

Spring 3-15-1993

Tales Newly Told

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Recommended Citation

Kondratiev, Alexei (1993) "Tales Newly Told," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 19: No. 2, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol19/iss2/8>

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Tales Newly Told

Abstract

Jones, Diana Wynne. *A Sudden Wild Magic*.

Tales Newly Told

A COLUMN ON CURRENT MODERN FANTASY BY ALEXEI KONDRATIEV

Some writers of fiction for young people come to hit upon a vein of inspiration that is so perfectly and uniquely their own that their work becomes the focus of something like a cult, attracting a circle of aficionados who will eagerly lap up anything their favorite author produces. Such a writer in our own time is Diana Wynne Jones, who has a large and devoted following among young readers on both sides of the Atlantic — as well as among adults who read children's literature, needless to say! As a children's author she is essentially in the tradition of E. Nesbit: her juvenile characters are realistically abrasive in their manner toward each other, they have somewhat less than awed view of adult behavior, and the stories move easily (as do the character's minds) from the totally magical to the totally mundane. But Jones has improved immensely on the Victorian roots of this tradition. Her inventiveness has an outrageous quality to it that is quite in tune with the experience of childhood in the late twentieth century. Although she maintains a link with more ancient themes from mythology and folklore, all the familiar gimmicks of science fiction — time-travel paradoxes, multiple universes, etc. — appear in her books in a completely matter-of-fact way, as though they were the stuff of old fairy tales. Her magical beings are, as often as not, shown watching television or driving cars, and are as much at home with such bits technology as with the starker landscapes of primordial myth (as, indeed, are most of Jones' young readers). While the stories tend to be humorous in tone (a leading factor in their popular success), there is a darker side to them as well: the evil in them is real, and thus genuinely frightening. No children's writer can portray cold, diabolical nastiness as vividly as Jones.

In some of her recent works Jones has drawn so much more heavily on the darker side of her inspiration that the resulting stories no longer fit neatly in the juvenile genre. In *Fire and Hemlock*, her powerfully original and effective re-telling of the Tam Lin legend, she began the story from a child's point of view, setting a tone and ambiance familiar from her other juvenile fantasies, but then took her protagonist into childhood, causing the elements of the plot to be re-examined in a different, more disturbing light. Her latest novel, *A Sudden Wild Magic* (Avon Nova/Morrow, 1992), has been published as adult literature. This means, among other things, that sexual themes are here dealt with more frankly than in her juvenile fiction, and tragic death is presented in somewhat starker terms. And yet, despite such major shifts in perspective, Diana Wynne Jones fans will feel completely at home with this new tale: the simply-drawn but vivid settings, the neurotic eccentricities, the madcap humor, the wild plot-twists, the moments

of deliberate silliness are all still there, not greatly changed.

The story is a development of the by now well-known legend which claims that the Witches of England banded together during World War II to protect their country magically against Nazi invasion (a legend based on certain historical facts, one might note in passing). Here the Witches of England (who are portrayed as modern Goddess-worshippers who raise energy by means of ceremonial-magic rituals) are set against an invasion from another universe. On the borders of our reality they discover a blue citadel floating under a dome, like Swift's Laputa or one of James Blish's flying cities (the Witches initially refer to it as "Laputa-Blish"). This turns out to be Arth, a pocket universe created by the Pentarchy (a world both very like and very unlike our own) to spy on the Earth's cultures, gleaming useful information applicable to the Pentarchy's own needs. Although they originally did no more than copy Earth inventions for the Pentarchy's use, the directors of Arth (a quasi-monastic all-male society, sworn to celibacy) have — prompted by Leathe, a country ruled by female magician-aristocrats — taken to engineering certain trends in Earth's history. Leading to catastrophes (in this case, global warming) which, as Earth's people are forced to find ways of dealing with them, will give the Pentarchy information on how to resolve similar problems in their own world. Arth has also sent secret agents to infiltrate the Witches and stave off any defensive action on their part.

Plans for defense proceed, nonetheless. Among the principals involved are: Gladys, a grotesquely eccentric old woman who shares a rambling house in Hereford with twenty-odd cats (although her true familiar, Jimbo, is a mysterious being called an "ether monkey"); Mark, a brilliant but peculiarly humorless young computer scientist; Maureen, a rather vicious and selfish professional dancer; and Amanda, an academic who takes a somewhat condescending attitude toward the rest of them. Amanda's younger sister, Zillah, has borne Mark's love-child, but, with a Hester Prynne-like loyalty, refuses to intrude upon his marriage or in any way lay claim to his emotional life, despite her deep love for him. When an expedition to Arth is mounted, she sees her chance to escape from her painful situation and stows away on the exploratory capsule with her little boy, Marcus, unknown to her sister and to the other Witches of the Inner Ring.

What Zillah herself doesn't know is that the expeditionary force — composed primarily of women — has adopted a strategy of "kamikaze sex," aimed at forcing the celibate

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their weight pulling my heart earthward,
fixing my attention on the things of this world

I wore them about my neck like a Coleridgean fowl
and despaired of the wretched stench of death
that rose noisome to my surfeited nostrils

Thus I labored through a third-score years
until, near the river's edge, I stood unburdened
and left without farewell for a promised land

I remember not my former dwelling place
nor the sorrows that I left beside the track;
without doubt they have no need to remember me.



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Brothers of Arth to break their vow of chastity, thus upsetting the magical balance of Arth. This leads, of course, to some uproariously funny scenes which, despite the "adult" nature of their theme, are very similar in tone to much of Jones' juvenile fantasy. The subversion of Arth's emotionally repressed denizens and their revolt against Brother Lawrence, the monumentally hidebound and unimaginative High Head, bring to mind any number of boarding-school stories. This effect is heightened when Zillah makes friends with some young enlisted servicemen from the Pentarchy, who are on Arth against their will and have little respect for its peculiarities. Chief among them is the young aristocrat Tod, himself the heir of a Pentarch, and possessed of a magical "birthright" which will play a crucial role in the plot.

What saves these scenes from coming across as frivolous and unbelievable is Jones' unique empathy for the childlike (or childish, depending on the context!) aspects of adult behavior. In her juvenile fiction this is usually brought out when adults interact with children, or when children interpret their elders' actions. Here the adults manage very well by themselves, driven, no doubt, by the extreme stress that is put on them. Unresolved childhood conflicts, nursery frustrations, are found to be the true motivation for actions with a seemingly adult rationale. Zillah, who has had a very bad experience with her mother, finds it all the more difficult to confront the terrifying Lady Marceney of Leathe.

Yet these obscure, pre-rational regions of the soul are also the source of the magic that all the main characters use; in fact, the more in touch they are with their instinctive feelings, the more potent their magic. It is clear, for instance, that it is Gladys's very eccentricity, her ability to

pay no attention to social norms, that has made her the most powerful of England's Witches, although the others may laugh at her uncouthness. Zillah's magic is just as clearly founded on her love for her son, and for Mark. Because these are feelings she cannot measure or control, so is her magic measureless and uncontrollable (the "sudden wild magic" of the title). And Tod, in his impulsiveness and self-reliance, shares somewhat in the "wildness" of this gift, which will defeat the more disciplined and seemingly stronger magic of their adversaries.

The tale is not without its flaws. The ending is a little abrupt, with too much happening at a frantic speed (although this is, in a way, a Diana Wynne Jones trademark). And hasn't Jones already given us a female villain unmasked in *extremis* as a non-human creature? (One may recall the ending of *The Magicians of Caprona*.) A subplot involving Maureen and her lover Joe (an agent of Arth) begins with a promise of great suspense but fails to sustain its own flow within the narrative as a whole.

The book's problems — such as they are — come largely from its seeming to fall between two stools, being neither a conventional adult novel nor a conventional juvenile one. But for Diana Wynne Jones' many fans, this should present no difficulty. They will not be disappointed; this new tale will give them all they have learned to expect, and more.

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