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'As if this were Narnia or somewhere': What's Real(ly) Fantasy? An Exploration of John Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began* and Isobelle Carmody's *Greylands*

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Fin de siècle fantasy and realism have done some cross-dressing on the stage of young adult literature. Marsden's adventure novel purports to tell things as they are but, in fact, is an escapist fantasy set, not within what C.S. Lewis has constructed as a morally uplifting world, like Narnia, but in a violent and stark wilderness, significantly called 'Hell'. Carmody's terrain of fantasy is found in the interstices of the real world during the moments of heightened perception that lead to growth and regeneration. No longer can fantasy and realism be considered as two discrete and opposing genres, but rather, a hybrid twinning of two constructs that are closely tied together and 'shade each other in a symbiotic relationship' (Jackson 1981, p.26).

While attempts to define both fantasy and realism are many and varied, the notion that both are literary constructs should be the cornerstone for an investigation of the genres. Writers who want to create the illusion of a realistic world in their fictional reconstructions may use devices that promote an enticing verisimilitude for the reader. But Marsden's sense of the eye-witness account or documentary style narrative is as much a fiction as Carmody's sense of the events in the 'real' world of her main protagonist, Jack, that lead to him inhabiting an 'other' or related inner world. Moreover, neither of these worlds can ever satisfactorily represent readers' experience of lived reality, which 'depends on the situations that readers find themselves in and the contexts in which an individual's life is played out' (Bull 1997, p.41).

The facade of gritty realism that Marsden creates in this series arrests its readers' attention through the simulated authenticity of its imaginary narrator, Ellie, whose sole teenage voice conveniently universalises its readers as a monolithic group. Realism is just an illusory version of the real and Paton Walsh suggests that 'realism is fantasy. Realistic fiction is about imaginary people, living in imagined contexts, doing what was never done, saying what was never said' (Paton Walsh 1981, p.35).

In *Greylands*, Jack attempts to come to terms with the traumatic death of his mother by writing about his loss. Carmody blends his reflections on his mother with a metafictional exposition on the nature of narrative and of life itself:

Real life isn't like a story with a beginning and a middle and an end. It's everybody's stories all muddled together.

(Carmody 1997, p.1)

The story that emerges breaks with the conventions of the fairy-tale opening that Jack's sister suggests 'should start: Once upon a time, in a faraway land, Jack had a dream' (p.1). While Jack's tale does indeed include many elements of traditional fantasy, it is constantly aligned with the place that he occupies in his everyday world, where 'you have to be careful of the cracks. Sometimes they are disguised as something else' (p.10). Carmody's fantasy world exposes the uncanny crevices in a fictionalised real world.

Contrastingly, Marsden's *Tomorrow, When the War Began* is the first text of a teenage adventure quaternion that relates the experiences of its narrator and chief focaliser, Ellie, whose view of narrative is simplistic and projects the ideology that text is synonymous with life:

There's only one way to do this and that's to tell it in order, chronological order. Recording what we've done, in words, on paper, it's got to be our way of telling ourselves that we mean something, that we matter.

(Marsden 1993, p.2)

Ellie shifts the reader straight into the world of the novel at breakneck speed, without the opportunity to reflect upon and distance herself from the adventures. With a disparaging comment on imaginary worlds of hope, like Narnia, Ellie leads the implied reader by the nose through the 'wild and forbidding Satan's Step's of 'Hell' (p.22) in search of water, a symbol of renewal, among the harsh and dry moon landscape of 'tumbled rocks'. The 'plunge into Hell' (p.23) represents the exit from the anti-

rational world into one which becomes more predictable and trustable than the strange world that they've left behind. Part of the challenge is the journey ahead on an 'overgrown path covered with leaves and sticks' (p.29) that leads to a bridge; these are all elements common to the milieu of the wanderer in mythology. The terrain of fantasy is both 'dense' and 'beautiful': 'There aren't many wild places left on Earth, yet we'd fluked it into the middle of this little wild kingdom' (p.33). It is the ordinary world, then, that is made an underworld setting for the mythological battles between good and evil.

The title, *Tomorrow, When the War Began* conflates future and past tense and thus positions us to read the text as a speculative fantasy. While the strong voice of the narrator debunks any similarity to the escapades of Enid Blyton's band of adventurers, the intertextual references serve only to situate the reader in the same enchanted wood, where Blyton's heroic teenagers, also freed of all parental restraints, break out of their mundane reality to engage in exciting activities. After the loss of two members in the guerrilla war that they wage, their leader, Ellie, spurs them on to further brave action with her Blytonesque exhortation, 'Let's go, famous five!' (Marsden 1994, p.251). The ubiquitous heroes are again compared with those of Blyton's novels in order to increase the divide between the genres of realism and fantasy:

So that was the Famous Five. Corrie and I made it to the Secret Seven. Hah! Those books don't have a lot of bearing on what's happened to us.
(Marsden 1993, p.16)

As the 'loud buzzing' of planes overhead becomes 'a roar' and Lee tells the others that 'it's probably the start of World War Three', Marsden's dialogue ominously signals to the reader that we are entering the zone of post-holocaust fiction:

'If there'd been a nuclear war we wouldn't survive. That fallout'd be dropping softly on us now. Like the gentle rain from Heaven above.'

'Did you do that book last year in English?'
'Z for Zachariah?'

'Yeah, that one. That was good, I reckon. Only decent book we've ever done.'
(p.40)

Tomorrow, When the War Began is clearly positioned as a 'decent book' in which Marsden assumes the mantle of success through his gratuitous intertextual reference to Robert O'Brien's *Z for Zachariah*. Marsden, however, crafts the teenagers' discourse concerning the possibility of rescuing the hostages in the Wirrawee Showgrounds to foreground the idea that the events of *Tomorrow, When the War Began* are 'close to reality', and not to be confused with fantasy:

If anyone has any ideas of rolling up there in combat uniform and shooting their way in and rescuing everybody, I think they can go back to sleep. Fantasyland is for TV. This is real life.
(p.232)

In a cliché redolent of soapie-style dialogue, Marsden brings Ellie's attempt at reflection to a forceful close:

We've all had to rewrite the scripts of our lives in the last few weeks. We've learnt a lot and we've had to figure out what's important, what matters—what really matters.
(p.16)

Ellie's limited lexicon and repetitive sentence structures wend their way through a text that fails to offer any profound reflection or mediating voice through which to filter these mundanities; the reader never does find out 'what really matters' to Ellie, the group or the hostages of Wirrawee:

We knew so little. All we had were clues, guesses, surmises. My logical mind was in a little box...and my imagination was in another box entirely and I wasn't letting one transmit to the other.
(p.78-79)

Ellie refutes the power of the imagination in an attempt to remain in control within this crumbling

world of reality. Marsden constructs a female New Age hero with superhuman strength and a plot with a surfeit of action. The alert reader is cued in to the awareness that action will prevail over Ellie's attempt at logic.

Marsden's plot is crafted to enable the group 'to go bush for a few days over the Christmas holidays' (p.3). At this level, it still has a strong link with the quotidian world, but the alluring discovery of a 'little wild kingdom' and the fun of camping in this 'wild place' among 'a cauldron of boulders' (p.4) where no-one has ever been, moves the narrative into the topography of fantasy. The use of the word 'cauldron' sets up the anticipation of a bewitched land away from the constraints of parents, where the teenagers can rule unchallenged over their domain. Hell is hewn from rough and uncharted territory, at once set apart from, yet contiguous to, the town of Wirrawee.

While the group goes 'feral', unnamed invaders declare war on the country and, conveniently, capture all parents of the teenagers, holding them hostage in the Wirrawee Showgrounds. Ellie and her compatriots, 'living their guerilla life up in the mountains' (p.204), take on the enemy in an attempt to restore order to Wirrawee, and to the country as a whole. This is the very stuff of high fantasy, where the ordinary is heroicised through

a story in which the forces of good and evil clash...The protagonist is ordinary in ways with which most modern readers can identify, but [s]he must perform heroic acts in the course of the story, which usually has a romance-quest structure.

(Kuznets 1985, p.19-20)

Seen in this light, Ellie represents the archetypal 'hero with a thousand faces' (Campbell 1975, pp.212-213) found in the 'monomyth' that has been transmuted from Greek mythology through the ages into a revisioning of Australia in the 1990s. Perhaps the acclaim that the series has received from teenagers can be attributed to the fact that this hero has mythic status, appears to speak in the voice of

Marsden's homogenised adolescent figure and, when harshly tested, loudly trumpets the rights of the adolescent in contemporary society. Marsden's ploy here is to manipulate teenagers' fears of being different.

Parents have no place in Marsden's construction of what W.R.Irwin terms an 'impossible society' that is 'exotic beyond credibility' (Irwin 1976, p.110). In an interview with the writer Glyn Parry, Marsden states that 'the first thing to do is to get rid of the parents. Blyton understood that very well' (Parry 1996, p.13). Ellie's narrative stereotypes her own parents, as well as the other sets of parents, with an authoritative tone that marginalises them. She reflects on 'the way adults turn growing up into such a complicated process. They expect you to be always on the lookout for a chance to do something wild' (p.6). She berates Chris's father who 'was born on the corner of Straight and Narrow', and her own mother whose 'idea of fun was making jam for the Preserves section of the Wirrawee Show' (p.5). The notion of escape for Ellie, and by implication for the book's teenage readers, would offer immense prospects of 'getting away from this for a week' (p.10) to a place where you were free to have 'two Mars Bars for breakfast' (p.40)! Marsden has collapsed all adults into one limited caricature of ineptitude in this adultless fantasy.

Overtuning conventional social mores and legal strictures offers excitement and a sense of power in a seductive other-world that is a dislocated simulacrum of the real. The text appears to transgress the authority of its stereotypical adults and creates the illusion of an environment where such actions are valorised:

I had no problem with all the laws of the land being broken—we could have been charged with stealing, driving without a licence, wilful damage, assault, manslaughter, or murder, committing under-age drinking....that didn't bother me....

(p.221)

Where realistic fiction is plagued by limitations in its synthesis from life, Marsden's 'literature of illusion'

offers the reader 'an invitation to escape reality' (Hume 1984, p.59) and to enjoy the vicarious experience of a shallow, fantastic escape. In the third novel of the series, Ellie comments that the group has reached heights that 'made [her] quite dizzy', they 'had already reached too far, tested [their] luck too often' and performed feats that were 'a bit over the top, Hollywood movie style...as a matter of course' (Marsden 1995, pp.103,107). For the adolescent reader, on the cusp of new, untried experience, Marsden's writing proffers safe sex and adventure in the war-zone of the imagination, where Ellie, but not the reader, may be left with a serious case of post-traumatic stress disorder.

What poses as realism in John Marsden's action-packed novel is really an alluring invitation to a tête-à-tête with Ellie, its indefatigable hero, who tempts the ideal teenage reader with the exciting prospect of sharing a vicarious escapist fantasy. A young reader, who had obviously been manipulated by the ideology of *Tomorrow, When the War Began*, commented enthusiastically on 'the strong element of reality it contains'. She eagerly added a neologism to the language when she stated that 'it creates a definite realness' (Pollard, in McGirr 1997, p.9). Kathryn Hume decries this mode of fantasy as being 'sensationalist' literature that 'offers blind, passive enjoyment...but rarely challenges us to think. We disengage from the real world in order to engage with these comforting illusions' (Hume 1984, p.81).

Isobelle Carmody's writing, on the other hand, deftly blurs the boundaries between realism and fantasy in a narrative that offers the reader a more active role in the integration of the two genres. *Greylands* is an exploration into grief and the disturbing effect that grief has on the lives and minds of its characters. The landscape of the text is indefinable and its setting shifts comfortably between incident and imagination. 'If it's not going to be facts, you can make the story happen anywhere you like' (Carmody 1997, p.2), Jack is told by his sister, when crafting his interpolated narrative.

The dream is an image that has always been common

to the landscape of fantasy and, for Carmody, it is an effective means of allowing subconscious thoughts to surface. In *Greylands*, Jack's dreams are not an escape from the suffering and grief that he is experiencing, but rather an opportunity to revivify for himself the hidden or closed compartments of his life. When 'Jack dreamed of his mother...they were walking along a beach together' (p.3). At this point in his evocative recounting of the dream, his hold on reality is palpable but 'dreams started to evaporate the minute you tried telling someone about them'. In his reconstruction of the dream, Jack's memory is of the 'castle in the sky' and other playful uncertainties from the fantasy of his dead mother's tales, the 'wild and unexpected things' that she told them 'she had made up' (p.4). Jack's dreams give his dead mother substance and, through them, Carmody makes 'visible the invisible' (Jackson 1981, p.4).

The setting of Jack's corporeal world is filled with the same sensory detail as his imaginative one, as Carmody frames fantasy around a canvas of realism: 'The dream had seemed so real that he could still hear the high, wild sound of her laughter, and smell the sweet, peppery scent she had liked'. Juxtaposed with this is the harsh sound of the word 'dead', which 'he said aloud', and which 'sounded like a door slamming in an empty house' (p.4). Carmody's writing harnesses Jack's dreams firmly in the real world of insomnia, where he is 'thirsty and needing to go to the toilet' (p.5), enabling readers to make connections between their experience of dreams and of reality.

Carmody uses the symbol of the Greylands to represent the inner recesses of the mind in those who are fraught with pain. Jack is writing of this pain and explains that 'there is a Greylands inside everyone. It's where you go when you get sad or scared' (p.172). The Greylands, as a fantasy terrain, is a mirror-image of the real world, but with the colour sapped from it. It is a ghostly, ethereal place that 'seemed to contain only mysteries and questions, like holding two mirrors facing one another so that

they simply reflected themselves' (p.112). Although the Greylands is 'a reflection of real places' (p.109), like the school change room or a deserted city street, its boundaries are as blurred as the 'dissolved edges' of fantasy and realism that permeate the many challenging gaps in the text.

Within this colourless world, fear is symbolised by the 'wolvers' (p.22) who prowl about unceasingly. They never take a specific form and are identified only by their feral sounds. Carmody's inventive term evokes a host of physical but undefined characteristics for the haunting creature that 'Alice had called a wolver, but maybe it was a wolfish-looking man. Or maybe it was a werewolf' (p.37). Where traditional fantasy writers create a disparate world of fairy folk like goblins and dragons, Carmody's fantasy world is empty of delineated beings but filled with foreboding. Uncertainty reigns and questions hang unanswered in the bleak air of the Greylands:

People always want to know who and where and why and what is the name. They have to know everything. They are always gnawing at things and at one another.
(p.103)

Carmody constructs a discourse that reflects the uncertainties and confusions of life where people, like the symbolic wolvers, prey upon each other in the quest for answers and definition. While Jack's mother gave the children imaginative 'wings' (p.4), their father's words negated this dimension in life: 'Some things are real and others not. Children need things defined' (p.15). Ironically, Jack's father fails to define the illness that brings about the traumatic death of Jack's mother; the events in the Greylands become Jack's quest to unravel this painful mystery for himself.

Greylands is a richly intertextual and reflexive pastiche of fantasy/realism narratives. In it, Carmody draws upon a wide range of well-known fairy tales and fables in order to foreground the constructedness of all texts. The dragon, traditionally the fierce monster

of fable, is recast as 'harmless' (p.31) in the game played by Jack's father. The notion of how 'something could come out of your imagination and be made real' leads Jack to reflect on the nature of fairy tale and its imaginative sway over the real world:

Maybe there were dragons in fairy-tales...because someone had thought about it. He could never figure out how somebody could think up things that weren't real. But maybe they were real, in a way. After all, dreams and stories were reflections of reality....
(p.123)

Jack has seen a pantomime of *Snow White* and it is this link in the real world that acts as a springboard to the symbol of the mirror through which he crosses to the Greylands in his imagination. His sister, Ellen, tells him that 'there was a book in the library called *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, about a girl who went through a mirror, just like he had done in his dream' (p.34). The two children then engage in a metafictional debate in which they compare the text as the creation of a writer with the control one has over the events in one's life:

'In books people can do anything, but not in real life,' Ellen said wistfully. 'Not anything,' Jack said. 'They can only do what writers decide they can do. At least in real life you have some say in what happens to you.'
(p.35)

Just as Jack's sudden appearances in the *Greylands* merge with his real life experiences, so the stories that he reads to Ellen are fantasies that merge with the tale of the family wrought by Carmody. The Snow Queen tells of 'a boy and a girl who loved one another very much...' (p.59) and it is the love for his sister that eventually brings him out of the Greylands. Rapunzel, Snow White and other characters from 'the land of faerie' (p.76) are part of the

make-believe stuff in books that wasn't exactly unreal, because you weren't supposed to see it as real in the first place. It was a symbol of something else.
(p.91)

John Stephens defines 'fantasy as a metaphoric mode' (Stephens 1992, p.248) and for Jack, all fantasies are metaphors for 'the inside stuff' (p.104). They are the bonds that tie him to his sister yet free him to fight 'the Greylands numbness' (p.131).

Much of the text in *Greylands* is a penetrating study of the chief focaliser's attempts to understand the dichotomy between the construction of fantasy and reality. Carmody sets up a debate in Jack's stream of consciousness, through which he interrogates the nature of the real. The novel opens with Jack firmly rooted in the real world of his familiar bedroom at night, where 'slysome shadows distorted everything' (p.5). Imagination skews reality and 'the house seemed to change shape so that there were more corners with shadows thick in them'. Even the people in Jack's real world could have stepped out of the pages of *Alice in Wonderland*: 'Night seemed to make him a different shape, too, like it did with the house. Jack became smaller and younger and more nervous' (p.6). His father 'looked small' and seemed to have 'shrunk since the death of his wife' (p.9). Ellen is the strongest of the three and, in Jack's vivid imagination, the family roles are crazily reversed so that 'just for a second, it was like his little sister was the mother' (p.11).

The text clusters the fantasy of *Alice Through the Looking Glass* with Jack 'falling forward, through the mirror, into the mirror' (p.18). Jack then reflects on this dream that has taken him through the mirror into the Greylands: 'You think a person could really go through a mirror?' he asks of his friend, Mario. The world of school intersects with the 'wild places on the other side of the mirror'. Similarly, Jack stares 'in wonder' (p.49) at the girl in the Greylands, whom he has also named Alice. Carmody's play on words connects the two fantasies and foregrounds their intertextuality. Jack ponders on how Alice 'could exist outside of his dream' and wonders 'what was happening to him right now in the real world?' (p.42). Mario's response is a parodic comment on the untenable grasp that the reader has on reality as

seen by Jack: 'I don't think a guy who goes jumping through mirrors into other worlds is any authority on normality' (p.91).

Greylands has features of a 'counter text which explicitly lays bare its artifice' (Waugh, in Moss 1990, p.50) and draws attention to its own fictionality. At the outset, Carmody uses a title, *The Beginning*, to open a discussion between her two characters, Jack and Ellen, on the openings of stories and the nature of realism. Jack, as the creator of his own story, blends the genres of realism and fantasy: 'This will be my story and I'm starting with me dreaming...' (p.1). While this opening statement signals a strong link with fantasy, Jack refutes such a link as he says, 'it didn't happen in some faraway land' (p.2). Carmody's text is a multilayered construct that draws on postmodern strategies. Seemingly contradictory, and in the hands of two creators, Jack's story becomes a writerly text that questions the boundaries between fictive and 'real' writers and the genres in which they write.

Carmody's novel dispenses with the traditional chapter chronology by inserting a break, entitled *The Middle*, in which her characters deconstruct the writer's crafting of fiction. 'It's real things turned inside out so you can see what the inside is like' (p.104), Ellen tells Jack, who then detaches himself from what might have been an autobiographical discourse: 'The Jack in the story isn't really me anyway. It's partly me and partly made up. It's the inside me that went to the Greylands' (p.106). *Greylands* is what Patricia Waugh terms

fictional writing which draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.
(Waugh 1984, p.2)

For Isobelle Carmody, the genres of fantasy and realism have, like the Greylands, 'dissolved around the edges' (p.109). Jack's 'triumphant return' (p.90) heralds his regeneration and newly-found strength to deal with difficulties. Responsibility to his father

and sister 'swell his desire to return' (p.86) to the real world, which is 'noisy and smelly but warm and bright. It was where he belonged' (p.124). Within the schisms of the real world, Carmody is able to affirm the restorative quality that her highly symbolic mode of fantasy attains. John Marsden, on the other hand, does some adroit genre-bending in asserting his claims for the plausibility of Ellie's war adventures and in suppressing a reading of Hell as a dystopic 'Narnia or somewhere' (Marsden 1993, p.23). The appeal of Marsden's lurid and unreflective narrative negates any solid compatibility between the two genres and privileges their binary opposition.

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