# Border Country

*John Rowe Townsend*

The title "Somewhere meant for me" reminds me that, among many other things, a book is a place. It is a platitude to say that every work of fiction creates, with more or less conviction, a world; that indeed it holds a world of unlimited size in the few cubic inches between its covers.

A book that a child enters into and lives in with delight and fascination is, for that child, "Somewhere meant for me." For most reading children I think there are just a few books that become perennial favourites, much loved and often returned to; and these have a special kind of intimacy, the familiarity of a known and loved place; to return to such a book is a kind of homecoming. And such a book can also be a point of departure for who knows what journeys of the mind. Those of us who are privileged to write for children must always hope to write a book that will become special in this way, even if for only just one child, somewhere, whom we shall probably never hear about. If we were the late E.B. White or Laura Ingalls Wilder, or the far from late Beverly Cleary, we would have the joy of knowing we had achieved this for far more children than one; lesser mortals can only hope and try.

I chose these three distinguished names, from among many others I could have cited,1 because it happens they've written very different kinds of thing: *Charlotte's web* and *Stuart Little* are fantasies; the *Little house* books are naturalistic writing about a time in the past that is already historical; and while Beverly Cleary has written fantasy — remember *The mouse and the motorcycle*? — she is known above all for books about Ramona and her circle, which are firmly rooted in contemporary everyday life. Is it important to the specialness of a particular book that it should be of a particular genre? That is a rhetorical question, and I will answer it at once myself. No, of course it is not. It is only important that it should be special.

It has always seemed to me that the classification of children's fiction into such categories as fantasy, realism and historical writing is something of a snare. It is not, as a rule, a point of any literary significance. Such usefulness as it has is, to my mind, organizational, and at a fairly low level. I hasten to admit that I have used it myself for organizational convenience. For several years I edited children's book review pages in a newspaper. The space we had was desperately limited, and if we divided it up into individual reviews of individual books, then the reviews would all

have been absurdly short and the makeup of the pages appalling. So we reviewed in batches of maybe six, eight or ten; and in order to give the reviewer a string on which to thread the items that made up the review we used to group together books that had something in common. In fiction, the dominant categories were those mentioned above: fantasy, history, and realism. The utility of such groupings to the reviewer is obvious; he or she can find a generalization or two, can find points of comparison, and can find stepping-stones to get from one title to the next. If you have six or more totally heterogeneous books to get into one review, you cannot make a decent overall job of it.

The same kind of division comes in handy for surveys. I have myself produced four editions of a historical outline of English-language children's literature, *Written for Children*, and it sets the same kind of problem. You're going to refer to some hundreds of titles, and you can't just put the whole lot in one long chronological line from earliest to latest. The result would be unreadable, if it were not unwriteable. The grouping of books of a kind cannot be avoided. The purpose, once again, is largely though not entirely organizational. To put it crudely, you have to decide how you're going to slice the sausage.

Surely one responds to, or judges, a book, not a genre; and one responds to or judges it according to what it *is*, not according to what slot it's in. It matters very little whether a book is classifiable as fantasy or realism or whatever. What matters is whether or not it offers a rewarding experience to the reader.

The danger is that classification may single out and emphasize the features of a book that are not really the most important ones. And it can result in a curious tendency to regard a whole genre as in some way superior to another genre. In British children's literature the superior genre was traditionally fantasy; historical writing, though respectable, was not on quite the same imaginative level, while realism was totally downmarket, the resort of the writer who had neither imagination nor learning. So, for instance, Frank Eyre, in a study of *Twentieth century children's books* issued by the British Council in 1952, remarked that "the majority of genuine writers when writing for children turn instinctively to fantasy, leaving the story of everyday life, with rare exceptions, to the second-rater." Conversely, there are those who would give much greater weight to realistic fiction, on the ground that it is more relevant to children's actual experience of life, and — not always stated but frequently believed — that it can be used to help children solve their personal problems or to form desirable attitudes.

Views of this kind, of course, affect what adults will offer to children, so may have the result of depriving them of the introduction to something that might be rewarding to them; they can even result in self-fulfilling

prophecies. I have frequently been told in recent years that "children won't read historical novels", and when a librarian tells me this I must accept that it's a view based on experience. But the real question is whether a specific book will grip a specific child, not what kind of book it is. The danger — quite a real danger, in this case — is that the belief brings about its own fulfillment. Children won't read historical novels, we think, so we won't offer them historical novels. So naturally they don't read historical novels.

I have to say that when Frank Eyre expanded, twenty years later, the study I've just mentioned (it became *British children's books in the twentieth century*, published by Longmans) he dropped his observation on fantasy and realism. He had in fact moved on quite a long way. He now said — I heartily agree with him — that

> the argument applied to adult books, that all books are measureable as good, bad, or indifferent by the same standards irrespective of their categories, is equally applicable to children's books. The sooner it becomes possible to consider a book for children on its own merits, without having to think of it as belonging to a particular category, the better it will be for everyone: writers, critics — and children.

The fact is that once you start classifying there is no end to it. Fantasy for instance includes such widely divergent kinds of book as *Winnie-the-Pooh* (talking animals, or rather, talking toys); Joam Aiken's *Black hearts in Battersea* and other novels (history that never was); Philippa Pearce's *Tom's midnight garden* (time shift); Catherine Storr's *Marianne dreams* or William Mayne's *A game of dark* (psycho-fantasy); Tolkien's or Alan Garner's novels (reincarnation of ancient legend, myth, or saga). These books have virtually nothing in common in subject-matter; what they have in common is that they succeed. You can if you wish sub-divide fantasy under a number of subsidiary headings — in fact I believe a learned German professor has done so, in immense detail — until you have practically a separate heading for every book ever published; but when you've done so, what have you got?

The best books, in all modes, tend I believe either to defy classification or to make it irrelevant. Obviously there is a sense in which all fiction is fantasy: a story may be set in the streets of a real city, closely and accurately described, but its true existence is in the minds and imaginations of writer and reader, just as much as if it were set in Middle Earth or Wonderland. Conversely, I believe that serious fantasy will always be found on examination to be ultimately concerned with human life and nature; that is what gives it meaning.

The latter proposition can be supported, I think, by glancing briefly at a few of the best known and most highly regarded fantasies to appear on the children's lists in recent times. *Watership Down*, Richard Adams's saga of

rabbits in search of a warren, is clearly about human society and relationships, though seen in animal guise. Russell Hoban's *The mouse and his child* is about the pilgrimage of a pair of wind-up toys, but what gives it poignancy is that the toys are people really, and the pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of human life. What of Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy? That's very complex, concerned in part with the inward exploration of personality and in part with the external question of responsibility that goes with power. Surely in the last analysis a major point in *The Wizard of Earthsea* is that the highest wizardry requires the highest wisdom, and this book and *The farthest shore* are largely about the fearful dangers of tampering with the balance of nature. *Charlotte's web?* Well, the unheroic pig Wilbur, guzzling and gulping in the slop-bucket, is our brother under the skin, isn't he? And loyal, resolute Charlotte, the spider who comes to his rescue, is our sister.

Philippa Pearce's *Tom's midnight garden*, a classic if there ever was one, is a beautifully constructed time fantasy, but I believe that the reason why it stays in the mind is that it is concerned with the human predicament, with what time does to people, with being young and growing old, and with the four-dimensional wholeness of life. It is, incidentally, what I call a minimal fantasy — minimal not in any pejorative sense of the word, but because, unlike a vast number of fantasies from *Alice* to *The Hobbit* and beyond, it doesn't create a secondary world, it doesn't rely on the continuous invention of fantastic detail; it simply makes one change in the natural order of things, and all the rest follows from that. Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck everlasting* makes one extraordinary assumption only: that by drinking from a certain spring a person could achieve immortality. An apparently simple idea; but the moral, social and philosophical implications are profound. Alan Garner's *The owl service*, too, is concerned with human relationships — complex, difficult human relationships — and it has always seemed to me that although the continuing life of ancient myth underlies the story the author could, if he had wished, have produced substantially the same novel without the supernatural element. A book does not in fact have to be fantasy at all in order to incorporate the power of myth. The historical novels of Rosemary Sutcliff, perhaps above all *Warrior scarlet*, are permeated by the oldest, most basic myths of death and rebirth. Miss Sutcliff is as well aware as any fantasy writer of the richness of those worlds that lie beyond the strictly literal.

The highest qualities of fantasy, I suggest, are simply the highest qualities of literature. What counts is the strength and sureness of the shaping imagination, whatever form it may choose to work in. There are however some freedoms which a writer enjoys in fantasy and which he — or, it goes without saying, she — cannot so easily obtain in realistic fiction. By opening a gateway out of the confines of literal possibility, you can open up new

perspectives and responsibilities. You can show human nature in new contexts of your own devising; you can construct settings specially designed to illuminate the themes that interest you. You can let your imagination soar far above everyday ground (though you will be wise not to let it soar uncontrolled). And for most authors fantasy is the form that best lends itself to symbolic or allegorical presentations of inward or other experience which cannot be adequately described in literal terms. It is a form that surely beckons to every children's writer.

Yet fantasy and realism are not separate countries, opposed and incompatible. Often they blend and blur. The borders where this blending occurs are fascinating literary territory.

One form of blending is where the writer, moving freely with a total unconcern for classificatory distinctions, has used elements of all these modes, or rather has used elements that we can assign to all these modes if we really must. I am thinking particularly of Jill Paton Walsh's *A chance child.* If we care to break it down in such a way, we can say that this book is realism, in being about a deprived child who escapes from being locked up in a cupboard and an anxious brother who goes in search of him. We can also say it is historical, in being about the treatment of children in England in the Industrial Revolution, and drawn largely from actual documents. And we can say that it is fantasy, since it is about a child who wanders away along the canal bank and arrives in the past, where indeed he remains. To offer this breakdown is not to say anything of any great significance about the book, which I admire for its intrinsic merits and not for such a reason as this; I merely wish to indicate once more that the classificatory distinction between realism and fantasy is unimportant, and in some of the best books you can't make it anyway.

There are books — and I wish to discuss a few of them — that deliberately explore the territory where factual and fantastic blur together; where the questions arise, within the context of the book, "Are the apparently-supernatural events we are now reading about supposed to have 'really' happened, or was there nothing actually supernatural at all? Or did they take place in the imagination or the dream of a character in the book? Or most intriguing of all, is it left to us as readers to decide? Or to leave undecided?"

A few years ago, Edward Blishen edited, for what is now Viking Kestrel, a book called *The thorny paradise*, which was a collection of essays by writers on writing for children. To my mind the most impressive contribution to this collection was the shortest. It was made by John Gordon, a British writer of considerable talent but rather small output, not as well known as I think he ought to be. He is a writer who inhabits that mysterious border country I have just mentioned; and in *The thorny paradise*, in an essay just over one page long, he had some cogent things to say about

it. I will pick out, disconnectedly, three or four of his remarks — although the piece is of such masterly conciseness that I would really have liked to read you it all.

> For me, [he wrote] writing is always an attempt to get to the edge of things, to reach that strangest of all places where one thing ends and another begins.
>
> In order to do this it is necessary to stand on firm ground. Within a story there must be a reality that is all but untouchable, a place in which things can happen. . . . [I]magination must be anchored. A story that attempts to dispense with rules is ink dropped into water . . . .
>
> A story is a shape . . . .
>
> The boundary between imagination and reality, and the boundary between being a child and being an adult are border country, a passionate place in which to work.

He is talking primarily about his own writing; and his books are nearly all about young people — adolescents — who experience uncanny happenings, somewhere on that far rim of experience where the skin of reality seems suddenly thin and as though one might break through it. He wrote, for instance, *The house on the brink*, in which a pair of teenagers, Dick and Helen, come across an evil-looking log, lying in the mud at the edge of a Fenland river: does it move of its own volition, leaving a foul and frightening trail? Is there some ancient evil enclosed in it? What is the threat to the attractive widow who lives in the house on the brink — is it psychological or physical, or something else? We're never really sure. The author tells us as much as he sees fit to tell us, leaving quite a lot for our own imagination to do. In another of John Gordon's books, *The house on the hill*, there's an atmosphere in a village of unease, fear and foreboding; at the centre of it is the unquiet grave of Tom Goodchild, the mentally defective cripple who hanged himself one midsummer eve, years ago. This midsummer it seems and feels as if the tragedy will repeat itself, but through Tom it is prevented, and now Tom can rest. Fantasy if you like, but I think rather that we are at that strange, far edge of things, where everyday reality itself begins to lose substance.

Adolescence itself is border country, as John Gordon says, and there's a degree of mystery and magic about it, a sense of new potencies and potentialities coming into play, which can work strongly together with some mythological themes, particularly on that other border where imagination and reality blur; we see this in Alan Garner's *The owl service*, and I think, in Robert Westall's *The scarecrows*. But the blurring of imagination and reality can also take place in books that are quite clearly children's rather than teenage. It occurs quite often in picture books, where what we see represented on the page is obviously being imagined by a child, and not supposed to be happening in the "real" world: "real" of course being in quotation marks, since the book is a fiction anyway. An instance of this is

Margaret Mahy's *A lion in the meadow*, in which a little boy runs in to tell Mother that there's a big, roaring, whiskery lion in the meadow. Mother, accusing him of making up stories, says she'll tell one too, and gives him a matchbox in which she says there's a dragon that will get bigger and chase the lion away. A disastrous ploy: the lion, scared by the dragon, runs into the house and hides in the broom cupboard, and now there's a dragon in the meadow. But boy and lion go and play in the meadow on the other side of the house, so all is well. An adult reader or an older child will perceive at once that all this action — colourfully portrayed by the artist, Jenny Williams — is going on in the little boy's imagination. In John Burningham's *Come away from the water, Shirley*, this is made clear enough for even a very young child to see: the dim and dreary exhortations of parents contrasted with the exotic joys of the child's own envisioning. A little farther up the age range, the line between imagination and reality may be more ambiguously drawn. Clive King's *Stig of the dump* is highly popular with British children, including small boys, who can be hard to please. It's about a boy called Barney who explores the dump at the bottom of the disused chalk-pit near where he's staying. There he finds a prehistoric cave-boy, who has built himself a house out of all those fascinating things you find on rubbish-dumps (a marvellous piece of juvenile wish-fulfilment, this.) I think most young readers take this story literally, but I myself am not sure about it. In the context of the story as told, I think it's quite likely that Stig is the imaginary companion of a lonely child. It's even more likely that the author was well aware of these alternative possibilities and simply chose to leave the matter open. You can please yourself. Why not?

Ambiguities of this kind may be subtle and enriching. I think particularly of Lucy Boston's *The children of Green Knowe.* Mrs. Boston became a published writer at the age of 62. That was quite a long time ago; she was born in 1892, so she is 95 this year, and when Jill Walsh and I last saw her, two or three weeks ago, she was still going strong. *The children of Green Knowe* was her first book for children. Like almost all her books, it's set in the ancient manor house at Hemingford Grey, near Huntingdon in England, where she herself has lived for nearly half a century, the house being thinly disguised in name only as Green Knowe. It's about a boy called Tolly who stays in the house with his grandmother, Mrs. Oldknow, who clearly blends with Mrs. Boston herself. She tells him stories of three children who lived in the house at the time of the Great Plague; and Tolly encounters these children himself — but does he "really" meet them, or their ghosts, or could it be that the only magic is that of the atmosphere of the ancient house at work on the joint imaginations of Tolly and Mrs. Oldknow? I don't know. I have never dared to ask Mrs. Boston — a formidable old lady for whom I have deep admiration and affection and even deeper awe — and I think if one did ask her she would smile, decline to

commit herself, and think privately, "What a stupid person!"

Yet the sense of catching, in the magical context of this marvellous old house, a fringe of the past, can be subtle, powerful and moving. Here is a passage I've quoted before, in my book of essays, *A sense of story*. Tolly and Mrs. Oldknow, in the house at evening, hear a woman's voice softly singing a cradle song:

> "Why are you crying, Granny? It's lovely" [says Tolly.]
> "It is lovely, only it is such a long time ago. I don't know why that should be sad, but it sometimes seems so."
>
> The singing began again.
> "Granny," whispered Tolly again with his arm through hers, "whose cradle is it? Linnet is as big as I am."
> "My darling, this voice is much older than that. I hardly know whose it is. I heard it once before at Christmas."
>
> It was queer to hear the baby's sleepy whimper only in the next room, now and so long ago. "Come, we'll sing it too," said Mrs. Oldknow, going to the spinet. She played, but it was Tolly who sang alone, while, four hundred years ago, a baby went to sleep.

Well, there we are at what John Gordon called the edge of things, that strangest of all places where one thing ends and another begins . . . .

The presence of the past — in places, records, history, archaeology, memory — is itself of course intrinsically as strange, as apt to give one a shudder down the spine, as anything created by a fantasist or science-fiction writer. This particular sense of the past is conveyed at its most powerful in some of Penelope Lively's books. I think particularly of *The driftway*, published in 1972. Mrs. Lively has said of that book that she wanted to write about the jolt given to a child's self-absorption by an imaginative involvement with other people's lives; in this instance lives removed in time rather than in space. She wanted us to see landscape as a channel for historical memory: "A perfectly ordinary road B4525 from Banbury to Northampton", but a very ancient road, once a drove road along which herds were driven long distances, taking days. And the attractive notion behind the book is that along this road significant incidents from the past might still linger. An old man who gives two runaway children, Paul and Sandra, a ride in his cart, explains that

> . . .sometimes in everybody's life there's a time when a whole lot of living gets crammed into a few minutes, or an hour or two, and it may be good or bad, but it's brighter and sharper than all the rest put together. And it may be so sharp it can leave a shadow on a place — if the place is a special place — and at the right time other people can pick up that shadow. Like a message, see?

And Paul picks up a number of such messages on a momentous day of his own life.

Is it a wholly fanciful concept, or could events in the past leave a shadow on a place that can still be picked up today? My own inclination — as a person of somewhat sceptical frame of mind — is to say "Not really": it is a person's here-and-now imagination at work in a place redolent of the past that can create the impression. I have felt that sense of the lingering of innumerable ghostly lives more than once in the Norman hall of Mrs. Boston's house, though alas I have never seen any people who lived in the past, or heard any voices.

A shadow from the past: it's what one is conscious of in K.M. Peyton's book *A pattern of roses*. Kathleen Peyton is a well known writer — she wrote the Flambards trilogy, which made a successful television series — and quite prolific. I haven't read all her books, but I've read a good many, and of those *A pattern of roses* is the only one with anything you could call a fantasy element, and is to my mind quite easily the best.

Tim Ingram, who is under unwelcome pressure from a successful father, is recuperating from glandular fever, and while at home in the country cottage his parents are doing up finds some drawings with his own initials, T.R.I., hidden in the chimneystack. Tim feels a ghostly affinity with Tom Inskip, the farm lad who made the drawings, who fell disastrously in love with Netty at the Vicarage, and died more than sixty years before. The story moves between past and present: we see Tom at key points of his short life, and we also see Tim and the present Vicar's daughter, Rebecca, trying to discover the truth about him. In the end, Tom's friendly ghost — if he is a ghost — saves present-day Tim from disaster.

Tim has had the sense of brushing against something from the past, and, memorably, on one occasion has heard ghostly playing of "The last rose of summer", which we know Netty played in the Vicarage all those years ago. Yet the fantasy element is quite slight, and towards the end the author seems almost to retreat from it. When Tim is sure that Tom won't come back to him any more, he "felt as if a part of himself was missing. Tom *was* himself. Had he ever really been a ghost, or merely his — Tim's — own imagination? Some things had no answers." Well, writers, as I've emphasized already, are not under obligation to supply the answers. So is *A pattern of roses* fantasy at all? You can only decide that point by answering the question the author would not answer. Incidentally, a large part of the subject-matter is social history: Tom Inskip, though talented, is a poor boy in a rigidly class-ridden society; there is no freedom for him, and no way forward. Here once again is a novel in which history, fantasy and contemporary realism meet and blur, a book that makes nonsense of the pigeonholes.

I have myself as a writer been increasingly interested in this border country where imagination and reality meet, and I shall finish by saying something about two of my own most recent books — books that arise in

part out of this interest. I hasten to say that I'm not putting them on a par with some of the distinguished work I've discussed, but I have the advantage of knowing what my intentions were — my conscious intentions, anyway — and how I actually wrote the books, so my thoughts about them in this context may be of some interest. They are *The persuading stick* and *Rob's place*. They were published last year and this year respectively by Viking Kestrel; they are not in Puffin yet, but they will be.

*The persuading stick* is about a small girl called Sarah. She's probably ten years old.

Sarah is always chosen last and in the nativity play she was a back-row angel. And at home she has two older brothers who are much too busy to bother with her. The day comes when she just can't bear being an also-ran. And that's the day on which she finds the persuading stick. It's among a clump of old hollow stalks; it's about eight inches long, with a rough, silvery surface; it's pleasantly warm to hold and slightly springy, with a feel to it as if it were a living creature. Sarah is convinced that when she holds it she can make other people do as she wishes. She has Beth and Katherine jumping up and down, she persuades Mum to make baked beans for tea and Dad to take the family to the fish farm, she persuades the neighbour to let her get her ball back, she takes the stick to school and is triumphantly persuasive there. It looks as if the stick works.

But there are snags. Sarah is asked to do things she shouldn't do, like persuading the old lady in the small shop to hand out free ice-creams. And she feels more and more compulsion from the stick itself to use it, until she's frightened of the stick, unable to sleep, but sure that no adult will understand or believe her. The resolution comes when mixed-up teenage elder brother Donald is threatening to throw himself from a high balcony and it may be that only the stick can persuade him not to do it. But Donald snatches the stick from Sarah's hand.

> For a moment she felt that without the stick she could do nothing. But this was a crisis and she wasn't going to give up. She concentrated her mind and clenched her fists. And then she felt strength flowing back into her. She didn't know where it came from. But it wasn't from outside, the way the power of the stick had been. It was inside her, in head and heart, and flowing through her arteries and into every bit of her body, and she was strong to the tips of her fingers and toes.

And by force of character Sarah talks Donald down. But the persuading stick is finished. It's just a bit of old stick. She and the younger of her brothers, Robin, bury it in the back yard.

Well, does the stick really have magic powers? Obviously Sarah needed it; she's won confidence and discovered the strength she has in herself. But did the stick do it for her, or did she do it for herself? It's no good asking me. I don't know; I merely told the story. I had in mind the theme of the

discovery of inner strength and confidence with the aid of a catalyst; and I also had in mind a second theme to be counterpointed against it: that power over others is dangerous and becomes addictive. Readers can make up their own minds, or they can, like me, leave the matter in abeyance. We are capable, if we try, of holding alternative possibilities both in mind at once.

Rob, in *Rob's place*, is about to start his last year in elementary school, and he's having a hard time. His parents have divorced; Mom is busy with her new husband and new baby; Dad has moved to another town and Rob only sees him on Saturdays, when they usually go to a boating lake together. On the day the story opens, a Saturday, Rob's best and almost only friend moves away, and Dad unaccountably doesn't turn up. Rob is disconsolate, but his other friend Mike, a college student who has a summer job as boating-lake attendant, takes him in the rescue boat to the tiny island, Pratt's Island, in the middle of the park lake. They play a game together of naming the island's features with Treasure-Islandy names: Cape Crossbones, Shipwreck Rocks, Quicksand Bay, Skull Cave and so on. They call it Paradise Island. And Mike, who will also be going away soon, tells Rob he can always get to the island if he wants to enough; "you can use your imagination as a boat."

Rob finds that by sitting on a swaying branch in a tree on the shore, he can persuade himself he's on the way to the island. In an imaginary voyage, he gets shipwrecked on Paradise Island, where he organizes himself Crusoe-style. As his troubles in real life multiply, he goes there more and more; he equips himself with a dog, Crusoe, and a parrot, Billy Bones, then with a friend and follower based on the boy who went away. He has adventures that compensate for things that go wrong in his real world. Adventures on the island form a substantial part of this story; the island is, I hope, quite vivid. And Rob tunes out from the real world more and more; begins to find himself on the island when he didn't mean to go. He's in deep trouble.

In the real world, Dad has found a woman friend, a nice woman with a daughter, Katie, who is Rob's age; but Rob resents them both, because hitherto Dad has always put *him* first. Rob in fact is so distressed that Dad unwisely promises not to do anything Rob would hate. In the island world, Dad has been a castaway, and now Rob prevents him from getting away, destroying the boat he's built.

The confusion between real and imaginary becomes such that Rob, taken by his stepfather on a trip to the actual Pratt's Island, thinks he's on Paradise Island, thinks a volcano there is erupting, runs over the edge and is almost drowned. Somebody has got to rescue him from his dangerous state of mind, and it's Katie, who manages to get inside his dream, go with him to the imaginary island, help him free Dad, and then come out of it.

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So it's a happy ending; Dad may or may not marry Katie's Mom, though it would be nice if he did, but anyway Rob is out in the daylight.

It's not for me to say whether or not the story works. But as you can see, it is both a naturalistic story and a fairly exotic story of an imagined desert island; it is a story about a real island and about an island of the mind; it is concerned, in its way, with that border land between imagination and reality that John Gordon finds so fascinating.

Ursula Le Guin has said that maturity is not an outgrowing but a growing up; an adult is not a dead child but a child who survived. In the end, I myself don't believe in literal magic, but I do believe that there are deep, deep mysteries; that reason is not enough; that imagination is a country to which children have access and to which the way must be kept open. There's a tiny four-line poem by a Victorian, Ralph Hodgson, that I like very much.

Reason has moons, but moons not hers
Lie mirrored in her sea,
Confounding her philosophers
But oh! delighting me.

## NOTES

1 I have to confess, ruefully, that none of the books discussed in the course of this paper come from north of the 49th parallel; they are all American or British. This may seem rather tactless when I am speaking in Canada, but there's a reason for it. Canadian publishing, lively as it now is, is regional publishing, even when it comes from major houses like Oxford and Penguin.

In international terms, English-language children's book publishing still revolves around a London/New York axis. The London and New York editors all know each other and are in constant contact. The books they think highly of get published in Britain and the USA. Those that *don't* get published in Britain and America remain unheard of in those countries, and there's a presumption — often, I'm sure, quite wrong — that if a book hasn't been published in America or Britain it can't be a front-rank book; otherwise it *would* have been.

One result of this is that it requires heroic and expensive effort for an American or British commentator to be well-informed on Canadian children's books. A still more unfortunate result, you may feel, is that British and American children don't see much of Canadian life through their books. In Britain we know about

Jean Little and Monica Hughes and Barbara Smucker because they are published in Britain, but there must be many good writers and artists we don't know about. We learn of some of them through conferences such as the Summer Institute held at London, Ontario. Let's hope the knowledge will spread.

**John Rowe Townsend,** *British critic, is the author of books of criticism, including* Written for Children, *and* A sounding of story-tellers, *and novels such as* The summer people *and* Dan Alone.