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Editorial

EDITORIAL

TALES WORTH THE TELLING



GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD



Many lovers of fantasy are of the opinion that we of the twentieth century have fallen upon grim times so far as the values of myth are concerned. Rejection of the principle of hierarchy entails that no one, however exalted in station, is above criticism; the ungenerous I've-got-my-rights-I'm-just-as-good-as-you-are spirit is undoubtedly among us, and has been for a long time. Children, many of whom have never heard a bedtime story, are fed travestied versions of nursery rhymes and fairy tales on much-acclaimed *Sesame Street*. Concrete separates us from the good earth; the sounds of automobiles and transistor radios fill our national parks, not to mention our cities; pollutants befoul the blue air, damage natural life, and may destroy the ozone layer and us. And so forth.

None of these things can be denied, but I would like to point out some reasons for hopefulness and affirmation of our times in the face of them all.

Otherness, distance from the commonplace, is one quality of fantasy and fairy story that seems to be receding from the range of our experience, as nature is despoiled and variety in human cultures loses ground to the uniformity of cars and Coca-Cola. Yet we should consider that Otherness may not have been all that accessible in the past either. Medieval people had armored knights and castles and virgin forests near at hand, and some of them were clearly stirred by the potential for romance in these things. But, as Lewis points out, the woodcutter's cottage on the edge of the forest was after all a commonplace, and many a woodcutter must have hankered for the remote splendors of the Holy Land and far Cathay, and knew them to be just as far out of reach as the Round Table is to us. The accessibility of the Other is a matter of degree. And even if (heaven forbid) our Earth ever becomes an unbroken megalopolis with no escape from concrete and billboards, a few may journey to Malacandra or Arcturus and return to tell us tales of the Other.

One of the most important characteristics of myth and fantasy literature, to my mind, is heroism. The heroic character is one who is angered by oppression, who is willing to sacrifice in order to fight the power of evil, who has (or manages to develop) the courage to do it. I learned in college and graduate school that all this is passé. Meaninglessness, disillusionment and cynicism were the burden of what knowledgeable people had learned from two world wars; the center cannot hold; ours is the age of the antihero. But all this meant was that the learned folk proclaiming this bad news were paying very selective attention to the times (which is unavoidable anyway). Courses were taught in Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd; there were none on Contemporary Heroes and Heroines.

Disappointing as our century is in so many ways, it has produced heroic men and women with surprising abandon. Over the years I collected quite a few, one of the first being Emperor Hirohito (and I'd grown up thinking him a heavy!) whose heroic courage, although it came too late to avert the Pacific war, appeared in time to save the lives of several million Japanese in 1945. One of my more recent acquisitions has been Elizabeth ten Boom, heroine together with her family of the Dutch Resistance, martyred in a Nazi prison. I admit I can hardly claim the ten Booms as my private discovery; and if in fact they are better known to plain folk who read popular books and watch second-rate movies than to worldly-wise philosophers and critics in academia, it is only another instance of the greater wisdom of fools.

The ironic thing about heroes is that when their aims are realized, they are out of a job; if we want more of them we must hope them to be unsuccessful. No doubt if storm troopers were swarming through our cities today and crematoria were smoking, some other Elizabeth would rise from her quiet kitchen to a windswept pinnacle of heroic achievement; but does anybody want to see the Shadow come so that her light will have a chance to burn?

Fortunately--or rather unfortunately--heroism on a smaller scale is within everyone's reach, because pain and injustice and exploitation are always with us. Anyone who mourns the passing of heroic ages and can make some spare time is in a position to increase the number of heroes in the world by one. There are always the desolate in hospitals needing visitors, hot lines needing to be staffed, hellholes that pass for prisons needing reform, vivisected animals and battered children needing defense. And on and on. Admittedly, entering such a dark place is not an adventure unless one has compassion, for anyone who does have compassion will need courage. And the maintaining of compassion without burnout over a long period will require endurance, not altogether unlike that needed to carry the Ring to the Mountain.

It is admittedly a small adventure. Hanging on the telephone at 2:00 A.M. listening to a homicidal or suicidal caller abuse you for causing all his problems will not turn you into a Frodo. If you crave a challenge of greater magnitude you could always move to India or South Africa and follow in the footsteps of Mother Teresa or Steve Biko. For ordinary people and practical purposes, local shadows will do. As Sam pointed out, adventures are pretty painful when one is in the midst of them. But sometimes afterwards there is a tale worth the telling.