the narrative concludes with a passage of essentially realistic, though lyrical, discourse, as a way of showing what has vanished:

It was anyway all a long time ago; the world, we know now, is as it is and not different; if there was ever a time where there were passages, doors, the borders open and many a crossing, that time is not now. The world is older than it was. Even the weather isn't as we remember it clearly once being; never lately does there come a summer day such as we remember, never clouds as white as that, never grass as odorless or shade as deep and full of promise as we remember they can be, as once upon a time they were. (538)

The real world, "as it is and not different," says Crowley's narrative, is empty without the world "once upon a time" that comes into being only in story. New York is no place unless it is also the City, teeming with elegance and vice and with all the stories into which those temptations can lead young heroes. The countryside, too, needs its stories, like Smoky's getting lost in the woods and meeting Mother Nature, whom he takes, not wrongly, for a neighbor of the Drinkwaters'. It needs Smoky's honeymoon in the moonlight on an island in a lake, and Alice's walking backward into a rainbow. These stories transform the world so that it is never without wonder: even Crowley's lament for lost beauty creates the image of that beauty.

It is unlikely that any of the indigenous fantasists intend readers to begin living like Wizard or expecting the fairies to bring about a transformation in their lives. When you convert history into story, you end up with precisely and only that—a story. Yet stories, by being different from nature or history, make nature accessible and history meaningful.

Fantasy, by its structure, emphasizes the difference between fiction and life, a difference which our critical tradition seemed for a long time to be determined to erase. Indigenous fantasy shows that fiction and life are not only separate but complementary. Those eccentric viewpoints sought by fantasists as a way of justifying divergence from the strictly representational are probably as useful to the writer as to the reader. They are enabling mechanisms, ways of evading the rational censor, so that our own tribal storytellers can resume their proper function, reclaim their unique discourse, and recapture the modern world for the imagination.

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