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Margaret Mahy's "Strong Characters"

What I would like to do in this brief discussion is to take the measure of Margaret Mahy's feminism. I do so knowing that Mahy would probably still resist using this label when referring to herself or her writing. After all, Tessa Duder reports Mahy's comment on the suggestion that she is/was motivated by what Duder calls "1970s feminism": "I didn't then and still don't have very strong political feminist intentions." Margaret Mahy goes on, however, to acknowledge that she has worked from her experience as a woman in ways that seems to me to have a distinctly political force. Mahy admits, "being female, I suppose that means a certain experience at my command, and there are times when I quite like making a strong character". (Duder, *Margaret Mahy: A Writer's Life*, page 172).

I am interested in what this "strong character" tells us; it seems to me that womanhood is more than simply an enabling condition, that the strong woman – who, after all, is an ideological construct as far back as the bible (*mulier fortis*) – realises a set of values that we might call a vision. We know that Margaret Mahy is so much more than merely feminist; but I would argue that she is a feminist, despite herself, that, at some level, she was indeed a feminist before the concept was articulated by so many and at such great length.

I am firstly concerned with her adolescent fiction where such an orientation is most perceptible, but, if we keep discussion to orientation rather than ideology, a feminist/proto-feminist view is evident almost anywhere, perhaps everywhere. I want to say enough to justify such a claim. I also want to suggest that in effect this re-vision of the social world is closely aligned to the reconstitution of fictional possibilities that is such a notable aspect of Mahy's writing.

In an interview with Murray Edmond, which appeared in *Landfall* in 1987, Margaret Mahy talks about the effect a poster of a 'predatory woman' had upon her, when she was a school girl:

I remember outside the picture theatre in Whakatane there was this picture of Belle Star. I remember the poster because she had guns – she was obviously a murderous woman, I suppose you might say, a predatory woman. I was very thrilled with this because it seemed to me here was a picture of a woman leading a tremendously adventurous life. . . Seeing that picture of Belle Star must have reinforced a personal image because I then wrote a whole story about an eleven year old girl called Belle Gray, which filled up three exercise books. (p. 176,)

Evidence of Mahy's fascination with powerful women/girls is clear in a great deal of her fiction. The importance of this fascination, for my argument, that Mahy is a feminist, is that she never sublimates woman's experience into an experience that simply supports male social interest. In her writing she makes ideology visible by giving to her female characters a distinctively female variety of power. That is to say her women collectively and individually make claims for themselves that stand against the view of culture at large. From Troy in *The Haunting*, to Laura in *The Changeover*, to Garland in *Maddigan's Fantasia* (adolescent fiction) maturation means freedom to enjoy newly discovered power.

The feminism is most acutely registered in resort to fantasy rather than romance, estranging a woman's skill just as the potent cultural figure of the witch has done in fiction for centuries. Girls come into their own in Mahy's fantastic fiction and we believe this underpins/instates a distinctive future. More traditional fiction tends to line the girl up for a distinctive marriage at best, giving us a happy ending, perhaps, but also robbing the girl of all that made her different and interesting. Mahy's girls may have marriage in their futures, but we are also utterly convinced that these are girls who will not be content to bump their heads against glass ceilings.

In her fiction targeted at a younger audience Mahy's vision is no less exemplary – I am thinking here of a book like *Jam*. In this very New Zealand story Mr. Castle is the stay at home housekeeper – 'the Picasso of jam makers'; while Mrs Castle has tremendous power and political influence in work and public life as a scientist. This family configuration is not so unusual today, but in 1985, it was still not a commonly held notion that a woman's career options included nuclear science, especially when such a choice meant her man's natural position was at home with the children.

Power in Mahy's fiction is defined in a number of ways. Heroes like Troy and Laura possess extraordinary magical powers. But neither is anything less than entirely human/woman/girl, however. That is to say, their power does not carry them out of this world or into another genre. Typically heroes like these in Mahy possess qualities of insight and adaptation that can only be described in terms of magic. Mahy's vision of /for these women drives her fiction into strange places – neither realism nor romance, nor fantasy in the normal sense. Much closer to the peculiar kind of fiction that leaves us uncertain where we are – Todorov's 'fantastic'. The hero cannot be safely identified with some generic model; the girl becomes a challenge to settled views of gendered relations.

One of the extraordinary and special things in Mahy's fiction is that she recognises the power of language, of words. Magic has a clear relationship with speech in both its actual and its full symbolic power. For Troy (*The Haunting*) and Hero (*The Other Side of Silence*) language is an index of psychic health; language is a threshold that must be crossed to become adult. But characters like Tabitha, out of whom words bubble up like an unstoppable fountain, and Harry, who knows how words can effect significant change, in *The Tricksters*, too know the extraordinary power of words.

Mahy does not deliberately fly in the face of convention. Yet she does over and over again. Step-mothers, for instance, are given good press in Mahy's fiction. From *The Haunting* to the comic and witty short story 'Stepmother', Mahy plays with the wicked stepmother of nursery tradition, using fairy tale as

counter-point and model. Fairy tale gets up-ended in 'Stepmother'. The young protagonist, Jenny, has an overly active imagination. So it is entirely plausible that with the advent of a new mother, she ascribes to herself the role of fairytale princess. Jenny has read her fairy tales, so knows all about stepmothers: "Princesses have a lot to put up with when there are stepmothers around. . . At any moment now terrible wickedness could start." Before too long, however, Jenny learns that stepmothers come in all shapes and sizes -- especially when her live-in stepmother confides in her that wickedness is too exhausting and she is 'too lazy to be wicked'. Finally, Jenny must concede that 'The wicked stepmother seemed far away – a hundred years ago'. As a stepmother, I can endorse the notion that wickedness is an exhausting business.

More to the point, in the most exhilarating way, Mahy here simply does not buy into the system of familial values that define a woman as good-enough or as monstrous, but always around the woman's traditional function within the home as wife and mother. Jenny has to discover that her future is not to have value by virtue of being anchored to a view where the wickedness of the stepmother and the handsomeness of the prince mark significant relationships.

The justice of this claim is surely confirmed if we turn to another of Mahy's picture books, where, disconcertingly, the child reader is invited to take in mind the dangers of repressing desire for duty. I am thinking of *The Wind Between the Stars*. This relatively unfamiliar Mahy story has always been one of my favourites. In the most entrancing fashion Mahy exposes the lack of fit (duty) between the standard pattern of a woman's life and her personal vision, virtues and talents – desire.

The Wind Between the Stars tells of a woman, Phoebe Moffat, who, as a young woman, bridles her imagination, refusing two invitations to lead an extraordinary life, to dance among the stars. In effect, she gives up her dreams for marriage and duty. Phoebe loses herself in the world of duty; but all is not lost forever. As an old woman, grey-haired Phoebe is given one last chance at a magical life – and with whole-hearted embrace she takes her turn "to slide down the lap of the wind to bob and laugh with the shy mermaids. .

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

.to vanish in a swirling spiral of leaves and rose petals.” We see she is special, but we are not allowed to think of her as eccentric. Maybe she leads the way? Late in life maybe, but she leads the way.

I love the suggestion that one can get a second and even a third chance at becoming special. I like to think that opportunities missed can be recovered later on in life – that extraordinary living is there for the taking, even by the old; that sooner or later, in unremarkable ways, a woman can lead a revolution within her own life. In this sense, to raise the question of feminism is to become conscious of a larger truth about Mahy’s generous vision as woman and writer. To read her fiction is to be liberated into a world of fantasy, imagination, and always with the sense that this extraordinary world is there close at hand, available, if one only took the time to reach out and touch it.