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Imaginary friends: tales of talking animals and fantastical adventure aren't just for children, argues Ursula Le Guin--we can and should return to them throughout our lives

Many of us have at least one book or tale that we read as a child and come back to now and then for the rest of our lives. A child or grandchild to read aloud to provides a good excuse, or we may have the courage to return, quite alone, to Peter Rabbit, for the keen pleasure of reading language in which every word is right, the syntax is a delight in itself and the narrative pacing is miraculous. Revisiting a book loved in childhood may be principally an indulgence in nostalgia; I knew a woman who read *The Wizard of Oz* every few years because it "made her remember being a child". But returning to *The Snow Queen* or *Kim*, you may well discover a book far less simple and unambiguous than the one you remembered. That shift and deepening of meaning can be a revelation both about the book and about yourself.

Curiously enough, most of these "lifelong" children's books are fantasies: books in which magic works, or animals speak, or the laws of physics yield to the laws of the human psyche. When there began to be such a thing as books written for children, in the mid-19th century, fiction was dominated by the realistic novel. Romance and satire were acceptable to it, but overt fantasy was not. So, for a while, fantasy found a refuge in children's books. There it flourished so brilliantly that people began to perceive imaginative fiction as being "for children".

The modernists extended this misconception by declaring fantastic narrative to be intrinsically childish. Though modernism is behind us and postmodernism may be joining it, still many critics and reviewers approach fantasy determined to keep Caliban permanently confined in the cage of Kiddie Lit. The voice of Edmund Wilson reviewing J R R Tolkien is still heard, bleating: "Oo, those awful Orcs!" There should be a word--"maturismo", like "machismo"?--for the anxious savagery of the intellectual who thinks his adulthood has been impugned.

To conflate fantasy with immaturity is a rather sizeable error. Rational yet non-intellectual, moral yet inexplicit, symbolic not allegorical, fantasy is not primitive but primary. Many of its great texts are poetry, and its prose often approaches poetry in density of implication and

imagery. The fantastic, the marvellous, the impossible rode the mainstream of literature from the epics and romances of the Middle Ages through Ariosto and Tasso and their imitators, to Rabelais and Spenser and beyond. This is not to say that everybody approved of it. Conflict with religion and with realism always loomed. In the first great European novel, imagination and realism meet head-on, and their contest is the very stuff and argument of the book. Don Quixote is driven mad by chivalric fantasies--but what is he without his madness?

Shakespeare may have influenced English literature towards fantasy in a rather particular way. Spenser has Continental counterparts, but *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* do not. Nowhere else in Europe did folk tale, legend, medieval romance, travellers' tales and individual genius coalesce in such works of imagination as those plays. That may be one reason why the literature I am talking about is very largely an English-language phenomenon.

It begins with, say, George MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* and runs on through *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, *The Wind in the Willows*, the *Just So Stories* and *The Jungle Book*, the Pooh books, *Dr Dolittle*, *The Hobbit*, *The Once and Future King*, *Charlotte's Web*, to my first three *Earthsea* books and all the serious imaginative fiction that continues to be published "for children" but is often read by adults. Does any other kind of fiction cross age-lines this way?

Realism does not. Realism comes in three separate age categories, fully recognised by publishers. Didactic, explanatory, practical and reassuring, realistic fiction for young children hasn't much to offer people who've already learned about dump trucks, vaccinations and why Heather has two mummies. Realistic "Young Adult" novels tend to focus tightly on situations and problems of little interest to anyone outside that age group. And realistic fiction for adults, with its social and historical complexities and moral and aesthetic ambiguities, becomes accessible to adolescents only as and if they mature.

As for "genre" fiction--mystery, horror, romance, science fiction--none of it is for children; they begin to read it as they approach their teens, but not before. The only kind of fiction that is read with equal (if differing) pleasure at eight, and at 16, and at 68, seems to be the fantasy and its close relation, the animal story. Not all fantasy, of course. Few eight-year-olds get much out of Borges, Calvino or Garcia Marquez. As the grip of realism weakened, the fantastic element began returning into adult fiction by various routes, magical realism being one of them. Borges and Calvino followed an older tradition, that of Voltaire and Kafka, the satiric or philosophic tale, or conte. Yet that form, when it uses fantasy, may become accessible to children, even if not intended for them. *Animal Farm* is read by kids of nine or ten, as is *Gulliver's Travels*.

Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince* is a lovely example of the conte deliberately written (and illustrated) for both the child and the adult, enigmatic yet entertaining to the child, ambiguously transparent to the adult, fully satisfying to both. Such "duplicity" certainly helps explain the durability of the books I am talking about. Lewis Carroll wrote to and for the child, with no winks and sniggers over her shoulder at the grown-ups. He clearly took pleasure in making the story equally absorbing for Charles Dodgson, the professor of mathematics, and for

any adult who was ready to appreciate his jokes, tricks, politics and chess moves, his half-hidden intellectual game-playing. But the important thing is that the naivety of his audience did not lead him to withhold emotional investment in the story, to "write down". On the contrary, writing for a child while keeping to a strict standard of emotional honesty seems to have freed him from facetious or merely allegorical Victorian moulds, to find an inexplicit but radically vivid imagery with which to explore the intersections of reality and dream. The same is true of George MacDonald, whose fantasies for children are deeper and stranger, I think, than those he wrote for adults.

It is the strict standard of emotional honesty that counts. This is where Oscar Wilde's fairy tales fail, and sometimes Hans Christian Andersen's. They only pretend to be for children. Disguising adult self-pity in sentimental cruelty is an unfortunately effective ploy. Andersen's tales fascinated and frightened me as a child; I read them only when I already felt morbid. But the Pan chapter of *The Wind in the Willows* I loved dearly even when I only half understood it, for its emotional exaltation is genuine. And in the last of the Mowgli tales in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, though the yearning pain of final exile from the kingdom of childhood was hardly comprehensible to me, I felt it as a truth awaiting me, and wept for it. Children don't mind you talking over their heads--they're used to it, and used to figuring it out. Anything is better than being talked down to.

The Harry Potter phenomenon, a fantasy aimed at sub-teenagers becoming a great bestseller among adults, confirmed that fantasy builds a two-way bridge across the generation gaps. Adults trying to explain their enthusiasm told me: "I haven't read anything like that since I was ten!" And I think this was simply true. Discouraged by critical prejudice, rigid segregation of books by age and genre, and unconscious maturismo, many people literally hadn't read any imaginative literature since childhood. Rapid, immense success made this book respectable, indeed obligatory, reading. So they read it, and rediscovered the pleasure of reading fantasy--which may be inferior only to the pleasure of rereading it.

- Ursula Le Guin is the author of many fantasy novels and short stories, including "The Earthsea Quartet" (Puffin)