Toward the Last Frontier

James Harrison

Grief, unhappiness, and sorrow are frontier regions of the soul through which all of us — children and grownups — must travel. The four attempts to survey this relatively undeveloped fictional territory which I propose to consider are, not surprisingly, for older children, their protagonists ranging in age from twelve to sixteen. Three of them — Ruth Nichols' *The marrow of the world,* Jean Little's *Kate,* and Monica Hughes' *The keeper of the Isis light* — are Canadian, and one — William Mayne's *A game of dark* — is British.

Sorrow is essentially an internal, passive, non-dramatic state of mind or being, so one of the chief points of interest in comparing these four books is the variety of techniques or strategies employed by their authors to externalize, dramatize, or otherwise give fictional expression to what is often such a private emotion. Indeed, the most intriguing frontier they approach, and in one case push back, may well be one of narrative technique rather than of subject matter or theme.

This is hardly the case, however, with Monica Hughes' science fiction fantasy. What is complex and interesting about *The keeper of the Isis light* is that there are three main themes centring on the protagonist, sixteen-year-old Olwen, the most obvious being the issue of colour prejudice. Orphaned very young on a distant planet where her parents were an exploratory advance guard for eventual colonization from earth, Olwen has since been reared by a robot whom she calls Guardian, a creature of superhuman, almost infallible capabilities. As she was so young, he was able to reprogramme her genetic make-up so as to give her enlarged lungs, broader nostrils, and a tough, almost reptilian, radiation-resistant skin of a greenish bronze colour, thus granting her the freedom throughout her childhood of a planet where normal humans must take constant precautions except in certain low-lying areas. When the settlers eventually arrive, Guardian makes her wear — ostensibly to protect her from infection — a suit and a mask that cover her completely and give her a deceptively "human" appearance. This lasts long enough for one of the young settlers to think he has fallen in love with her, and vice versa. Once they see her in all her true glory, of course, neither he nor the other settlers can accept this bipedal green lizard as of their own kind.

The second theme is Olwen's unwavering self acceptance, even in the face of such rejection, and her indignant refusal of possible medical treatment to

restore her to normal human form and to dependence on protective clothing and breathing apparatus over much of the planet's surface. But what is perhaps of most lasting interest is her expanding awareness as to the nature and possibilities of human relationships. For many years she has encountered nothing but the placid, even-keel, entirely reasonable responses of her emotionlessly perfect Guardian. Nevertheless, she has been vaguely aware of something missing. The song of the mountain lark, for instance, "was the most beautiful sound on Isis, and yet, in some strange way Olwen could not understand, the beauty seemed to be full of pain. It left her with a strange, aching emptiness ..., as if she lacked something terribly important, and did not even know what it was."[1] With the settlers' arrival, of course, she begins to realize what has been missing. "Laughter! Guardian never laughed . . . There was a funny feeling inside her, an empty wrenchng sort of ache. It was a bit like the way she felt at the song of the upland lark. She suddenly felt she wanted to cry" (p. 20). And soon enough she does cry. But she is glad of even that experience. So much so that, at the end of the book, when it occurs to her that Guardian will long outlive her and be left alone, and he replies that he does not have the capacity to feel emotion or be lonely, she responds in a whisper, "Poor Guardian."

In turning to Ruth Nichols' *The marrow of the world,* we move from parable, verging on allegory at times, to fantasy verging (as all fantasy aspires to verge) on myth. Linda, adopted as an infant foundling of totally unknown parentage, is magically snatched back into the "other" world of her birth, together (by a miscalculation) with her earthly cousin Philip. There she discovers that she is a half-witch, and becomes involved in an evil quest for enough of the marrow of the world to keep her ailing half-sister (who is a "whole" witch) alive. In some ways the book lacks tension, since once the children encounter the good wizard king of this other world, about two-thirds of the way through the story, the reader senses that the latter is in more than sufficient control of whatever may happen. Yet, as always, the true quest is for self-knowledge.

Linda, who has always been a tempestuous misfit of a child, in fact finds herself increasingly at home in this new world — increasingly aware of affinities with it, and also of new, magical powers. Yet the experience proves to be a terrifying one. For her sister has convinced her that her only options are to be killed by or to help overthrow and kill the witch-hating king. And unlike Olwen, unshaken in her acceptance of and pride in a self so well adapted to her native planet, Linda fears and dislikes the new self which she feels emerging in response to her native world. She can see no escape. The book is clearly a Canadian fantasy in many interesting respects, not least of which is that, like Morag in *The diviners,* Linda eventually discovers that her true roots are to be found in her adopted rather than her ancestral home. But the period of time she spends in that other world, where she tries to reject what she increasingly and despairingly feels is her true self, is also obviously a metaphor for an extreme if not pathological case of someone who senses herself becoming

increasingly alienated from a world and a way of life she wants to belong to, and increasingly but helplessly mistrustful of the new self she seems to be turning into.

All this we watch taking place from Philip's point of view — Philip who must follow the headstrong Linda further and further, deeper and deeper on her misguided quest, just in order to be there when she needs his help.[2] On one level, therefore, the novel is a moving, frightening account of helplessness in the face of a loved one who desperately needs but cannot or will not accept one's help. Beyond that, however, and the more intensely felt for being unspoken, there is Linda's deepening terror at not being able to accept what she yearns for. There is some failure, I still feel, to find an adequately exciting external equivalent (an "objective correlative," if you will) for inner tension. Yet the book remains a brave attempt to embody, in a narrative of metaphoric or almost mythic form, those inner fears and sorrows we are not ready or able to articulate any more overtly — to create what Bettelheim might term a fairy tale for adolescents.

Jean Little and her protagonist have no such hang-ups about overt articulation. The story is told in the first person, by Kate, and the resulting self-exploration and self-revelation is augmented memorably by the poems Kate writes.[3] At one point Little even neatly inverts the insistence of post-modernists on the fictiveness of what they write by having Kate argue that, if it were fiction she was writing, this would be where . . . . "But I'm not making it up, and that isn't what happened."[4] All of which helps the book to remind us of the extent to which, if on the one hand we live and come to terms with ourselves through dreams, symbols, and myths, on the other we do so equally through narration — narration and all the selection, the analysis, the passing of judgments, the censorship, the revision, and the clarification which such a process involves.[5] We recount our experiences to each other, improving on them, tidying them up, giving them shape and point as seems necessary. We go over, or recount to ourselves, our moments of triumph or humiliation, and thereby analyze for future reference what went right or wrong. We rehearse what we are going to say to so and so about such and such, and afterwards rehearse what we should have said but didn't. We spend much longer, in fact, anticipating and/or recalling most of the important events in our lives than we do in living them. And *Kate* enables us to extend the range of such narrational learning experience vicariously.

For the book is full of living and learning experiences. For instance, whether through the long-standing, secret sorrow of Kate's father over the break with his family and his religion, or the short-term but no less bitter estrangement between Kate and her friend Emily (an estrangement which is a double learning experience for Kate, since it helps her to understand her father's situation), we learn the importance of keeping the lines of communication open, of not retreating into a hurt silence. But we learn not by being told but by sharing

in Kate's retrospective analysis, until it becomes almost like our own — the one we undertake every day and every night, drifting off to sleep.

If Monica Hughes' parable depicts her unhappy protagonist greeting rejection and sorrow with an unshaken sense of self-worth, and if Ruth Nichols depicts unhappiness and self-dislike feeding on one another almost to the point of breakdown, all within the setting of an archaically mythic world such as Tolkien and Le Guin create, and finally if Jean Little has her heroine discuss, analyze, and resolve in thought, word, and deed "sorrow's springs" (which are, you will remember, "the same") in both her father's life and her own, then William Mayne in *A game of dark* goes some way toward combining most of these characteristics in a single story.

Nearly fifteen-year-old Donald is having trouble relating to his aging invalid father, largely as a result of the latter's unlovely and puritanically rigid Methodism. Unable to bear the resulting tensions, and resenting the undeserved guilt inherent in his situation, Donald is leading a double life, slipping in and out of this world and yet another quasi-medieval world as if in and out of waking and dreaming, without being clear which is which. But these are no romanticized Middle Ages. Discomfort, cold, and hunger vie with danger for our attention. Even the dragon that must be fought off, and finally killed ingloriously, is a revolting ninety-foot worm that moves by expanding and contracting its body, and leaves a trail of foul smelling, poisonous slime. Clearly Donald is indulging in no ordinary escapism. Rather, the degrading harshness of physical existence in his other life seems an exaggerated embodiment, almost a parody, of what he must bear emotionally in this life. yet, insofar as he finds himself able to choose between lives, he chooses "the one with less shame and guilt to it.[6] For, despite the parallelism, the fable within the fabulous (and mercifully this stops short of such facile allegorizing as "dragon equals daddy"), what is finally insisted on most strongly is that, despite the hardships, the seemingly insurmountable frustrations, the disgusting danger, and the final dishonour of victory, there is the possibility in that other world of changing things for the better and of achieving something. As much at his wits' end as Linda, Donald clings with Olwenlike tenacity to his self-esteem.

Alongside the dream/parable/myth, however, runs the day-to-day life of school and homework, of friends and neighbours, of visits to the hospital and trying not to offend — even trying to love — a dying father who once used to make racing-car noises as he played with his young son and chased him in his wheelchair. Most important, there is talk — talk that communicates and talk that fails to communicate, talk that makes things clear and talk that leaves things more confused than ever. It is almost as if *The marrow of the world* and *Kate* had been interleaved so as to read as a single work. For the transitions are so smoothly managed that it is clearly of one life that we are reading. And though the marked differences of mood between the two modes of existence — on the one hand an easy-going, hopeless despair, and on the other a desperate

coming to grips with hardships and peril — though they mount in separate, parallel curves, they reach a simultaneous, integrated resolution. Moreover, without a single word of authorial comment on what he is doing, Mayne convinces us that what we are watching and listening to is realism and talk taking us as far as they can in real life, and that at about the point where dreams and nightmares and delusions (or fantasy) take over in real life, so they do in fiction.

It becomes apparent, particularly in *The marrow of the world* and *A game of dark,* that we are often at least as near to the frontier between sanity and insanity as to that between life and death — except, of course, that there is no such hard and fast line between the sane and the insane as between the quick and the dead. Therefore, in addition to the ingenuity and tact needed to present the peculiarly private emotions involved in all these novels, there are additional demands made on the writer if the shifting and often abnormal states of mind of a Donald or a Linda are to be captured convincingly. Extending such an argument, moreover, if the very world we live in elicits extraordinary tactics from the writers of adult fiction, why not from those of children's fiction? I grow impatient when my own children tell me it is harder for them to be teenagers than it was for me. They use this argument as an excuse for practically anything. But all the same, it *is* harder. And I am sometimes at least as intrigued, dazzled, and captivated by the technical aspects of certain books for children as I am by those in avant-grade writing for adults. I think, particularly, of a writer like Alan Garner, whose command of dialogue in *The owl service* and *Red shift* rivals that of Pinter and Stoppard. Moreover, the way Garner ruthlessly eliminates all traces of the narrator's voice in both books, yet at the same time emphasizes their essential fictiveness by brilliantly manipulating the levels of his narration, juggling in the one case with myth and naturalism and in the other with three different time frames, makes many post-modernists seem like quaint Victorian throw-backs.

And yet, and yet, though I am almost as convinced of the need for such dexterity in the case of *The owl service* as I am in that of *A game of dark,* I find that *Red shift* comes close to a mere exercise of ingenuity. At which point I recall the relief of that silent and oh so moral majority in some of my classes if, along with Mayne or Garner, I have put on my course list Morley Callaghan's *Luke Baldwin's vow.* Here at last is an author they can feel at home with. Here at last is an author who, not so much through what he says as through the way he says it, is familiar, reassuring, secure.

Auden talks of "resisting the temptations/ To skyline operations" along the frontier. We are right to rejoice over and celebrate those who push back the frontiers of children's literature — the frontiers of both content and technique, since in so many cases the one operation depends on the other. We are even right to give them Carnegie Medals and Newbery Awards. But we do need to remember that majority of the child population — that majority, even, of

the minority who read books — for whom such "skyline operations" offer too little that is familiar, reassuring, secure. They are the children who will grow up to be the adult majority that does not read Joyce or Kafka or Borges. They may therefore also be the children who most need to exercise their imaginations while there is still time — to learn the lesson which Callaghan, however unimaginatively, may teach them but which Mayne, however imaginatively, will not.

NOTES

[1]Monica Hughes, *The keeper of the Isis light* (London: Methuen, 1981, p. 16. Further page references in text.

[2]That the one occasion we do not perceive things through Philip's consciousness should be when Linda alone accompanies her dwarfish guide to where the marrow of the world is to be found emphasizes, appropriately, her total isolation at this point in the story.

[3]A sequel to *Look through my window, Kate* began its existence as a series of poems by Kate, a character in the former story. They continued to insist on being written, says the author, even after the earlier book had appeared in print.

[4]Jean Little, *Kate* (New York: Harper & Row, 197l), p. 75.

[5]See Fred Inglis, *The promise of happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 40.

[6]William Mayne, *A game of dark* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), p. 52.

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