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Dark Mirrors: The Scholar Guest of Honor Address from the 1993 Mythopoeic Conference

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Abstract

Scholar Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 1993. In exploring the “thesis that fantasy is as much of its time as beyond it,” Yolen examines various prejudices in a number of noted Victorian to modern fantasies for children.

Additional Keywords

Fantasy—Criticism and interpretation; Prejudice in fantasy literature; Race and racism

DARK MIRRORS

THE SCHOLAR GUEST OF HONOR ADDRESS FROM THE 1993 MYTHOPOEIC CONFERENCE

JANE YOLEN



hat we are each mirrors of our time, reflecting prevalent prejudices, and class hatreds does not surprise us. Yet when an author of a fairy story is such a dark crystal, giving back in a fantasy setting the baser beliefs and feelings of his day, it often comes as a shock to more perspicacious readers, especially those who come long after.

I would like to explore the thesis that fantasy is as much of its time as *beyond* it. And this essay is just that, an *exploration* as ragged and as dogged as any of the early expeditions set forth by an Agassiz on the Amazon or a Franklin across the Northern seas or a Leakey in Central Africa. I leave the real scholars to fill in the large gaps of family, species, and whether these particular dinosaurs were cold blooded or warm.

First, I want to mention a couple of early fantasy books for young children that fall into these pits.

Kingsley's *Water Babies: A Fairy Tale for a Land Baby* (the unexpurgated edition which is, admittedly, difficult to find nowadays) is one such book. Charles Kingsley was an Anglican minister, a nineteenth century cleric who was, surprisingly, sympathetic to the Chartist movement which "sought to eradicate the feudal-capitalistic basis of Imperialism by organizing the working classes." He was also a founding member of the Christian Socialists. Yet as liberal as we should suppose this would make him, he was also an avowed anti-Catholic, anti-ascetic, two stances which found strange expression against the Irish especially in his *Water Babies*.

Anti-Irish sentiment was particularly virulent in Victorian England, though it had been around Britain since as far back as 1243 when the first statutes had been passed "for the expulsion of the Irish beggars." By the mid 1800s, Engels was to talk of the Irish as "slovenly intruders upon the green and pleasant land..." and Henry Mayhew, writing a detailed study of London laborers and London poor could write "next to a policeman, a genuine London costermonger hates an Irishman." That hatred percolated up in society, especially when a few of the Irish managed to lift themselves into the parlors of the gentry — one entrance through trade and another through the church. When Catholicism began to regain a tenuous toe hold in England that had some three hundred years previously declared itself divorced from popery, the upper classes became infected with Irish hatred too.

Kingsley was man of his times, particular to it, but peculiar in it. He had fallen in love with a woman seven years his senior, a woman so religious she had planned to become an Anglican nun. It took him four years to convince her to marry him, and his distaste for the ascetic life and the life of self-mortifying celibates, was cemented. He strongly identified this kind of life with Catholicism.

By the time Kingsley began *The Water Babies*, at the request of his youngest son, Grenville, he had already written many specifically anti-Catholic works, articles like "Why Should We Fear the Romish Priests?" (1848) and novels which touched upon it like *Westward, Ho!* (1855). But *The Water Babies* shows only the slightest bit of this. Instead, in a remarkable substitute for his virulent anti-Catholic attitudes, Kingsley's anti-Irish feelings are given full presentation.

The novel is concerned with a fantasy journey from childhood to manhood, from the state of sin to the state of grace, from the slums of London through the regenerative baptism of the clean streams of Nature to a glimpse of a pantheistic god(dess) and beyond. The main character is a chimney sweep, Tom, who is a brutalized and degenerate creature when we first met. The sweep is literally and figuratively washed clean by the waters of the world, makes a highly symbolic trip to the Other-end-of-Nowhere, and is reborn.

That Kingsley meant his novel "to have political repercussions" there is no doubt. The defenseless children of the poor, hired out by parents or circumstances to the cruelest masters were a special concern of his, a concern he shared with other eminent Victorians. But what is surprising in the novel is that, for all its concern with social questions of the day; for all its protestation of social reform; its cursing of the poor homes, poor schools, poor sanitation, poor health measures in the hovels of the city's poor, it is all an embarrassment of open calumnies against the Irish.

The Irish Kingsley writes about combine the worst of the Irish caricatures. They are full of blarney and bluster; they are naturally lazy and childlike; they are quarrelsome, querulous, and wild; they are cowardly and coarse. He writes of one such: "And then Dennis will look up at you with his handsome, sly, soft, sleepy, good-natured untrustable Irish grey-eye, and answer with the prettiest smile, 'Sure, and didn't I think your honour would like a pleasant answer...' You must not trust Dennis because he

is in the habit of giving pleasant answers; but, instead of being angry with him, you must remember that he is a poor Paddy and knows no better.."

Kingsley's book also offers up a variety of other prejudices, prejudices that most Victorian Englishmen subscribed to, passing nasty references to Jews, non-Christians, blacks, and Catholics. For the period they are surprisingly mild. Yet all these utterances occur in sentence-long touches or in great Rabelasian lists. The anti-Irish remarks, on the other hand, are full-scale scenes.

Moving ahead a number of years we come to the original *Mary Poppins*. P. L. Travers, an Australian writer living in England, created in her books a magical nurse maid with a turned up nose and the ability to lead four English children across the borders of time-and space. On one such trip they go to the four compass points meeting pickaninies and little Eskimo children. It is a trip that for all that it seems to be about teaching the Banks children that there are children with feelings just like theirs all over the world, really underlines the attitude that in fact to be English is to be better than anyone else.

Mary Poppins was published in 1934, the first of a series, and has always been much more popular in America than England, which may explain the ease with which the Dick Van Dyke movie portrayal of chimney sweep Burt, with its cockney accent that falls in and out of rhythm, was such a hit. And no one but birders noticed that the robin in the movie was an American robin, and not, in fact, the British bird.

Pamela Travers had loved fairy tales since she was a child. As an adult she started the magazine *Parabola*, which deals in a modified scholarly way with folklore and mythology. She is considered an expert on matters of myth. Yet *Mary Poppins*, for all that fairy tales informed it, was the product of the rather culturally-closed Ms. Travers.

In the last fifteen years, black critics especially have taken after *Mary Poppins*, with the result that Pamela Travers has rewritten sections of it. Mavis Wormley Davis, in *School Library Journal* wrote: "One of the most startlingly offensive classics is the ever-popular *Mary Poppins*..." She points especially to the passage in Chapter Six, where the Banks children on one of their magical trips with their nursemaid encounter "a man and a woman, both quite black all over and with very few clothes on." They have beads "in their ears and one or two in their noses... On the knee of the negro lady sat a tiny black pickaninny with nothing on at all. It smiled at the children as its mother spoke: 'Ah bin 'specting you a long time Mar' Poppins... You bring dem chillun dere into ma l'il house for a slice of watermelon right now. My, but dem's very white babies. You wan use a lil bit black boot polish on dem.'" Ms. Davis writes passionately that "Cordial as she was, the black scantily-clad mother remains an objectionable stereotype, the perennial watermelon-fancier, bead-bedecked and uttering the deepest dialect."

When interviewed about the problem, Travers admitted knowing little, if nothing about blacks. But the chapter "Bad Tuesday" was eventually revised because of how much it troubled black readers. The wording was changed, but at least for a long time after the changes had been made, the illustration remained the same.

Another author forced by changing attitudes to rework published material was Roald Dahl. In his *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, published by Knopf, the original Oompa Loompah were little chocolate-colored pygmies who had been discovered in darkest Africa, and who now play their banjos by the side of the chocolate river in Willy Wonka's factory. There they are used by Wonka in a variety of experiments.

I was junior editor at Knopf, working on a manuscript, having held my job for less than a month when Dahl was asked by the editor to make the Oompa Loompahs a color other than black and drop the references to playing the banjo by the river. This was an incredibly enlightened attitude back in the early 1960s for a book editor. But Dahl replied, "Racism is an American problem." He insisted that the manuscript remain unchanged.

Years later, when Britain itself became aware of the racism on its own shores, Dahl changed the color of the Oompa Loompahs to green and shifted their place of origin to a South Sea Island, only slightly mitigating the problem of a different-skinned people being held captive and doing the work in a factory for the reward of a handful of chocolate.

If we fast forward a decade or two, we come to Lynn Reid Banks' *Indian In The Cupboard* with its appalling caricatures of Native Americans. Or Richard Adams' rabbits in *Watership Down* who while they can talk and sing and plot and tell stories and make myths cannot redeem their womenfolk from the narrow role of breeder.

As Northrop Frye has written in *Anatomy Of Criticism*: "The corruption out of which human art has been constructed will always remain in the art, but the imaginative quality of the art preserve it in its corruption, like the corpse of a saint."

The problem, of course, is that literature will always have a didactic power, whether the author intends it or not. Dylan Thomas spoke of this obliquely when he wrote that we are all "young Aesop's fabling in the near night." This is even more true when speaking of children's fantasy books. The hidden messages can, sometimes, be the more potent for being hidden.

How hidden?

When I first discovered the magic dispensed by the pammead, that strange sand fairy who had a gift of wishes in E. Nesbit's *The Story Of The Amulet*, I was about 8 years old and I read my magic books eagerly, hungrily, sitting on the window seat in our living room with the noise of New York City streets honking and squealing four

floors below me. You see, once I got into a book, I could leave all those mundane city sounds behind. An onlooker might have seen only a small, pigtailed child hunched over a book; but that was not really me. I had already left that everyday cubbyhole-for Never-never Land or Wonderland or Oz.

England for me was a magical place. As a child I loved Edith Nesbit's books uncritically. Her sensible approach to magic, the cozy way she addressed the reader, the very Britishness of the things she wrote about, drew me in. But as I got older and reread the psammad books, and researched Nesbit's life, two things stuck out for me as never before. First, knowing what I did about Nesbit (that she lived in a very unconventional household with her husband and lots of other people who came and went regularly, and that they were all Fabian Socialists, along with the famous writer H.G. Wells), I "caught" certain references I had never understood before. Such as the little boy named Wells who lives in the future. Second, I understood that Nesbit, like all authors, was mired in her society with

all the prejudices and hatreds and misunderstandings that included. In Victorian and Edwardian England this meant a certain knee-jerk anti-Semitism, among others.

Now remember, I first read these books at the end of the 1940s, and I was a young Jewish child living in New York City. My father had been in the war, where he had been wounded; a war fought — from my family's perspective — against the greatest anti-Semite of all times. Yet, I had loved the Nesbit books uncritically. Passionately. As I had loved *Mary Poppins* and *The Water Babies*; my own children would love *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory* and *Watership Down*. I never "noticed" the anti-Semitic remarks until as an adult I reread Nesbit's books in order to write an afterword to one of them.

I said this essay would be an exploration, and so it is. I come back from the field, a tattered map in hand. Going out into the field means I have now returned with more questions than before, and with very few answers. The treasure has not been uncovered, the pyramids have not been discovered, the ancient scrolls have not been recovered. It is someone else's turn to try.

As an author, as a critic, as a passionate reader, I decry censorship whether from the left or right. As a writer of fantasy, I have felt the full brunt of fundamentalists who have called me a "Tool of Satan" for even mentioning witches, wizards, dragons and magic in my books. Cultural revisionism, historical revisionism is just the other side of the Satanic Coin. Heads they win, tails we lose.

Jack Zipes in *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* tells us that "The best fairy tales are supposedly universal. It does not matter when or why they were written." But watch that *supposedly*. He uses it cleverly, provocatively, purposefully. Such fairy stories carry the thumbprints of history as assuredly as do books of fantasy. Art is never free of its cultural and historical references. It is never clean. It is never pure. Lloyd Alexander has stated that "the muse of fantasy wears good sensible shoes." I contend that they are Birkenstocks and her toes are frequently muddy, her toenails are far from clean.

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