

Real plums in imaginary cakes

Claire Mackay

Résumé: *Les livres de Claire Mackay, dont Le programme Minerve, sont traduits en français. Celle-ci retrace pour nous sa première rencontre avec un récit apparemment anodin, Og, son of fire, qui a façonné les personnages de ses romans, notamment celui de Julie, son héroïne rebelle.*

In a metaphor both homely and elegant, one I cheerfully purloin today, Mary McCarthy has observed that the link between life and literature is one of "putting real plums into an imaginary cake." What I propose to do is to extract, from the half-dozen imaginary cakes I have baked, a handful of plums for our mutual inspection, plums plucked from my own life or the lives of people close to me, which have found their way, directly or circuitously, into my books.

To push the metaphor further--a bad habit of mine--plums come in several varieties: some are sour, others sweet; a few are fibrous, tough-skinned and gaudy; the flesh of others is soft, the skin fragile, the colour delicate. And in the process of baking, the plums change: some stay solid and almost whole; some shrink and blur around the edges; some swell far beyond their original dimensions; some nearly disappear in what surrounds them, leaving only a sort of vestigial spoor; and a few disintegrate altogether, and what remains is the memory of a plum, a phantom plum, known only to the cook. At least until now. It is this last sort of plum, the phantom plum, that I'd like to talk about most, because I believe it flavours--or haunts, you may pick your own image --everything I've written.

When I stand a little distance from my books and look at them askance, before they can notice what I'm doing, so to speak, I glimpse a common theme or pattern running through them. And this pattern, this theme--the phantom plum--springs from the favourite book of my childhood. Its title, which nobody has ever heard of, is *Og, son of fire*. To my shame, I can't remember the author. But I do remember it was the 12th book on the second shelf of the bookcase in the northeast corner of the children's department of Yorkville Public Library in Toronto, and it had a maroon cover with embossed black printing on it. I know because I read it 17 times. I suspect that I also dusted it 17 times, since, when I was ten years old, I worked at the Yorkville Public Library, at a wage slightly below that of a Victorian ratcatcher. (By the way, I should dearly

love to own a copy of *Og*, and stand ready to offer my next royalty cheque--which is not as generous a gesture as you might think--to a willing vendor.)

I wish I could claim that *The secret garden*, or *Anne of Green Gables*, or perhaps Oswald Spengler's *The decline of the west* was my favourite childhood book. But no. It was *Og, son of fire*. *The decline of the west* was my second favourite. Og is--I use the present tense because for me Og lives--a paleolithic prepubescent boy who is the despair of his father, for when it comes to spears and clubs and stone axes, Og is all opposable thumbs. Nor is poor Og held in high esteem by his peer group: he is always the last to be picked when the kids play Kick-the-Skull or Run, Mammoth, Run. Og never gets elected class president. Og is not an opinion leader in his neighbourhood. (Nor as it happens, am I. I have never been asked for my opinion on anything, except where I got my rugs cleaned, and I couldn't have given a satisfactory answer, because no one has phoned me since.) Og is a misfit, an outsider, a quiet revolutionary, a wanderer and a wonderer, with a talent for solitude, a knack for the romantic, a love for the larger than life, and a capacity for epiphany. He dreams of noble deeds, of valour, of glory and sacrifice, and of a place in the sun of his father's eyes. Because Og is what he is, to him is granted, courtesy of a serendipitous local lightning bolt, the gift, the transmuting power, and the terrible magic of fire. He brings that gift, with appropriate accompanying heroics, to his people, to his father. His dream comes true.

Why did I love Og? Why did I read his story with such intensity and devotion? You will have guessed the obvious: yes, I was Og, no matter that he and I were separated by sex, 500 millennia of alleged civilization, and several other infinities of difference. I was Og--but not, I fear, nearly so brave. There is a family story, which I haven't yet managed to suppress, that as a child I was frightened of grass. I've come a long way: it doesn't scare me anymore. Except at night, sometimes. I was an undercover Og, a closet Og. I dreamed Og dreams, of quest and discovery, of impossible bravery, even of martyrdom when I was feeling especially dramatic or melancholy and later, when I had 3 children in 3 years, I got a chance at it. I wanted a place for myself; and I longed, often, to make a gift to my father, to bring a light to his eyes. I also thought it would be terrific not to wear shoes.

Og, or a part of him, is in all the books I have written. The children in my books, like Og, like the secret me, like most of us perhaps, tend to be passionate, if reluctant, outlaws. Because they are so, they win through to a fuller sense of themselves as human beings who are valid and powerful. And sometimes they bring gifts, too.

So Steve, in my first book, *Mini-bike hero* (written for and drawn from my remarkably Og-like third son) upsets his father, his teacher (modelled on a real, if unbelievable, teacher who was heavily into bondage and discipline), and six or seven commandments in pursuit of his dream, finally risking, if not

life, then certainly limb, in a redeeming act of heroism that heals all wounds with the exception of the limb, as the sun sinks slowly in the west.

So Julie, in a later book in the series, rebels at cultural stereotypes and parental expectations, even as Og did, even as I did, although I happened to be 35 at the time and it was my children's expectations I rebelled against, then rescues her friend Colin--another outlaw--from despair, not to mention a magnificently described forest fire, and brings about for both of them a deeper understanding of, and reconciliation with, their parents, as the sun rises slowly in the east.

So Barney in *Exit Barney McGee* (the surname meaning, by the way, "son of fire," as does MacKay, which might be why I married the fellow), his place usurped by a too-strict stepfather, runs away in search of his real father, only to find that some dreams are false, that gifts come in odd packages, and that heroes may wear humble disguise.

So Lucie Laplante, the young French-Canadian millworker in *One proud summer*, whose father's death has split her life in two, musters the courage to fight injustice, breaking several laws, a dozen factory windows, and a few heads along the way, and discovers not only her own power, not only the power of herself joined to like-minded others, but also the thrill of subversion, as I did when at age 11 I delivered illegal midnight pamphlets calling for the violent overthrow of the government.

And so Minerva, in *The Minerva program*, built like a large wading bird, inclined to lose control of her limbs and her temper, feeling left out at home and at school, desperate to be good at something, to know her own excellence, and finding it in the two-edged magic of computers, is tempted by *hubris* into disaster, and must mend a shattered friendship, burglarize the school, and engage in some dazzling derring-do before she wins her place.

You will not have failed to note that fathers figure largely in my books. And you will further not have failed to infer that my father figured largely in my life, even, or perhaps especially, when he wasn't around. Our relationship was intense, often troubled--I am very like him--but I have neither the time nor is this the appropriate place for me to enlarge on the matter. I will say only that like Steve, I fought with him. Like Barney, I searched for him. Like Lucie, I mourned him when he died too soon. Like Minerva, I remember him. But she can speak for herself:

Minerva glanced at the . . . photograph, . . . the one of her father . . . and herself when she was four. She still remembered that day. They'd been at the beach, with the sun hot and white in the middle of the sky, and her father had called to her. She had run to where he stood, tall as a tree it seemed then, and he had swept her up to the place he kept for her on one warm shoulder. And she had looked out from that great height and seen farther than she'd ever seen.

That passage (*The Minerva program*, p. 27) is plagiarized from a sonnet I

wrote for my father when he was dying. Like Og, I wanted to bring him a gift. It's entitled *Snapshot, 1934*):

. . . And this was taken at the beach one day
When I was only three, or maybe four.
I remember I was busily at play
Building moats and minarets along the shore
When he called. I ran to where he stood.
He was stronger, taller than a tree,
And I climbed the tower of his limbs till I could
Nestle in the place he kept for me
On one warm shoulder. . . Ah, in that hour
I was a queen! My lifted finger hurled
Suns, made mountains dance, and deserts flower!
For as long as he held me, I held the world.
. . . Scared? No, I was never scared at all.
I knew my father would not let me fall.

I have never managed to get that piece published; now I grab at the chance.

This particular sequence is, I suppose, rather like the "begats" in the Bible. The real event, the story plain, is my father and I on the beach in 1934, which begat the photograph. (Unfortunately my brother is in it too, which rather spoils it.) The photograph begat the sonnet. The sonnet begat the passage in *The Minerva program*. And now, together, we have just engaged in a further begetting: as I tell you of these things, you bring your own perceptions and experience to the understanding of them. The story is no longer plain, but suffused with colour. Each step in the genealogy, from the ancestral plum to the finished cake, is, in a way, a step further from reality, since it is shaped by, if not art, then certainly artifice. We might legitimately ask what is left of the original event, the first plum. I believe that however far we--and I'm sure I speak for most writers in this respect--may stray from the *fact* of the matter, we never abandon, indeed we may enhance, the *truth* of the matter. And the truth of the matter--in this case the faith of a child in her father's desire to keep her safe--is doubtless why we later pick the plum.

"What a writer has not experienced in his heart," said the biographer Edgar Johnson of Dickens, "he can do no more than coldly image from without. Only what he has proved within emerges from those depths with irresistible power, . . . no matter how thoroughly the mere surface details may have been changed and disguised."

Two hundred and fifty years ago John Newbery, that hustling, merry pioneer of children's books, opened his shop in St. Paul's Churchyard in London. Above it he hung a sign, with a slogan inviting all children to enter and find books they might love, books that might show them their place in the world, books that gave them, in Nina Bawden's words, "a little hope, and courage for the journey." The slogan read: "Trade and Plumb-Cake forever,

huzza!" I am trying with my own few plums, with my own small cakes, to live up to that grand ideal, so that one day, if I am lucky, a child will say of one of my books, as I said of Og, "This is my story, my own story."



Claire Mackay

Claire Mackay, a leading member of CANSCAIP (Canadian Society of Children's Authors, Illustrators and Performers), fits her writing into an energetic program of workshops, conferences and speeches.