

An adventure with time travel

Barbara Smucker

Résumé: *Dans cet hommage aux vertus créatrices de l'histoire, Barbara Smucker explique la genèse de son roman Garth et la sirène et dévoile les influences qui ont enrichi sa mise en oeuvre.*

In the *Guide to Writing and illustrating children's books*, edited by David Booth, Monica Hughes writes,

Fantasy is not bound by the laws of the universe but by the laws of the particular world of fantasy that the writer has designed.

Neither science fiction nor fantasy should be used in order to bolster an implausible plot or weak characterization. The only reason for being on one of Jupiter's moons or out in a fantasy world is because that is the only place your story will work. Research is the strongest tool you have.

I would add that the same comments hold for a story set back in time.

I have just completed a novel for children which could be called a time-warp story, a travel-in-time or a past-time fantasy. I call it *Garth and the mermaid*. It is one of those stories that was researched, partially written, and then put away. In 1990, however, it was unearthed with my discovery of a new approach and a new beginning.

The original idea for the plot came to me like a tiny electric spark during a year in Cambridge, England, when my husband had a sabbatical there. He and our daughter had separate interests and studies and I became enchanted with ancient cathedrals.

One day while touring through one of them with a guide, I noticed a small, delicate mermaid carved on the wall of a bishop's chapel. I was puzzled. The guide said, "It seems to be the only mermaid in this vast cathedral. We think it was done by a stone mason's apprentice."

The young apprentice came alive for me and I named him Garth. I began researching through the vast supply of materials on medieval history in the Cambridge libraries. I soon realized that it was a grave offense to carve in stone on a cathedral wall before one had received the hard-earned title of mason and membership in the stone mason's guild.

What was Garth's punishment? Why did he do it? Why did he carve a mermaid?

The story developed chapter by chapter. Then it was packed away when our sabbatical year ended and we returned to another world, another life and other books to be written.

Garth, however, refused to be packed away. He would emerge and I would think, "Who am I, a North American, born on the prairies, to compete with the superb English authors of medieval historical fiction like Rosemary Sutcliff, Leon Garfield and many others? Could these same authors come to my prairies and write books about cowboys, covered wagons and sod houses?"

But Garth wouldn't stay buried. Other books, however, got in his way. My love of research led to writing historical fiction that brought slaves and refugees to Canada. Then a job as children's librarian at the Kitchener Public Library diverted me into reading books on every shelf and especially those catalogued under Fantasy.

Among my favourites were Phillipa Pearce's *Tom's midnight garden* which Sheila Egoff describes in *Thursday's child* as a "perfectly conceived fantasy where Tom and Hatty came together across boundaries of time and dreaming because of their need and desire for each other....Victorian Hatty and 20th century Tom had longed for someone to play with. Going back in time Hatty is able to take Tom with her."

Other time-travel fantasies enchanted me. Janet Lunn's *The root cellar* was one of them. I liked what Michele Landsberg's *Guide to children's books* said about it: "*The root cellar* is an unusually fine time-shift fantasy about Rose Larken who slips back in time to Upper Canada. During a graphically realistic search for Will, lost somewhere in the American Civil War, she discovers compassion, roots and warmth of friendship."

There were other time-slip fantasies that I consumed: Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck everlasting*, Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, Susan Cooper's *The dark is rising*, C.S. Lewis's *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*, Karleen Bradford's *The other Elizabeth*, Kevin Major's *Blood Red Ochre*, Cora Taylor's *The doll*, Kit Pearson's *A handful of time*, Ruth Nichols's *A walk out of the world*. There were more.

Then persistent Garth emerged again. I think I took him with me on the day I gave a reading in a grade seven class at a school near Toronto.

As we entered the classroom there was noisy excitement. The boys and girls were studying medieval history and for several hours each day they lived in fourteenth-century England. Every student chose a character to portray from this long-ago time.

Suddenly my Garth became a student in that classroom. He was a twentieth-century boy in Canada fascinated with fourteenth-century England. Perhaps he did think, feel and view that ancient time differently than a boy or girl living in twentieth-century England. But he could experience the event. He could research it. He could time-travel back to the Middle Ages and become the young boy who carved the Mermaid.

Fortunately, my editor David Kilgour at Penguin Books Canada agreed. He suggested the story might begin in a Canadian city known for its buildings of native stone. I remembered attending a concert at Guelph in Ontario's Gothic cathedral, The Church of Our Lady. It was built of native limestone. A description of Guelph in the Canadian Encyclopedia fit my story perfectly. "The wide use of a warm-hued locally quarried limestone, easily worked by stone carvers, has given a visual unity to much of the community's downtown streets." It was on one of these streets that Jean Little's grandfather built with limestone and fell to his death from a broken scaffold.

My Garth, at last, fulfilled his demand to come alive, and Janet Wilson's book cover illustration skillfully captured his frightened look when his carved mermaid was discovered on the cathedral's walls. I should add that research and travel were not my only tools for writing *Garth and the mermaid*. Dr. Ted McGee, a member of the English faculty of St. Jerome's College at the University of Waterloo, gave the manuscript a helpful and critical reading.

Other time-travel books are appearing in 1992. One that I think is both profound and well written is *Anything can happen* by Toronto-based writer Susan Hughes. Her young hero, Raj, time-slips to India and encounters his heritage in the 1600s at Agra, the home of the world-famous Taj Mahal. A violent act is subdued by his use of Gandhi's non-violent resistance.

I hope that *Garth and the mermaid* qualify under Monica Hughes' definition of Fantasy.

Barbara Smucker *has lived in Canada for 23 years; she resides and writes in Waterloo, Ontario. Garth and the mermaid is her tenth book. Her books have been published in other countries including Japan.*