

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

## MAHY SYMPOSIUM

### **The Dream of the Chocolate Biscuit**

When my children were at Primary School, they would often spend the afternoon after school in the library waiting for me to come and pick them up. One night my son had a dream that as he was sitting in the library reading, the books on the shelves turned into chocolate biscuits and he ate one. The idea of books as being magical food strikes me as one of the ways to remember Margaret Mahy. For more than any other writer for children of all ages, her books can be as magically sustaining now as when they were first read twenty or thirty years ago.

Here are two kinds of magical food I found in Mahy when I went back to her writing for teenagers recently. Both have to do with reminding magicians and writers and heroes that they belong to real, mundane family life as well as the exciting world of the imagination.

### Harry's upstairs self and her downstairs self

Harry in *The Tricksters* has bookish fantasies of magically becoming a book with the power to affect the world. She also has a teen crush on the fantasy character Belen she has created. Mahy shows readers how Harry must learn to move from the adolescent way of writing about love which is constructed on fantasy and imagination upstairs in her bedroom to a more embodied, richer understanding of life. She achieves this through coming downstairs and taking part in family life; and through meeting and facing up to the effects of her fantasy about a real historical character, Teddy Carnival, which one summer gives birth to Ovid, Hadfield and Felix.

Some secrets are made to be shared; to become public. Some secrets become less important when they have been shared. It is wisdom to know this. Harry has to learn this wisdom the hard way: through living it and being on the receiving end of other

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people's scrutiny. (For instance, when her older sister Christobel scathingly reads her fantasy about Belen aloud to the gathered family.)

One lovely way Mahy illustrates the interaction of imagination with the real world is the moment when Harry's skin becomes marked by the grasses as she and Felix 'make love'. You might say that she receives the imprint of life on her flesh that in turn brings greater understanding and magical power to her writing hand.

My second example comes from *The Haunting*.

### Scholars and Palmers

It strikes me as deeply significant that the two families represented in *The Haunting* are distinguished by their work in the world. Scholars is obvious, and gives a reader the impression of academic achievement and study; of hard-won knowledge and scholar magicians. Tabitha talks about how her Scholar relatives have a 'papery' feel to them. The Tarot signifies this form of tradition through its two Major Arcana cards of the Hierophant and the Magician.

The name Palmer for me is resonant of a very different experience. Firstly, it reminds me of the pilgrims in the middle ages who after they had been to the Holy Land, or perhaps to another shrine close by (Canterbury, for instance) would wear a pair of crossed palms to show their identification with Christ and his final pilgrimage through Jerusalem. Sometimes they would pin scallop shells to their hats, especially if they had been to Santiago da Compostella in Spain where the body of St James was said to lie.

I'm not sure whether Mahy intended me to make this connection, but you could say that the word 'Palmer' in *The Haunting* associates with a more humble life; one of faith, humility, perhaps, of some search undertaken.

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Another sense that comes to mind is the hand itself. The palm of the hand reminds me of the power of the writing hand; and the way Harry in *The Tricksters* pulled Teddy Carnival from the sea of the imagination through into her world in the harbour of Bank's Peninsula. Significantly, the truly magically powerful character in *The Haunting* is not a Scholar, but a Palmer. Which suggests to me that power does not necessarily come from learnt knowledge or the discipline of memory, but from simply grasping at life; and in Troy's case, naturally creating from it.

The Scholars' natural gifts have become blocked or corrupted through attempting to suppress or master them. Great-grandmother Scholar's face seems to be covered with 'angry writing;' Great-uncle Cole contains a darkness and malice that comes from not having grown up properly. Instead, he has become a stunted prodigy, threatening disruption to the Palmers. Troy, on the other hand, is able to let go of her obsessive tidiness, her outside control of herself, and let her natural magical talents emerge from inside. As she says of magic: 'It wants to show itself. It wants to be recognized.' (131) And as we are here today to recognize the achievements of one of our best loved writers, so too her magic 'wants to show itself,' waiting to be born again through the magical pages of a book.