
Roald Dahl's Reception in America: The Tall Tale, Humour and the Gothic Connection

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Modern America has virtually no use for the modern British children's book. Compared to the enormous popularity in America of the English Golden Age classics, very little nowadays travels successfully across the Atlantic (Carpenter 1985, p.216).

Humphrey Carpenter, a noted English critic, biographer and radio broadcaster, penned these words in 1985, in his important survey of the so-called golden age of children's literature. He died in 2005. One wonders what he made of the worldwide Harry Potter phenomenon or the critical and commercial success of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000) in the US. In Carpenter's narrative history, the great Victorian and Edwardian fantasises (such as Carroll's *Alice* (1865 and 1871) books, Kenneth Graham's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908) and J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* (1911) found a highly receptive audience in the US. Later both Tolkien and C.S. Lewis 'became hugely popular in America; but they were the last English authors for children to do so' (Carpenter 1985, p.214). The 1950s is often seen to mark the beginning of a second golden age in British children's literature. This was also dominated by fantasy, but, according to Carpenter, this had very little impact on the American scene, which was beginning to develop its own fantasy writing for children, albeit influenced by Tolkien. Rather, British and American children's fiction went their separate ways after the Second World War. Although not a children's book, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is frequently acknowledged as a key influence on the realist strain in American literature for children and teenagers. A line of continuity has been traced between Salinger's book and an increased focus on the anguishes

and hardships of childhood/adolescence in American children's literature. From the 1960s onwards, writers of the so-called 'new realism' in young adult fiction (S.E. Hinton, Robert Cormier, Judy Blume) began exploring hitherto taboo subjects such as sexuality, violence and death. Thus, writes Carpenter, the 'children's book in America would appear, in every sense, to have "grown up"' (1985, p.215).

Indeed, realism has been the dominant mode of expression in American children's literature. David L. Russell speculates that this 'perhaps has something to do with the Puritan, no-nonsense, work ethic that has imbued the American culture and made fantasy suspect' (Russell 2009, p.17). Elsewhere I have argued that British children's literature is infused with a sense of time and a need to explore new worlds. This contrasts with the 'newness' of the US heritage, in which the myth of the American Frontier still exerts an influence on the national imagination, rendering somewhat redundant the exploration of other worlds in its literature for children. 'The US already occupies, as it were, other worlds' (Schober 2004, p.135). Like their British counterparts, American boys of the nineteenth century drew pleasure from boys' own adventure stories, but rather than reading about the exploits of British boys, they favoured stories set in their native land (Russell 2009, p.16). The claim that American children's literature was unproductive in the fantasy genre prior to the publication of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) has been recently contested, but it is still Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and Alcott's *Little Women* (1868) that have left a lasting impression on the genre. As Beverly Clark notes in *Kiddie Lit: The Cultural*

Construction of Children's Literature in America (2003): 'Whatever fantasy literature was being written [in the US] did not figure in the national imagination as contributing to a Golden age of children's literature' (p.219), although this picture is complicated by 'Americans' appreciation for British fantasy' (p.219). Clark believes that it is precisely this *Britishness* that American readers find so appealing in J.K. Rowling's fantasies, which 'draw on nostalgia for an idealized bygone era. Their present is a rather old fashioned one: there are no drug problems, no sexual abuse, no teen pregnancies' (Clark 2003, p.165). In this sense, America *has* been drawn to another world, one that is more quaint, conservative, Victorian, although not without controversy.¹ This suggests a turning away from realist themes in the American context. And yet the success of *His Dark Materials* on this side of the Atlantic implies that Americans are more willing to embrace a form of magical realism or, 'stark realism' (in Pullman's own description of his writing craft), than straight fantasy.²

Given the historical dominance of fantasy in British children's literature and the American predisposition for realism, it is somewhat surprising that Roald Dahl's children's books were initially better known and appreciated in the US than in Britain. As Jeremy Treglown, one of Dahl's biographers, notes, Dahl was 'unusually successful in the USA' (Treglown 1994, p.177), where American houses like Knopf and Harper & Row vied for publishing rights. Hard to believe now, but it took time for Dahl's children's books to catch on in Britain and become the publishing phenomenon they eventually became. When the daughter of Rayner Unwin of Allen and Unwin brought home American editions of Dahl's work, her father soon made the author an offer he couldn't refuse, but not without Dahl calling Unwin's bluff. Unbeknown to the publisher, Dahl's first children's books were 'turned down by practically every other established publisher in Britain' (Treglown 1994, p.192). Only by the mid 1970s were his books achieving bestseller status on both

sides of the Atlantic (Treglown 1994, p.201). Still, Dahl was dissatisfied that his popularity in Britain was not met with official acclaim. Not until 1983 did he receive the British Whitbread Children's Book Award for *The Witches* (1983/2001).

Why was Dahl unusually successful in the US? Perhaps significantly, Dahl creates low fantasies for children that incorporate fantasy elements in the real or primary world.³ Dahl is, of course, not a magical realist. 'But in using magic to empower his readers, Dahl does not create completely fantastic worlds into which his readers can escape, the likes of Wonderland or Narnia. Instead, he roots his stories very firmly in the real worlds of the middle to lower classes, which his young readers have experienced and can easily recognise. When he then introduces his quirky brand of spell weaving into his otherwise mundane setting, Dahl makes it seem all the more possible. Magic becomes a viable option in the real world in which his readers live' (Donaldson 2004, p.135). Thus while Dahl's literature for children feeds into the tradition of other British fantasies, he still writes within the realist parameters of American children's literature.

Despite his major reputation as a British humorist/ironist, a solid case could even be made that Dahl 'should be seen as an American author. He began his writing career in America in the early 1940s [he settled in New York City in the early 1950s, returning to England in 1960], and for a long time his stories and books appeared in America before they came out in England. It was not until the mid-1970s that Dahl began giving his English publishers the chance to bring out the first editions of his works' (West 1992, p.ix). Perhaps tellingly, the belated sequel to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* was titled *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator* (1973/2001) and not *The Great Glass Lift*, which might have puzzled his American child readers. The book was also first published in America. What is more the ridiculously overblown plot of the *Great Glass Elevator* seems to have an American audience in mind,

which propels its leading characters into outer space via a glass elevator, to meet with vermicious kids on board an American space hotel, and finally ends with an invitation to the White House by the President of the United States of America. *James and the Giant Peach* (1961/2001) similarly ends in America, where the stone of the peach becomes a famous monument in New York's Central Park. (And like the *Great Glass Elevator*, the book also adopts Americanisms like 'faucet'). However, to complicate matters, Dahl reacted against attempts to Americanise his work, refusing to allow *The Witches* to be changed to suit an American audience (Treglown 1994, p.249). It seems that he saw himself as a quintessentially British author. And while the *Great Glass Elevator* may have been written largely for the American market, the book is also seen by some to contain anti-American sentiments, the reason for its banning in some American libraries. Dahl lampoons American President Lancelot R. Gilligrass as an incompetent, an overgrown child dependent on his Vice President, who also happens to be his former nanny. (In the 1971 cult film *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, scripted by Dahl (if in name only), Mike Teavee seems to be a satirical portrayal of the all-American child's obsession with television and violence. Mike is an aficionado of movie Westerns. When he asks his proud father why he can't have a Colt 45, he casually replies: 'Not til' you're twelve, son', which may be read as a witty gibe at America's violent gun culture).

Treglown paints a most fascinating, contradictory picture of the famous children's writer, one that is at odds with documentaries authorised by the Dahl estate or the biographical sketches given in his children's books. He was, Treglown shows, not above telling tall tales about himself, never letting the facts get in the way of a good story. For example, he accuses Dahl of shamelessly embellishing his World War Two experiences; he regards his 1942 debut literary effort in the *Saturday Evening Post*, titled 'Shot Down Over Libya,' as the

beginning of his 'career as an imaginative writer' (Treglown 1994, p.59). In playing fast and loose with the facts, it seems that Dahl, the 'war hero', was given to hyperbole here: early evidence of a tendency that would later surface in his children's books. Indeed, I believe that the leading reason why Dahl's British children's books were so unusually successful in the US is because Dahl is first and foremost a teller of tall tales; and American culture has a particularly rich tradition of the tall or 'longbow' tale.

Although variants of the tall tale exist in other cultures (such as the death-defying adventures of eighteenth century German Baron von Munchausen, or, in Australian folklore, the stories surrounding the Speewah), the tall tale as a 'literary experiment remains essentially an American phenomenon' (Wonham 1989, p.285). The form has its roots in American oral tradition, but rather than being merely 'a comic lie or an impossible exaggeration ... the tall tale is a fictional story which is told in the form of personal narrative or anecdote, which challenges the listener's credulity with comic outlandishness, and which performs the different social functions depending on whether it is heard as true or as fictional' (Brown 1987, p.11). American folklore is populated with figures who are the subject of tall tales - Davy Crockett, Paul Bunyan and Johnny Appleseed - and who make up America's founding myths. Like European fairy tales, tall tales were originally intended for adults, but were also enjoyed by a younger audience (Susina 1992, p.219). These yarns eventually made their way into children's literature with titles like *Paul Bunyan Swings his Axe* (1936), *The Hurricane's Children: Tales from Your Neck o' the Woods* (1937) and *Yankee Thunder, the Legendary Life of Davy Crockett* (1944), reaching their peak of popularity between the two World Wars (Susina 1992, p. 219-20). Robert McCloskey and Sid Fleischman are two American children's authors who were notably influenced by the 'tone, form, and conventions' of the tall tale (Cart 1995, p.117). Recent expressions may be found in

Linda White's *Comes a Wind* (2000) Deborah Hopkinson's *Apples to Oregon* (2004), and Lynne Betrand's *Granite Baby* (2005). Was Dahl directly influenced by the tall tale? This is a moot question. But it's almost certain that he profited from this storytelling tradition. In point of fact, Dahl's first children's book, the virtually forgotten *The Gremlins* (1943/2006), earned praise from one reviewer for Dahl's 'remarkable adeptness in building up a tall tale in the American tradition' (Buell 1943, p.9).

A special class of tall narrative deals with Nature's munificence in America, often involving boasts about its extraordinary vegetation and animal life, calling forth images from H.G. Wells' science fantasy *Food from the Gods* (1904). In a famous 1765 letter addressed to the London *Public Advertiser*, Benjamin Franklin raved about the tails of American sheep being 'so laden with Wooll [sic], that each has a little Car or Waggon [sic] on four little wheels, to support and keep it from trailing on the ground' (cited in Thorp, 1964, p.6). It seems that these far-fetched accounts were partly contrived to make the English jealous of what the New World had to offer. And the English, unaccustomed to such accounts, often did not question their veracity. In one tall tale from the Ozarks, a potato:

grew so big it couldn't be dug nohow, so they built a new cabin over it, and cut a trapdoor in the kitchen floor. Whenever the kids begain hollerin' for victuals, Pogey just climbed down through the trap and shovelled up a big chunk of 'tater ... The jacket of Pogey's 'tater was three feet thick, with bark on it like a hackberry tree, not suitable for cooking. That one potato lasted the Mahone family for fourteen years.

(Cited in Hoffman 1994, pp.17-18).

Another account from 1837 relates how 'Uncle Jonathon had 'writ' to 'un' that 'pumpkins' grew so big out west that they made a stable for the cow out of one half, and fed her through the winter on the other half'

(cited in Hoffman 1994, p.17). Thus a story of a boy who lives with his creature friends inside a giant peach, which serves as their source of sustenance as well as mode of transport, would not have seemed too outlandish to American farmers and settlers not unfamiliar with this mode of storytelling.

I am referring to Dahl's first modern children's book, *James and the Giant Peach*, first published in 1961. A précis of the plot is instructive to draw attention to its tall aspects. When James Henry Trotter's parents are suddenly eaten up '(in full daylight, mind you, and on a crowded street) by an enormous angry rhinoceros which had escaped from the London Zoo' (Dahl 1961/2001, p.7), he is sent away to live with his wicked, abusive Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker. Three years later, James receives tiny magical crystals that when accidentally spilled cause a peach in the garden to grow to gigantic dimensions. Before long he discovers a tunnel into the peach that leads to a door, which he opens to find a giant grasshopper, spider, ladybird, centipede, earthworm and glow-worm. When the centipede nibbles the stem that attaches the peach to the tree, the peach, on a slope, starts to move, squashing his aunts dead. The peach then rolls through the countryside and over a steep cliff into the sea, only to be surrounded by hungry sharks. A quick-witted James uses the string supplied by the silkworm to tie around the necks of 502 seagulls, to lift the peach out of the sea. While in the air, the party are set upon by Cloud-men. This takes them to America. When a plane severs the strings on the seagulls, the peach starts to fall, eventually landing its travellers safely on top of the Empire State building. Equal parts tall tale and farce, a series of inflated incidents forms the narrative of *James and the Giant Peach*.

As well, *James and the Giant Peach* demonstrates a kinship with the tall tale through its larger-than-life characterisations and use of hyperbolic language. Thus the 'selfish and lazy and cruel aunts' (Dahl 1961/2001, pp.7-8) that regularly beat James and treat him as a slave are monstrous,

outrageous and ludicrous caricatures, prefiguring the revolting, child-hating Mr and Mrs Twit from *The Twits* (1980/2001) and the abusive headmistress Miss Trunchbull from *Matilda* (1988). As the aunts are about to meet their doom by the giant, oncoming peach, Dahl revels in the type of overstatement that is so characteristically American: 'They gaped. They screamed. They started to run. They panicked. They both got in each other's way' (Dahl 1961/2001, pp.56-57). The cartoon-strip like nature of their demise helps to mitigate or neutralise what might otherwise be a violent, even traumatic, event for some young children (further tempered by Quentin Blake's sketchy and innocuous illustrations):

There was a crunch

And then there was silence.

The peach rolled on. And behind it, Aunt Sponge and Aunt Spiker lay ironed out upon the grass as flat and thin and lifeless as a couple of paper dolls cut out of a picture book.

(Dahl 1961/2001, p.57)

Overstatement has long been a hallmark of American humour, often taking the form of slapstick or physical comedy. This has flourished alongside a great tradition of nonsense and word-play in American literature and culture (one thinks here of the legendary wit and word-play of the Algonquin Round Table in the 1920s). In fact, humour 'has been described as probably America's most popular creative achievement' (Hunt 1995, p.236) and it has been a staple of American children's literature. The continued American appreciation for humour and nonsense is evidenced in the works of Dr Seuss, while British children's literature has gone virtually half a century without humour.⁴ Thus it is not altogether surprising that Dahl's children's books initially found a more enthusiastic reception in the US. When Miss Honey asks Matilda, 'Do you think all children's books ought to have funny bits in them?', Matilda answers her with characteristic insight: 'I do

... Children are not so serious as grown-ups and they love to laugh' (Dahl 1988/1996, p.81). This seems to be Dahl answering his critics, who have routinely objected to his dark, violent, sadistic and 'scatological' brand of humour. But these criticisms fail to acknowledge the vigorous play of language in Dahl's books which abound with funny, witty puns, rhymes, jokes, alliteration, onomatopoeia, spoonerisms, malapropisms, as well as eccentric use of nonsense such as 'snozzwangers,' 'homswogglers,' 'whangdoodles', and deliberately misspelt words. Dahl's penchant for overstatement is further displayed in the profusion of synonyms. An example is when the children and their parents first set eyes on the chocolate room in his dark, confectionary tale: '[they] were too flabbergasted to speak. They were staggered. They were dumbfounded. They were bewildered and dazzled. They were completely bowled over by the hugeness of the thing. They simply stood and stared' (Dahl 1964/2004, pp.89-90).

In a landmark collection of essays on children's literature and the Gothic, Julie Cross cites *James and the Giant Peach*, *The Witches* and *Matilda* as examples of the 'comic Gothic,' a genre which she notes really only gained momentum in the late 1980s and 1990s (Cross 2008, p.57). Much of Dahl's Gothic-inspired humour, she points out, derives from his reliance on 'grotesque caricature' (Cross 2008, p.59). It's worth disentangling these related concepts. Dahl's method of caricature is to write what E.M Forster termed 'flat' not 'round' characters defined by a single overarching trait or quality, which he then exaggerates for comic effect, for example, Augustus Gloop's obesity/gluttony. But very often Dahl's use of caricature is so extreme that it seems like exaggeration for its own sake; here it becomes grotesque representation. As Philip Thomson points out, 'there is a norm for caricaturist exaggeration – a norm of abnormality. When this norm is exceeded, the caricature is no longer simply funny, but disgusting or fearsome besides, for it approaches the realm

of the monstrous' (Thomson 1972, p.39). Thus, nine-year-old Augustus 'was so enormously fat he looked as though he had been blown up with a powerful pump. Great flabby folds of fat bulged out from every part of his body, and his face was like a monstrous ball of dough with two small greedy currant eyes peering out upon the world' (Dahl 1964/2005, p.36). Although it's difficult to imagine children who'd take such grotesque representations seriously, adults have expressed reservations about the simplistic, two-dimensional nature of Dahl's morality, where characters are either good or evil, with no in-between. For one of his most outspoken critics, David Rees, Augustus' representation invites children 'to dislike this child because he is fat, and therefore sanction a prejudice that exists in every school playground' (1988, p.145), thereby appealing to the darker, spiteful side of a child's nature. In Dahl's strict moral logic, Augustus' 'deadly sin' must not go unpunished.

David Petzold illuminates a number of subdivisions of the grotesque in children's literature. '*The grotesque of deformity*,' he notes, may be found in the 'frequency of representations of grotesquely deformed bodies in descriptions and illustrations in children's books' (2006, p.183), for example, goblins, gnomes, dwarfs, giants and witches. Dahl likewise revels in these literary and cultural stereotypes. His witches wear gloves to hide their claws for fingers and wigs to cover their horrid baldness (*The Witches*). Equally notable is the glass eye of Mrs Twit 'that was always looking the other way' (Dahl 1980/2001, p.8). The grotesque here also consists of 'aberrations in size' (Petzold 2006, p.183) and Dahl is no exception: for example, ungrateful Violet Beauregard who swells into a giant blueberry after chewing Wonka's experimental gum or the despised grandmother of *George's Marvellous Medicine* (1981/2001) who undergoes startling physical changes after drinking her grandson's motley concoction. Petzold specially singles Dahl out for his exploitation of the '*grotesque of the abject*' (p. 184), the comical treatment of

bodily functions which has strong taboo associations, such as 'whiz-popping' (farting) in *The BFG* (1982/2001); as well as '*the grotesque of the macabre*' (p.184), in which Dahl transposes the black humour of his celebrated twisted tales for adults to his children's fiction. As Dahl once summed up his formula for writing for children: 'Children love to be spooked, to be made to giggle. They like a touch of the macabre as long as it's funny too. They don't relate it to life. They enjoy the fantasy. And my nastiness is never gratuitous. It's retribution. Beastly people must be punished' (quoted in Warren 1988, p.16). Perhaps his most macabre tale for children appears in his animal poetry collection, *Dirty Beasts*, in which a most perspicacious pig, alarmed at the prospect that he will end up on someone's dinner plate, 'Bashes the farmer to the floor' (Dahl 1983, no pag.) and then eats him. This rewriting of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945/1951) almost reads like one of Dahl's tales of the unexpected.

The grotesque effect is augmented by the Gothic, another major contributing factor to Dahl's success in the US. The etymological sense of the word 'grotesque' derives from the grottoes found in 15th century Roman excavations. These underground chambers contained mural paintings which fantastically combined human and animal forms. However, the word was 'soon extended to become a descriptor for real abnormalities. This, and its association with a buried past, lent it readily to appropriation by the gothic revival, and through the gothic its exaggerated, distorted representations of the human form took on a darker aspect [cf. Dahl] than has lingered in modern usage' (Webb & Enstice 1988, p.89). I suspect that the peculiar intensity of Puritanism in the US, with its lively belief in witchcraft and the supernatural, as well as Manichean distinctions between good and evil, may partly account for why the European Gothic translated so well to the American cultural context. As a literary form, the Gothic is associated with darkness, horror, the supernatural, imprisonment, deformity, persecution and cruelty; its character types

include tyrants, villains, vampires, witches and monsters. In Dahl, Gothic elements and characters appear in the stock manner. R.L. Stine, dubbed the Stephen King of children's literature, has also fabulously benefited from America's investment in horror and the Gothic. However, Dahl's Gothic inspiration derives largely from European folklore and fairy tale. Indeed, Culley argues that to 'appreciate better Dahl's place in children's literature it is necessary to perceive the strength of his work's links with folklore. The two share many qualities. Both normally involve exaggerated characters with obvious good-and-evil alignment, a narrator as a sort of companion figure, the prophecy of the unexpected and the fantastic happening, violence, repeated themes, vivid images, and the ending where the heroine or hero triumphs over the villain' (1991, p.62). Likewise, Nicholson points out that Dahl's children's books 'portray archetypal characters from traditional tales and, more significantly, they feature elements of the supernatural and extraordinary with which Norwegian folktales and myths abound. These stories tell of giants, ogres, witches, and humans with supernatural powers' (2000, p.322). In terms of this nexus between the Gothic and folklore in Dahl's *oeuvre* for children, it is moreover significant that Daniel G. Hoffman reinterprets the Gothic in terms of supernatural folklore which made its way into the American colonies through literature.

In a sense the folk imagination has always been Gothic in its acceptance of the inexplicable, of the supernatural. Gothicism in its attention to the medieval past focussed on the very period when the superstitious lore of modern times was being formed. The lore is the detritus of Europe's pagan past, a past which has lingered in country customs, seasonal festivals, the lore of witchcraft, and folk belief in revenants, stregas, fairies and other un-Christian inhabitants of the world of spirit. Much of this lore came with settlers of the American colonies,

where it survived to nourish the imaginations of our own [i.e. American] writers of romance'.
(Hoffman 1994, p.8).

Dahl also presents a version of the Dickensian Gothic: Wonka's mysterious chocolate factory, with its 'huge iron gates leading in it, and high wall surrounding it, and smoke belching from its chimneys, and strange whizzing sounds from deep inside it' (Dahl 1964/2004, p.18) whiffs of a factory in Dickens' London during the Industrial Revolution. It is very telling, I think, that Tim Burton's 2005 film version of Dahl's book seizes directly on these Dickensian Gothic elements, from the outset in cold, wintry scenes of the Bucket's ramshackle house (whose odd angles resembles a set from a German expressionist film) situated on outskirts of the city. In the background loom the Gothic-style towers of Wonka's factory, which immediately evoke a working class suburb of London during the Industrial Revolution. Ironically for those who hold the 1971 film sacrosanct, critics immediately hailed auteur filmmaker Burton's darker vision as more faithful to the mood of Dahl's book; Burton the perfect match for Dahl's sensibilities. Both storytellers display an affinity with the Gothic, as well as fairytale motifs.

Dahl's hyperbolic children's fantasies appeal to the American love of overstatement, a hallmark of that most American of storytelling forms: the tall tale. Humour is an essential element of the tall tale; one of its most famous practitioners was Mark Twain. Dahl's brand of humour clearly profits from this national literary form. His employment of grotesque caricature also has links with the Gothic, a mode in which Dahl excels, as does America. However, as Petzold notes, the question of whether 'there are national differences in the use of the grotesque is ...yet to be investigated' (2006, p.183). It may be that American culture is more willing to embrace a particular form of the grotesque.

Notes

1. However, as Felicity Hughes argues, British writers have been particularly adept at employing fantasy as a 'protective cover to save the work from prying adult eyes ...extend[ing]' considerably the range of subjects dealt with in children's literature' (1983, p.244), for example, teenage sexuality or possession (see my book, *Possessed Child Narratives in Literature and Film* (2004)). Rowling has stated that 'it would be inappropriate – in these books – were Hermione to have an underage pregnancy, or if one of them were to start taking drugs, because it's unfaithful to the tone of the books. It's not at all that I don't think those themes can be explored superbly in children's literature. It's just that in the *Harry Potter* books there isn't a place for those particular issues.' Yet June Cummins (2008) fascinatingly argues that Rowling employs the Gothic and fantasy mode to explore issues of female development in the series.

2. A film that courts religious controversy can often be a boon for the box office, as witnessed by the success of the *Harry Potter* films, Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and Ron Howard's *The Da Vinci Code* (2006). But the relative failure of Chris Weitz's serviceable film version of *The Golden Compass* (2007) in the US suggests that the religious backlash from the Catholic League and evangelical groups had a negative effect. As American film critic Roger Ebert commented, 'any bad buzz on a family film can be mortal, and that seems to be the case this time.' The film did very well internationally, though.

3. Low fantasy is a rather ill-defined subgenre that is more usefully distinguished from epic or *high* fantasy. Set in an alternate or secondary world, high fantasy often incorporates medieval romance, mythic quest structures and the grand struggle of good versus evil. *Lord of the Rings* (1954-55) is the exemplar.

4. Tellingly, the fantasy elements in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* did not make

much of an impression on American reviewers in December 1866. Rather, 'it was the humour, the puns, the word-play that were praised (qualities that had not been much noticed by English reviewers)' (Hunt 1995, p.227).

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