



his is a REVISED AND expanded version of a long letter of mine which was published in response to an article entitled "For Realism in Children's Fiction", by Andrew Stibbs, a lecturer in Education at Leeds University. His article appeared in *Use of English*, Autumn 1980, my response was published in the summer 1981 issue, and a further riposte from Mr. Stibbs appeared in the Autumn 1981 issue.

Since Mr. Stibbs has revised and clarified his original statements, particularly rejecting the implication that he was attacking fantasy as a genre, I am not going to quote extensively from his article with a view to further criticism. However, I shall quote him where necessary before putting my own point of view. Those wishing to read the complete correspondence should refer to *Use of English*, a magazine usually taken by university libraries and education departments. The following article is not specifically a refutation of Mr. Stibbs's opinions, but I hope will provide ammunition for Tolkien Society members whose parents and teachers tease or even bully them for reading fantasy as opposed to 'realistic' literature - or even for reading anything at all.

One important point which was not made clear in Mr. Stibbs's first article, but which could have been inferred from the context, and the title of the magazine *The Use of English*, contributed to our mutual misunderstanding. Mr. Stibbs was speaking primarily, though not exclusively, of the study of fiction *in the classroom*, and of the teacher's choice of books to read to the children and to set for study. He was *not* speaking as a would-be censor of children's private reading. However, the tone of his remarks, especially as regards Garner and Tolkien, might well have persuaded teachers with little or no knowledge of their writings to discourage children from reading their books altogether. Hence my indignation, which Mr. Stibbs assuaged in his second article.

It is a sad but necessary fact of life that it is insufficient to

justify the reading of fiction (not just fantasy) with the reason that it is a pleasurable activity. Teachers must find concrete reasons to explain to headmasters and parents that reading for fun is not a waste of time, and deserves a place on the school time-table. To do him justice, Mr. Stibbs makes a brave, if pompous, attempt at providing the defenders of fiction with such reasons. Fiction is of value, both in one's personal, and one's social and even political life.

"I ascribe a moral value to exercising of the imagination through reading and teaching literature . . . attending to particular complex and sometimes uncomfortable realities . . . is a guard against those immoral acts . . . which spring from apprehensions of reality contaminated by the self - acts of laziness, self-deception, vanity, or self-pity . . . It is for celebrating and teaching such attentive realism that we so value the novel."

So good novels, such as Jane Austen's, may help us improve ourselves by demonstrating faults of personality which we may then discreetly try to correct.

Fiction also makes us aware of political and social problems, which, again, we might strive to eradicate in real life. Prime examples of these might be *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *1984*. Of this second aim of fiction, Stibbs says: "The imaginativeness which English teachers *should* educate rejects the untrue and the impossible . . . and should help pupils to avoid commercial and political exploitation and corruption." However, Stibbs thinks that reading some supernatural fiction could blind children to real evil. "Supernatural-mongers . . . are teaching pupils to live in a dream world and to see themselves as powerless . . . I want to teach children that we cannot escape by flying and that we must not treat evil as supernatural."

Stibbs is also concerned that some fantasy fiction fails to arouse the reader's imagination and sympathy for other people's problems. "The subjects of such imaginativeness are possible worlds, not fairy lands; human feelings, not inhuman feelings; and events consistent with the evidence of our senses, not flying in the face of it."

In the rest of this article I expand my original letter in order to provide examples of fantasy fiction which fulfil Mr. Stibbs's criteria for good fiction i.e. either shedding light on aspects of human personality, or on political and social problems. In the first category I concentrate on the children's fantasies of Ursula le Guin and Diana Wynne Jones, and in the second,

Lord of the Rings, which came in for particular criticism from Mr. Stibbs. Although I shall be quoting from this criticism later, I should here quote from his second letter, to show that I am not continuing to attack him in print, and that he conceded that my examples were well chosen.

"I was not . . . attacking fantasy as a genre . . . like Ms Yates I admire the Earthsea trilogy - and admire it for its realism."



Fantasy is a diverse literature: it can be an epic of war, such as *The Lord of the Rings*; allegory like Dante's *Inferno*; a mixture of science fiction and politics like Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*; or a family story like Nesbit's *Five Children and It*. All the stories have in common the impossibility of their events occurring in 'everyday' life.

Mr. Stibbs does not mention these works, to do him justice, he attacks English teaching about "ghosts, ghost stories, spells . . . a termly theme on 'The Supernatural'". Like him, I deplore the exploitation of children's fascination with witchcraft and the occult simply to keep them interested in schoolwork. In common with Mr. Stibbs, I dislike second-rate supernatural thrillers. But there are good fantasy alternatives to sensational ghost stories. On the one hand, myth, legend, folk-tale, the heritage of the Celtic, Norse, Greek, Egyptian, Indian and African races, all in excellent modern editions. On the other hand, there *are* children's fantasies just as good, as human, as realistic, as thought-provoking and well-written as *Carrie's War* which Stibbs so much admires. In such as these, children are not "taught to live in a dream world and see themselves as powerless". On the contrary, the young heroes and heroines *do* think of others, *do* exercise power, and *do* win through.

Let me suggest that for some children - and every child is unique - the approach made by realistic fiction is often too near the bone. Children and adults with domestic problems may find the necessary solace and strengthening of their personality in metaphorical treatments which fantasies provide. Stibbs is not alone in rejecting Alan Garner's earliest books, which Garner himself now despises, but Garner has corresponded with many teenagers and adults whom *The Owl Service* has 'helped' (if we

must see the novel as a kind of medicine!). Stibbs's casual reference to "the fairy worlds, replayed myths or red shifts of his earlier novels" makes me wonder if he has even read *Red Shift*, one of the great adolescent novels of our time, a powerful story of teenage sexual awakening, which deserves considerable attention from anyone claiming to be a literary critic. However, *Red Shift* is not a children's book and neither is *The Lord of the Rings* - one wonders what place a critique of either of them should have in an article about 'Children's Fiction'.

One should not dismiss the genre of children's fantasy without considering the very best, such as the work of Joan Aiken, Ursula Le Guin, and Diana Wynne Jones, and the combination of science fiction and fantasy in Peter Dickinson's "Changes" trilogy and Rosemary Harris's *Quest for Orion* sequence. Mr. Stibbs's criteria for good children's books, "The best books are realistically subtle, detailed and quirky" must surely include the work of the above authors.

Le Guin's 'Earthsea' trilogy, despite being set in a world of magicians and dragons, does illustrate "human feelings, not inhuman feelings". *A Wizard of Earthsea* may be read as a lesson against pride; and shows how our worst enemy may lie in ourselves, but that we can conquer our flaws. As a parable of growing up, it certainly does not teach young people to "see themselves as powerless". *The Tombs of Atuan*, which deals with religious mania and intolerance, illustrates kinds of evil that we find in the real world. *The Farthest Shore* is about Life and Death. All three "Earthsea" fantasies are studies of young people growing up, making decisions, "attending to particular complex . . . realities".

Diana Wynne Jones represents the domestic side of the fantasy genre, as opposed to the epic tradition of Tolkien which Le Guin follows. She employs the Nesbit tradition of fantasy as a metaphor for family tensions: as children learn to control their magic powers, they solve their personal problems too. Her stories are based on universal themes which children have always enjoyed and needed: the Quest, for instance, and the Ugly Duckling syndrome. We may find "attentive realism" in *The Ogre Downstairs*, in which five step-siblings learn to live together, and a commentary on racial intolerance in *Power of Three*, in which a seemingly perpetual war to the death between two races is ended by the heroic efforts of three groups of children who ought to have been mortal enemies. In several books, including *Dogsbody*, *Charmed Life* and *Eight Days of Luke*, she describes the difficult lives of orphans living with their relatives. Space forbids

a further discussion, but I do recommend you to read *Drowned Ammet* and *The Spellcoats*, which are her best in my opinion.

This utilitarian analysis of my favourite children's fantasies is frustrating! I would far write about the beauty of the writer's style, the excitement and originality of the story, the feeling of private communication between teller and listener. I would like to quote from a colleague of mine within ILEA, Gillian Klein, who says:

"The idea is becoming increasingly accepted that children's books should be relevant to, and should even reflect, their readers. To think that books must therefore be just like life is to misinterpret this philosophy sadly. The world doesn't always afford excitement to children and it would be a dull library that didn't extend horizons beyond the probable to the possible, and then to the impossible. For their joy alone fantasies are invaluable; there is also research which shows that fantasy often provides children with an avenue by which to approach particularly prickly realities." (ILEA Contact, 14 September 1979).

Such a piece of research was reported in the *Library Association Record* for October 1980, and in the editorial of *Books for Keeps* 5, November 1980. Evidence from Germany suggested that "Children who are told fairy tales are more intelligent, calmer, mentally more balanced, and more open-minded than those who are not."



I also found some pertinent comments in *Screen Violence and Film Censorship* by Stephen Brody (HMSO 1977) in which he tackled the question of whether what we read, and particularly what we view, can influence our actions in real life:

"A theory about the importance of fantasy and day-dreaming for personality formation has been developed by the psychologist J.L. Singer . . . Day-dreaming is seen as an adaptive mechanism, a dimension of human skill and competence . . . Another function of the imagination is to stand as a protection between states of arousal and the need to engage in impulsive and potentially damaging behaviour by making possible delays in, and deferment of, gratification. Individuals lacking imaginative resources are thus much more likely to express aggressive and other feelings in overt and immediate action rather than

by fantasy gratification or by transferring aggression through imaginative reconstruction into other channels . . . imaginative individuals appear to possess greater self-awareness of their own limitations and emotional difficulties and are consequently more able to deal with them, although they may suffer more worry and anxiety as a price for this advantage." (p.64).

This does not surprise me. As a school librarian I have often noted that enthusiastic readers of Tolkien and science fiction turn out to be, as likely as not, more mature, sensitive to other people's feelings, gifted, resentful of stereotyped labelling, active against injustice, politically aware and keen to serve the community, as well as receptive to various genres of literature. Readers who choose to read 'realistic' books, on the other hand, often refuse to read any other kind. But we may see by the space fantasy films which have become the craze, and the Tolkien cult before that, that if the mythic element is missing from one's literary diet they will instinctively seek for it elsewhere, whether in the cinema, in radio and television soap operas where they treat the characters like J.R. and The Archers as real people, or in the world of pop music.



Before I come to Tolkien I want to remind you of the two functions of fiction - in one's personal and political lives. This distinction is brought out in an essay on Science Fiction by Robert Conquest, printed in his anthology *The Abomination of Moab* (Temple Smith, 1979). "Western literature, as it has been in the last two hundred years or so, is a very special and eccentric sort of thing compared with any other. What distinguishes it is the extraordinary, dominating position of the novel of character. Literary taste has therefore involved acceptance of the conventions implicit in this . . .

There have always been two sorts of imagination in literature. One has been fascinated by the variations of human feelings and actions . . . the other is inclined to take the human behaviour largely for granted and to be interested more in environmental changes . . . There is now this inclination to hold that the *psychological* interest is somehow higher and more important than the other . . . this is a self-perpetuating process. Introspective literature attracts introspective critics who create introspective canons and anathematize what does not

appeal to them."

Mr. Conquest continues in praise of science fiction, but what he says might equally be applied to *Lord of the Rings*, and its reception by conventional critics. It is not a novel of character, although it contains human feelings and conflicts; it is primarily a political work about human aggression and how to cope with it, when manifested in war.

And now I come to Tolkien, and here I must quote Mr. Stibbs. "Both the unrealism of the impossible (the unrealism of the undisciplined imagination) and the unrealism of the collective (the unrealism of the inattentive imagination) characterise Tolkien's (sic) pseudo-sagas."

Although *The Lord of the Rings* is an imitation, or pastiche, of Norse sagas, it is a much better pastiche than William Morris managed. Many 20th century writers employ pastiche, for example James Joyce and John Barth. Far from insulting Tolkien for reviving a style of the past, I want to praise him for connecting the long-severed strands of English literature, since *Beowulf* and the alliterative romance were lost to literary tradition. In the epic tradition, most great epics imitate a fore-runner: a chain leads back from Keats' *Hyperion* to Milton, Dante, Virgil and Homer. Tolkien looks back to the Norse sagas and *Beowulf*, and to our youth, deprived of their roots by timid teaching which avoids the classic works of literature and music for fear of being labelled "imperialist" and "elitist" - to our youth, Tolkien may be the only "roots"-type experience they receive in their adolescence. If we all have a right to our roots in this multi-ethnic society, Tolkien provides a modern synthesis of Celtic mythology, the Arthurian legend, the Norse sagas, and Old English culture, plus in the person of the hobbits, a view of the English peasantry.

In criticising modern children's fantasy, Stibbs claimed that it was irresponsible and unrealistic to invite children to "engage with characters who . . . fight supernatural (and frightening) Dark Forces and Wild Magics caused by no human responsibility? . . . Contemporary pseudo-myths are fundamentally trivial and unreal where their prototypes were fundamentally serious and realistic." (He must be getting at Susan Cooper - who does deserve some criticism, I think.)

I do not think that this is fair criticism of *The Lord of the Rings* (again, one must remember that it was not written for children). The Dark Lord is a metaphor of evil which can be present within us all, and we can all

become petty Saurons. But in his epic Tolkien describes a completely realistic situation when lust for world domination overtakes a country's ruler. Although we may not call such people totally evil, because they are human beings, by their deeds shall we know them, and our duty is to end their tyranny. Maybe we protest; occasionally we go to war.

The situation of a conscienceless warlord determined to conquer as far as possible is no fantasy - it has occurred all through human history. Advances in 20th century technology only make their powers more frightening. The question of whether evil is supernaturally caused or not is irrelevant when the scientifically invented weapons possessed by both super-powers might just as well be magic for all we can do individually to destroy them. In the present international situation Frodo had a better chance with the Ring than we do with the Bomb and the rest of the military apparatus which threatens the hobbits of this world. Sauron is indeed a character from real life. However, we must not make the mistake of identifying him with any one political leader today, or deceive ourselves by thinking that a Sauron could never arise to lead our own country. Similarly, Sauron's soldiers, the orcs, are symbolic of any enemy soldier, policeman or anyone who uses military or uniformed authority unjustly to massacre or torture civilians. When states are at war, Tolkien does not endorse the solution of battlefield conflict, where the unjust side might win by force of numbers, but somehow to neutralise the warlord or ideology which keeps the aggressive war going. The destruction of Sauron meant the disappearance of orcs as a fighting force. Remember that in his Letters Tolkien clearly stated that in the real world there were no orcs - nobody could be so totally evil.



Returning to Mr. Stibbs's criticism of *Lord of the Rings*, I note that he has not concentrated on Sauron and the orcs after all, but on Saruman's 'ruffians', where, failing to attend to the context of the passage, he calls Tolkien's attitude to them as shown by Merry and Pippin, "unrealistically snobbish, narrow-minded, and aggressive". He quotes the passage in "The Scouring of the Shire", from "The ruffians had clubs in their hands" to "The sword glinted in the westering sun" and comments:

"The reader who has got so far in the trilogy has read nearly three volumes written from the hobbits' point of view,

and may find it easy to forget that it is they who are the 'bullies' . . . For are they not bullying the 'ruffians' with their superior weapons and insults and their Royalist authority? . . . To write *The Lord of the Rings* from the anti-hobbit point of view might be a morally commendable exercise of the imagination."

I pointed out in my reply that he had ignored the context of the quotation. The four hobbits had, after all, been fighting for freedom elsewhere, and on their return they found their homeland invaded by an alien force of gangsterism. Food was collected and taken off to storage and export, nobody was allowed to move far without permission, and anyone who protested was imprisoned on a starvation diet. In short, a totalitarian regime: a police state, without any legal Power to legitimise it. Now, if we look back at what Mr. Stibbs claims is one purpose of fiction, it is to be "armed and educated . . . to avoid commercial and political exploitation and corruption". The lessons learned by the hobbits, therefore, are exactly those which Stibbs wanted fiction to teach! Perhaps they are better taught and learned in the powerful metaphoric setting of epic fantasy, or science fiction, than in the novel of character which concentrates on personality development!

There is a certain schizophrenia of the intellectual establishment in this country. They applaud freedom fighting in colonies of the Third World, but are more ready to attack their own country's legal framework than to consider what freedom fighting might mean in defending themselves. I am not accusing Mr. Stibbs particularly, but must point out that he dislikes 'Royalist' authority. It seems to be a cliché of left-wing children's book criticism that any novel about kingship brings automatic disapproval because good socialists are assumed to be good republicans too, and nobody takes the historical context into account. Certainly you cannot accuse Tolkien of claiming that hereditary kings or queens must be good rulers - see the Appendices. In Middle-earth there are good kings and bad, and Aragorn wins to the throne as much by proving his worth as by hereditary claim.

The left-wing critic Bob Dixon exemplifies this kind of approach. In "Catching them Young", volume 2, *Political Ideas in Children's Fiction*, he utters the following, about the epic fantasies of Tolkien, Lewis, Le Guin etc.:

"Another very striking feature of this group and one which links it strongly to the religious tradition of the past is class antagonism and manipulation . . . this feature appears as a sense of hierarchy. This is especially noticeable in Tolkien and Lewis and reference to 'blood', 'race' and 'stock' take us, especially in

Lewis, to the fringes of racism. In several of the writers there's a strong sense of elitism . . . and in Lewis there's great and constant stress on royalty". (p. 147).

"evil . . . is not seen as originating in social relationships and conditions. Therefore, these are not seen in need of any change . . . The effect of this kind of literature . . . is to divert people from the here and now and persuade them that it's not possible to do anything about the problems of this world . . . *Lord of the Rings* isn't an allegory but of course it does have a meaning . . . It says a lot of things about power and hierarchy - aristocratic notions are very much in the forefront and there's a great love of ceremony." (p.149).

However, Tolkien is not so easy to pigeonhole as that. You can argue that *Lord of the Rings* is a book about "the problems of this world" and that hobbit society at least is not hierarchical. 'Royalist' authority does not equal authoritarianism, but simply a system of law and order designed to protect the weak against the strong. It is legally necessary for the hobbits to invoke the King's power, as this gives them the legal authority to rouse the rest of the hobbits and drive out the ruffians. The evil described in "The Scouring of the Shire" is typical of crime in Britain today: muggers, kidnappers, gangsters, murderers, protection rackets - all appear in our daily newspapers, and children need to be aware of the dangers.

Mr. Stibbs, in his second article, writes that he took exception to the language of the quoted passage rather than its ethics, and says: "Ms Yates is right to put the passage in its narrative context, and I do not dispute that the story has a different suggestiveness from the one I pick out from the language . . . And maybe my prejudice against the 'snobbery' and 'aggression' I said I found in Tolkien has blinded me to the effectiveness of his presentation of 'The higher creativity of Good'.

That last phrase was quoted from my reply, and this is how I ended my defence of modern fantasy. There are different kinds of evil abroad in the world, and sometimes, as with the gas chambers and mass murderers, we are faced with metaphysical evil costing millions of lives which we must oppose with all our might. At other times there is wrong on both sides: then, we should not over-react but negotiate, admit our faults and strive to avoid violence. Tolkien did not see the only solution as lying in all-out battles: his Good forces would have lost if that were so. His solution lay in the higher creativity of Good to devise a way of winning without using evil weapons. In his Foreword to the second edition of

The Lord of the Rings he suggests that a correlative to the present world situation would be a corrupt West facing Saruman, both possessing Rings of Power. If we don't use the higher creativity of Good, the prospect will be a bleak answer to Frodo's question: "Shall there be two cities of Minas Morgul, grinning at each other across a dead land filled with rotteness?"

There are still evils loose in the world, in West and East, often hidden by effective propaganda, and people are deaf to what is going on, just as once they refused to believe in the gas chambers. But literary works which can inspire their readers to fight political evils may be found in many genres of literature. I would urge readers not to dismiss, but to look again at the best in children's and adult's fantasy.

Bibliography

- Part one: Fantasy - what the authors say about their work
- Alan Garner "A bit more practice", *TLS* 6 June 1968, reprinted in *The Cool Web* (Bodley Head, 1977); "Coming to terms" *Children's lit.* in ed. no.2, July 1970; Interview in *The Pied Pipers* (Paddington Press, 1975).
- Diana Wynne Jones "Creating the experience", *TLS* 11 July 1975.
- Ursula Le Guin *The Language of the Night: essays on fantasy and science fiction* (New York, Putnam, 1979).
- C.S. Lewis *An experiment in criticism* (C.U.P. 1961). *Of Other Worlds* (Bles, 1966 (out of print); Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975). Includes Lewis's speech to the Library Association "On three ways of writing for children" in which he said, *a propos* of a purely realistic reading diet: "There is something ludicrous in the idea of so educating a generation which is born to the Ogpu and the atomic bomb. Since it is so likely that they will meet cruel enemies, let them at least have heard of brave knights and heroic courage."
- J.R.R. Tolkien *Tree and Leaf* (Allen & Unwin, 1964). Includes essay "On Fairy Stories", justifying his use of fantasy.
- Part two: Commentaries on fantasy and our authors
- Abbs, Peter (ed.) Tract 29/30, "Myth and symbol in education" esp. the essay by Neil Philip (Gryphon Press, 1980).
- Benton, Michael (ed.) *Approaches to research in children's literature* (Univ. Southampton, 1980). Various articles.
- Bettelheim, Bruno *The Uses of Enchantment* (Thames & Hudson, 1976).
- Campbell, Joseph *The Hero with a thousand faces* (Sphere, 1975).
- Carpenter, Humphrey *J.R.R. Tolkien: a biography* (Allen & Unwin, 1977).
- Cook, Elizabeth *The Ordinary and the Fabulous* (C.U.P. 1969; 2nd ed. 1976).
- Haughton, Rosemary *Tales from Eternity* (Allen & Unwin, 1973).
- Lewis, Naomi *Fantasy books for children* (National Book League, 1975).
- Yates, Jessica (as Jessica Kemball-Cook) "Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien and Diana Wynne Jones" in *Twentieth century children's writers* (Macmillan, 1978); "Earthsea and others" *New Society* 11 November 1976.
- Part three: War; peace, violence . . .
- Arendt, Hannah *On Violence* (Allen Lane, 1970).
- Thompson, E.P. *Writing by candlelight* (Merlin Press, 1980).
- Walzer, Michael *Just and unjust wars* (Lane 1978; Penguin 1980).