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The Wood Between the Worlds

Abstract

Guest of Honor speech, Mythcon 15. A poetic and personal paean to the power and importance of story and storytelling—both oral and written.

Additional Keywords

Fantasy authorship; Story; Yolen, Jane—Technique

The Wood Between the Worlds

Jane Yolen

The Guest of Honor Speech delivered at the 15th annual Mythopoeic Conference, Mills College, Oakland, August 10-13, 1984.

In keeping with the theme of the conference, THE WOOD BETWEEN THE WORLDS, I would like to suggest that the one who dwells in the wood, is the guiding presence, the spirit and essence, is the author. The author creates out of her own body and mind that wood; plies the meadows with flowers of her imagining; laces the trees over in a canopy; designs intricate mosses and the lacy trailings of ferns underfoot. But if you think this is always a green and pleasant place, remember that even here—where in Elizabeth Pope's lovely words "miracles rise out of the wayside grass as easily as larks"—I—even here there are dragons. For the wood, being the author's spirit, means that the author's own dragons bedevil a place. So beware of sinkholes and sandpits, of thistle and thorn. This is still, even in the glare of the sun, a shadow land. No one goes here in total safety. Ever.

I want to take a minute to remind you of a rare Hermetic text, Abraham Lampesprink's "On a Philosopher's Stone", in which he writes the following which could serve as l'envoi to our weekend:

The sages say truly that two animals are in this forest: one glorious, beautiful and swift, a great and strong deer; the other an unicorn. ...If we apply the parable of our art, we shall call the forest the body... The Unicorn will be the spirit at all times. The deer desires no other name but that of the soul.... He that knows how to tame and master them by art, to couple them together, and to lead them in and out of the forest, may justly be called a Master. 2

But never forget the dragon dwells here, too.

Encircling the wood is the real world. Let us call it Mundano, where language is as flat as vowels can make them, where ideas are called data, where humans touch at nexus points, where magic is rigidly controlled by a light switch, and dragons sell breakfast cereal.

Within the wood is the world of Faerie. But to get into the world, one can not just stroll in casually. It requires a plunge, a leap of faith, a casting off the human skin. As George MacDonald wrote in The Golden Key:

The Old Man of the Earth stooped over the floor of the cave, raised a huge stone from it, and left it leaning. It disclosed a great hole that went plumb-down.

"That is the way," he said.

"But there are no stairs."

"You must throw yourself in. There is no other way."3

Here then is the entrance to the wood, to Faerie. Throw yourself in. This is the place where image feeds the imagination. Where the word is spoken that is the beginning of the magic spell. And that word is ONCE.

Once upon a time... once there was and there was not... once when the world was filled with wishes the way the sea is filled with fishes... once.

ONCE UPON A TIME... there was a man who was in all things successful and comfortable. He had a fine family, money enough to treat his friends, and a craft of which he was proud. He had an honest name and an untroubled heart, yet he was not completely happy.

"I must know Truth," he said to his wife.

"Then you must seek her until you find her," his wife answered.

And so the man left his fine family and his friends whom he had often treated and the craft for which he was justly famous and went out onto the road a beggar after Truth.

He searched in towns and villages, he looked for Her in the city streets. He made his way into farmlands and onto seacoasts, through deserts and hilly wastes. And after many sleepless nights and tired days, in a small cave atop a vast mountain, he found her.

Truth was a wizened old woman with only a single tooth left in her head. Her eyes were rheumy and her skin drawn fine and crinkled as parchment over her bones. Her hair hung in lank strands on her shoulders. But she was Truth, of this there could be no doubt.

She gestured to the man with a hand crabbled with age.

"Come in, come in," she sang out to him, her voice miraculously lyric and pure.

And the man went into the cave.

He spent a year and a day by the old woman's side and learned all that she had to teach. And at the end of that time, he said to her, "My Lady Truth, I left my wife and my family, my hearth and my friends to be by your side and learn from you. And now I am ready and must go home. But still, I would do something for you in exchange. What can I do?"

Truth looked at him and cocked her head to one side. Then she laid an ancient finger to her nose.

"When you talk of me," she said, "tell them I am young and beautiful."

When I first heard that story, from a storyteller named Carol Birch on a mountain top in Tennessee, I laughed. "So much for truth," I commented.

But as I flew home, the story became a part of me. I realized that what I had heard was a metaphor for story and that though it might have seemed a study in mendacity, a story is not a lie. Sometimes to tempt our readers to know the truth, we have to embroider what we say. Draw them into it. Then give them a way to always remember. Story is a way of remembering. Our ancestors knew that. Why else have the greatest teachers—and our greatest and most important religious books—told stories to set down truth?

Once upon a time doesn't mean a specific era. It means all time and all times. Just one small letter stands between never never land and ever ever land. And it is with exquisite care that someone once called faerie the place where things never were and always are.

We are a people of story. It is what distinguishes us from animals, this storytelling ability. Animals, of

course, have a marginal language: the tilt of head, the twitch of ear, the placement of forepaws or tail. Scientists watching wolves have distinguished a whole variety of signals, primitive language tricks. Ornithologists can tell a southern crow from a northern crow by caws and effect. Dolphins have been studied and their clicking signals partially translated. Whale "song" has been charted. Jane Goodall learned to decipher chimpanzee communications; others following her techniques have worked with mountain gorillas. Washoe and Nim and other captive apes have been taught hand signs and to identify symbols on cards with certain words that signify treats. But Story? Only humans can place words together, and so make whole stories (though there is rudimentary evidence that some apes can lie!) Only human beings can create tales that change and/or structure the universe.

I remember vividly the first great story I was ever told. I must have been about seven at the time and we were at a family camp up in Bar Harbor, Maine. Once a week a storyteller entertained the families in her cabin. And believe me, it was family fare. She told the kind of stories, as Philip Sydney wrote, that "...holdest children from play, and old men from the chimney corner." (Defense of Poesy).4

It was evening with that deep chill of summer nights in Maine where even after a day of sun, one was forced to light a fire. We gathered, sweated and shivering, by her fireplace. I probably leaned against my mother's knees. It was my favorite position for storytime. My little brother Steven, finger in mouth, was surely on my mother's lap.

The other families drifted in. We would have been among the first to arrive. My mother was always prompt and I got to observe people a lot because of this gift of hers. I still cannot stand when things begin late. And then the storyteller closed the door, moving to the front of the room. Her back to the fire. She was ancient in my eyes, which probably means she was about 40. And with the flickering light behind her, she was ringing with an aura of flame.

She began. Once upon a time.... The magic started. Mark Van Doren's poem, "The Storyteller," marks this moment:

He talked and as he talked
Wallpaper came alive;
Suddenly ghosts walked,
And four doors were five;

Calendars ran backwards,
And maps had mouths..."5

She began. The great story I heard that night is still with me. It was the story of a mighty hero named Perseus who sought the Gorgon's head. And when the teller came to the point where he had slain Medusa, and held up her head, I could have sworn-- sworn, mind you, on my mother's heart-- that I saw snakes curling and uncurling around her wrist. It might have been the shadows moving. It might have been hot dogs for dinner. It might have been an hour past my bedtime and the long day's play and the cold night's wearing. But it was none of these. It was Story. It turned me to stone as surely as Medusa's gaze stared down the wicked king. I could not have moved at that moment had my young life depended upon it.

Van Doren's poem ends:

He had wakened a worm
In the world's brain,
And nothing stood firm
Until day again. 6

That's the power of story.

Why is story so powerful? It recalls history, mystery, it is a witnessing of events of the soul. In publishing we are fond of reminding ourselves that the word publish comes from the root word "to make public." But even before that, before print make publishing a really mammothly public event, people were participating in Story. People. The public.

Stories make public what is private and make private what is public. As a writer of tales I know how I air in public my most private feelings through Story. For example, "Creyling" (World Pub. Co., 1967) speaks of a parent's fears of a child's fledgling, leaving home. It has become a very personal story for me again this year as my daughter, my oldest, has just gone off to college. "The Boy Who Sang For Death" (in DREAM WEAVER, Philomel Books, 1976) carries in its body a line ripped out of my own grieving for my mother: "Any gift I have I would give to get my mother back." "The Lady and the Merman" (from THE HUNDRETH DOVE, Crowell 1974, Schocken paper 1982) speaks of my relationship with a cold and distant father. "The Emperor & The Kite" (World/Philomel, 1968) of trying to please that same father. "The Girl Who Loved the Wind" (Crowell, 197) of leaving him to go off with a challenging man I love.

But I also know how my public stories become other people's private thoughts. A story I wrote recently, "The Face in the Cloth", which will appear in Fantasy and Science Fiction Magazine in 1985, is about a princess forced to carry a portrait of her dead mother sewn into her clothes. She cannot prosper until she learns to pick out these threads and sew up her own picture into the material. That story, which I told at a workshop, helped a young woman I met there pull free of her famous mother's image and to start to live her own life. It gave her hope, you see. Stories can sometimes lend permission. And I have lost count of the numbers of women (and a few men) who have come to me in tears after a reading of "The Lady and the Merman" to confess that what I had told was a story they had lived through painfully in their own lives. And recently there was a California storyteller who wrote to me for permission to tell my story "Dawn Strider" at a wedding because the couple had specifically requested it. It was a favorite tale of theirs-- a tale that spoke of the binding together of two very disparate individuals. Every week I hear surprising witnessings of a similar sort.

I am not just touting my own stories. Story is the setting down of human emotion in a recallable form. There are two core tales, both of them from the Grimm collection, that spoke to me early in life. In fact, they were important stories to me long before I really understood their importance, long before I was able to articulate what they symbolized in my life.

The first is Grimm tale #6, "Faithful John". It is a story about a servant who-- even knowing his sacrifice will mean his turning into stone-- is willing in order to save his king and his king's young bride. The idea of responsibility and sacrifice, of willingness to do for others, to (in old Movement terms) put one's body on the line have long been part

and parcel of my life's commitment. These same themes turn up again and again in my own crafted tales.

The second story that spoke to me when I was young with a lightning stroke of recognition was Grimm #13, "The Three Little Men in the Woods." That is the story in which the young girl who tells lies is forced thereafter to speak toads. Every time her mouth opens, another toad drops out. Now I come from a family of gifted story tellers-- whom some folk call consummate liars-- and so I have always been afraid of speaking less than Truth. I hate toads.

But what is Truth in story? Writing teachers always admonish their students to "write about what you know." But the human heart is a vast storehouse; the human mind a phenomenal composting system. What we know is everything. I have never met an actual merman, seagreen eyes under phosphorescent hair, his powerful chest and thrusting hipbones thinning down into a long, sinuous tail. But I have met men who are mysterious, compellingly otherworldly, split between being elusive and rooted, between being human-- and Other. I have never stroked the silken head of a unicorn or touched the coruscated, shelllike horn. But I have been part of the unicorn experience, when all that was innocent and trusting and ready in me met the hand of a tamer. I have never been face to face with a dragon, the black shrouds of its eyes masking a riddler's mind, the furnace maw steaming, the teeth a horrible invitation. But the blood and fire and lust and rage, those puzzling aspects of myself that I keep contained behind a thick skin of intentions, I do know. I take what I know-- and shape it to what I can believe. That means heart and mind work together. Belief and craft. As Lamsprink said "He that knows how to tame and master them by art, to couple them together, and to lead them in and out of the forest, may justly be called a Master."

So story is the underlying earth of the forest of faerie where we must go in quickly, plunge in, if we are to go at all. Listen to what the Maori story tellers say when starting a tale:

The breath of life,
The spirit of life,
The word of life,
It flies to you and you and you,
Always the word.7

In this country today there is a great renaissance of storytelling going on. In library schools and teachers colleges, these old bastions of story-book telling, a change is happening. Young men and women are being trained in the traditional storytelling ways. And though one could dwell on the irony of having to rediscover our most basic cultural heritage this way, (the faerie earth, story, having been saved-- as it were-- in a museum), it is best to remember that cultures that always venerated the storyteller or bard or seer had long apprenticeships in the art of telling a tale. In ancient Ireland the chief poet studied for fifteen years. He had to have:

Purity of Hand: Bright without wounding.
Purity of Mouth: Without poisonous satire.
Purity of Learning: Without reproach.8

But storytelling, like any other form of mouth to mouth resuscitation, needs two people for the experience. So does writing, which I have often described as a private act between two consenting

individuals: story teller and story listener, or story writer and story reader. Breath giver, breath taker.

So let us enter the wood. Hold my hand. I can feel your fear rise on your palm like a map beneath my fingers. We do not need to see dragons to know that there are dragons here. Here, where the trees grow close together, obscuring the path, where trillium as red as heart's blood, marks the path. Is this wood Pooh's Hundred Acres? Or Sherwood? Broceliande? Or Mirkwood? Or is it a wood made up of "huge alders and beeches and wild cherries and sequoias and cedars all planted by the numerous acquaintances of the poet Pope"9 by the banks of the Quincunx overlooking the eggshelled, five columned Mistress Masham's Repose? We have a weekend to make up our minds, we have many lifetimes to explore.



NOTES

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- 6 Van Doren, *ibid*.
- 7 As quoted by Laura Sims, storyteller, in an unpublished manuscript in the author's possession.
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