

## SOME PRESUMPTUOUS GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT FANTASY

Precise definitions of fantasy do not account for all the different things people do call fantasy. The best definition is the vaguest: fantasy depicts a world unlike the one we usually call real. All fiction creates its own world; the worlds of fantasy are clearly different from the world we live in.

Fantasies have four main elements: the world they describe; the things that happen in that world; the meaning of what happens; the way what happens is described.

Most criticism centers on the first element, and describes the cosmology of fantasy worlds. While such discussions do show the differences between fantasy worlds and the world we call real, they do not account for the particular effect of a particular novel. The invention of interesting worlds is not always accompanied by the ability to write about them well; our delight in fantasy is not merely our pleasure in the peculiarities of fantasy worlds.

Critics who emphasize what happens in fantasies usually confuse imagination with the unconscious, and assume that the plots of fantasies express archetypes, that fantasy is a symbolic representation of the patterns that underlie our usual reality. But if we believe that archetypes underlie reality, there is no reason to believe that fantasy is more archetypal than realistic fiction. Furthermore, the archetypes contained in any fiction are inevitably less interesting than the particular events that contain them.

But since fantasies do not describe ordinary reality, it may be assumed that the rules that govern them are metaphysical rather than physical. Critics who emphasize the meaning of fantasies assume that they are allegories, and that their essence is psychological or moral. The assumption is still that fantasy worlds are symbolic representations of our usual reality; and while in this case the meaning of a fantasy is personal to its creator and not a product of the generalized human unconscious, the same objection holds. Other fictional worlds may be approached in the same way, and with equally unproductive results. To understand what a book means is

not likely to account for its uniqueness. And that is particularly true of fantasies; since by definition they do not describe ordinary reality, to assume that their significance is the meaning they give to ordinary reality is to miss the point of their extraordinary characteristics. We do not enjoy fantasies because of their psychological or moral meaning.

In fact, the meaning of fantasies may be different from the meaning of other novels. Writers of realistic fiction try to understand reality. Writers of fantasy, in coming to terms with their own apparently perverse act of writing about worlds that do not exist, often write about fantasy itself, and its effect on our lives in our usual reality (Where the Wild Things Are, Earthfasts). But not all fantasies explore the idea of fantasy; some merely take it for granted. And some non-fantasies are also about the implications of fantasy (Harriet the Spy).

But the way things are described in convincing fantasy does seem to be different from the way things are described in other good fiction, and for a good reason. The writer of ordinary fiction must persuade us that the events he describes could possibly happen in a world we live in and are already familiar with. The writer of a fantasy must persuade us that a world we are not familiar with is as he describes it to be.

That ought to be easy. Reading realistic fiction, we inevitably compare the writer's perception of the world with our own. Reading fantasy, we have nothing to compare the fictional world with; theoretically we have no choice but to accept what the writer tells us.

But we do not always accept it. If we do not, it is because the person who tells us about it has not established his own credibility. Realistic fiction convinces us by creating a world we can recognize; fantasy convinces us by establishing a believable narrator. We must trust the narrator before we can accept the world he describes.

That implies that the narrator is not the novelist, but a character the novelist creates -- the person Aidan Chambers calls "the author's second self." Anyone who sets out to tell a story instinctively (and perhaps unconsciously) invents the right person to tell it, a narrator whose personality may or may not be like the storyteller's personality. So every story implies the imaginary person who tells it.

It also implies what Chambers calls "the reader in the book," the ideal audience to hear it.

Consequently, there are two important questions: what is the character of the storyteller implied by good fantasy, and what is the character of the audience implied by good fantasy?

First, the ideal storyteller. If we are to believe the narrator, he must himself believe. He should be a citizen of the world he describes, so that he will not express uncertainty about its existence or be excited by its oddities. (In the case of many children's fantasies in which characters move from a normal reality to a fantastic one, the narrator's world should contain both; he should not be surprised by movement between them, even though his characters may.) His attention should be focused on the story, not on the world in which it occurs nor on its meaning. He should be neither a tour guide nor a moral philosopher, but a storyteller.

As a storyteller, he should trust his story and his audience. He should assume the audience knows the world he describes already, and that it is the particular story about that world he is telling that will interest them. He should not try to be charming, or call attention to his own wit or to his own interpretation of the story's meaning. He should be most interested in communicating the story in the best way possible, in finding the words to tell it that will make it have the effect he desires on his audience. He should act with the conviction that he can tell the story so well that its audience will both enjoy it and understand its implications.

As for the ideal implied audience: it should also live in the world the fantasy describes, and possess the knowledge citizens usually have of the place they inhabit. It should want to hear the story for its own sake, for the history it preserves or the enjoyment it contains. It should not want to be instructed either in morality or geography. For this reason, it should not consist of children, especially in a children's fantasy. If it does, the storyteller will talk down to the audience, and try to explain things to it. The implied audience should be people who want to hear real stories about real events in the real world they live in, or realistic stories about possible events in the real world they live in.

Only by ignoring the fact that it is fantastic, by pretending to be a true story about a real world shared by the characters in the story, the storyteller, and the people who hear the story, can a fantasy establish its credibility and work its magic on those who actually hear it.

In other words, the secret of good fantasy is the control of tone -- the creation through the right choice of words of the right relationship between the writer and his audience. The right relationship in a fantasy is the audience's faith in the narrator; the right words create a tone of matter-of-fact acceptance that allows us to believe in what we know does not exist.

That implies a paradox. Fantasy does not really persuade us of the existence of the world it describes; it only allows us to pretend it exists. We pretend to be the ideal audience hearing the real truth about a real world only so that we can become conscious of the differences between that audience and ourselves, and that world and our own. We experience the pleasure of its otherness by pretending not to be different from it.

In fact, that pleasure is a consciousness of otherness, a revealing penetration of the limited vision imposed upon us by our own inevitably unique readings of reality -- a freeing from solipsism. By experiencing something clearly and completely different from ourselves, we become acutely aware of who and what we actually are.

While much of what I suggest here about fantasy applies to other kinds of fiction, it is not always so important. The problem of credibility is less intense in fictional realities that purport to represent the world we usually call real, and in much good realistic fiction, the narrator's untrustworthiness is deliberate; the writer forces us to compare the narrator's faulty reading of events with our own knowledge of reality. In this kind of writing the narrator's tone is anything but matter-of-fact.

But children's literature, fantasy or not, is different. In fact, for grown-ups, all children's literature is much like fantasy. It is not so much literature for children as it is literature about childhood, literature describing the world as children might see it and understand it to be. In other words, it does not describe the world we as grownups consider real in a

(Continued on page 18)

Generalizations (cont.)

way we would consider realistic -- unless we force ourselves to adopt a childlike attitude in order to determine whether or not the attitudes it contains are convincingly childlike.

Furthermore, children's literature is frequently about coming to terms with a world one does not understand -- the world as defined and governed by grownups and not totally familiar or comprehensible to children. All fantasy is about worlds one could not possibly have understood before reading the novels that contain them. So both children's literature and fantasy place readers in a position of innocence about the reality they describe, and create the same peculiar relationship between the story and its audience. The ideal storyteller implied by children's fiction may be similar to the ideal storyteller of fantasy, with the significant difference that good writers for children seem to believe that the ideal audience their work implies is in fact exactly the same as their real audience -- that the world they create in their stories is in fact the real world as children perceive it. And perhaps one of the main pleasures any fantasy offers us is its ability to let us, as newcomers to the worlds it describes, experience innocence again.

In any case, fantasy and children's literature have clear connections with each other. Understanding one may help in the understanding of the other. It may also explain why much of the best children's literature happens to be fantasy.

Perry Nodelman  
Associate Professor of English  
University of Winnipeg