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## A Little Masterpiece: Patricia Wrightson's *A Little Fear*

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Publication of Patricia Wrightson's *A Little Fear* in 1983 marked the end of an extraordinarily prolific period from 1977 onward during which Patricia Wrightson published a novel every two years as she explored the possibilities of successful Australian fantasy first opened up in *The Nargun and the Stars* in 1973. After the large experiment of the Wirrun trilogy (1977-1981) Wrightson turned from high fantasy and the hero tale, but her willingness to experiment remained as strong as ever: the central character of this children's novel is an unprepossessing old woman named Agnes Tucker, the first in a line of elderly protagonists that was to continue in her next two novels, *Moon-Dark* and *Balyet*. *A Little Fear* also contains Wrightson's first animal characters: Mrs Tucker's dog, Hector, and the chickens and rats living on the small rural property in which the novel is set. Along with these new ventures, however, came a twofold return — a literary one, in short, in the intensely focused fantasy in a small, detailed setting, and a literal one, in the rural north coast district of New South Wales in which Wrightson has spent more than half her life. Because of its precise evocation of place, *A Little Fear* is notable among the growing number of regional



novels in Australian children's literature (Saxby 1993, p.506). The quality of the novel was recognized immediately: it was commended for the Carnegie Medal in 1983 and was judged Australian Children's Book of the Year in 1984.

Like its immediate predecessors, *The Nargun and the Stars* and *The Book of Wirrun*, *A Little Fear* uses Aboriginal spirit creatures to motivate the plot and to assist Australian readers of European descent in making imaginative connections with a landscape into which many of them were born, but to which they are not indigenous — a process Goldie terms 'indigenization' (Goldie 1989, p.13). *A Little Fear* is closer,

however, to *The Nargun* and *the Stars* than to the Wirrun novels, developing and varying themes and techniques first seen in *The Nargun* and *the Stars* in a new setting, that of the Clarence River estuary near Maclean, New South Wales. After the high fantasy quest of the Wirrun trilogy, in which she explores the nature of the hero through his journeys and battles with and against the spirits of Australia in the setting of the whole continent, Wrightson reverts in *A Little Fear* to examining the development of a single main character in a limited, isolated setting containing only two spirit creatures that reflect aspects of both the natural world and of the protagonist. In addition, Wrightson extends her previous use of pastoral and of a central motif in a daring analysis of the personal and psychic growth of an elderly female character against a background of an ecological system depicted by means of direct description and of animal characters. Such layering and suggestion of meaning and interlocking of elements of plot, setting, and character, coupled with provision of a variety of possible subject positions for young readers (Stephens 1992, p.70) show Wrightson at her best: as a miniaturist whose powers are concentrated by a circumscribed setting and by brevity.

Wrightson is intensely concerned with the main human protagonist of *A Little Fear*. Agnes Tucker is alone during most of the narrative; much of the conflict in the novel occurs in her mind; and the overt conflict with the Njimbin matches her with an adversary whose nature closely resembles hers. She is an original and interesting figure whose predicament is saved from sentimentality by Wrightson's characterization. Agnes Tucker is hardly the ideal grandmother of children's literature, in the mould of L.M. Boston's Mrs Oldknow. Her tall, raw-boned frame, 'tiny white moustache' (Wrightson 1983, pp.5-6), 'bellowing laugh' (p.28) and 'bunioned feet' (p.5) are no more attractive than her irritability (p.6) and slyness (p.7) and her manipulateness (p.9). If she is slowing down mentally, she is aware of the fact, and is still tough and assertive (p.6). Given her age and self-assurance, one would not expect her to be the protagonist in a *Bildungsgeschichte*, but she is, in a novel that proceeds, like *The Nargun and the Stars*, on three levels simultaneously. First, *A Little Fear* deals with Mrs Tucker's growth through endurance in a struggle against a creature whose temperament and circumstances closely resemble her own. Second, the novel offers an account of her

loss of illusions during her withdrawal into a pastoral setting that is consonant with late twentieth-century views of nature. Third, the novel presents Mrs Tucker's psychic growth in the later stages of the process of individuation.

The Clarence estuary near Maclean offers a distinct topography remote enough to sustain the credibility of Wrightson's 'magical realist' style of fantasy, especially since she has largely invented the spirit-creatures of the novel and can link them closely to natural features. She uses the spirits to generate suspense as the protagonist discovers what the reader already knows; she exploits the pathos of Mrs Tucker's fear of senility and the humour of her dog Hector's damaged pride, while also using the character of the Njimbin to embody, in the narrative of its struggle with Mrs Tucker, the capacity of the land to defeat an intruder. John Bright's old cottage, within a few miles of a small town, yet isolated on a ridge leading down to the river, is a believable home for Mrs Tucker. The surrounding land could readily hide a small spirit that clearly represents some of its features: the Njimbin is 'grey like stone and gnarled like an old root with age' (p.37). Small rafts of twigs, leaves, and grass, drifting with wind and tide or caught in

branches above the water could just as easily be Hairy Men. The scrub and blady-grass growing rankly among the trees in the humid sub-tropical heat of summer and early autumn rustles with all kinds of animal and reptile life and swarms with insects. As an ancient part of this setting, the Njimbin is both the source of motivation in a cleverly original plot, and the embodiment of the land: directly in its resentment of intrusion, adaptation to the presence of man, and use of teeming, tiny forms of life against an interloper who will not submit to management; and indirectly, through the indigenizing associations of its Aboriginal appearance and weapons.

In the small-scale but hard-fought conflict that constitutes the bulk of the narrative, Agnes Tucker and the Njimbin are well matched. Both of them want the security of a place they can call their own, one in which they can live on their own terms. Both of them are manipulative: Mrs Tucker consciously turns the good nature of other people to her own ends (pp.8,9) and shrewdly uses written (p.93) and spoken (p.108) language to bend her daughter to her will; the Njimbin uses introduced sources of food and shelter, manages the rats as if they were its own livestock (p.12), and '[puts] on an injured tone' (p.76)

to achieve its ends. Both of them are irritable (pp.6,46), especially with weaker characters such as Helen or the fowls; both hate to look foolish (pp.65,69) or to admit defeat (pp.84,106). After a victory, both are self-satisfied; after a defeat, both are unforgiving (pp.97,111).

Though in the end Mrs Tucker leaves the cottage, her endurance in the battle against the Njimbin is rewarded. When the novel begins she is in the dependent position of an 'aged child' (p.9), and seeks an escape that her granddaughter understands: "You're going to run away, aren't you?" she whispered, one child to another' (p.7). Later, however, strengthened by the freedom to pursue her own interests in her own time, Mrs Tucker does not run away from the cottage, despite the fear of senility caused by the Njimbin's tactics in the battle for control of the fowlhouse. She faces her fear, discovering the Njimbin's fire (p.70) and her burnt traps (p.72), and confronting the Hairy Man (p.90). She even begins to recognize the Njimbin's right to shelter and independence, and thinks of seeking an accommodation with it (p.93) until young Ivan's action provokes the midge-storm that finally defeats her. In defeat, however, Mrs Tucker attains a realistic perception of her

loneliness and need of others (p.109). The independence she has acquired from her endurance at the cottage and her negotiating skill secure for her the maximum freedom possible within her limitations. She is no longer running away into dreams of an ideal past, but level-headedly planning for a possible future.

Agnes Tucker's time in the pastoral world, like Simon Brent's in *The Nargun and the Stars*, is one of learning, testing, and self-discovery leading to acceptance of her mortality and a clearer understanding of her place in the scheme of things. She arrives at this end, however, after an experience that is almost the opposite of Simon's. The world of Wongadilla in *The Nargun and the Stars*, like the European world of Green Knowe, is a romantic one in which 'natural supernaturalism' leads to healing. Simon is brought into the pastoral setting, begins by hating it and wanting to hold on to the urban values he has brought with him, but ends by finding a home in it. Though Wongadilla contains the terrifying Nargun, it also communicates itself to Simon in deeply satisfying moments of awareness and companionship, and in discoveries that fill him with 'delight' (Wrightson 1973, p.55). Mrs Tucker runs away to the pastoral world hoping to find in the cottage and its

surroundings the pleasures and pains of simplicity and independence that she recalls from her younger days, but ends by discovering that she cannot live without human companionship and help in 'a place that [doesn't] know her or want her' (Wrightson 1983, p.109). She does not achieve a sense of wholeness through Wordsworthian moments of self-awareness or through co-operation with the spirits of the land, but through defeat in a battle against manifestations of 'natural supernaturalism', and through recognition of her place as part of an ecological system that accommodates her grudgingly. The natural world of *A Little Fear* is capable, in time, of overwhelming her, just as it threatens to overwhelm the lonely cottage whose 'tired old frame' (p.105) represents her own.

In coming to the cottage, Agnes Tucker is entering a landscape that has been settled almost from the beginning of white colonization and is more accessible than Wongadilla. From the outset, however, Wrightson makes clear the indifference and potential hostility to humankind of this Australian setting. The landscape of *A Little Fear* has defeated Europeans; it has been 'cleared and farmed and deserted', and 'the forest [is] now struggling back' (p.10).

Here there is none of the comforting depth of human occupation found in the European pastoral settings of such writers as Alan Garner, Penelope Lively, or L.M. Boston. This is a landscape without stone walls, churches, clocks, small fields, trades, or music, but also without even the sustaining company of people like Edie and Charlie, and the pleasure of creatures like the Potkoorok. The countryside is almost empty of human life, houses are sparsely scattered and hidden by ridges or distance, and in 'the hard heat of January' (p.10) John Bright's old cottage waits in 'glassy silence spun from the shrilling of cicadas' (p.11) for the bushfire that will inevitably destroy it.

By contrast, Mrs Tucker brings into this world the values of conventional pastoral. She looks forward to the simplicity of living in two rooms (p.17), the independence of using tools (p.19), and the self-sufficiency of a vegetable garden (p.19). She enjoys the beauty of butterflies (p.18) and the fun of Hector's cautious approach to a frog (p.24). The reality of the natural world soon asserts itself, however; 'it [begins] to seem a waste of time to plant' seeds (p.26) when her vegetables are nibbled or taken outright. She turns her attention to the fowl run, which can at least be

enclosed, but in so doing incurs the anger of the Njimbin. Even without the help of the old spirit, the realities of this pastoral setting begin to undermine Mrs Tucker's expectations. The once-amusing frogs become noisy inhabitants of her cottage (p.43), and along with plants and insects become puzzlingly deceptive (p.48). The startling camouflage of a moth, 'all its symmetry and shape cunningly hidden', turns her puzzlement into fear: 'It was suddenly frightening, this sly concealment of shape. It meant that anything could really be something else' (p.51).

By calling into question the reality of Agnes Tucker's distant memory of a dairy farm as 'the right picture' of a 'good life, hard and lonely and free' (p.7), Wrightson is also calling into question the version of pastoral that 'enables us to live, on our own terms, with a nature we have abandoned' (Rosenmayer 1969, p.118). *A Little Fear* is founded on the belated but necessary realization, in the late twentieth century, that human beings are as much part of an interdependent ecological system as its tiniest and least-considered creatures. The animals in the setting - Mrs Tucker's dog Hector, the rats, and the fowls - help to shift the focus on the novel from the human to the more broadly biological. Among the natural

and supernatural creatures of the natural world of *A Little Fear*, unsentimental predation or self-interested management are normal, and introduced species such as lemon, peach, and cassia are most subject to attack (p.11). At first, the dog Hector understands the nature of the land around the cottage much better than his mistress does. What she sees as a place for a garden, he recognizes as the territory of creatures 'furred and scaled and skinned; hopping, wriggling, running; eaters of leaves and insects and flesh' (p.22). With the help of Hector as focalizer (Stephens 1992, pp. 67-69) the reader learns those facts, and so, eventually, does Mrs Tucker. Most pervasive of all, the insect life of the river banks and nearby bushland, like the silence of *The Nargun and the Stars*, provides a motif underlying the whole novel and marking the climax in the clash of wills between a closely matched pair: the Njimbin and Agnes Tucker.

The cumulative power of independent, non-human life - the 'tide of fluttering wings' (p.52) and the constant movement and sound in the darkness outside the cottage and even within its walls - bears down upon Mrs Tucker, but she cannot hide from it (p.52) or ignore it (p.60), and begins to feel that she is 'the intruder' in

the cottage (p.69). When she angers the Njimbin, the land's indifference turns to hostility expressed in the inexorable power of its teeming life. Ants nest in her food, her plants, even her bed. Frogs invade every corner of her cottage, and a 'midge-storm' (p.104) finally engulfs the building completely. The pastoral world of *A Little Fear* destroys the illusions of Mrs Tucker's memories of a land dominated by hard work and youth. Though she still has the courage to face the little fears of insects and frogs, and the greater one of her own senility, she recognizes the truth that at best she has the choice of accepting a constrained rather than a dominant place in the world of the cottage, and that 'old and alone' she cannot 'fight a war against the land' (p.105). Further, she recognizes the limitations of her advancing age.

This recognition is itself dependent upon a process that according to Jung 'is not a task of youth but of mature years' (Jacobi 1962, p.119): that of 'attaining a broader personality that may be regarded as a preparation for death' (Jacobi 1962, p.105). As a result of her endurance, Agnes Tucker grows in self-knowledge; through encountering the 'cold, impersonal truth of nature' (Jacobi 1962, p.121), she becomes aware of the power of

her unconscious, instinctive desire (Jacobi 1962, p.127) for a life lived on her own terms. In so doing, she achieves a conscious understanding of her position and a detachment that enables her to seek an accommodation with her circumstances and to plan her future realistically.

Though Agnes Tucker is not young, she is certainly able to endure and to grow. Throughout the process of settling into the cottage and contending with discomfort, loss, and outright fear, she undergoes a development similar to that leading to what Jung calls 'self-realization'. This development requires acceptance of 'the contrasexual aspect of [one's] psyche' (Jacobi 1962, p.120); recognition of the archetypal figure 'that represents the objective truth of nature'; and a transforming recognition of the power of the unconscious that can lead to self-knowledge. Through Agnes Tucker, Wrightson examines individual growth in the latter part of life in detail. Mrs Tucker's journey of self-realization is that of an older woman who, in Annis Pratt's words, wishes 'to integrate herself with herself and not with a society she has found inimical to her desires' (Pratt 1981, p.136). She deliberately plans and executes her escape from the retirement village,

leaving its society for a solitary life, turning in upon herself in the cottage that mirrors her in its age and isolation. In it she can live as she pleases, and she begins her new life by integrating her male and female attributes.

From the opening of the novel, Wrightson stresses Mrs Tucker's masculinity: her height and her 'large-boned frame', her 'tiny white moustache', and the assertiveness signalled by her posture and manner (pp.5-6). Life at the cottage enables her to externalize this masculinity. She wears her brother's clothes; uses his hand tools as she has always wanted to do; and takes out his boat (pp.30-31). Such recognition and acceptance of the masculine side of her nature leads to 'enrichment' and 'broadening' of her personality (Jacobi 1962, p.120). She laughs 'in a hearty bellow that would have surprised the staff at Sunset House' (p.24), and begins to plan for the future and to assert her occupation of the land by buying fowls for the long-abandoned fowlhouse. She knowingly integrates her masculine and feminine sides; before going to town she dresses 'in the sort of clothes that old ladies are expected to wear' and '[dabs] a little powder on her moustache' (p.31).

Her refusal to give in to the fear of senile dementia during her battle with the Njimbin for

control of the fowlhouse leads her to the next stage in her growth, because 'it is precisely the endurance of tension, the ability to hold out in the midst of psychic disorder, that provides the possibility of a new psychic order' (Jacobi 1962, p.124). She proves to herself the existence of the Njimbin, and recognizes in it the personification of the 'cold, impersonal truth of nature' (Jacobi 1962, p.121). This recognition is vital in the female individuation process (though it is usually associated with the figure of the Magna Mater) and Wrightson emphasizes it, linking the spirit creature to the continuing motif of bustling, indifferent insect and animal life as well as to Mrs Tucker herself:

*[S]he felt that in some unseen way she knew this thing very well: a secret, ancient thing, small yet somehow immense and unknowable. It had to do, she thought, with the impertinence of rats and the disregard of ants; with fragile lime-green butterflies that ate up a whole tree; with the implacability of night, that rejected her but lay in wait for her cottage lights; with the sudden strong voices of frogs living hidden in pipes and gutters that she thought were only hers; even with the inscrutability of a twisted bit of paperbark that was really a living moth. All these things*

*were in some way a part of this one small thing, and this challenged her.*  
(Wrightson 1983, p.77)

In her conscious knowledge of the Njimbin, a creature that in so many ways resembles her, Agnes Tucker underestimates its power and succumbs to the 'danger of becoming arrogant and vainglorious' (Jacobi 1962, p.122). She challenges the Njimbin by setting up the earth-creature's axe 'in plain sight' (p.78), and by locking the fowlhouse, thereby gaining the 'small victory' (p.88) of an egg. She has yet to reach the next stage of growth: the self-realization that requires her to face what Jung calls 'the animal impulses of the unconscious without identifying [herself] with them and without 'running away' (Jacobi 1943, p.119).

Mrs Tucker encounters these animal impulses in the form of the Hairy Man, a creature Wrightson depicts as being primitive in shape (p.37) and as having little to say, even with its own kind, the spirits (pp.37,38,85). Her experience in the cottage has given her greater strength of mind and capacity for self-analysis than she has ever had (p.89). In spite of her astonishment, anger, and fear at seeing the Hairy Man leave the most private recess of the cottage when it comes 'shambling out of her bedroom

as if it [owns] the place', Mrs Tucker enters the cottage without conscious thought (p.90), and faces the creature. It is unafraid of Hector or of her, and is quite absorbed in the process of eating live frogs, but when she confronts it, '[s]omething - a sense of pity or of fellowship - [flows] between them' (p.90). Once she has encountered the Hairy Man, has accepted its presence, and has conceded its ability to deal more effectively than she can with one of her problems, Agnes Tucker sees her real enemy for the first time (p.91). Her reaction after sighting the Njimbin is to make explicit her understanding of it (p.91) and to accept its presence also in the world of the cottage. She wrongly believes that she knows what the Njimbin is like (p.91), and considers the possibility of co-existence (p.93). Mrs Tucker has yet to attain full self-realization, which requires that she solve the problem of her relation to 'outward and inner reality' (Jacobi 1962, p.123).

In the suffocating horror of the midge-storm that brings to a climax the motif of insect life Wrightson has used throughout the novel, Mrs Tucker learns what distinguishes her from the Njimbin. She is mortal. She cannot exclude or see beyond the midges that she has already associated with time (p.88); she

can kill them, but they are 'momentary things' (p.102) that die readily and are immediately replaced, like ticking seconds. She realizes 'despairingly' that 'nothing [makes] a difference' to them (p.102), and learns from Hector to endure them, though his inarticulate companionship cannot make any contact with her conscious mind (p.104). After a night spent in the attitude of death, without the comfort of light and shrouded 'from head to foot' (p.104) under a rug, she emerges into a scene that mirrors her own position. In an autumn morning in which 'threatening' columns of midges are still forming, she contemplates the cottage, 'alone in a landscape swarming with unseen life, its tired old frame vulnerable to rats and frogs and snakes and midges and fire' (p.105). She now knows her position as a mortal part of a larger reality that she cannot control, nature itself. She seeks and achieves a way of life that involves the worries and problems that are 'the natural attributes of all human existence, the normal counterpole ... of happiness' (Jacobi 1962, p.124) — attributes that Sunset House denied her, but that the cottage gave back. She is precisely aware of her situation and of her feelings (p.109); her 'late-life transition is both a preparation for the *ultimate* transition of death and the opportunity to accept [her]

personal existence as part of the immutable will of the cosmos' (Stevens 1991, p.222). Her final acts are realistic assertions of her individuality: gathering the tools she will need in an independent future, planning to 'go out with a bang' (p.111) in her vendetta against the Njimbin, and beginning to 'make a dog' (p.31) of Hector by eradicating his fear of water.

Hector is one of Wrightson's first experiments with fantastic animal characters. As well as giving the reader a non-human insight into the place of humans in the ecological system, they provide much of the humour of *A Little Fear*. Wrightson matches the limited talk of frogs and fowls to their natural sounds, and deftly characterises the hysterical hens and pompous rooster through dialogue. The rats' ironical politeness is not so obviously the talk of animals, but it provides a counterpoise for the Njimbin's boastfulness. Hector says little, but his lugubriously pacific nature and fear of water, so oddly matched with his heroic name, and his clumsy but sincere efforts to help Mrs. Tucker, provide the comedy that saves her predicament from being too threatening. Wrightson also uses Hector to reveal the Njimbin to Mrs. Tucker and to form a bridge between the human and animal

world in a manner explored more fully in *Moon-Dark*.

The character of Hector is also part of a narrative strategy that is more sophisticated than those seen previously in Wrightson's work, except perhaps in *I Own the Racecourse!* — one 'by which readers may be "estranged" from the possibility of simple identification and so prevented from adopting a single subject position' (Stephens 1992, p.70). Among the narrative strategies that help readers avoid the unqualified identification with a central focalising character common in children's literature Stephens lists the use of 'shifts in the focalizer' and 'focalizers who are not "nice people" and hence do not invite reader identification' (Stephens 1992, p.70). Wrightson uses both strategies in *A Little Fear*. Hector is one of the three main focalizers of the novel, along with Mrs. Tucker and the Njimbin. None of them is particularly attractive for reasons already noted, and that fact and the movement of focus from one to another during the course of the narrative precludes the danger of sentimentality likely in any treatment of animals and elderly people by allowing readers to consider the characters and their situations critically, even if they come to respect their independence or persistence or loyalty.

Of all Patricia Wrightson's novels, *A Little Fear* is the one in which the main characters and the resolution of the narrative are least conventional. At the close of the novel the Njimbin has won a Pyrrhic victory, since he will lose his shelter in the fowlhouse; Mrs Tucker is grudging in defeat and, if anything, more manipulative of others than before (pp.108-9); Hector remains anxious and dismal and fearful of water; and he and Mrs Tucker are facing the uncertainty of life in town. For all main characters, especially for Mrs Tucker and Hector, the future implies change and development beyond the close of the narrative. For readers, especially for young readers, the difficulty of unqualified identification encourages awareness of the constructedness of that narrative and of its characters. These very qualities of uncertainty, unconventionality, and openness are among the many strengths of *A Little Fear*, and coupled with multiplicity of meaning, precision of setting, and innovation, make it, along with *The Nargun and the Stars* one of the most successful of Wrightson's novels.

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#### Biographical Note

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