# Turtles All the Way Down

JANE YOLEN.

The famous philosopher Will James had just finished giving a lecture on the solar system in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when he was approached by an elderly admirer. She was shaking her head and her umbrella and looking very stern.

"Mr. James," she admonished him, "I am shocked by your notion that we live on a ball rotating around the sun. That is patently absurd. "Politely, James waited, inclining his head toward her.

"We live on a crust of earth on the back of a giant turtle," the Grande dame announced.

James, ever gentle, asked, "If your.., um... theory is correct, Madame, what does this turtle stand upon?"

"The first turtle stands on the back of a second far larger turtle, of course," the old woman replied.

James lifted his hand. "Ah, Madame, but what does this second turtle stand upon?"

The dowager's eyes were bright. She laughed triumphantly, "It's no use, Mr. James--it's turtles all the way down!"

And so it is with writing fantasy--whether books for adults or children, whether a plot revolving around elves or unicorns or travel through time or angels stalking the earth or Chinese dragons having tea with detectives. Each book stands on the back of story. And as the old lady in Cambridge would agree, it's no use--it's story all the way down.

The writing of fantasy relies on that relationship, thrives on the ironies of a modern intelligence at work on the old tales, is enhanced by the juxtaposition of what-we-know-now and what we-once-believed. Making fantasy stories is sciamachy, or boxing with shadows. Old shadows. Devious shadows. Wily shadows. Weird shadows. Our own shadows.

## Writer as the Careful Observer

Since the creating of fantasy worlds, which contains universes, is built on the sturdy crust of story, the first important rule is that one needs to be sure of one's roots. Socrates said about allegories and myths that:

He is not to be envied who has to invent them; much labor and ingenuity will be required of him; and when he has once begun, he must go on and rehabilitate centaurs and chimeras dire. Gorgons and winged steeds flow in apace, and numberless other inconceivable and portentous monsters. And if he is sceptical about them, and would fain reduce them one after another to the rules of probability, this sort of crude philosophy will take up all his time.

In other words, do your research and believe in your monstrosities--at least as long as you are writing of them. Otherwise your skepticism will translate into condescension on the pages and alienate readers.

It is difficult enough to make believable what is not, in broad daylight, believable: the seelie court alive and well in Minneapolis, water rats and moles conversing and messing about in boats, a furry-footed manikin out to save the world by tossing away a magic ring, a boy pulling a sword from a stone and thus becoming a king, a young man fighting his shadow self for possession of power, a young woman calling her dark sister out of a mirror, a world in which dragons can be ridden through time and alternate space. The writer of such stories must know something, then, about the seelie court, about the habits of water rats and moles, about his own furry-footed manikin's genealogy, about all the things that will bolster belief. Belief by the author, belief by the reader.

Background, then, is important. The landscape of the world must be carefully limned. Sometimes, as in Emma Bull's War for the Oaks, the place is real and the author lives there. Still, as well as Bull knows Minneapolis, she had to research material on the seelie or elvin court. Sometimes the author takes a trip to the place, as Ellen Kushner did for her novel Thomas the Rhymer, striding across the Eildon Hills of Scotland, avoiding cowpats and taking notes. As I did for The Dragon"s Boy, scouting the Glastonbury marshes for duckweed and frogbit and brightyellow kingcup and the white clusters of milk parsley, my wildflower book in hand. Sometimes the research is done in libraries only, as Susan Shwartz did for her fantasy novels about the Silk Roads. But in fantasy, outer landscape reflects inner landscape. The hills and mountains must be true, whether they are based on actual places like Minneapolis or Scotland or England or China--or are made up analog fashion, from places in the author's mind. All of the fantasy authors I know own research volumes on wildlife, wildflowers, insects, birds. Peterson's Guides have a use Roger Tory Peterson never intended, perhaps, but they are useful all the same.

Analog fashion. By that I mean if you are not using the city of Minneapolis or the actual Eildon Hills or the fenland around Glastonbury with the for mounding up over the quaking land, but rather a construct of your own, it needs to have some sort of referent in real life. Writers need to be observers first.

If you have never seen a mountain, I mean really looked at one, don't put a mountain in your fantasy land. If you have not studied a wildflower and noted that certain types grow in marshy places, others in drier scrub, then don't pepper your fantastic landscape with red and blue catch-me-nevers or beggar-my-neighbors or whatever you decide to call them. You are sure to describe a hothouse variety where only a scraggle-rooted one will do. And don't send seabirds salling over mountaintops, or water pippits stalking up rock slides. Look hard at the real world and then look slightly askance. That is how you make your fantasy analog. As Emily Dickinson advised in one wise little poem, "Tell all the truth/but tell it slant." Fantasy looks at the world through slotted eyes.

So, too, the creatures of a fantastic world need careful observation. If you intend to use elves, for example, don't rely on Tolkien or any other modern writer's elves. Go back to source. You will find that elves are not the cute, pointy-eared, fur-loinc lothed critters that modern comic books would have us believe. Rather, according to older lore gleaned from such books as Katherine Briggs's The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature or her An Encyclopedia of Fairies, they are amoral, they are lovers of tidyness, and they set high value on courtesy and respect, and yet "honesty means nothing to (them). They consider they have right to whatever they need or fancy, including.., human beings themselves." Or if you want to put dragons in your story, find out as much about the difference between Western and Eastern dragons as a start, and then decide if your

dragons could exist. (Would they, for example, need hollow bones like large birds?) If you wish Wotan or Coyote or Manannan MacLit to come striding into your fantasy, go back to source to get the descriptions of clothing, speech patterns, and the color of mist that wraps around the god. If you decide to depart from source, at least you will know what you are departing from. The dilution of modern mythologies comes from writers who think that a Dungeons and Dragons manual is prime source material or that they can know all about Hercules from watching B movies and learning what the acronym SHAZAM stands for.

So the writer as careful observer comes first. If the writer creates what Eleanor Cameron calls "the compelling power of place," building up the fantasy world or the real world in which the fantastic takes place with a wealth of corroborating details, the reader will have to believe in the place. If the place is real enough, then the fantasy creatures and characters--dragon or elf lord or one-eyed god or the devil himself--will stride across that landscape leaving footprints that sink down into the mud. And if those creatures are also compelling, having taken root in the old lore and been brought forward in literary time by the carefully observing author, those footprints in the mud can be taken out, dried, and mounted on the wall.

Writer as Vatic Voice.

The vatic voice is the prophetic or inspired or oracular voice. Nowhere in writing is this voice used as narrative so well as in the literature of the fantastic. Fantasy is dreamer’s history and often it is the dreamer’s voice, the bard afire with the word of God, vates.

The voice of fantasy pipes through the writer down strange new-yet-old valleys wild. There is nothing tame in the world of faerie. Tendrils of green lianas crawl across the paths. Invisible beasts call from behind dark trees. The world is moonlit, a chiaroscuro world where light and dark are in constant play. But the calling is not one voice, the piping not one single tone. One might almost name three: the oracle, the schoolboy, and the fool.

The oracular voice speaks in a metaphoric mode, from hollow caves, out of swirling mists of perfumed, drugging smoke, in riddles and gnomic utterances. It sings with the bardic full chest tones. This is the sound of the high fantasy novel. Three who do it to perfection are J. R. R. Tolkien, Ursula Le Guin, and Patricia McKillip. Others include Robin McKinley, Meredith Ann Pierce, and Lloyd Alexander. It is no coincidence that riddles play an important role in their books.

There is the riddle of the ring poem in the beginning of The Lord of the Rings that binds the three books (really four, counting The Hobbit) with as fierce a power as the rings bind the characters who dare put them on.

And in Le Guin’s The Wizard of Earthsea, the riddles Ged, the young master wizard, must ask himself, have to do with shadow and substance, good and evil, light and dark. He is told by the Master Wizard: This sorcery is not a game we play for pleasure or for praise. Think of this: that every word, every act of our Art is said and is done for good or for evil. Before you speak or do you must know the price that is to pay!

Ged answers, driven by shame: "How am I to know these things when you teach me

nothing?" His finding the right answers to the riddles of his master's teachings are, of course, the basic thrust of the book.

Patticia MeKillip uses the riddle itself as the main metaphor for her entire trilogy. In The Riddle Master of Hed, the riddle is the key to Morgon"s self-knowledge. As he says, "The stricture according to the Riddle-Masters at Caithnard is this: "Answer the unanswered riddle!" So I do." And he spends the rest of the three volumes trying to learn to temper his passion for unriddling with wisdom, compassion, and an understanding (inherent in all great fantasy novels) that magic has consequences.

The oracular tones are the full basso profundo of fantasy dialects, the ground bass on which the melodies of the others overswell. The words are sometimes archaic--elven, sorcery, stricture. Sometimes they are fanciful, Latinate, sonorous. There is frequent use of alliterations: "a ring to rule them"; "pleasure or for praise." And the sentences, like chants, often end on that full stop, the strong stress syllable that reminds one of a knell rung on a full set of bells. One can declaim high fantasy, sing out whole paragraphs, even chapters. I expect that if they were set to music, it would be Beethoven, full and echoing, melodic, resonant, touching deep into the most private places of the heart.

The schoolboy voice is more securely set in the here and now. While fantasy figures bend and bow around it, the voice remains childlike, innocent, a sensible commentary on the imaginary. Ray Bradbury, E. Nesbit, C. S. Lewis, Diana Wynne Jones, and Natalie Babbit reign supreme here. The voice speaking in ordinary tones about the extraordinary recall us to our humanity in the midst of the fantastic.

Listen to the way a Nesbit child reacts when first coming upon a psammead, a creature that has "eyes on long horns like a snail's eyes.., a tubby body.., shaped like a spider's and covered with thick soft fur.., and.., hands and feet like a monkey"s." She says: "What on earth is it?... Shall we take it home?" which seems eminently childlike and sensible.

And while in C. S. Lewis's Namia wars and witches are raging, the voice of a very real British schoolboy, Eustace, meeting the elegant and marvelous talking mouse Reepicheep, who has lust bowed and kissed Lucy's hand, remonstrates:

"Ugh, take it away," wailed Eustace. "I hate mice. And I never could bear performing animals. They're silly and vulgar and-and sentimental."

Two schoolchildren"s reactions to marvels: opposite, apposite, and very real.

And when Winhie Foster in Babbifs Tuck Everlasting first hears the strange story of the Tucks and their water of everlasting life, she thinks not about the unbelievability of their history but rather about the humanity that confronts her:

It was the strangest story Winhie had ever heard. She soon suspected they had never told it before, except to each other--that she was their first real audience; for they gathered around her like children at their mother's knee, each trying to claim her attention, and sometimes they all talked at once, and interrupted each other in their eagerness.

There, quite simply, is the key to the schoolboy voice. The child in this kind of fantasy takes over the role of the adult, shepherding the fantastic creatures through their paces, guiding, guarding--even when frightfully afraid--for this world belongs to the child, this world in which magic has slipped through. And it is not the magic itself that is startling,

because children expect that kind of magic to occur, but the vulnerability of the creatures of magic who are sad in their magnificence and, in Eustace's words, sometimes "silly and vulgar and--and sentimental." The child responds to this vulnerability by becoming both more childlike and yet adult, a paradox seen whenever a child plays house, giving advice and taking it at one and the same time.

These are the middle tones, carrying the tunes so familiar to us, dancing in and out of the fantastic as a Bach fugue does, using a simple tune made more complex by its interweaving; plain, unelaborated except where the fantastic itself is concerned, it is the everydayness of the language that reveals when set against the extraordinary. Natalie Babbit does this brilliantly, eschewing the fanciful for the ordinary in the opening of Tuck Everlasting. She reports with a painter's eye, and that report becomes the metaphor for the book:

The first week of August hangs at the very top of summer, the top of the live-long year, like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning. The weeks that come before are only a climb from balmy spring, and those that follow a drop to the chill of autumn, but the first week of August is motionless, and hot. It is curiously silent, too, with blank white dawns and glaring moons, and sunsets smeared with too much color. Often at night there is lightning, but it quivers all alone. There is no thunder, no relieving rain. These are strange and breathless days, the dog days, when people are led to do things they are sure to be sorry for after.

The third voice, high and piercing, full of ridiculous trills and anachronisms, ludicrous and punning, is the voice of the fool. But don't be guiled by it. Underneath the pratfalls and the bulbous-nose mask, behind the wild shrieks and the shaking of slapsticks, lie deep, serious thoughts. As Montaigne says in his Essays, attributing it to Cato the Elder, "Wise men have more to learn of fools than fools of wise men."

Examples of this voice are Lewis Carroll, Sid Fleischman, Norton Juster, Terry Pratchert, Esther Friesner, and Craig Shaw Gardner. Like a comic opera by Mozart, there are wild, sweet melodies hidden amid the silliness, and you would be a fool indeed to miss them.

When Lewis Carroll invented his Mad Teaparty, he little knew that it would serve generations of English teachers and writers as well as children. Listen:

"You should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied, "at least--at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say "I see what I eat" is the same thing as "I eat what I see!"

"You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"{"

"You might just as well say," added the Dormouse, which seemed to be talking in its sleep, "that "I breathe when I sleep" is the same thing as "I sleep when I breathe"{"

"It is the same thing with you," said the Hatter…

That is not just straight silliness. The applicability to everyday life is so fierce in Alice

in Wonderland that I wish to remind you of the time of Watergate in this country when the following phrases--and more--were lifted from the Alice books by columnists, commentators, essayists, and editorialists and used to explain politics:

"I told you butter wouldn't suit the works" "Believing six impossible things before breakfast" "Sentence first, verdict after"
"Curiouser and curiouser"

Sid Fleischmann's humor is regional, hyperbolic, and anything but casual. The silliness is unrelieved, or so it seems. But Fleischman is a traditionalist when it comes to humor, and he knows well how to disguise pain with the puttynose, to teach us wisdom with a wisecrack.

In Chancy and the Grand Rascal, my favorite of his many books, Chancy, who is so skinny he'd "have to stand twice to throw a shadow," goes through a series of picaresque adventures in order to find his family because "kin belonged together, didn't they?" And when a wicked man is described as "gander necked.., with a nose like a stick," the absurdity of it sets the tone and character with economy and grace. We laugh, but we are properly fearful, too.

Norton Juster's The Phantom Tollbooth is not just a book-long play on words, although at times it may seem so:

"If you please," said Milo [speaking to King Azaz the Unabridged] ".... your palace is beautiful." "Exquisite," corrected the duke. "Lovely," counseled the minister. "Handsome," recommended the count. "Pretty," hinted the earl.

"Charming," submitted the undersecretary.

"SILENCE," suggested the king. "Now young man, what can you do to entertain us? Sing songs? Tell stories? Compose sonnets? Juggle plates? Do tumbling tricks? Which is it?"
"I can't do any of those things," admitted Milo.

"What an ordinary little boy," commented the king. "Why my cabinet members can do all sorts of things. The duke here can make mountains out of molehills. The minister splits hairs. The count makes hay while the sun shines. The earl leaves no stone unturned. And the undersecretary," he finished ominously, "hangs by a thread. Can't you do anything at all?"

That is a hymn to language, our use and misuse of it that William Satire, Russell Baker, and Edwin Newman would envy. But it is also story--not Sunday editorial polemic. In the end, of course, the voice of fantasy is not a particular dialect at all--not the oracle, the schoolboy, the fool. There is a much older voice that lies in back of them all--the storyteller's voice--bridging the gap of history, singing to us out of the mists of time, telling truths.
As the Maori people say when beginning a tale:

The breath of life,
The spirit of life,

The word of life,
It flies to you and you and you,
Always the word.

If the fantasy story does not have that breath of life, whether it uses the words of the oracle, the schoolboy, or the fool, it does not deserve to live and will lie, stillborn, on the pages of a dust covered book.

Writer as Visionary.

It surprises no one that writers of realistic fiction write about the society in which they live, that their stories reflect current thinking, and that fictional accounts of child abuse or women's rights or nuclear issues are published in the decade of public awareness and social legislation. But fantasy authors are just as mired in society as authors of realistic work are, though their work is like the wicked queen's magic mirror that does not always give back the expected answer.

For example, Charles Kingsley's Water Babies is a picture of the underbelly of English society in the nineteenth century, but the plight of poor chimney sweeps is only the mirror's first casting. What Kingsley didn"t realize was that later readings would judge his anti-black, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic attitudes, which are only slightly disguised in the book, rather more harshly than he ajudged the rich-poor dichotomy. Rudyard Kipling's otherwise brilliant The Jungle Books is marred by jingoism. Mary Popins and Dr. Doolittle share a cultural bias against peoples of color. Charlie and the Chocolate Factory in its first printing showed the Oompa-loompahs with skin "almost black" because they are "Pygmies... imported directly from Africa," as if they were so much yardgoods. In later printings of the book the little workers in Willy Wonka"s factory have been transmogrified into a different color and a different place of origin.

What is easy to see with these examples is that fantasy books deal with issues (consciously or unconsciously, in a good light or in a bad) as thoroughly as realistic fiction, but one step removed. For example, Randall Jarrell's book The Bat Poet is about the artist in society, Le Guin's Tehanu about woman's power, Patticia Wrightson"s A Little Fear about active old age, my Sister Light, Sister Dark about the integration of personality as well as the inaccuracies of history.

But it is the phrase one step removed that is the most important. Fantasy fiction, by its very nature, takes us out of the real world. Sometimes it takes us to another world altogether: Demar, Middle Earth, Namia, Earthsea, Prydain, the Dales. Sometimes it changes the world we know in subtle ways, such as showing us the "little people" who live behind the walls of our houses and "borrow" things. Or that in a very real barn, but out of our hearing and sight, a pig and a spider hold long, special conversations. Sometimes a book of fantasy travels us between planets (A Wrinkle in Time), between worlds (the Oz books), or between times (A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur"s Court), or the traveler himself is from somewhere else, such as Nesbit's psam-mead or Bull"s pucca or Diana Wynne Jones"s goon.

By taking that one step away from the actual world, the writer of fantasy can allow the reader to pretend that the book is not talking about the everyday, the mundane, the real society when indeed it is. It is a convention all agree to. A mask. In eighteenth century

Venice, when masked bails were common, it became a convention that a person who wished to go about the street and be treated as if he were disguised needed only to wear a pin in the shape of a mask on his lapel. Thus accoutred, he was considered masked and could act out any part he wished without fear of shame or retribution or recognition.

So fantasy novels go capped and belled into literary society, saying in effect: this is not the real world we are talking of, this is of course faerie, make-believe, where bi-colored rock pythons speak, where little girls converse with packs of cards, where boys become kings by drawing swords from stones, and where caped counts can suck the blood of beautiful women in order to live forever.

Children who read fantasy may be beguiled, because they may not totally understand the conventions. They mistake the pin for the real. They write to Maurice Sendak and ask for directions to the place where the Wild Things live. They believe in Namia and Middle Earth and Prydain and Demar, and for them these worlds may become even more real than the every day. After all, when we write about such places we must adhere to three very persuasive laws: first, that the fantasy world have identifiable and workable laws underpinning it. (Lloyd Alexander says that "Underneath the gossamer is pre-stressed concrete.") Second, that there is a hero or heroine who often is lost, unlikely, powerless at first or second glance, or unrecognized and therefore easy for the reader to identify with. And third, that in a fantasy novel things always end justly--though not always happily. Come to think of it, adults also are beguiled--at least for the length of the book--that such things are so because of those three laws.

Therefore, it is important that writers of fantasy be aware of the moral underpinnings of their work. Lloyd Alexander wrote, "Fantasy, by its power to move us so deeply, to dramatize, even melodramatize, morality, can be one of the most effective means of establishing a capacity for adult values." Thus the writer of a fantasy novel must have a vision of the world, must be a visionary.

Of course, there is this to be understood about writing any kind of novel: the novelist knows very little about what she or he is doing at the start. We learn more as events, characters, and landscape take form. Every plunge into a new novel is a parallel adventure - for the hero and the novelist. Like our fictional counterparts, we take a journey into the unknown. We authors are Joseph Campbell’s definition of the hero: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." We venture forth from our writing rooms - the world of common day into the supernatural wonder of the story. We encounter supernatural forces like slippery words, monstrous, unwieldy plots. The decisive victory won is the book completed. And after all, there is only one letter difference between the words boon and book, which we bestow on readers everywhere.

Once we understand the vision, it is our basic charge that we must write all stops out to make that vision sing. It is, after all, what fantasy does best, has done always. Turtles all the way down.