Realism, fantasy, and history: facts in fiction

Jill Paton Walsh

Our brief is to discuss realism, fantasy and history in children's books, with the subtitle "focus and blend". I would like to start by blending, very thoroughly. For I think it is very important not to lose sight of the fact that works of realism, whether contemporary or historical, are just as imaginary as works of fantasy. In the sense in which Plato meant, when he called poets — that is, fiction writers — liars, realistic writers tell as many and as whopping lies as writers of dragon tales, space Odysseys, time warps, etc, etc. *Gaffer Samson's luck* does not relate any event which is impossible — everything in it, including an old man's superstitious beliefs, *might* have happened; but none of them did. I made up the whole thing — and in the sense in which dragons are false, James and Angie are false. It is possible that it requires more imagination on the part of the reader to believe the dragon; but it requires at least as much imagination to create James and Angie, or perhaps even more, since one cannot piece them together out of great medieval poems, or mug them up anywhere, come to that.

There is one important difference between realistic writing and fantasy writing which we must look at before I embark on the main theme of this talk, in case we get confused by it. Works of fantasy preclude naive readings of the text. There are no dragons in the world, and everybody knows it. One of my children aged only two, announced from her high chair, "There's no such thing as dragons but there is such a word. . .", and we may take it that what is apparent to a two-year-old is apparent to one and all. There are no dragons, as there are no magic swords. But there is greed, and malice, and courage and self-sacrifice. The fantasy element in the story forces on us an allegorical mode of thinking. We know the story isn't true; so we go seeking the truth in it in a creative, lateral thinking frame of mind, and it is this frame of mind which is literature's greatest gift to the reader, for it makes him a creative force of his own, interpreting, finding meanings, perceiving depths. But realism can be read — and surprisingly often is read — like journalism. The author is understood as one who protects his sources by not giving their real names, but as simply putting stuff that really happened into a book. A realistic work is autobiography or biography, or hearsay. People even nobble you to tell you interesting

things that happen to them, under the impression that you will rush off and write a book about it. Now and then an actor in a soap opera gets assaulted in a public place because someone doesn't like the conduct of the character he plays. This kind of naive reading is very disconcerting to authors, who by and large expect that it will be understood that they are making it up, even when they are lying so proficiently that it reads like truth. If they do use real happenings in their work, they may expect to be thought to be making it up anyway. So let us agree that what we are talking about is properly fictional readings of fiction, realistic fiction included, *as* fiction. Let us agree that the courage shown by a character in a book — I shall offer as an example my own tough little James, contending with life and death in a new village — bears the same, indirect, knight's move sort of relationship to the reader's courage, as the great treasure-hoarding Beowulf dragon bears to greed.

Once everyone has conceded the fictional nature of realistic fiction, we can turn to the main topic of this talk which is the nature of facts in fiction because of course, in many works of fiction there is a substantial input of fact, for which the author does diligent research before, and during the writing of the work, or even in an emergency, after writing it! And yet the necessity for facts in fiction is itself controversial. What should I have said to the friend who told me it did not matter in the least whether the history in an historical novel was accurate or all fudged up because people did not go to novels for that kind of truth? This at least I would have to concede, that once a fact has got into a novel its factuality is compromised. A reader cannot be sure which apparent facts are true facts and which are imaginary facts. Once in my writing life — when I was writing *A chance child* — this ambivalent status of facts-in-fiction caused me a profound moral and literary dilemma, which I would like to talk to you about later; but first I would like to draw to your attention the recent and modern nature of the demand for facts, or imaginary facts, in fiction at all. There are no facts in Homer, or Dante, or Milton, or Shakespeare. The use of facts or invented facts as part of the apparatus of illusion, now so universal that we notice it no more than we notice that books are printed and bound, so universal that we call all other authorial strategies "experimental" is in fact no older than DeFoe; it begins with *Robinson Crusoe*, DeFoe's first, the English language's first, novel.

It is very well known that *Robinson Crusoe* is based on the true story of Alexander Selkirk, a seaman who was marooned for four years on the island of Juan Fernandez. Let me tell you a little about him. He was the seventh son of a shoemaker of Largo, in Fifeshire, Scotland, born in 1676. He was a ruffian, summoned before the pulpit to be rebuked for brawling in the house, and striking his father and brother. In spite of that, his father was bitterly opposed to his desire to go to sea, and succeeded in stopping

him until 1695, when the parish records show that he was summoned to appear on charges of indecent conduct in church and was found to have gone to sea. His mother had encouraged him, either from a wish for peace in the household, or from a foolish belief that he would make his fortune, being, as a seventh son, born lucky.

He did become a capable seaman. In May, 1703 he joined a privateering expedition under Captain Dampier, and was made sailing master of one of two vessels, the *Cinque Ports*, of which Thomas Stradling was the captain. All his experience of brawling can hardly have prepared him for the chaotic conduct of Dampier's expedition. Privateering was only a polite word for piracy, or, to put it as it would strike one of us, robbery with violence or rather without it, for Dampier was successful in taking prizes only when he met with no resistance. In the course of one of the incompetent efforts to take a French ship, Dampier inadvertently left a boat with seven men on the uninhabited island of Juan Fernandez. Many lunatic adventures later the expedition split, Selkirk remaining with Stradling on the *Cinque Ports*, and finding themselves near Juan Fernandez, they put in for water and repairs. Five of their shipmates had been taken off by the French, but two who hid had survived the six months quite well, living on the resources of the island. At this Selkirk requested his captive to maroon him with some supplies.

He leapt on shore [we are told] with a faint sensation of freedom and joy. He shook hands with his comrades, and bade them adieu in a hearty manner, while Stradling sat in the boat, urging their return to the ship . . . .[N]o sooner did the sound of their oars, as they left the beach, fall on Selkirk's ears than the horrors of being cut off from all human society, perhaps forever, rushed upon his mind. His heart sank within him, and all his resolution failed. He rushed into the water, and implored them to return .... Stradling turned a deaf ear, and even mocked his despair, denouncing the choice he had made of remaining upon the island as rank mutiny and describing his present situation as the most proper state for such a fellow, where his example would not affect others.

Thus began the most famous solitude in history.

He had with him [we are told by Woodes-Rogers, the sea-captain who rescued him] his clothes and Bedding, with a firelock, some powder, bullets, and Tobacco, a hatchet, a knife, a kettle, a bible, some practical pieces and his mathematical instruments and books. He diverted and provided for himself as well as he could; but for the first eight months had much ado to bear up against melancholy and the terror of being left alone in such a desolate place. He built two huts. . .in the lesser hut he dressed his victuals, and in the larger one he slept, and employed himself in reading, singing psalms and praying, so that he said he was a better Christian while in his solitude than ever he was before, or than, he was afraid, he should ever be again.

By the time Selkirk spoke these resonant words he was safely on ship-

board again, though it was a narrow squeak; for to draw the attention of the English ship he had lit a great fire, and made them suppose there were Frenchmen on the island and that they would have to fight for water. But while they were considering whether to fight, their pinnace which had gone to reconnoiter returned unharmed, and brought "abundance of crawfish, with a man clothed in goatskins who looked wilder than the first owners of them." Captain Dampier, having not surprisingly failed to find backers for another expedition with himself as Captain, was sailing under Woodes-Rogers, because of his knowledge of the South Seas. He told Woodes-Rogers that Selkirk had been the best man in the *Cinque Ports*; Woodes-Rogers accordingly agreed with Selkirk to be a mate aboard his ship. He had been on the island four years and four months.

Woodes-Rogers was a much more successful buccaneer than Dampier, so that when Selkirk finally reached the Thames after an absence of some eight years on the 14th of October 1711, his share of the booty was 800 pounds sterling. Selkirk's story excited considerable interest, fired the public imagination. Something about it appealed strongly to the preoccupations and concerns of the time, and more than one writer brought it before the public. Woodes-Rogers devoted a long passage in his book, *A cruising voyage round the world*, to an account of the rescue of Selkirk, full of minute particulars of the way in which he had survived on Juan Fernandez; Sir Richard Steele met him and devoted an entire issue of his paper *The Englishman* to an account of him. All this was in the public prints in good time for DeFoe. Even the delay between Selkirk's return and the publication of *Crusoe* — DeFoe was usually keenly up-to-date — needs to be considered in the light of the second edition of Woodes-Rogers which appeared in 1718. *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719.

Enough is known about Selkirk to provide us with a fascinating case history of a set of facts transmogrified into fiction. I would first like to draw your attention to the dramatic little tale above, of Selkirk, having asked to be marooned, changing his mind at the sound of the oars on the gravel as the boat that is to leave him pulls away. Wonderful stuff! Why didn't DeFoe use it? For, as you remember, Robinson is not marooned deliberately, but shipwrecked, and with some cost in plausibility is equipped with the necessary minimum gear and tackle for survival, including dry powder for a firearm, by salvaging from the wreck. This doesn't seem nearly as dramatic as the scene with the hard-hearted captain urging the boatmen to row off, and the desperate mariner rushing into the water, and meeting with refusal. I would have used that, had it been my book...or would I? This question brings very clearly before us a major element in the relationship between facts, and facts-in-fiction, the question of omission. Dramatic though the scene is, it would weaken the theme of *Robinson Crusoe*, which is, though the abridgments in which we usually read it

nowadays conceal it, a religious work. It is based clearly and closely on the long tradition of example stories, spiritual autobiographies, of which the plot is rebellion against one's elders and assigned place in life, sin, punishment, repentance, achievement of spiritual calm, restoration to worldly prosperity and the society of Christians. The basically puritan narrative form was a long tradition when DeFoe wrote; you might like to compare it with the captivity and redemption narratives written by North Americans kidnapped by Indians. The point is that Crusoe's suffering on the island is to be seen as a punishment for the evil-doing of his whole former life, a punishment from the hand of God, not merely as the obvious consequence of quarrelling with your Captain and being so spectacularly stupid as to *ask* to be marooned.

The factual input of a work of fiction is processed, we see, in several ways. By omission; never mind how Selkirk got onto an island, Crusoe is going to be shipwrecked for artistic effect. Of course the shipwreck will be offered to the reader in a dust storm of convincing facts about shipwreck .... By inclusion; all sorts of pleasing details about survival on the island, about goats, and rats and cats, will be taken directly from Woodes-Rogers's account of Selkirk and will give a gritty credibility to Crusoe. And by expansion; no need to stick to the facts; what the sources lack, imagination will supply. DeFoe, Stephens wrote, "was merely aiming at true stories which happened not to be true." We will return to DeFoe's aims later.

But for the moment let us notice that the cumulative effect of these three processes applied to facts is to produce a distinction that is very like the famous one made by Aristotle between poetry and history. Of course by poetry he meant everything that we now call fiction, by history he meant what we now call fact.

> The poet's function [he says] is to describe not the thing that happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e. what is possible as being probable or necessary. . .hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to which such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do, which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters; by a singular statement one as to what, say Alcibiades [or Alexander Selkirk] did or had done to him.

More philosophic, and of graver import than the facts, then, is the fiction. And *Robinson Crusoe* certainly is a universal such as Aristotle referred to. For every reader, Robinson is a kind of personal test bench; we wonder how we ourselves would have managed, and DeFoe has guessed rightly that we will wonder first how we would eat, and find shelter and clothe ourselves, and only second how we would feel. What DeFoe invented, in short, was the seemingly naive narrative voice offering us fictions for consideration

as facts, and doing it by loading the narrative with facts both true and imaginary. The most careful research, if offered not for belief as a fact, but as part of a fiction, becomes de-factualized, and turns into Aristotelian, imaginary truth.

And this brings me to the difficulties of writing *A chance child.* The subject of this book, the Aristotelian subject, that is, is the State of England, and how it got that way. It included an account of the labours and sufferings of children in the early industrial revolution, and the terrifying thing about these facts is that they are Selkirk facts — it really happened. There is nothing either pitiful or terrifying about a writer being able to make up a child of five lost down a coal mine for three days — that it actually happened is what packs the punch. Except of course that people do not sit down and read the Parliamentary Papers, and find the facts to weep over.

But *A chance child,* in spite of all the facts that went into it, is not a realistic work like *Robinson Crusoe.* Even the most naive reader could not take it for a factual account, because it contains time-travel. And what readers do, I was afraid, with that kind of fantasy in a book, is to accept as "real" one time horizon, and assign to the other the status of dream, haunt, illusion. There are two facts in *A chance child* which lie in two different time horizons, and neither of which would it have been moral to present as dream or illusion, and those two facts are cruelty to children then, and persisting cruelty to children now. I could not bear to let the past seem less real than the present, and so my time-travelling child once in the past, must stay there, must never awake, absolutely must not return unharmed and unchanged, like so many time-travellers in fiction, getting back as though from a package tour.

But however hard one tries, it remains true that all the facts in the book, in either time horizon, have been de-factualized by inclusion in a work of fiction. Probably you would be hard put to guess which fiction-facts are real facts. I did not, for example, make up Tom; his story (apart from the encounter with Creep, of course) is pure fact. I did not make up the wonderfully cheerful stout woman who beat the overseer with a billy-roller; I wouldn't have dared make her up, but I didn't have to, she's in the Parliamentary Papers, large as life! Oh, and I didn't make up the child locked starving under the stairs; the probability of *that* child, its recurrence again and again till it has the nature of a general truth is enough to break our hearts.

And here it is time to notice two more twists of the tangled skein we are unravelling — first that if you didn't believe the woman with the billy-roller — if you had said to yourself, "Well, *that* couldn't have happened, anyway," it would be no good at all my saying, "Well that bit's perfectly true, as it happens." That something is a fact-fact, is no defence if it doesn't

work well as an imaginary fact; the book is fiction, and Aristotle rules. And second, curiouser and curiouser, it isn't even always perfectly clear to me, or other authors, I imagine, whether a fact got into the book or not. For example, in the course of the extensive reading I did working up to writing *A chance child*, I discovered that in 1820, when uncontrolled use of child labour was at its height, half the population of England was under fourteen. The other half included those too old to work, or too sick, and all those wealthy enough to be consumers rather than producers in the economy. The relatively small proportion of adults in work were in under-capitalized employment. They could not produce enough to feed such numbers of children. The alternative to child labour was not full time free education, it was child starvation. A situation pretty much like that of the third world at the present time. The employment of children as workers had nothing to do with wickedness, and a lot to do with necessity. Now this fact didn't get into *A chance child* as a fact; you can't learn it by reading the book. But it did influence me strongly in describing what I described; it led me to suspend judgment on the people I was writing about, it helped me in the difficult task of writing cool about such a subject. You have to write cool, for the author's emotion is the enemy of the reader's. You don't want to know that I, Jill Paton Walsh, disapprove of sending five-year-olds down coal mines; who doesn't? You want me standing aside, just showing you, so that your feelings are evoked by the subject of the story.

So did the population statistic get into the book or not?

But I am opening out a discussion far too large for this hour, or this week, and anyway extended discussion of one's own work is dangerous. Let's get back to Crusoe. "Are there any facts in *Robinson Crusoe*?" is the question to ask.

DeFoe was attacked in his own time for romancing, accused that "there never were any such man or Place, or circumstances in any Man's life." (That itself is interesting: can you imagine an objection to, say, *Hamlet*, couched in these terms?) And in a wonderful bombshell that I have been delightedly saving up for you, he retorted that every word of *Robinson Crusoe* was true, not because it had happened to Selkirk, but because it had happened to *him*!

> The story [he wrote] though allegorical is also historical . . . .all those parts of the story are real facts in my history, whatever borrowed lights they may be represented by; thus the frights and fancies which succeeded the story of the print of a man's foot, and surprise of the old goat, and the thing rolling on my bed, and my jumping out in a fright are all histories and real stories; as are likewise the dream of being driven on shore by the surge of the sea. . .[that shipwreck!] the ship on fire, the description of starving; the story of my man Friday and many most material passages observ'd here and on which any religious reflections are made are all historical and true in fact; it is most real that I had a parrot, and taught it to call me by my name, such a servant a savage, and afterwards a Christian, and that his name was

called Friday, and that he was ravished from me by force, and died in the hands that took him, which I represent by being killed; this is all literally true, and should I enter into discoveries many alive can testify them . . . .[I]n a word there's not a circumstance in the imaginary story but has its just allusion to a real story, and chimes part for part and step for step with the inimitable life of Robinson Crusoe.

And for good measure he adds, "'Tis as reasonable to represent one kind of imprisonment with another as it is to represent any thing that really exists by that which exists not" — justifying, as he goes, I think, all those dangers and monsters and islands of earthsea, and otherwheres that have been written since his time.

Of course we know what he meant; but to assert that *Robinson Crusoe* is true because it happened to Daniel DeFoe, notwithstanding pet parrots and Indian servants, is to wrench the word "true" a long way from the facts. If Crusoe's island is only a metaphor for the New Newgate Prison; if DeFoe could seriously affirm "that I enjoy much more solitude in the middle of the greatest collection of mankind in the world, I mean, at *London* while I am writing this, than ever I could say I enjoy'd in eight and twenty years confinement to a desolate island. . .", then even this first, most apparently factual novel, most closely based on a real instance, demands to be read like the works with unicorns and dragons, and perfect happy endings, metaphorically.

Who cares about facts? We shall not find truth in them. Though we may, if we seek for graver and more philosophical meanings, be able to forge truth from them.

"What is Truth?" said jesting Pilate; but to that question he did not wait for an answer, and neither, I am sure, can we.

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