

Some Operations of Truth: A personal response to Margaret Mahy's *The Haunting*.

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One of the key theorists that have influenced my reading of texts and the consequential implications for me as a teacher-educator is the work of Louise Rosenblatt (1978). She posits that there are two ways of engaging a text such that meaning is not inherent in the text itself, but emerges as a consequence of the stance that readers apply, as they read a text. Firstly, she identifies the efferent stance, derived from the Latin *effere* (as in “to take away”) which speaks of a stance whereby readers seek information from the text. Secondly, she identifies the aesthetic stance which she describes as a living through the experience of the text. This is known as reader-response theory.

Today I want to share my “living through” experience of re-reading Mahy's *The Haunting* (1982). I have chosen this text (having reviewed many of her other novels in the last ten years) mainly for its iconic status in the Mahy *oeuvre*; and for very personal reasons, as we will see.

Reader-response theory has been criticised more recently as a theory that posits the idea that the reader as a free agent interacting freely with the text. Theorists within a cultural studies framework, utilising a more sociological orientation, argue that all readings are contextualised by socio-political forces that act to limit such agency.¹ In educational theory, these theorists draw attention to the necessity for developing a critical literacy approach to the literary text, exploring concepts such as reader/subject positioning. I tend to take an eclectic approach, drawing upon different theoretical stances for different purposes.

It seems to me that as Mahy's work is increasingly a focus of critical attention, various critics assume an efferent stance towards her texts (tending by-and-large to be self-effacing when it comes to describing personal engagements with story). Berkin (1990) for example, approaches *The Changeover* in terms of its resonances with the fairy tale “Sleeping Beauty” employing theories about archetypes and how Mahy usurps traditional gender roles; Gose (1991) similarly draws upon a Jungian frame in exploring the folktale resonances within *The Changeover* and *The Tricksters*, using Alan Garner's *The Guizer* as source, and Marquis (1987) too explores *The Haunting* in contrast to *The Secret Garden* in terms of (neo)Freudian ideas of the subject, seeing in Mahy's text, something of a feminist project. I am variously persuaded by the “consensus reality”² as described in these analyses, but my truth, in negotiating *The Haunting*, is of a different sort.

¹ See for example, Lewis, C. “Limits of Identification: The personal, pleasurable and critical in reader response” *Journal of Literacy Research*, Vol. 32 No. 2 2000 pp. 253-266

² Mahy's conviction that life is more than physical reality led her to posit that “truth” is found in metaphor and story which crosses the borders between myth and “consensus reality.” See Mahy,

Indeed, it is Rosenblatt's second kind of reading, the aesthetic stance, that I want to talk about today. The text here is less an object to be critically dismembered but rather is an experience to live through. It seems to me that this type of reading, derived from the life journey of the reader as much as the signifiers of the text, closely resembles the idea of truth that Mahy (1989) speaks about in her essay, "A Dissolving Ghost: Possible operations of truth in children's books and the lives of children." Mahy here speaks of story as a "marvellous code" that helps us to make sense of our lives. She states:

I am going to propose that there is a code in our lives, something we automatically recognise when we encounter it in the outside world, something personal, but possibly primeval too, something which gives form to our political responses, to our art, our religious feeling, sometimes to our science and even to the way the weather forecast may be presented as a little drama. It is something eagerly recognised in children, so perhaps there is no first encounter. Perhaps it is already in them... This code makes use of cause and effect, though sometimes it precedes and transcends this necessary relationship. It can be suspected or duplicated but I don't think it can really be dismantled... I am referring to *story*, something we encounter in childhood and live with all our lives."

I have to be honest and say that for me, it *is* inherently problematic to set up a dualism as Rosenblatt does when she distinguishes between an efferent reading and an aesthetic reading in that, for me, they are often, in the nature of life as I now live, fused. That is to say, given that much of my life has been devoted to academic endeavour, to becoming a critical reader (where the metaphor of the journey is *the* underlying truth), often the very act of reading has become an academic exercise rather than a lived through experience of "possible operations of truth". I respond less to the truth of the story and more to the reality of certain signifiers. Such is the joy of the critic. But, if I read Mahy correctly, truth is centred on the personal and the imaginative, and to talk about the truth of a story, it is necessary to personal, to be able to describe the imaginative resonances between text and reader.

Indeed, when I read critical analyses of Mahy's oeuvre in terms of particular theoretical orientations, like *The Changeover* being a feminist project, or *The Tricksters* being read as a Jungian thesis or the relationship of Mahy's work to concept of genre and the concept of supernatural realism, I am aware that there is consensus reality to them in that textual support (and hints from Mahy herself) can be brought to bear on the propositions, but at the same time, I feel a certain distance from such utterances. They simply don't touch on my sense of truth, especially when responding to *The Haunting*. Perhaps, it is because I am standing here as a male in what is dominantly a female occupation (librarianship and teaching) responding ostensibly to a text that purports to be a feminist project, I can't help but be "phallogocentric" (a term, I might say, that leaves me a little hot-blooded!) Whatever, when I read such dissertations, I respond aesthetically too, in that I wonder what life story is embedded in the life of the critic such that there is a necessity to respond to a story in such terms. What is it to be haunted? Critics have their stories too.

That is to say, as Mahy reminds us in her experiences and discussions on the nature of science, the notion of an objective reality independent of the personal and the imaginative is an impossibility. It seems to me that the critical enterprise is likewise

M. (1991) *Surprising Moments: The inaugural Margaret Mahy Award lecture*, Auckland: NZ Children's Book Foundation, p. 19.

so constructed, and that the learned critic, refined in sensibility, uttering grand truths is a fiction. Take from me then, what you will.

You see, to respond to Mahy's *The Haunting*, I need to tell you something of *my* story, because it is in *this* particular code, some possible operations of truth are made real. Let me tell you about my grand-mother whose resemblance to great-grandmother Scholar is deeply mysterious. When I re-read *The Haunting* most recently, I recognise a fracture in my world, a disjunction between external lived realities (the domesticity of ordinary living and going about my business) and some underlying truths; that my sister (older and somewhat Troyish) and I (a remarkable blend, one might say, of the introspective Barney and the garrulous Tabitha) have been haunted!

In picture books, short stories and novels, Mahy often conjures up an image of fracture, the shimmering of a surface, a crack in the world, a double in the mirror, the time and space where the supernatural impinges on the natural. Mahy's persistent use of this dislocation motif, found in both the life of characters and the representation of our landscape, Te Papa, is precisely the point I believe where readers are given permission to engage deeply with the operation of the truth of the novel. It is the fracture between "fantasy/magic" and "realism". But it requires an imaginative leap, a telling of story.³

When we talk, as critics, about "identification" of the reader with the story, this notion is generally focused in Aristotelian terms as the identification of the reader with a character, be it hero(ine) or villain, (and forgive my phallogocentric example) we may be talking about Walter Mitty boys having wet dreams about superheroes and all that they can attain! Reader-response case studies indicate some usefulness for this notion of identification.⁴ But I think the concept of identification, especially in my re-readings of Mahy as an adult reader, is equally focussed on the imaginative resonance between a reader's life story and the mirror that the text presents to that life story.⁵

It is not then that I simply want to appeal to some notion of the child within relating to the represented child without (me being Barney/Tabitha if you will). It is much more about the dislocation that the idea of being "haunted" and "possessed" as metaphors have in the face of me being domesticated. You see, my story about being haunted by my ancestors is a universal truth; we all are haunted by ghosts from our past; we are, as Maori recognise, a construction of the past, present and possible futures.⁶ The trick,

³ Not unexpectedly, the notion of haunting and possession, the foci of the meeting of nature and the supernatural can cause some concern by various Christian groups. Teachers need to be aware that the literary and the religious can be in conflict. Mahy's personal stance is that of open scepticism. <http://skeptics.org.nz/SK:VIEWARTICLE:1001.6126:waDeptTOC.1.A842>

⁴ See Moffat, W. "Identifying with Emma: Some problems for the feminist reader" *College English* Vol. 53 No. 1 1991 pp. 45-58

⁵ See Kuiken, D., Phillips, L., Gregus, M., Miall, D., Verbitsky, M., & Tonkonogy, A. "Locating Self-modifying Feelings within Literary Reading" *Discourse Processes: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 38 No. 2 2004 pp. 267-286

⁶ The notion of story containing universal truths causes considerable conniptions on the part of critics within cultural studies in that it seems to be an essentialising, colonising business. However, the reality of a writer being translated into multiple languages and such books

if I read *The Tricksters* and correctly, is to face the future having integrated the central truths of our past; and at the same time recognising that this new story is also, in the moment told, a new past. The domestic returns, though *Memory* is transformed.

My abiding memory of my grandmother (may she rest in peace) is a wizened face and strong wrinkle lines, hands forever knitting booties and the rolling of her false teeth (vertical if you will) in her mouth. I could tell you stories of this matriarch as a very controlling person, needing to establish her significance and powerfulness in a very tough environment. I could retell the story of my mother as a child running over the sand-dunes of Plimmerton to fetch my grandmother who was visiting friends. The bailiffs had come and all possessions removed from the house (including family). I could tell you about next day grandmother knocked on the parliamentary door of Mickey Savage and him personally giving money for the family to go the Princess Hotel, run by the Sallies. I could tell you about the family getting one of the first state houses in the suburb of Berampore, Wellington, the location of my holidays as a child. I could tell the story of a grandmother who struggled in life, even to the point that at 80, she fell and was hospitalised. Some time later, the neurosurgeon said, "Mrs Williams. You're the luckiest person I know. By rights you should be paralysed. If I was you, I would go and buy yourself a lotto ticket." She did and won first prize, and at 80 became for the first time, a woman of independent means. One of the first things my grandmother did was to go and buy a complete Royal Dalton dinner set. Two years later she died. Did I, as eldest grandson get a whiff of it? Not on your life. It all was meant to go to SPCA, IHC etc, etc. Fair enough. But there was dissension in the family as the will was contested. I had a sense at the time that my grandmother was "up there" cackling. Is that the end of the story? Well, no. Twenty-odd years later, my sister (Troyish) and I (Barney/Tabitha), working through our own life crises, needed to talk about grandmother and the impact on the family over time. My sister's memory of grandmother was much more stark, such was my grandmother's relationship to the issue of the gender...but that's another story.

This juxtaposition between Mahy's story and my (family) story seems to me to define an essential pleasure of reading; a recognition of sameness within difference. It gives permission to disclose something of oneself and how much we need to recognise the courage of any author to display some aspect of the personally felt imaginative life to public perusal. For me, the following Mahy signature tunes, as evidenced in *The Haunting*, "hailed into being"⁷ my lived-through experience of the text.

- Much of Mahy's young adult novels invoke the past as a provocation for the plot. Past events must be exorcised so that truth and memory become whole. For me, the older one gets, the more one has to integrate the past. In this sense, a Jungian frame that talks about the pathway to individuation is a useful construct.
- Often the plot revolves around the dislocation between parent (usually the mother) and the child (p.4); the story revealing the need for parents to be learners as much as children.
- One must note the a-typical representation of characters such as the grandmother (p.11, p.64 p.114). Children's literature could be defined by the adult need for grandparents to be idealised, thus preventing accusations of

reaching vastly different and huge audiences suggest that the concept of universality, though problematised, may still have currency.

⁷ After Althusser whose concept of interpellation, or hailing into being, speaks to how texts construct readers to read the world ideologically, primarily as subjects of the powerful, the state.

ageism. However, children (and the defenders of their faith, authors such as Mahy) know better.

- The necessity of representing domesticity grounds the fantasy as imminently possible. Adventure in Mahy's novels is contextualised by domesticity (family events, sibling rivalry, rituals of home and hearth); the focus of her stories begins and ends in domesticity (p.133). To me, this creates a greater possibility of engagement between the domesticated reader and story.
- Wonderfully nuanced writing creates a real sense of mimesis (p. 24). Mahy has the talent to use metaphor to finely fix imagery in the mind of the reader, creating a commitment of belief in the character and actions of the characters.
- Ironic wit invites us to play with ideas of truth and reality (eg. self-referential play with the act of writing and melodrama as represented in Tabitha [p.52] and where Tabitha disputes a psychological explanation of Barney's dilemmas [p.60-69]). We are positioned consequently to be reflective, hesitant and open about the possibilities of the story.

Of course, there is a degree of efferent reading in this listing of characteristics, but in this case it serves the aesthetic. It is less a case of holding a theoretical position and looking for confirming evidence; it is more a case of being aware of how this text constructed for me, a lived-through experience.

Now, there are some important principles for us as adults that I would want to draw attention to in this explication of my interaction with Mahy's *The Haunting* that, in my view, speak to the truth of children's literature as defined by Mahy as "some possible operations of truth". Firstly, in contrast to the dominant educational practices of requiring young people to approach teacher-chosen texts *efferently* (and the consequential necessity to perform for assessment purposes), there is an urgent need to give space for *aesthetic* readings through the mutual sharing of the code of story, if the imaginative truth of Mahy as writer/critic is to be realised.

Efferent practices not only include traditional requirements to identify such notions as plot types, the delineation of character and the explication of themes as abstract propositions; but also include more postmodern imperatives to recognise ideological positioning in order to develop resistant strategies. These practices may all speak to the idea of a "consensus reality" but, Mahy challenges us to seek to use the code of shared stories as a space for healing fractured selves, the heart of aesthetic readings. How do we allow children and young people in the context of the classroom to express how, for example, that they are haunted? What counts for "best practise" in enabling aesthetic readings to occur? As teachers, we need to recognise that, if we do not allow this space, we are subverting, for our own adult purposes (something about herding sheep for the slaughterhouse comes to mind), the true heart of children's literature.

Secondly, and similarly to my concern above, there seems to me to be a need for parents, teachers, librarians and critics too to explicate the aesthetic experience both in terms of themselves as readers (and storytellers) and especially, to understand the nature of children's and young people's living-through experiences. As we

Following the looping line: exploring the literary legacy of Margaret Mahy.

collectively tell stories, including the stories of how we come to be, then we truly experience literature wholly. To do otherwise is to open ourselves up to the accusation that we, as adults, are colonising the child in children's literature. Instead, let us empower the young person to be who they are. To quote from the end of *The Haunting*:

“I am not going to be the same Troy again, anyway. Let me be free...And she held out her arms, became a flowering tree, a flying bird, a burning girl, a creature made of stars. Her boundaries with the rest of the world ebbed and flowed...” (p.121)

In this space, we are astonished. This to me, is the gift that Margaret Mahy offers children and young people: the necessity to be constantly astonished at the wonder of the world and who we are in it; to be in a constant state of awe. To her must go the final words:

These days it seems to me that when I look at the world I see many people, including politicians, television readers, real estate agents and free-market financiers, librarians too at times, dressing as sharks, eating leaves and drinking out of puddles, casually taking over the powerful and dangerous images that the imagination presents, eager to exploit the fictional forms that haunt us all...I believe that inner space is haunted by other singularities, by stories, lines of power along which our lives align themselves like iron filings around a magnet defining the magnetic field by the patterns they form around it, and that we yearn for the structure that stories tell us, that we inhabit their patterns and, often but not always, know instinctively how to use them well.

Mahy, M. *A Dissolving Ghost* (ibid)

If you will allow me my Tabitha moment and say the final, final word: go forth and tell stories.

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