An eye for Thresholds

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In Peter Dickinson's award winning novel, *Tulku*, there is a tense moment when bandits catch up to young Theodore, the book's protagonist, and his two companions, backing them up against a deep gorge over which a rope bridge leads from China to Tibet. The bridge is in use, blocked by a Lama and his party coming over into China. As it turns out, through the Lama's intervention, the bandits are scared off. But there can be no going back for Theodore and company. They must cross the bridge into Tibet leaving everything behind. Theodore has little enough substance to go back to but he is leaving behind his adopted home and his past. It is a passage, then, of some moment. Dickinson writes:

> The Yak-drivers they had met on their way to the valley had said that there was no real border. The Lama waved a vague hand eastward and explained that two whole provinces had been stolen by China a hundred years before, so Theodore's party had really been travelling in Tibet for many days. But for Theodore the border lay, sharp as a shore-line, at the bridge. *From then on the grammar of all things, large and small, changed.* [my italics].

Crossing the bridge, Theodore enters "the enormous sharp-seen distance". He will never be the same again. The grammar of his life, the seemingly insignificant little events, the units of time with which we measure off the diurnal cycle — all this has changed; he will see everything in a new light. He has crossed a very real Threshold. Had Dickinson not pointed this out to us, the adolescent reader would have been very likely to recognize it as such. Threshold recognition is one of the joys of literature. "Hark! We are this very minute entering a new stage in the life of the character or the drama (and, most likely, both)."

In addressing the notion of "Somewhere meant for me", I have chosen to hover on the Threshold, looking forward and backward, furtively, and considering the nature of boundaries, and limits, real or imaginary.

"How concrete everything becomes in the world of the spirit when an object, a mere door, can give images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome and respect," says Gaston Bachelard in *The poetics of space*. He adds: "If one were to give an account of all the doors one has closed and opened, of all the doors one would like to re-open, one would have to tell the story of one's whole life.

"But is he who opens a door and he who closes it the same being?"

That is what Thresholds are all about in literature. A Threshold is the physical manifestation of change. Inasmuch as the image of the Threshold is stoutly conceived, it is as physical — as real — as any doorway of wood or steel, for the memory is reductive; the real and the fictional are rendered down to impulses. One must "imagine" the real doorways of one's life and as such they end up being stored alongside the ones we read about in books. The past renders them equal in substance though one is more likely to recall the literal doorway more vividly for, assuming the writer/creator had some gift of style, these doors were probably built to be remembered. Art is like that.

The poetics of space is a book of philosophy which has had the most profound influence on me as a writer. It is, among other things, about the space occupied by memory, a space not measured in brain cell dimensions, or hiatic gaps. Memory, according to Bachelard, is stored in rooms and cupboards and playing fields. Bachelard sees one's life as a series of rooms, of places to put things, or to curl up in, or to carry a candle to. He talks about nests and shells and corners and in the next-to-last chapter, he looks at "The dialectics of outside and inside". It takes Bachelard nearly a whole book to get to the subject of Thresholds. He quotes Georges Spyridaki: "My house is diaphanous, but it is not of glass. It is more of the nature of vapor. Its walls contract and expand as I desire."

From the time I was about eight I wanted to be an architect. I discovered, to my horror, about by my third year at architecture school, that to be an architect was to put up walls, to disconnect spaces, one from the other, to remove the possibility of getting from here to there. All along I had liked most those rooms one occasionally finds in the woods, if one looks hard enough. Rooms constructed by a geometry of leaves and dead logs and light. One leaves such a found-room only after having absorbed the sense of it and one leaves only the sense of it behind. The next woods-walker might pass through the room without knowing it there at all. Walls which contract and expand as I desire.

I realized by my third year at architecture school that I was interested mainly in an architecture of the spirit. There was a time after I left architecture school to become a musician, then an art student, and finally a lecturer in art, when I would turn to architecture for solace in times of despair. I would design a house on paper, in greater and greater detail depending directly on the length and breadth of my depression. It was in just such a state that I "built" *Odd's End.* I actually did build it, 3/8" to-the-foot, but I still could not dispel the gloom of a failing relationship and having just served a two-year term at York University Penitentiary getting my MFA. I needed to inhabit the house I had made and since I could not make myself small enough — not quite — I wrote a book and moved in. It

is a book about a couple predisposed to distrust one another and an intruder, a Mr. X., who capitalizes on this and comes between them. He wants their home to himself! The German title for the book was *Der ungebitten dritte* — the uninvited third. But there are really four characters in *Odd's End*: Mary, Malcolm, Mr. X., and the house itself. I've been writing ever since I built Odd's End and everything I write has to do with architecture. Indeed, my next picture book, to be illustrated by Ian Wallace, is entitled *The architect of the moon*. It takes place in a child's bedroom and then in the room where the moon lives.

Doorways are no less crucial in stories than in the architecture of stone and wood. Indeed, as I have mentioned, we are inclined to notice the fictional threshold more readily than the real ones we cross for granted. Let us look at some solidly built doorways in children's literature. There is the doorway in Shirley Hughes's *Alfie gets in first*, for instance. Nothing could be more solid, more familiar, or more threatening than that door to Alfie's own house! Alfie has raced Mom and Annie Rose home. Mom brings up the groceries to the hall and goes back to retrieve Annie Rose from the stroller, when, with the winner's zeal, Alfie closes the door — slam, bam! Mom's keys are inside with Alfie. He cannot reach the door knob. He cannot reach the letter-chute; he is locked inside and his own house home is quite suddenly a jail. Well, he gets out. Half the neighbourhood congregates on the front stoop to solve the problem, but Alfie figures out his own escape and in so doing crosses a Threshold of signal importance. With the help of his chair he reaches the lock. He is taller for the experience. The real Threshold coincided with a symbolic crossing-over, as well it might.

In my own book, *I'll make you small*, illustrated by Maryann Kovalski, when Roland finally has the nerve (and the excuse) to visit the crotchety and reclusive Mr. Swanskin, his next door neighbour, he finds the door opens easily — a little too easily, on a rusty hinge. Faced with an open door, it is difficult to turn back. It is a long way through Swanskin's house to the room where the old man works but the light shining in the workroom doorway draws little Roland forward like a beacon despite his growing trepidation. He wants to cross the Threshold.

We come across a door as seemingly impenetrable as Alfie's in John Rowe Townsend's *The intruders*. The whole book has a lot to do with home and hearth and belonging but the Threshold to which I refer is not the one to the protagonist's threatened house. The doorway of which I speak is not met until the climax of the book. Arnold Haithwaite has narrowly escaped death at the hands of the intruders of the book's title but now faces the equally awful prospect of death by drowning in the mounting tide of the Skirl estuary. He has made it as far as Saint Brendan's church, once on an island but now "the church in the sea" and long since deconsecrated and deserted. There he finds Jane, who herself is cut off from the mainland.

She is a powerful swimmer but the storm and the tide have made swimming to safety impossible. As the water rises around them, Arnold casts back in his mind for an image:

> . . .a fleeting image from years before. . .Ted Whitson, the council bricklayer, surrounded by children — Arnold one of them — and filling in the archway, The archway to the stumpy useless [church] tower.

To find that bricked-in entranceway in the "blank unyielding wall" of the tower is their only hope. Having found it, Arnold must bust his way in with a boulder, hurling it at the wall, again and again, and hurling abuse at the sea and the rock and the church as he does so: "He swore between blows, swore at the top of his voice, swore and hit, swore and hit."

They get in, Arnold and Jane, and are saved. Arnold breaks a hole clear through the storm. There is some tenderness between them — the tenderness of thankfulness. But in rupturing the walled-in Threshold of that tower, Arnold has forever revealed to Jane who he is and he is not someone she can ever really know; nor she him. The tower is a powerful image of Arnold's angry solitude.

Mr. Townsend says something wonderful as Arnold rescues Jane: "Arnold was dragging her through the hole, through water, through panic and despair and death and resurrection all in a second." There is this about Thresholds: one is born through them and one dies through them. And it all happens in an instant.

There is a sensational birth in Jan Andrews's and Ian Wallace's *The very last first time*, which, incidentally, takes place at the rising of the tide. Eva Padlyat, an Inuit girl, has gone below the ice at low tide to collect mussels. The netherworld between ethers captivates her, she loses her way, drops her candle, hears the tide coming in — is panic-stricken. But then she finds the hole she has cut through the ice and her mother drags her out. It is a rebirth, an apotheosis crowned by the sun in Ian's breath-taking illustration.

Death appears at the doorway, not always in black with a scythe; sometimes as radiant with light as Eva on the ice under the midnight sun. In Jill Paton Walsh's *A parcel of patterns*, death is everywhere, the town of Eyam is under the siege of the plague. Apart from laying her family in the grave, the plague has kept apart our narrator, Mall, from her beloved Thomas, who lives in the next village. Believing Mall to have died, Thomas crosses the border, crosses the brink: "Then he plunged over the scarp, and lurched like the land, downwards, running, arms spread like a bird starting into flight . . . ." He finds Mall very much alive and since he is there and cannot cross back over the boundary which quarantines the dying village, the two are married, finding something of joy in the desperate

little valley town. In the brief happy period of their marriage, Mall describes Thomas arriving home:

> He would be rimmed with gold, for the setting sun would catch upon his golden head and the red-gold hair upon his wrists and arms, and bleach his shepherd's smock, and dazzle me. But though he stood in shade, or in rainlight, or in the summer darkness in the gardenside, I saw him always as apparelled in celestial light, and I warmed like a sunlit stone when he drew near me.

What could be more beautiful or sensual than this description of her lover returning home and framed in the doorway? It is foreshadowing. And how horrifying it is when that same wreathed figure arrives at the same doorway only a few pages later and says to Mall: "Sing me that air again, sweet Mouse." And Mall looks up, startled, for she had not been singing and a deadly calm engulfs her as she tries to sing the song he has thought he heard her singing all the way down the street, drawing him home. But of course the song he heard was not one for which Mall knows the words. She and the reader recognize the signs. He is dying. Mall does not waste much of her journal or the patience of the reader describing her last week with Thomas. The image we are left with is of Thomas on the brink of death, apparelled in celestial light. Almost an angel.

Not all boundaries are as visible as a deeply cut gorge in the Himalayas or, for that matter, as visible as a simple doorway into a cottage. I would like to give a rather disturbing image, not from fiction but from my adolescence (which may very well prove to have been a fictional time in the final reckoning of things!) I recall the rather extraordinary home of my high school girlfriend. Physically it was very plain though it had flat roofs, which for Ottawa was different, which is to say, not very sensible. When it snowed too much someone would have to get up on the roof and shovel off the snow and when it was icy the ice on the roof would crack like a gunshot. I remember this as a deterrent to advanced amorous activity. There was a very old grandfather in the house who might have been fascinating had he ever spoken. I recall only one such occasion over Campbell's Scotch Broth and a cheese sandwich on plain-white store-bought bread.

My sweetheart proved to be far too smart for me: she became a professor of statistics. But there was one thing about the memory of her and that time and that flat-roofed house that will always remain enigmatic for me: an older sister who had suffered a nervous breakdown. I was then, as I am now, drawn to psychological dysfunction. This sister did not manifest much in the way of hysteria but she did exhibit a marked inability to walk through doorways. I recall vividly watching her enter the television room off the dining room. It had double glass doors, both wide open, but she stood on the Threshold for several moments, swaying, held back, before at

last breaking through whatever barrier there was there for her. I could not see her face from where I sat but I'm sure she must have squeezed her eyes shut before she could take the step. It is the kind of step one takes in a dream, like Alice down the rabbit hole. Doorways required a major commitment from my sweetheart's sister. Perhaps for her, each doorway represented a little death.

From an early age I sensed with mingled dread and delight those little deaths which are everywhere to be found in children's books. I am not the only one who has commented on this but for a long time I was sure that it was a morbid obsession peculiar to myself.

Particularly I recall George MacDonald's *The princess and the goblin,* when the princess, bored, finds a stairway she has not seen before. She mounts the stairs and goes up and up until she arrives at a place where there was "nothing but passages and doorways everywhere!" After travelling in circles and crying her eyes out she finally does notice a door to a stairway around a corner, half open. "But alas! the stairs went the wrong way. They went up!"

Uh oh! There was and is only so far you can go upstairs before arriving in Heaven or a reasonable facsimile thereof. Perhaps, unconsciously, I was alerted to the special nature of these stairs by the lack of description MacDonald provides the reader. The stairs don't have a colour; the light is not described as falling on them in any particular pattern, if there is light at all. They are not made of any material. The stairs don't squeak or creak. Not a good sign. Mind you, I was not displeased or even frightened. I took it calmly. I hadn't known the princess long enough at that point in the story to mourn her passing. The fact that she returned to the nursery didn't fool me for a minute. She was dead; the rest was but a dream. There are certain passages in fiction, movements into certain places which strike me with unexpected force and which I can only assume represent a kind of modified dying. The death may be only the death of innocence.

In Maurice Sendak's *Outside over there,* Ida's baby sister is carried off by goblins. Ida must think quickly and, as it turns out, she thinks too quickly:

Now Ida in a hurry
snatched her Mama's yellow rain cloak,
tucked her horn safe in a pocket,
and made a serious mistake.
She climbed backwards out her window
into outside over there.

"Outside over there" sounds remarkably like the end-of-the-line to this ear for Thresholds. In an extensive interview in Jonathan Cott's *Pipers at the gates of dawn,* Sendak says: "If I had died of a heart attack in 1967, my career would have ended with *Higglety pigglety pop*! — a book that's all

about death. And even in a comic work like *Really Rosie*, all that the characters talk about is death — the whole thing is a theme and variations on how many ways you can die."

Sendak goes on to talk about how characters in the works of Kleist confront an overwhelming situation by fainting or swooning. He says: ". . . And in a sense, this blacking out is a form of dying. Something happens which is so terrible — it's like a Gorgon's Head — that when you look at it, it kills you. But you wake up as if in another life, refreshed — you wake up better for having died."

Sleeping, dreaming, dying — writers can be frustratingly gratuitous about using these terms interchangeably. But then if one is not the same person who closes the door as the person who entered it then that other person must have died. And, come to think of it, wouldn't you die rather happily if in so doing you could fly to Neverland and never grow up? And isn't it true that in order to stop growing up or older one must stop altogether?

What, I can't help wondering, would Bachelard have made of *Outside over there*? Ida's journey takes her out and down and through and in and back. Sendak himself says it is such a spatially convoluted story it might as well be called "Inside in here." There is about Thresholds this ambiguity of which way is in and which way is out. Ambiguity, as Carl Jung has pointed out, is the nature of the true symbol. Arnold Haithwaite and Jane are prisoners *outside* the tower. Alfie is a prisoner *inside* his own home, because a good deal of what makes home home to a child — *mother* — is outside.

These words, from Pierre Albert Birot's *Les amusements naturels*, stand at the Threshold of Bachelard's opening chapter in *The poetics of space*:

> At the door of the house who will come knocking?
> An open door, we enter
> A closed door, a den
> The world pulse beats beyond my door.

A pulse outside of oneself. As if one were in the womb surrounded by the pulse of an all-engulfing mother one has never seen but upon whom one depends entirely for sustenance. One is poised on the Threshold of life waiting to be born. It's an ongoing process. Some of us are not happy unless we are born over and over again, still trying to get it right. In *Outside over there*, Sendak was born again. It was for him a story about "dissolution, the eradication and conquest of fear and depression, of hallucination, of obsession, of neurosis — breaking through and making it literally disappear by one's own act...." In the five years from the conception of *Outside over there* to its birth, Sendak was able, through therapy, to overcome a long-standing depression. It took him a great deal longer than Ida who made her trip in the twinkling of an eye.

Thresholds. Boundaries. Kathy Lowinger at the Canadian Children's Book Centre made an interesting point when I mentioned the topic of my paper. In an immigrant nation, she suggested, Canada, itself, is a Threshold. Having crossed a Threshold is an integral part of our collective consciousness. Needless to say, this sense of new arrival finds its way into the literature of the country. In Barbara Smucker's *Underground to Canada*, there is a Threshold early in the story as young Julily decides to make her break from slavery. It is a Threshold which might lead to death or freedom, but these were precisely the choices open to many early Canadians and some very new immigrants, it would seem. So, like Theodore in *Tulku*, who had been travelling in Tibet for many days without knowing it, Julily had been travelling in freedom for many days, but needed that second tangible Threshold, the border, in order for the grammar of her life to change in some meaningful way. A political boundary as insubstantial as it may be when it is not walled or patrolled by armed soldiers still makes real the abstract quality of Freedom.

The experience of the immigrant once he is safely landed is another kind of Threshold: the Threshold of non acceptance/acceptance, of not being understood/being understood. Social mores and customs come complete with walls which must be breached. It's a two-way street, this doorway. In this country's children's literature, if the truth be told, there is a great deal of tokenism with regard to mutual awareness between people of differing ethnic, racial, or religious backgrounds. There are by now a great number of token Sikhs and Greeks trapped in styleless tracts sitting about on high school book shelves waiting for a sensitive and well-informed teacher to lend life to their tales. Didactic literature depends on a support system in order to breathe. However, there are very moving exceptions to this triviality, notably, Joy Kogawa's *Naomi's road*, which deals with the experience of a Japanese Canadian child interned during the second world war. Kogawa is a fine writer, which is the difference between her book and those written by good-hearted, well-intentioned moralizers.

Another quite good exception to the rule of mediocrity in the immigrant experience is one of the short stories in Nazneen Sadiq's *Camels can make you homesick*. In the story, "The shonar arches", Amit, a Canadian child born of Indian parents, is disenchanted by the visit of his grandmother from Bengal and especially by the traditional cooking the visitor and his mother end up doing. Then he is given the golden opportunity to choose where the family might go to dinner one evening. He takes her, as you might guess, to McDonalds, "the golden arches". Grandmother is impressed: "So soft!" she exclaims of her Big Mac, and insists on congratulating the boys and girls behind the counter who have cooked this delicacy. Young Amit's chest swells with pride. The story is called, in a beautiful pun, "The shonar arches", for grandmother has described, lovingly, the

burnished colour of the sun on the fields in her Bengali homeland as "shonar". A Threshold is crossed. "The stranger is invited in."

Then there is, in this country, the Threshold between the civilized, of which there is very little, and the wilderness, of which there is an enormous lot! This theme is so popular as to have given rise to one of the country's most important critical literary studies, Margaret Atwood's *Survival.* As I said recently in my column in *The Globe and Mail,* "Writers addressing teen readers seem to find endless inspiration from stranding a youthful protagonist or two in the 'monstrous' wilds, there to come to better terms with themselves." In that same column I reviewed Monica Hughes's *Log jam.* In *Log jam* Isaac Manyfeathers

> ...escapes from a medium-security prison and sets out to find the home of his grandmother many hundreds of miles to the North. His trek becomes a spirit hunt in which, through fasting (literally going out of his mind), Isaac hopes to get in touch with his animal self. Lenora Rydz, 14, is on a different kind of trip altogether, an agonizing camping holiday with her mother, her brand-new stepfather and his two sons.
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> Chapter by chapter the paths of these two alien beings approach one another, until on the banks of the lonely Brazeau River, where Lenora has been washed ashore after a canoeing accident, they finally meet. The meeting is brilliant and strange, for the memory of both of these babes in the wood is compromised; one by starvation, the other by a bump on the head. The surprising series of events that then take place leads each of them to examine the log jam in his or her head, as dangerous as the one which spilled Lenora on her nightmare ride down the Brazeau.

Lenora is "born[e] down the river".

Now there are distances which are a great deal larger than the distance between the cities of the east and the great expansive boreal forests of the northwest, and there are lands further apart than India and Canada. Worlds apart. Separated by light years of space or the more impenetrable barrier of Time. Fantasy is all about Thresholds. For, as Sheila Egoff has said, "Fantasy is a literature of paradox. It is the discovery of the real within the unreal, the credible within the incredible, the believable within the unbelievable. Yet the paradoxes have to be resolved. It is in the interstices between the two halves of the paradox, *on the knife-edge of two worlds, that fantasists build their domain.*" [my italics]

It would be quite easy to write an entire book about the notion of Thresholds in fantastic literature. In time-travel, for instance, it is the manipulation of the mechanism of travel, whether it be a machine, a door, or a watch ticking off the hours of a summer long past, as in Kit Pearson's recent *A handful of time* — whatever the mode of transport may be, the manipulation of the Threshold device is so critical as to determine the success of the book regardless of the writing talents of the author. Logic must be seen to be done justice in the crossing and re-crossing of the Threshold which

separates now from wherever it is the writer has spirited us. It is a generalization but I think a safe one that there are always two critical crossings of the Threshold in a time-travel fantasy: the first time the protagonist crosses into the new world and the last time. If loneliness or illness has provoked him or her to cross the Threshold in the first instance, there is inevitably a greater dilemma in store, compelling the protagonist to go or stay behind, stranded in the past or the future. Time-travel is, structurally, a literature suspended between Thresholds.

In "straight" science fiction, Thresholds are often described in great technological detail, from the decorous Second Empire furnishings of Jules Verne's *A journey to the moon and a trip around it*, right down to the cockpit of a starship about to go into warp-drive. But there are more interesting modes of transportation across the great divide. I myself am partial to the means by which the young Lord Tomi Bentt is forced to leave ArcOne in Monica Hughes's *Devil on my back*. A shortlived revolution of the slaves in the domed city finds Tomi hiding and then falling down a garbage chute into the wild river (which just might be the Brazeau) and the wilderness outside the city. Tomi tumbles into — well — outside over there. Once again we see the theme which Monica hammers home again and again with great gusto and invention: the necessity of knowing the interface between the wilderness and civilization, between our past and our future, of knowing the interface and establishing intercourse across that border at all cost however inviolate that border may seem to be.

I would like to look now at what Thresholds mean to the writer in the thick of the "creative process" — or should I say, what Thresholds mean to *this* writer during the fragile period of early gestation when the threat of miscarriage is imminent, when the idea can only sit there in the mind and coaxing it to move anywhere at all is a delicate business, let alone getting it to go "Somewhere meant for me". It is from chance bits of dialogue or narrative which occur to one out of nowhere, or snippets of conversation, overheard, or bits of paper which float into the collage of our lives, and which the artist notices and *grasps* — it is precisely from these disconnected and oftimes feeble but nonetheless, to the ready mind, startling discoveries that the artist or writer *begins*. Thresholds are necessary in the creative process in giving an idea somewhere to go. There are doors, of course, windows, and railroads — all of these are Thresholds, *connectors* to other places. And then there are books, and last of all, launching pads — books and launching pads are Thresholds to places of great distance — as far as the mind can see.

I would like to talk about three doors of my own devising: the big front door upon which Zoom knocked in *Zoom at sea* which was opened by Maria; the little door signposted "The Northwest Passage", through which Zoom made his way to the Arctic ocean, but which was too small for Maria; and

finally, the door through which Zoom is to enter upon his third and last adventure in the book, *Zoom upstream,* a book for which the bones, the scaffolding, exist — which is to say, the words — waiting only for Ken Nutt (or his friend) to flesh out.

When one is writing one must make certain never to be far from a doorway, or preferably a hallway lousy with doors. How else can your characters get in? There is a gorgeous picture in Edward Gorey's *The unstrung harp*, a book all about writing books, in which the author meets one of his characters at the top of the stairs. Presumably he let himself in.

The Obvious is the great bane of the writer, no matter how good he might be. It is like a giant lump and it is in the room with you as you write only waiting to be tripped over. The word comes from the Latin: *ob viam* — that which gets in the way. It is a stifling great pile of a blanc mange, always whispering suggestions: "Pssst! If this Zoom-cat likes water so much, why don't you take him to the sea and he can rent a fishing boat and. .." Sometimes the Obvious oozes in so close, crowding you up against your desk, that "making leaps" becomes an impossibility. That is when a doorway comes in handy. One simply paints a door on the side of the great white amorphous lumpy Obvious, as does the roadrunner in the cartoons, and runs through it.

When I was writing *Zoom at sea*, at a crucial moment, with the gooey Obvious already trickling down my shoulders, I recalled Ken Nutt's gorgeous not-so-still-lifes which I had seen in art galleries: large drawings of familiar objects and their shadows rendered in equally intricate detail on spatially shallow shelves where you could keep your eyes on them. I knew that the sea for Zoom, if Ken was to illustrate Zoom, could not be anywhere near any obvious open-ended sea. And simultaneously, I realized that the *right* sea must be contained. From that second the sea was not far really. Zoom could take a bus. I always tell that to writing students: if you are having trouble describing how to get from A to B, maybe you should just take a bus, and have done with it. Or better still, there was a story by Isaac Asimov about a future society in which every household was equipped with a doorway which led to anywhere you programmed it. Simultaneous transmission. You push a button and — poof — you're there. In Asimov's story, there is a mechanical breakdown and the protagonist ends up using the emergency door which actually leads out of his house into the place between destinations, a great messy place filled with weeds and flowers and birds and sunshine — that kind of a place. Well we all know that half the fun of going somewhere is getting there but sometimes the writer can get awfully bogged down "getting there", describing the route to "There" with such weighty details as to suddenly turn the story into an allegory and bring the pace — the pulse — to a level, dangerously low. Sometimes in the writing process one must make a leap to "Being There". Thus

Thresholds.

Anyway, in climbing off the bus to the sea, Zoom was confronted by a big door. We, me and Zoom, knocked on it together, three times, for all magic comes in threes. We did not have the foggiest idea who would answer. When the door opened, Maria was there. I had the feeling she had been waiting a long time and that her bit of business about having to put her hair up was just a ploy. Ken must have sensed this and consequently never shows her hair undone in the first place!

I cannot say this with more sincerity. The mind of the most boring of God's human creatures is fairly bursting with images to offer up if he or she can but find the door behind which they reside. This requires believing in the door and recognizing it when one sees it and then, having the courage to knock on it.

Zoom required considerable courage to enter the door called the Northwest Passage. He has to do it alone, a point I didn't realize in my first draft but which Ken made clear to me. Of course Maria could not reach the North Pole by the same route as Zoom; she is a grown-up, she will have to find her own way, which, of course, she does. She will be there when Zoom is tired. How she gets there is not important to the story any more than how we, as parents, are there when our children need us is important to them. They take us for granted. How she got to the Catship is Maria's story, and might be an interesting one at that, but *Zoom Away* is Zoom's story.

In *Zoom upstream*, the last of the trilogy, Zoom and Maria are such old friends that the story opens with them together in the backyard on a fall day, raking leaves and planting lily bulbs for the spring. The sun is warm and Zoom takes a nap. When he wakes up, Maria is gone. Luckily for him, she has left muddy footprints back into the house. To the library.

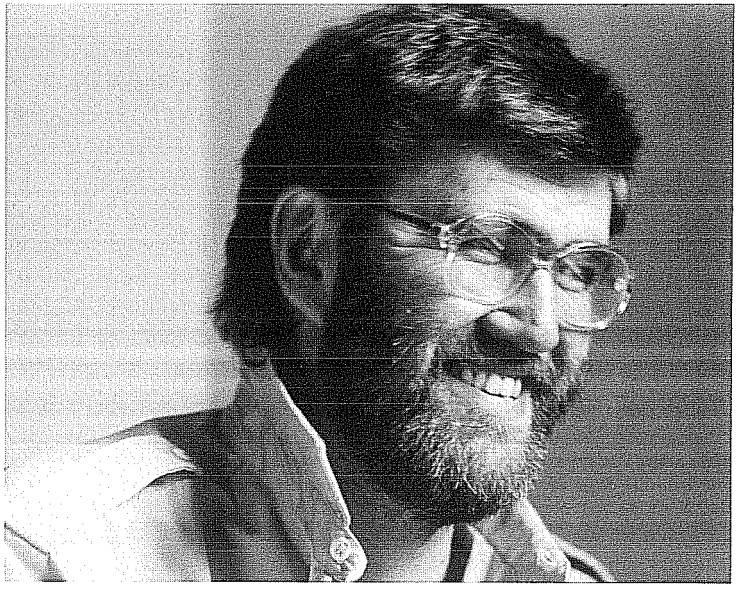
I experimented with other places. I knew the only route left for Zoom was down since we had already sailed over the first floor and hiked to the attic. The question was: how to get down? I didn't want Zoom going into the closet! It seemed far to obvious to march him down to the cellar! And then I realized what the final Threshold *had to* be. A book, or better still the place behind a book, the place where a book was: "Zoom followed Maria's footsteps to the library. The footsteps ended at a huge book which lay on the carpet. There seemed to be a light coming from the space on the shelf where the book had been."

Every book is a Threshold. But it must first be taken from the shelf. In Zoom's case, the shelf is high and the book is a step-up. "This must be the way," Zoom realizes and sure enough behind the bookshelf is a staircase made entirely of books.

For the young child, the preliterate child, there are really only two kinds of literature as far as I can tell. Those books which mirror the child's life,

his environment and expectations, and therefore give him a secure sense of belonging to a society. And those books which are Thresholds to the world beyond the home and his day-to-day experiences: The Arctic Sea, The Nile, The Moon, the house of one's crotchety next-door neighbour — all places about equally as far away for the pre-schooler. This second kind of book is a Threshold book. Just about everything is a Threshold for a six-year-old. And the Threshold is an important concept to get firmly in mind. The Canadian scientist and Nobel laureate, John Polanyi, said recently in an interview: "It takes a very trained mind to recognize when you have made a discovery. When you cross a Threshold no bells ring." The real world does not readily reveal its patterns. Fiction, the *shape* of fiction, with its literal Thresholds, trains the mind to recognize Life's invisible truths and thus lends form to the chaos of living. "Somewhere meant for me" is only reached through many such doorways, both real and fictional. It would seem to be advisable to create picture books for children which ring the bell loudly, that the child, grown-up, might hear the echo down through his life and stop and look around and step forward with courage and cognizance across otherwise invisible Thresholds into Discovery.

Tim Wynne-Jones, *author of the* Zoom *series,* Mischief City, *and other children's books, writes a book-review column in* The Globe and Mail, *Toronto.*



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