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Something Wicked This Way Plods: Fantasizing the Banality of Evil / Hilary Turner

The Princess Pawn. Maggie L. Wood. Sumach, 2003. 299 pp. \$10.95 paper. ISBN 1-894549-29-5.

Dance of the Stones. The Summer of Magic Quartet 2. Andrea Spalding. Orca, 2003. 174 pp. \$9.95 paper. ISBN 1-55143-268-4.

The Shining World. The Notherland Journeys 2. Kathleen McDonnell. Second Story, 2003. 233 pp. \$8.95 paper. ISBN 1-896764-79-7.

The Sacred Seal. The Goodfellow Chronicles 1. J.C. Mills. Key Porter, 2001. 304 pp. \$14.95 paper. ISBN 1-55263-328-4.

The Messengers. The Goodfellow Chronicles 2. J.C. Mills. Key Porter, 2003. 294 pp. \$15.95 paper. ISBN 1-55263-551-1.

The Book of Dreams. The Chronicles of Faerie 4. O.R. Melling. Penguin, 2003. 538 pp. \$17.00 paper. ISBN 0-14-100434-7.

The Dirt Eaters. The Longlight Legacy 1. Dennis Foon. Annick, 2003. 312 pp. \$19.95 cloth. ISBN 1-55037-807-4.

In the most ambitious (and perhaps the most original) of these recent fantasy novels, the climactic confrontation between good and evil is somewhat dampened by the protagonist's discovery that malevolence is not really very interesting: "This was not the imaginary evil so often depicted in the world as epic and exciting. This

was barren and monotonous and utterly dismal. *The banality of evil*. There was nothing lively or imaginative about it, for it worked always to kill liveliness and the imagination" (492). So observes Dana Faolan in O.R. Melling's *The Book of Dreams* as she prepares to sacrifice herself in an apocalyptic battle for the preservation of contact between the Kingdom of Faerie and our world. The italicized phrase is Hannah Arendt's, who famously accounted for the willingness of Adolph Eichmann and others like him to operate the machinery of the Holocaust with no apparent awareness of the enormity of their deeds. It was — and is — a good phrase for a historical moment in which the evils that are actually done in the world are not merely stranger but also crueler and more frightening than even the most lurid fiction. It is not, however, a phrase that springs to mind with regard to Milton's Satan, nor Goethe's Mephistopheles, nor Stoker's Dracula. Intriguing villains, troubled intellectual villains, villains whose evil emanates from weaknesses over which they have no control — these seem to be the products of times more stable morally and more assured culturally than ours at the present moment. It may be that we cannot currently afford to entertain these seductive miscreants.

In any case, the depiction of a battle between good and evil, a common feature in all seven of these books, is undoubtedly more challenging when one of the parties is hamstrung by his or her (or its) own banality. With certain notable exceptions, the one-sidedness of the contest produces a kind of limpness in the designs of these novels, and in some cases a nagging doubt that the heroic efforts of good have been well applied. This can be a serious flaw in a work of fantasy — witty, entertaining, and otherwise well crafted as it may be.

Maggie L. Wood's *The Princess Pawn* certainly exhibits these latter qualities. Its plot is structured around a game of chess, a device with well-known literary antecedents. In this case the game is more like three-dimensional chess, however, for the contest takes place at three levels — the ordinary world, the realm of the immortals, and the magical land of Mistolear — and is so extensive that it involves parts of the latter setting that some of the characters have never seen. As with other examples in this genre, the device works best as an allegory, and Wood is adept for the most part at matching the rules of the game to the exigencies of plot and characterization. Each move is a journey. Traps and sacrifices abound. The Queens have all the power. The knights are unpredictable. Pawns can only move forward. To be captured is to disappear from the game. It is, in fact, the capture of Diantha, Princess of Gallandra, that necessitates her daughter Willow's temporary sojourn in our world and that later calls her back as the potential saviour of the kingdom.

Willow Kingswell is a reluctant heroine, and — since she wants to go back to where she came from — an intractable pawn. Her task, like Alice's, is to infiltrate the back rank of her opponent, thus becoming a queen and replenishing white's depleted forces. But having been yanked out of a most interesting period in her life in Earthworld, a period that seems to promise boyfriends, popularity, and fun, she only gradually comes to terms with her regal responsibilities. Wood handles the transition between worlds cleverly in her first novel, offering us a sulky teenage heroine who is given to such locutions as "jerk," "jeez," and "creep," and who is refreshingly underwhelmed by the formality of Mistolear dress, speech, and customs. Yet, at the same time, Willow's progress toward true confidence, generosity, and self-knowledge will appeal to lovers of high fantasy. Once queened, she is a real queen who richly deserves the respect and honours bestowed on her by her subjects.

The overall purpose of the game is somewhat unclear, however, not only to the characters — who have simply been thrown into their roles — but to the reader as well. Only toward the end of the novel does it emerge that a power-loving elf named Nezeral has devised the game as a way of enlivening the long, dull aeons he must spend in the realm of the immortals. Sadistically, he enjoys pitting lesser beings against one another and watching their confusion and pain. When confronted by Willow's newly-achieved magical capabilities, he defends himself unconvincingly in a set speech on the attractions of power for its own sake. Nezeral's defeat is accomplished by magically returning him to infancy, replacing the misguided adult with "a kicking, squirming baby boy" (281) who will be raised properly this time by Willow's own mother, now also restored to her rightful place at court. Although the device neatly ties up the loose ends of the story, simply pressing the rewind button in this fashion seems to evade some important questions. If we are indeed "as flies to wanton boys," what is the lasting significance of good's triumph over evil? Is good nothing more than the negation of its opposite? After such knowledge, what conviction?

Nezeral's counterpart in Andrea Spalding's *Dance of the Stones* is a wraithlike Dark Being whose mind has also been corrupted by a desire for power. Ideally, according to the Celtic mysticism that inspires this book, light and darkness must be balanced, as must the four material elements that comprise the universe. When the supernatural forces who represent good — Equus, Ava, Myrddin, and King Sel, who has long been buried under Sibury Hill — sense that this cosmic alignment is slipping, they call upon the assistance of four human children. This is the second adventure of Chantel, Adam, Owen, and Holly, who find themselves summoned to Avebury, England, site of an ancient stone circle, larger and more mysterious than Stonehenge. Their task is to recover Ava's circlet, the symbol of her ancient authority, and thus restore the balance of opposite powers. This they achieve, despite a series of attempts on the part of the wraith to invade their consciousness and frustrate their plans.

The underlying structure of this book is sound, but its surface is cluttered with details and digressions only tangentially related to the main plot. Like the magical adventure stories of Edward Eager, and in some ways like C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*, *Dance of the Stones* portrays the resourcefulness of a group of children who must contend with powers greater than themselves. Their struggle is set in the context of a lengthy historical struggle, and the glimpses into the Neolithic origins of Avebury circle and its natural magic are interesting and effective. On the other hand, the works of both Eager and Lewis derive much of their strength from the insight of E. Nesbit (whose influence is acknowledged by both) that character should drive the action, not the inverse. Although Spalding creates a breathless narrative filled with twists and turns, many of its events seem arbitrary and unmotivated. The children are caught in a whirlwind of events, rather than personally involved. As Adam, the most fully realized of the four central characters, remarks with Eeyore-like skepticism: "This is nuts. . . . Wise beings, dreams, a magic acorn, the Mother tree, a wraith, and stones that are supposed to dance. That was all complicated enough. Now suddenly Ava's hurt and there's a talking bat and a Golden King. . . . It's all too much. . . . I can't keep track because everything's happening at once" (115).

Nor does the eventual thwarting of the Dark Being provide more than fleeting satisfaction. Because her malignity is motiveless, she can be checked but not con-

quered. And because her existence is necessary to the balance of light and darkness, she can never be eliminated. Such a dualistic conception of good and evil is not conducive to either closure or optimism. On the final page, as the children rest from their labours in preparation for the third installment in their "summer of magic," the Wise Ones are pictured looking fearfully (and, one suspects, wearily) across the universe at an "approaching black cloud" (169).

Not quite cosmic in scope, but still expansive, is the imaginative canvas of *The Shining World* by Kathleen McDonnell. Also the second in a series, a sequel to *The Nordlings*, the book follows the adventures of Peggy, a musically-gifted and self-reliant teenager. As a child, Peggy had created her own imaginary world — *literally* created, for Notherland and its inhabitants have taken on a life of their own and continue to evolve even in her absence. Pay-Gee the Creator, as she is known to her creatures, co-exists with the ordinary Peggy who is spending the summer as a tree-planter in northern Canada. When a crisis in Notherland draws her back to the world of childhood, she has all her grown-up experience to bring to bear on the problem. She is accompanied by Gary, the young Aboriginal man who figured as Jackpine in the earlier adventure.

Like all good imaginary worlds, Notherland is both familiar and strange. Imprinted with the traces of Peggy's musical background, it is the home of characters named Mi and Re9. It is also the repository of some of the utterly quirky details of childhood — a doll named Molly, whose accidentally missing eye has given her a vocation as a pirate; a philosophical talking loon named Gavi; an overhanging canopy of light known as the RoryBory. Somehow these disparate elements come together in a self-consistent microcosm. It transpires that Mi, in emulation of her creator, has discovered new powers of her own and has gone off to seek a land she calls the Shining Place. Fearing that in her innocence Mi has fallen prey to the evil power known as Nobodaddy, Peggy accepts the task of tracking her down.

The method of travel in this adventure is collective dreaming. Lying in star-formation with their heads together, Peggy and her friends dream their way along the route taken earlier by Mi. This includes a stop for tea on an ice floe with Sir John Franklin, an interlude on a pirate ship with the sixteenth-century Pirate Queen Grania O'Malley, and (as the trail grows warmer) a visit to the London workshop of William Blake. All three historical settings are well researched and vivid, yet it is the third that makes sense of the adventure.

Indeed, the thread that unifies the book as a whole is Blake's theory of the imagination, which accounts not only for the peculiar autonomy of Peggy's creation, but also for the evil force that all the characters are now convinced has abducted Mi. In a delightful scene, Peggy and William Blake vie for the dubious honour of having brought Nobodaddy into existence. In Blake's mythology, Nobodaddy is the Father of Jealousy; he is associated with the old transcendent gods whose function it is to punish and oppress. "He is the squelcher, the oppressor, the one who destroys what he cannot own or control," says the fictional Blake (153). He is "Nobody," says Peggy, recalling a pretend-monster whose name became "Nobodaddy" only by a slip of the tongue (152). It is no accident, of course, that these two visionaries have given identical names to the same predatory power. As with the collective dreaming that moves the characters through time and space, "all things exist in the imagination and . . . all sentient creatures simply draw on it like a vast pool for their ideas and inspiration" (152).

Nobodaddy differs from the dark powers mentioned above in more than his

pedigree. As the overlord of a hellish place called the FarNear, Nobodaddy is parasitic upon the creative energy that goes along with innocence. Although protean in his manifestations, he is a natural slave, more like a shadow cast by human creativity than its true opponent. Unlike the others, he is motivated, driven by a kind of Satanic envy that is more complex and plausible than sheer indiscriminate malice. Peggy's final battle with Nobodaddy, a battle in which real injuries are inflicted, shows him as anything but banal. *The Shining Place* is not, admittedly, intended as a primer of Romantic philosophy. Its characters and plot are at the forefront. Yet these would be less attractive and engaging by far without the sophistication of its moral vision.

The first two volumes of *The Goodfellow Chronicles*, intended for slightly younger readers, have something of the same zany energy as *The Shining Place*, yet the story is more diffuse and the moral framework less prominent. The books are organized around a contest between two supernatural factions — the Sage, who are humanity's helpers, and the Fen who try to stop them. Diminutive and rarely glimpsed, the Sage make it their business to whisper in the ears of human geniuses whose confidence has failed them or whose projects have come to a standstill. To them we owe the productivity of such luminaries as Galileo, Newton, Rembrandt, Marie Curie, Florence Nightingale, and Winston Churchill. To ensure that they remain inconspicuous, the Sage dress themselves in mouse suits, the perfect disguise for a long-living and widely traveled race, for "mice have populated most of the earth's surface for millions of years, and live in every type of climate" (*The Sacred Seal* 32). As the story opens, Jolly Goodfellow, the 902-year-old tiny servant of humanity, has just been discovered by young Sam Middleton. Sam's misery at being forced to move across the country with his parents is greatly alleviated when he makes Mr. Goodfellow's acquaintance, and the two become collaborators.

Although the plot is episodic and punctuated by lively confrontations between the two forces, it centres on a mysterious scroll, ostensibly the property of Professor Hawthorne, the previous owner of Sam's new house. The Professor himself has vanished without a trace, and his whereabouts and the location of the scroll are subjects that keenly interest Avery Mandrake, a sinister archeologist and former colleague of Hawthorne. When Sam and Mr. Goodfellow discover the scroll virtually under Mandrake's nose, the second stage of their quest begins. The scroll contains mysterious symbols reminiscent of crop circles found in England. Believing that the sites of these formations will lead them to the missing Professor, the two take their operation across the Atlantic, pursued by Mandrake, who is determined to beat them to the quarry, and by the Fen, who are determined to thwart them. Mandrake has good reason to be interested, for it turns out that the Professor's scroll is one of a pair, the other of which he has secretly had in his possession all along. Together, the scrolls reveal the prehistoric arrival of members of an extra-terrestrial civilization upon earth and their influence upon human affairs.

These are enjoyable books, whose strengths are characterization, scientific speculation, and the jocular humour and drawings of J.C. Mills. The contest between good and evil, although structurally necessary, is handled with a light touch. Avery Mandrake is almost a slapstick villain, easily derailed by booby traps, whereas Shrike and Bogg Fen, although disagreeable, are more inclined to melodramatic threats than actual violence. The indestructibility of these malefactors, however, is their most important feature, for it is clear that the seesaw battle for possession of the scrolls will continue through another volume.

While a two-dimensional antagonist is no particular handicap in a comedy, a serious novel needs something more substantial. O.R. Melling's *The Book of Dreams*, volume four in her well-received *Chronicles of Faerie*, is both morally serious and nearly epic in scope. At over five hundred pages, it unfolds a multi-layered tale of the final battle for the alliance between the kingdoms of Earth and Faerie, an alliance that historically has benefited humanity and that the enemies of humanity are determined to smash. The book begins promisingly, with a wolf running through Queen's Park in the middle of the night, communing with the stone memorials of leaders and fallen soldiers. The image is in fact a good emblem for the work as a whole, whose principal thesis is that Canada is no stranger to enchantment. Like Robertson Davies, who devoted a whole career to depicting the hidden passions of Canadians, Melling maintains that there are unseen agents of magic afoot in the land, whose presence enriches our various cultures and inspires our heroes.

When she illustrates the actions of these spirits as embodied in individuals, the results are striking. For example, she perceptively describes a troupe of Cape Breton musicians as follows: "Throats hoarse with whiskey and cigarettes and age, they were men of the sea and men of the mines, hard men who lived hard lives, eking out a living, battling bad governments and poverty and hardship, their lineage not forgotten, the blood of the Druids in their veins, the memory of the ancient stones, the blood sacrifice and the Otherworld so close to their own" (245). The same authenticity can be seen in the Cree medicine man who conjures a vision of the Great Wheel of Life, the elderly Chinese woman who (with the help of her alter-ego, the Dragon Lady) invokes the aid of the *I-Ching*, and the young adventurers determined to relive the experience of Brendan the Irish Monk, said to have been the first European to cross the Atlantic to these shores.

When supernatural entities are shown in their proper shapes, however, the portrayal is often a little awkward. The Lord Ganesh makes an incongruous appearance on Brunswick Avenue in Toronto. The heroine's visit to the Sasquatch in Northern British Columbia strikes me as intrusive, as do the helpful actions of the Cailleach, the goblins, and Fingal the Giant, presiding powers of Cape Breton Island. The trolls who make their home beneath the Toronto subway, although amusing, seem equally superfluous. On the other hand, Melling's knowledge of comparative folklore is impressive, and her conviction that the magical creatures of all our contributing cultures have accompanied their peoples to Canada is hard to resist. The notion might be described as "magical multiculturalism," and it produces a fine mosaic of Cree, Mi'kmaq, Inuit, French, English, Irish, Chinese, and Indian beliefs, the majority of which are revealed as more compatible and complementary than one might suppose.

The plot of the novel, too complex to summarize here, builds toward a final confrontation with the powers of evil just at the threshold of the last remaining portal to Faerie. In her circuitous journey toward this decisive moment, Dana, the questing heroine, has reinvigorated her own faith in the power of fairies — a faith that has been in remission since she left her home in Ireland. She has gleaned knowledge in far-flung corners of Canada, in both the present day and far back in the country's history. She has assembled about her a sizeable company of supporters and friends, including a love interest who has sacrificed his own magical powers to save her life. She has recovered her own identity as princess in Faerie and is prepared to die for the protection of that kingdom.

Against all this is pitted Grimstone, a persistent but undistinguished vehicle

for the forces of evil. He is an elemental — one who can control the weather — and he makes frequent appearances in the form of mists, squalls, odiferous breezes, storms, and blizzards, always opportunistically, when good is vulnerable. Motivated by “mindless and implacable” hatred (298), Grimstone is scarcely more than a blank screen upon which various characters project their fears. Except for a brief incarnation as a high school teacher — his only example of wit — Grimstone trickles through the story like a wisp of smoke. Nothing of the texture of the cultural tapestry so carefully depicted throughout the book is evident in him: he is without history, without culture, and without individuality. His eventual and inevitable defeat is brought about very simply by the prosaic realization that we have nothing to fear but fear itself:

[Dana] sensed him in her mind like a malignant tumour. Worse than the physical revulsion was the mental anguish that came with the true knowledge of evil. She struggled to contain its reality without despairing, without falling prey to the darkness itself. *Truth shall be thy shield and buckler.* Acknowledging that evil existed in the world, she held to the truth of the struggle for good. Good existed and that was the truth and as long as good existed the war was not lost. Slowly and steadily, Dana smothered the evil within her heart. (494-95)

Because *The Book of Dreams* is so much more than a history of self-overcoming (although it is that, in part) and because its grasp of history and its understanding of the spiritual sources of human actions are so solid, this seems a curiously meager and disembodied portrait of their darker side. If evil is as insubstantial as all that, one wonders, why have the forces of good so expended themselves in combating it?

Evil considered as a perversion of good, rather than its shadowy or dependent opposite, yields rather more meaningful results in terms of both plot and characterization. This is the insight that distinguishes Dennis Foon’s most recent novel, *The Dirt Eaters*, from those we have considered so far, and it is what makes it the most interesting and morally complex of the group. The barren, contaminated, after-the-bomb setting of this book is reminiscent of Walter M. Miller’s *Canticle for Liebowitz*, as is the resurrection of primitive mythologies that is shown to take place when a civilization collapses into tribal enclaves. The first in a projected series called *The Longlight Legacy*, *The Dirt Eaters* is the story of young Roan’s abduction from his peaceable and secluded village and his forced schooling in the martial arts at the hands of a marauding cult. The charismatic leader of this cult, a self-annointed prophet known as Saint, is a villain whose malevolence is the more dangerous for its subtle attractiveness.

Saint is very good at what he does. Although illiterate, he has nevertheless created a religion based on partially remembered fragments of Roman pagan philosophy. Around him he has assembled a self-contained community of Friends and an elite band of fighters called the Brothers. The devastation of the landscape and the scarcity of food have made survival nearly impossible. Reasoning that the end justifies the means, Saint ensures the relative prosperity of his band by raiding other survivors for their possessions and entering into barter with the City — the only remnant of the former self-destructive civilization that is still intact. While conscious at some level of the compromises he has made, Saint is almost wholly in

the thrall of his own propaganda. His conflict with Roan, a mere twelve-year-old at their first encounter, is therefore a prolonged psychological struggle in which each must confront his true nature.

The struggle is complicated for Roan by his discovery that, despite his pacifist upbringing and beliefs, he turns out to be a gifted warrior. Easily passing through the various grisly stages of initiation into the Brotherhood, he is on the point of being accepted into their number when he discovers that for every one who joins, another must be sacrificed. This knowledge, coupled with his dawning awareness that Saint is a fraud and not a teacher, is enough to propel him out into the wilderness to live by his wits or die.

The balance of the narrative concerns Roan's journey across various alien landscapes, where he pieces together something of his true identity from the scattered survivors who remain. He is, in fact, Saint's dialectical opposite, the great-grandson of a true visionary who fled the conflagration, driven by a vision of peace and passive resistance. It was this ancestor, of course, who founded the village of Longlight, now left in ruins by Saint's depredations. By glimpsing small fragments of the past, Roan begins also to understand the lessons of history — that humanity has been reduced to its present desperation by a cycle of violence and revenge. Running in tandem with Roan's process of enlightenment are Saint's repeated attempts to recapture him. Characteristically, Saint wants to possess and control the rebel, not to destroy him, and it is this overweening desire that proves his undoing. In a satisfying final confrontation, the man of many compromises is annihilated by the youth, whose more solid moral vision prevents him from ever taking the easy way out.

It remains only to observe that, in fiction, the banality of evil seems also to imply the banality of good. A Manichean division of the world into the faceless opposites of good and evil leaves an intelligent protagonist with no real choices: he or she is destined to resist evil unthinkingly and to represent good without pausing to reflect. Although we are perhaps enduring a historical moment where moral choices seem obvious and automatic, writers and readers of fantasy know in their bones that things are never really as simple as they appear.

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Are We There Yet? Stories of Maps and Their Mapmakers / Gordon Lester

The Road to There: Mapmakers and Their Stories. Val Ross. Tundra, 2003. 146 pp. \$29.99 cloth. ISBN 0-88776-621-8.

In Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1997), Kublai Khan asks Marco Polo the purpose of his journeys. Marco answers, "Elsewhere is a negative mirror. The traveler recognizes the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will never have" (29). If Elsewhere is a negative mirror, then maps are distorted mirrors that reflect the desires, fears, cultural values, and personalities of their makers. Val Ross's