

## Are You Living in the Real World?

Adapted from a university lecture given on a book tour of the United States.

I snatched the theme for this talk from a flier I saw in London at a children's Book circle called "Are we living in the real world? An exploration of fantasy in children's books today." It was hosted by Faber and Faber, and it seems to me, at least, an interesting subject for discussion, with the proviso that books are, of course, a kingdom to themselves and what we say here among literate, chattering adults is never quite as important as what children are actually reading and enjoying and learning from. That is to say the wellsprings of great writing are not really academic, not the stuff of Ph.D. theses, and few writers, except perhaps the archly Victorian ones, actually begin their books knowing precisely why they are doing what they are doing, or where their books will take them.

So—fantasy and reality? The REAL world? It seems a paradox, doesn't it? It's quite obvious that a 'fantasist' isn't living in the real world and wouldn't want to, especially when they're traveling between Texas and San Francisco, Seattle and New York. How dull for Lucy or Peter or Edmund to scabble to the back of that wardrobe and bump their heads against a hunk of plywood. How depressing for Lyra to talk to her daemon only to find that it is a well marketed cuddly toy.

The point of the journey is the fantasy. What

seems impossible suddenly becomes actual. What seems incredible is realized. What is completely fantastical becomes the realm of everyday experience, for the protagonists taking the journey anyway, and their loyal and wondering readers.

But wait just a moment? Is that really the key to great fantasy? Simply what the writer can imagine to be possible and then lets happen? Should we all be

imagining the moon to be a giant banana and sending vitamin-starved children into space to mine a new source of fruit drinks? Lunar Smoothies. Imagination, we say to children in schools so often, like an unthinking mantra, imagination is what it's all about. And children, responsive and impressionable as they are, pick it up and nod and secretly chuck away the book being peddled at them in favor of a far more exciting and immediate computer game.

But what exactly is this thing that we and Hollywood and the world insist we and kids buy into so readily, this mysterious thing

called imagination? Is it something that can be popped into a Dream-Works to produce, Willy Wonka-like, an instantly satisfying result? I don't think so, and that is why the question, "Are we living in the real world," is important. It was the English romantic poets, as individualistic as any serious children's writer should be, and especially Coleridge, who made the distinction



Researching for his fantasy/thriller about supernatural wolves set in Transylvania, David poses with a friend at the Wolf Trust in Berkshire in the UK.

between fancy, (for the moment let's not call that fantasy), and imagination.

Fancy to Coleridge was, on the one hand, a light, almost airy thing, the stuff of sugar plum fairies, of daydreams, of what you will. But imagination, now that was entirely different, something far deeper, more poetic, more insightful, more powerful and visionary. And what differentiated this powerhouse called imagination from those light fancies that we all have everyday? The things we make up on a whim. The ability of the person imagining to fully engage their mind and their emotions, their thoughts and their feelings, for as Coleridge believed "there can be no great thoughts without great feelings," with everything around them, with life itself. In short with truth as they understand it.

Bang. And we bump our heads on the back of that wardrobe. Truth? Crikey! Harry Potter isn't true. Far from it, some Christian fundamentalists cry, and isn't it evil to talk to kids about things like magic and make it seem so wonderful? We agree, say the scientists, if not about the "evil," because there is no evil as such, then at least about the nonsense of magic. And Philip Pullman, he isn't trying to tell the truth either, no more than it could be true that a deer could be born in thirteenth century Scotland with the mark of an oak leaf on its forehead, a he is in my first novel, *Fire Bringer*, and talk to the animals. These are fantasies and should be accepted and enjoyed as such, and nothing more.

It is at least reassuring to writers worried about their own work that, as a friend said to me once when I was fretting about what message I was giving to children; kids are far cleverer than we think and know that "they're only stories." And if we worry about why children should be wasting their valuable time over "stories," rather than studying the Dow Jones Industrial Average or learning to steal hub caps, we should remember that one of the greatest of all storytellers, Robert Louis Stevenson, labeled many of his own deep felt works "an entertainment." And there's nothing wrong with entertainment, and "no business like show business."

Except that there is something wrong with entertainment when it's bad entertainment. When it numbs us with the cheap, the obvious, the formulaic and the dull. And in the world of fantasy it will be bad entertainment if mere fancy rather than true imagina-

tion is engaged, without passion and vision and courage. If the writer or playwright or film maker doesn't really care about what they are doing, doesn't seek truth in their characters and their journeys and in themselves, doesn't address themes, and feelings and thoughts that are vitally important to us all in the everyday. Because that's what the heart and the mind, the soul if you like, desperately needs to feed and breathe and grow on. It is in fact that seemingly paradoxical tension between addressing "real life issues" in the form of fantasy, that responsibility in their art, that makes the greatest storytellers, and that sometimes agonizing tension between fantasy and the supposed real world that is the very stuff of children's fiction.

"Grow up," the adults and the realists cry, "it's not like that," as parents attempt to control and direct their children. There is no Santa Claus. There are no daemons. There is no goblet of fire. But that is exactly the point. In fact, in a child's awakening mind, everyone is a potential Santa Claus, or wicked uncle, daemons literally exist and there are goblets of fire. But great children's stories are helping us all to grow up and most especially when they pit the child's imagination, forming, creative, wondering, with the adult's, realistic,

responsible, authoritative, scientific nowadays. Think of muggles versus wizards. Think of Lord Azreal's bridge into other worlds. Think of fur coats and wardrobes and the sudden appearance of a lamp, a fawn and a freshly falling silent shower of snow.

It's not a game, nor, with a bow to modest Mr. Stevenson, a mere entertainment, it is something absolutely intrinsic to the human journey and always will be. And not only important for children, but adults too. Just look at how many supposed adults suddenly started reading Harry Potter on the way to

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work. Doesn't adulthood so often seem to rob us of our hopes, our passions, our ideals, our beliefs, our love? Well, in the wardrobe, in Will and Lyra's promise to communicate with each other in that scientific botanical garden, in Harry's. . . well, that we'll see about, the great, often terrible transition between the extraordinary possibilities of a child's mind and future, and the often harsh truths of life are being directly confronted.

Not always in the fact of plots, or reversals or denouements, but most powerfully in the very matrix of the committed writer's imagination. You can feel Pullman's visceral struggle with childhood and adulthood, with what fantasy, imagination, and belief are and what experience, reality, loss and death make us, bursting between the lines. His heroic and passionate, Miltonic and Blakean, defiance of Church and God, the authority, into whose heart he tries to plunge far more than a subtle knife, versus his profound, almost sacred wonder at life itself. It is his knowledge and mind, his skill with language and his deep commitment to his characters and his art, his moral maturity, that make that tension so miraculous and rightly won him the Whitbread in Britain.

The same tension is at work in Harry Potter, though to a lesser extent, and in the Narnia Chronicles, in Tolkien. They are so powerful precisely because their writers directly confront what confronts us all, namely the real world itself and the potential failure of our own imaginations and beliefs, with how so often life is not what we dreamt it to be, with how so often it is not the hopefully nurturing, protective place of home, with how it is not the stuff of fairy tales. No, that's not right. It is the stuff of fairy tales, but sometimes a very Grimm fairy tale, indeed. Indeed, the best approach the very real danger of myths themselves, how they can inspire us, but how we need to step beyond them in order to be really human.

And the greats address one thing in particular that I think truly ambitious children's books all share, namely the potential loss of God. For Phillip Pullman that is in essence a good thing, heralding, when he's

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worked through the entire canon of literature, a republic of heaven. But it leaves him with a paradox. How can he overturn religious myths, using the very myths and language he seeks to undermine? If the Authority to Pullman is a dangerous fantasy, he is still writing fantasy literature, still giving license to that searching, questing imagination, which even when you accept all science's powerful lessons, still leaves room and need for a wondering question, and for the language of God. For J.K. Rowling it is, we imagine, disastrous when a muggle world predominates, when there is no

magic. Except, of course, that all her characters and most of her settings are very realistic, even mundane. Home and school. Here again she roots her imagination and fantasy in the real world and, beyond the opposites of good and evil, of Harry and Vold . . . oops, "He who must not be named," of wizard and Muggle, she is writing about that most important thing of all to real life, relationships. For Tolkien the battle is with a different kind of God, the gods of Middle Earth, perhaps the end of Childhood itself, and the passing of an age, when the elves go into the West and the time of Men predominates.

In my books the tension is there too and the problem of God and the gods is directly addressed in *The Alchemists of Barbal*. In *Fire Bringer* the whole pattern of the book is informed by religious myth, and the tension between that and the truths of nature, while in *The Sight* the tension becomes even more palpable. In *The Telling Pool* the myth of King Arthur and Excalibur and what it might make us aspire to, and the earth magic of visionary waters that conjure images like a TV set, is set opposite the very real and horrible facts of warfare and a very domestic drama. If it becomes a didactic exercise, lecturing and badgering, then it will fail as fantasy, but clever writers, in the challenges they set their characters and in their fantastical plotting, will find a way to key into their own dilemmas and obsessions. The challenges their own beliefs face in the supposedly real world. That will allow them an almost psychic doorway back into

a child's imagination.

We know that we do have to grow up, that all children want to grow up. Indeed it is in trying to pretend that life and bad things don't happen, that the battles of good and evil are not so often more complex than black and white, that children will always be protected without having to learn resilience and independence for themselves, that we do the most damage. It's like saying all children's books should be cozy things, or that we should glorify childhood for its own sake. Leaving the child a perpetual child as he or she stands bereft under that Christmas tree, wondering in the face of fairy lights where all the magic went. That's what worries me a little when I see a nation of adults reading Harry Potter, or at least seeming to want crawl back into the womb, when they might be helped far more by reading Tolstoy, or naturally my own books! But then both children and adults need safe places to go and explore themselves in, and the arc of most popular fantasies is intrinsically safe. Though characters may die, and those moments can be brilliant preparations for real life, though really nasty things may happen, there is an implicit pact that the writer, like a loving adult, will guide their characters back to safety and psychic health—and will certainly help them to grow into themselves.

In fact children's fantasies today, certainly in the realms of teen fiction, are rightly willing to confront, with a chance at those safe explorations, issues that might have been banned or caused apoplexy 50 years ago. Sex and sexuality, drugs and alcohol, science and belief, life and death. All those things that exist and which children one day will have to confront in the real world. When critics talk nonsense about "the evil" of Harry Potter they fail to touch a fundamental human truth, that the potential for dark and light, for lies and truth, for good and evil is in all of us. It is within the human mind. Children will grow into far more balanced adults if they are allowed to see that, that they are not alone in their own problems and anxieties. Yet, perhaps we have to be careful with it. The culture does, to an extent, make the society. But books, which give more space for imagination, association and moral examination than the moving image, are the best place to do it. In Wales in the late 1920's my grandfather threatened to horsewhip my uncle for reading Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*, since Wilde, hounded for homosexuality, had

fallen from grace. He was in that respect a man of his time, but how wrong can you get, not least because Dorian Grey, like Wilde's fairy tales, is a deeply moral book. Just as that gay angel in *His Dark Materials* is a deeply moral figure.

And in terms of "living in the real world" there is of course that other powerhouse of fantasy, Science fiction. There the real revolutions of science can be explored through the necessary human construct of a narrative. Which brings me to a little act of revenge. I can't remember which critic for *The Washington Post*, while saying that she couldn't put it down, compared my book *The Sight*, to a bad episode of *Star Trek*.

Now I'm not sure who that's ruder about, me or *Star Trek*, but I'd like to put it on record that I like *Star Trek*, damn it. Or used to. Besides the trouble with critics is that they have to be treated like tribbles, but what they say doesn't really matter.

What matters is the letter I got from a kid called Sam in Wisconsin, who is adopted and who said that *The Sight* has really helped him through. *The Sight* isn't science fiction, it is most definitely fantasy, but some of the most imaginative, subversive and individualistic novels have and are appearing in the world of science fiction. In space all those human issues, and the challenges that science

throw up, can be synthesized beyond country and culture, in that no man's land, or perhaps every man's land, The Future. If the lesson of Arthur C. Clarke's invention of the telecommunications satellite is anything to go by, not only are those fantasists living in the real world, they are helping to create it too. There fantasy, imagination and science go on an intimate journey together.

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And that journey that readers take is not a real journey when it is forced toward an unnaturally happy conclusion. Like an LA producer demanding that the movie has a happy ending, because he knows it's close to Christmas and wants maximum comfort factor and profits. It's understandable to want happy endings; we all do, but what's the point when, like a darling girlfriend of mine, you pick up a novel and read the end first to see if you'll like it. Then you're not taking a journey at all. Dang, that used to make

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me cross. So then to fantasy in Hollywood. Like America the dream machine is blamed for a lot of things, sometimes rightly and sometimes wrongly. Hollywood and American TV is at its absolute worst when it takes up fantasy and myths that it fails to respect and understand, on the level at which they were created. Take HERCULES the series, though that may have been Australian. Snatch a demigod, tone him into The Governor of California, and then surround him with characters and language straight out of a geeky day at the shopping mall. The cultural gap is too great, and the result is just cheesy. I'll forgive Sheena, but for entirely different reasons. But the failure to look to the roots of why myths have become myths, at what they might be

telling us about the human mind and psyche on a universal level, to give them authenticity, depth and cultural context is as wrong as the tendency to want to rewrite history and convince the world that it was actually the USA that played a decisive role in the conclusion of the Boar war. The obverse of that is the new tendency to throw out the baby with the bath water and approach mythic stories in a pseudo

realistic way. Troy, 'The Truth'; Alexander the really not very Great; or the truly atrocious Arthur of the Britains. Thank god that a mature children's writer, William Nicholson, was brought in to the "warzone" of the set of *Gladiator* to save the day. The point once again is tension. That tension present in good children's books, between the storyteller's desire to touch the limits of their imagination and create universally satisfying stories, in myth and allegory, and the desire to realistically confront experience, history, character, fact and the truth.

When Hollywood does that well, nowhere is it done better. Practically anything touched by Spielberg. The teams working at Dreamworks and sometimes Disney, too. Updated myths like the wonderful *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or in America's case myths grounded in their own reality, like the "Legend of Sleepy Hollow." Directors and writers who understand their own culture and its needs, but respect the roots of legend and go back to the source. And that is why, and here's my pitch to become a national institution, or at least get a fantastical job in Beverly Hills, writers and their books are so important and must be valued, especially when they hate selling themselves. It's why Hollywood, for all its have-a-go genius, still looks to literature for its inspirations.

And now children's literature. The *Harry Potter* films, *Narnia*, *The Lord of the Rings*, the coming of Pullman. And at no time in the union of art and technology can fantasy be so amazingly fulfilled in the "real situation" of a cinema auditorium. But although I don't think a film has to be a book, I do think the danger of the bandwagon is always present, and that scriptwriters and directors have to stay true to the spirit of the novelist's imagination. The director did it fantastically with *The Lord of The Rings* trilogy, because he so obviously loves those stories, although I think he falls down in his treatment of the Ents and not acknowledging how deeply Tolkien's imagination and message is rooted in trees. That is, in an almost pantheist sensitivity to nature, and the deep transformation stories that come out of nature based Anglo-Saxon legends.

"Oh, grow up," worried execs might be saying now at my publisher's, it's really about selling things. Well, that it is, but all of us, if we are lucky enough to, want to sell things that are worth buying. And for the committed children's writer, that imperative to "grow

up” is not the angry or contemptuous shout of an adult toward an unruly or naive child. It is the hope that the wonder and potential is carried fully into adulthood. And there we suddenly are as adults, often feeling about eight years old. But when we hurt each other, or tear each other apart, or scream that YOU have to live in MY real world, when what we call reality invades our souls and someone tries to tell us that they know the absolute truth, then above all we need that opening imagination. As a child knows that they have so much to learn from a parent, but that if we lived 10,000 years ago or 10,000 years into the future, would the rules or the truth be quite the same?

That kind of imagination hopefully reminds us too that though the rent has to be paid or this domestic situation may be more painful than we can cope with, we are all, here and now, on a planet, floating in space at 60,000 miles an hour, and that is always and forever quite miraculous. Terrifying often, but miraculous. When the Fundamentalists too, or those who claim the absolute good or the perfect moral high ground, tell us that we must believe in what they believe in, in their Authority, then we need the Pullmans to wield, scientifically and brilliantly, their subtle knives. But when science tells us that it has proved that magic doesn't exist, as surely as faith in something is wrong, and that their methodologies encompass the whole of being, or the human heart and imagination, then we need the magical and miraculous to be restored to us in stories, and to be reminded that even scientists need extraordinary leaps of imagination for their revelations. To be told, too, that on one very real level these things are about language and that while there may be objective scientific truths out there, there are also human truths, what is healthy for the human animal, and sometimes they are in direct conflict.

That's why the greatest children's stories are not just for children but for adults too, and carry forms down to the future. Down to our children. Was *The Lord of The Rings* voted the greatest book of all time in the UK because we all as illiterate as the rest of the world? Or because in Frodo's journey to destroy the Ring of Power and cast it into the cracks of doom, in

the face of all odds and ultimate evil, Tolkien had hammered out a psychic archetype of resistance, belief, hope and freedom, that is at the very core of the human journey. As deeply embedded as *The Odyssey* or Bible stories. One that beyond all political flag waving, beyond what we are told we should accept as truth and reality, readers have and can carry with them in their private hearts and minds to the darkest of places. And humanity is what Rowling, Tolkien, Pullman, and Lewis are ultimately dealing with. The making of men and women. Everything JK Rowling writes is really about how to protect, encourage and nurture Harry into an adult world, but one that still contains magic, and one that is more tolerant, imaginative and inclusive than many adults would have us create. Do I live in the real world? Am I a fantasist? I prefer to think, because that is the key to creativity, change and growth, that somewhere there is always a doorway between the two.

*David Clement-Davies is the author of fantasy fiction works, including Fire Bringer, The Sight, The Alchemists of Barbal, and The Telling Pool. His newest book, Fell, a sequel to The Sight, will be out in 2007. Born in London, David grew up in Wales and attended Westminster School and Edinburgh University, where he studied history, English literature, Italian Renaissance literature, and Russian Literature and Society. His books are marked by rich intricacies of plot detail enabled by his formal education and interest in English literature, Arthurian Legend and its depictions in popular culture, Romanticism, and nature. His works are recently available in the United States.*

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