

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

NEW TALES FOR OLD

Myth and folktale are more often authored by a people than an individual. They are part of the shared imagination of the past. By contrast, new stories have a traceable author. They are the creation of individual effort.

The deliberate making of imaginative tales can be traced to the Romantics. While the Brothers Grimm collected the old stories, poets like Goethe and Novalis began to create new tales. Initially these creations were aimed at the imaginatively gifted adult — a poet's gift to those poetically inclined. Later the tales of Hans Christian Anderson and Oscar Wilde were directed more towards the child and sparked a whole genre of children's literature in their wake.

Writers like C. S. Lewis and Tolkien, Phillip Pullman, Michael Ende and J. K. Rowling have elevated the imaginative tale into an art form. As fantasy their tales are able to be real in a higher sense and can introduce themes that might otherwise be anathema. These stories are powerful medicine and have to be handled with care: used in the right moment.

Children need guidance into the adventurous realm of contemporary myth. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is the first true epic of the modern imagination and a masterpiece of English. But though it is a signpost of hope for the imaginative tale, it has to be used with care. *The Hobbit* is fine for a ten year old, but *Lord of the Rings* is not. While it is a good read for teenagers, it is a 'grown up' myth, too dark and complex for a young child.

Ideally children's stories come with a guide to age-appropriateness. Authors often give this unconsciously, in the age of the heroes that populate their tales: Harry Potter is exactly eleven when he is invited to join Hogwarts' school of magic. Milne's Christopher Robin is preschool age, and Ende's Bastian Balthazar Bux is about nine when he embarks on his Never Ending Story.

Harry Potter

I am in two minds about Rowling's creation, particularly as literature for young children. I think the books and films are often encountered too early. Harry Potter is great fantasy, but a certain foundation of soul needs to be established before a child enters the gothic labyrinth of Hogwarts.

The Potter books are based on the mystery novel and the emotional suspense created by this genre. In most mystery novels we do not know who the murderer is until the very end. In the Harry Potter books, the murder is yet to come. Though we know it is the Dark Lord who is attempting to kill Harry, we do not know under which mask he is hiding. This makes the books even more harrowing for the soul than conventional mysteries.

The dark forces in the Harry Potter series are hidden and unscrupulous, and ever more brilliant as the books progress. The portrayal of evil echoes the racial ethos of the Nazi regime and procedures of black magic. All this may be exciting and highly stimulating reading for the imagination-deprived teenager, but it is not appropriate for younger readers, who need to know who is good and who is bad so they can morally orientate themselves in a story.

In fairytales, evil and cruelty are dealt with imaginatively. The wolf who devours Red Riding Hood spills no blood and the child is soon revived. But the killing in Harry Potter is real and irreversible. The blood that is spilled is 'real' blood that will leave a mark on a young child's soul. The cruelty of a sinister figure like Voldemort is too convincing to be digested before a child is equipped to face him. Too young, they may fall prey to his schemes — and as the book tells you, he is eager to kill them as young as he can.

I recommend you to the advice of the world expert in all matters concerning Harry Potter and the care of the magical and endangered child: Albertus Dumbledore, Director of Hogwarts School of Magic. The wise Professor protected Harry from all contact with the shady and dangerous world of magic until he had reached the age of eleven. I take this as the story's own explicit advice for its appropriate use: children should reach this age before being admitted to the school of sorcery.

I have said I am in two minds about Harry Potter. While I am concerned about its premature use, it nevertheless provides a good dose of fantasy for teenage consumption. It also speaks directly to contemporary myth — its popularity shows that the stories answer a dire need in our culture: the story deprivation of contemporary childhood.

Children recognise themselves in Harry. Like the modern child he starts off deprived of imagination and magic, denied his birthright to be an adventurer in any realm other than this world. Like the modern child he is endowed with imaginal gifts and has been brought up by parents who are 'muggles' — totally unmagical folk. Most parents are 'Dursleys', not only lacking imagination, they suppress it with any means at their disposal.

The imaginal part in every modern child is as maltreated by parents and education as Harry Potter is by the Dursleys, while the child's conventional and unmagical part is as spoiled as his stepbrother Dudley — who is the

very kind of insensitive and competitive bully our world seems to reward while the Harrys are locked in the closets and punished for who they are.

Harry Potter exemplifies the drama of the imaginative child. This is what makes his story a modern myth. He is the hero who escapes the prison of convention, breaking through the brick walls of Victoria Station into a new dimension of imaginal adventure. Harry is a symbol for the imaginal child and her adventures in this world and the next — but for a young child there are smoother ways to break the brick walls of convention. A new dimension may be more easily entered through an old wardrobe hung with fur coats.

The Chronicles of Narnia

C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* are a masterpiece of children's literature. A nine year old can appreciate the imaginative treasures this series contains, and there is no need to censor their use for the stories have a purity that will protect them from misuse. The children who are the heroes of many of the Narnia tales are aged between seven and twelve, and that seems a good indication of their age-appropriateness.

The *Chronicles of Narnia* are Story Medicine at its best. Whenever I am recovering from sickness I read a Narnia book and find they work better than vitamins. They stabilise the soul and through the soul, the body.

When you embark on the Narnia stories you are on familiar territory, and so is the child. Each tale is a homecoming to one or another province of the soul — it maps an adventure that calls for the great-hearted heroism of a lion. Children who hear that call are transformed. The traitor, Edmund, becomes King Edmund the First; the notorious Eustace Clarence Scrubb sheds his dragon skin and becomes the likeable hero of further adventures. And just as the heroes of the Narnia books are profoundly changed by their encounter with Aslan the great lion, so are the readers.

Harry Potter is fantasy with mythological elements. The *Chronicles of Narnia* are much stronger myth, a product of exact imagination, revealing realities beyond the apparently real. The Narnia stories meet the soul on its own home ground. They speak the imaginative language of the heart and carry the power of transformation that only this language can provide.

It is this transformative capacity that Harry Potter lacks. He is a likeable hero and remains so, even as he becomes more adept in magic. He is protected by the love of his mother, but he is not touched by the love that changes the heart. He remains a somewhat superficial hero, the master of outer accomplishment and victories. He is Superboy equipped with magical powers and all the gadgets of the trade: owls and broomsticks, invisibility cloak and miraculous maps.

Momo and the Neverending Story

Michael Ende's *Neverending Story* is an epic of children's literature, a rich feast for the imagination. It contains the very map that makes a superficial hero into a real one. Its hero, Bastian Balthazar Bux, enters the imaginal realm of Fantasia by means of a magical book. The story is complex and is true Story Medicine — much of what I have said in these pages is said there too by imaginative means and clothed in an adventure that is a depth account of the soul's journey towards integration. In this journey the headstrong Medusa of unbridled fantasy is turned into an imagination with a heart.

The *Neverending Story* is the length of an epic. If you do not have the time for such long stories, read Ende's *Momo and the Grey Gentlemen* instead. This is an important book for children and adults, one that ought to be read and performed in schools and theatres, in hospitals and city parks. It is a true modern myth and offers Story Medicine for the most widespread epidemic of our civilisation: the lack of time. Once you have read *Momo* you will *make* time for the *Neverending Story*.

Momo contains a message for everyone, even for young children, perhaps especially for them. It is, however, not written to suit the preschool age. But fortunately, there is another story that is, and one which will achieve something similar — A. A. Milne's *Winnie the Pooh*.

Winnie the Pooh

Winnie the Pooh is *Momo* in bear format. Pooh always has time and is never rushed. In his home it is always eleven o'clockish and just the right moment for a little something, which is either honey or honey. Pooh lives in sweet time. He embodies the comfort and benevolence of the bear in all of us. *Winnie the Pooh* is inspired by the genius of English childhood itself. We immediately feel at home with Eeyore and Piglet, Rabbit and Kanga. They are our friends as much as Pooh's. To the child, they are an extended family of imaginary companions.

Winnie the Pooh is the perfect complement to fairytales. The little adventures, the humour, the poetry and the good-natured spirit that pervades the books, speak directly to the child. While fairytales explore the interior of the soul, *Winnie the Pooh* captures childhood imagination in its transition to reality. The stories are a gentle guide to the world beyond childhood and contain a brilliant introduction to the temperaments that begin to assert themselves by school age: Eeyore is melancholy incarnate, Rabbit is choleric, Roo exemplifies the buoyant sanguinity of the young child. Pooh is not only the 'best of bears' but the best that the phlegmatic temperament has to offer — the benevolent friend and trusty companion through the childhood of the imagination.

All this makes *Winnie the Pooh* a timeless classic, a *Neverending Story* in its own right that can be enjoyed at any age, reading it again, or hearing it on audio tape. Unlike the intimate fairytale, it offers itself to this medium, which can be a great help on long car trips and plane flights and even at home. The same is true of other stories that follow in the wake of *Winnie the Pooh*. *The Wind in the Willows* will capture the child's imagination for a long time with the amiable water rat and mole, the hardy badger and the marvellously conceited and totally adorable toad.

Winnie the Pooh and *Wind in the Willows* can accompany the child until the imagination closes around the age of nine or so. It is then that the portals to Narnia can open it again. The best children's stories resurrect the imagination from the intellectual assault of this world. They are more than remedies. They are life savers that preserve the child's creative forces from premature death.

Teenage Fiction

Going into puberty, novels like Harry Potter or Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* can be followed by more mature works. Some of the novels written for the age group of thirteen to fifteen ascend to a level of artistry that captivates adults and teenagers alike, among them Ursula Le Guin's *Wizard of Earthsea* and Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*.

The Wizard of Earthsea is a masterpiece hero quest, one of the great transformational tales that treats the remote past and early magic with an authenticity that only a great writer can achieve.

Madeleine L'Engle's *Wrinkle in Time* explores the imaginal dimension of science when the child heroes of her novel are hurled into a future pervaded by inhuman technology and mass manipulation. Through the power of love they overcome the brain-machine masterminding the technological universe and so save the world from an inhuman future. This is more than a good novel. It is a prophetic book that captures the essence of science fiction writing. Every science fiction novel is a wrinkle in time. It confronts us with the dangers of an overly technological world and asks us whether this is the kind of civilisation we want to create.

One important way to help create a more human future lies in the making of new tales. For those who wish to take this path the third part of this book offers a map that will help their imagination to take the necessary steps.