

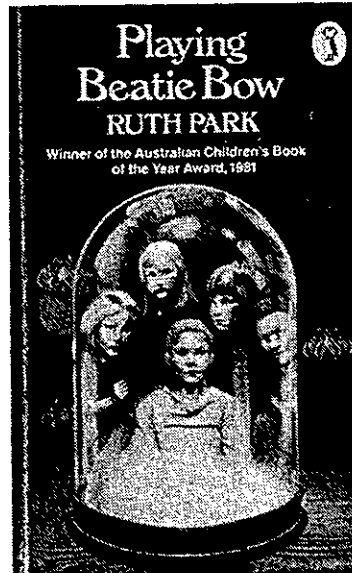


A Century of Dislocated Time: Time Travel, Magic and the Search for Self

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Time,' the Phoenix tells Cyril, Anthea, Robert and Jane, 'is, as you are probably aware, merely a convenient fiction.' (Nesbit 1979, p.223). The dilemma of time is its inconsistency, for while it moves at a regular and measurable pace in the outer world, this does not coincide with its eccentricity in human experience where emotions and sensations affect the way time is perceived. In *Philosophy and the Young Child*, Gareth Matthews examines children's attempts to understand causality and the linear nature of time, drawing on Piaget's discussion of young children's sense of reality which 'impregnated with self and thought is conceived as belonging to the category of physical matter.' (Piaget 1951, p.166).

In their attempt to understand time's mystery, many fantasies which foreground time present its enigmatic process as magical. Writers about fantasy, such as Nikolajeva and Egoff, point out the increasing connection and proximity between emotion and magic in recent children's literature. Hailed by Nikolajeva as an evolution in fantasy which gives it psychological depth, this development is condemned by Egoff as a destructive one which weakens the genre. Whether one applauds or



criticizes, it is clear that this more recent aspect of fantasy balances the perceived world with the inner world, and pursues what many believe to be fantasy's ultimate arena, the exploration of the relationship between inner and outer worlds, and the shifting dynamic between them. Books in which time is foregrounded must address this dynamic, and those in which time is dislocated clearly illustrate the evolution the critics address.

Twentieth century children's books offer a number of such examples. Those written early in the century feature travels in time which are fun, adventurous and often educational; however, the

journeys, though they cross the boundaries of time, do not usually penetrate the boundaries of the self to any significant extent. The children return home with souvenirs, new information about the past and even some knowledge which increases their intellectual horizons; but their inner selves remain basically unchanged. However, as the century progresses, the time-traveller's self-concept and personality increasingly undergo significant growth and change even to the point of reassessment and redefinition of the innermost sense of self and self-identification.

The time-travel books of E. Nesbit, Alison Uttley, L.M. Boston and Mary Norton offer a variety of examples of earlier twentieth century approaches to the dislocation of time. In E. Nesbit's *The Phoenix and the Carpet* (1904), *The Story of the Amulet* (1906) and *The House of Arden* (1908), time itself is strongly foregrounded, and is presented both conceptually and in terms of action, unequivocally expressing the author's philosophical assertion that 'time is only a mode of thought.' (Nesbit 1980, p.132). In *The Story of the Amulet*, as in the Phoenix's definition with which I began, the notion of time's relativity and the way real people experience and understand it is a significant

theme. Anthea and Cyril grapple with the concept:

'This about time being only a thingummy of thought is very confusing. If everything happens at the same time —'

'It can't,' said Anthea stoutly, 'the present's the present and the past's the past.'

'Not always,' said Cyril. 'When we were in the Past the present was the future. Now then!' he added triumphantly. Anthea could not deny it.
(Nesbit, 1980, p.193)

Certainly the children's understanding of the nature of time and of their own place in it does become clearer with their myriad experiences, but their personalities undergo no significant change.

Allison Uttley also involves some degree of philosophy in her *A Traveller in Time* (1939), beginning with the book's opening motto taken from the sundial: 'Time is. Time was. Time is not.' While Penelope's experiences, particularly her loving feelings toward Francis and her out-of-body imprisonment in the tunnel, compete with external events for the reader's attention, it is Penelope's education about the past which is the primary intent of the book, and the house Thackers which serves as the central focus, linking people

and objects from various times. This use of place as the nucleus of the work is similar to L.M. Boston's Green Knowe series begun in the nineteen fifties, where the focus is directed toward the house, Green Knowe, rather than its inhabitants, and the emphasis falls upon the historical richness of the environment rather than on the psychological landmarks within the children's personalities. That there are different child protagonists in the series accentuates the sense of permanence, security and identity that Green Knowe embodies. Like the other works alluded to, Mary Norton's *The Magic Bedknob* and its sequel *Bonfires and Broomsticks*, written in the nineteen forties, feature external rather than internal events as the significant actions. Perhaps least philosophical of the books mentioned, Norton's are action adventures whose time-travel is to a great extent controllable and planned.

It is Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden*, written in 1958, which moves the time-travel fantasy from a focus upon children involved in a fantastic environment to which they have a special sensitivity, to the notion that the psyche is the point of drama at which the real action takes place. This work foregrounds the nature of

time more intensely than any of the works I shall discuss, delving deeply into the ambivalence suggested in *Amulet* and *Arden* between philosophical statements of time's relativity set against the sense of humankind's time-bound existence. Mrs. Bartholomew's clock that hangs in the hallway to Uncle Alan and Aunt Gwen's flat provides the immediate focus for Tom's eyes and remains at the center of the book's dilemma, symbolizing both the inexorable passage of time and, in the biblical inscription 'Time No Longer' hidden behind its pendulum, suggesting a mystical apocalyptic state where time ceases to exist.

Synthesizing the religious-philosophical understanding of time's illusion with the human reality of time's irreversibility is the serious intent of this book, as the mystery of Tom's experience deepens. While the magical garden provides the external setting to which Tom's time displacement brings him, the apparent illogicality of the time sequences complicates and draws attention to time's mystery, a mystery which Pearce attempts to resolve with the final explanation that Tom has been drawn into the elderly Hatty Bartholomew's dreams. This transposition of the philosophical question of time into a psychological puzzle

clearly points to the approximation of magic and emotion, although the answer to the enigma is inadequate and Hatty's statement about time that 'nothing stands still except in our memory' (Pearce 1976, p.212) only a partial explanation. That Tom can somehow be drawn into Hatty's dreams in the present time does not stretch the imagination beyond impossible bounds; but that he should be pulled back into Hatty's actual past where the gardener Abel also saw him, defies logical explanation.

In the shifting emphasis from external to internal reality as the locus of significant activity, Tom's *Midnight Garden* is clearly the turning point. The three books I shall discuss next were all written more than twenty years after Pearce's outstanding work, and all foreground the protagonists' psychological lives. While the accuracy and detail of the historic setting is in each case exceptional, it is the emotional journey of the protagonists, the shifting of the boundaries of their self-knowledge and identity that the time displacement throws into focus. In all of these books, *Playing Beatie Bow*, *The Root Cellar* and *The Devil's Arithmetic*, the protagonists are able, by moving out of their own time, to gain the knowledge and

maturity that enables them to see themselves much more clearly.

In a perceptive recent article, Rod McGillis notes the mirror imagery in *The Root Cellar* and ties it to Lacan's mirror stage of development, the point at which the young person's self concept begins to split into self and other as self perception takes on multiple perspectives. In her fascinating psychological work *Prisoners of Childhood*, Alice Miller explores an even earlier sense of self defined not by a real mirror, but by the metaphoric mirror of a mother's love: 'Every child has a legitimate narcissistic need be noticed, understood, taken seriously, and respected by his mother ... to be mirrored by her.... The mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother's face and finds himself therein.' (Miller 1981, p.32). In the absence of this holistic mirroring, the child becomes unidimensional in his or her self concept, like Narcissus obsessed with a single image, without measure or proportion. Both of these mirroring concepts are valuable tools in understanding the protagonists' search for a sense of self, involving as they do the significance of other people in the emergence of a self image, for in others' reactions we see the reflection of our own words and actions and learn to know

ourselves as others perceive us.

Both *Playing Beatie Bow* published in 1980 and *The Root Cellar*, published in 1981, sharpen the sense of the child protagonist's dislocation that has been introduced but not much dwelt upon in the works already considered. In the works discussed so far, the children's lives have all been disrupted—by parents' travel or illness at home—but while this disruption of their lives clearly renders the children more vulnerable to the extraordinary, their uncertain hold on the routines of everyday life serves as a backdrop but rarely as a focus of the adventures in time travel. For Abbie and Rose however, their emotional states of mind are foregrounded. Their alienation from their own feelings and self-identification are of several years' standing and the crisis that tears the veil of the fantasy world brings the final shattering of an already splintered sense of reality. When Abbie's mother tells her that her father wants to rejoin the family after leaving them for another woman, Abbie having renounced her father and changed her own name to symbolize her rejection of the love she had felt for him, finds it impossible to accept this reunification. Rose who, since her parents' death has lived an emotionally barren and

circumscribed life for many years with her grandmother, finds herself, on her grandmother's death, placed with a family of cousins on a farm. Both girls suddenly find their familiar world turned upside down, are alienated from those around them and unable to make the connections of love and caring that they need.

The time shift thus triggers in both books a journey to self realization and emotional healing. While in each case the setting is meticulously developed and rendered with extraordinary historical accuracy, the earlier time serves most strongly as the setting for a kind of allegorical voyage to a new state of understanding, a penetration to new levels of emotional maturity to which the path was blocked in the real world. For Rose the root cellar becomes the path to a world in which she feels a strong true sense of belonging never before experienced. When at first she finds herself unable to realize the secret of the passage - that the shadow of the hawthorn must fall across the centre of the cellar door - and is unable to return to Susan and Will back in the 1860s, she feels she has been barred from her true home. And, once she discovers the secret of the passage, she chooses repeatedly to return there with no thought of the

present day family she has left. Not until she learns to love and trust others in an unselfish and mature way is she ready to return and become a real part of the family that has so generously taken her in. Abbie's experience is different, for she realizes she has penetrated into another time and wants desperately to return home. But it is her developing love for the family with whom she lives, and her sense of commitment and responsibility to them that keeps her with them until her task has been fulfilled. Her pattern of growth is comparable to Rose's in that she too matures, falls in love, and learns through experience the essential interdependence of human relationships that enables her to return to partake in the rebuilding of her family.

While the earlier books discussed tend to dwell upon the philosophical nature of time, and explore the inconsistency of outer and inner time, *Playing Beatie Bow* and *The Root Cellar*, written in the eighties, do not find this of concern. Both Rose and Abbie are fascinated to find the traces of the earlier times in their modern environment - Abbie the streets and landmarks of old Sydney, Rose the natural lines of lake and orchards and the families that live in the same houses - but they do not

attempt to provide rational explanations. Today we all accept without question that time is simply a dimension of the time/space that forms our reality, but our experiential perception of such a concept is not much more advanced than that of the children hearing from the Psammead in 1906 that 'Time and space are only forms of thought.' (Nesbit 1980, p.52). At this point in the century we are more accustomed to scientific 'truths' that are often at variance with human sensations and often hard to understand or visualize. Scientific and technological 'magic' permeate our everyday lives. Perhaps this makes it easier to accept the stunning magic that brings Rose Christmas dinner ready made, and Abbie a new love who reincarnates the spirit of the original, drowned in 1874. The reader must also be ready to acknowledge without question that the girls have both lived many months in an earlier time, have matured physically as well as emotionally, and retain this maturity when they return to the same point in the modern world that they left. To ensure that the growth is not passed off as metaphorical, Abbie must cut her waist-length hair back to shoulder level, and Rose explain the darkly tanned skin she acquired from her long hard trek in search of Will.

The most recently written text I wish to consider is Jane Yolen's *The Devil's Arithmetic*, written just eight years ago. Like Tom, Rose and Abigail, Hannah steps from the modern age into another time, but she also moves into another country: Poland in 1942. Certainly, like most of the time-shift books, there is a strong element of educational intent in this work whose historical accuracy provides a convincing backdrop to the horrors of the holocaust. But the book's contribution to a study of the evolving emphasis upon the psychic journey is especially striking. While the notion of trading places with someone else is an accepted convention, in this work Hannah finds herself physically transformed into another person, and her own identity and memories are slowly replaced with the experiences of the person she has become; her old self gradually slips away until it becomes a faint memory of a story she once knew. Unlike Rose and Abbie, who become more themselves in their new environment, Hannah becomes increasingly someone else. Her final act of heroism, taking Rivka's place in the gas chamber because somehow she knows that 'she would live in the future, - she, or someone with whom she shared memories' (159), catapults her back to the Seder dinner she

left, where the circle is completed in a way that is even more mystical than any of the books we have considered. At the end of Tom's *Midnight Garden*, Tom meets Hatty, now an old woman whose dreams he has somehow used as the bridge to the past and to the garden. Old Susan Morrissay of *The Root Cellar* returns from the past to enter Rose's time, cooks her Christmas dinner, speaks with her afterwards and returns the pendant Rose had given her a century before. Abbie in *Playing Beatie Bow* finds her circle of connection with the Bows is completed when she falls instantly in love with Robert Bow, Judah's and Beatie's great nephew. But Chaya/Hannah returning to the dinner table is surrounded by the living people whose lives she has touched in her other existence - aunt Eva in whose place she, as Chaya, died, and Uncle Will whom she has feared as Wolfe, a Kommando in the concentration camp where she has suffered.

During the century, the desire to know the past moves from simple curiosity to a kind of nostalgic wish for connection and a sense of heritage. Most recently this has metamorphosed into a deep need, often traumatically induced, which drives the

children into an earlier time so that they might be made whole. While only one of the children in these last three stories is motherless, nonetheless each of the girls has been cut off from a significant source of nurture, and is thus deprived of an important aspect of her self realization. Rose, most simply, lost her parents to accidental death. Abbie, cut off from her father, renounces both love and her own name, severing herself from emotion and identity. And Hannah is alienated from her family's past which has been hidden from her, her uncle and aunt having, like Abbie, attempted to obliterate painful memories by changing their names. Miller points out that in times when groups shared a common, unchallenged value system, the sense of group identity and support rarely available today gave individuals a measure of security, a mirror which reflected and reinforced their sense of who they were. In these last works, time itself becomes the mirror in which the children seek their reflection, looking back into the past to give depth and dimension to their impoverished sense of self, and finding new images in a looking glass of another age.

With the current incredible pace of technological revolution, we have become

accustomed to the metamorphosis of fantasy into reality, so that the line between ordinary life and magic has become blurred. Until 1759, when John Harrison's prize-winning chronometer at last permitted an accurate calculation of the nautical day, the dependable navigation of unknown waters was impossible. But though Harrison achieved the measure of the time of day, the human perception of time and its passage, the gauging of time's trajectory by means of the landmarks of human memory, has remained a challenge. The child's primitive conception and perception of time that Piaget describes persist within adults' senses of their own life stories and the texture of their own idiosyncratic emotional realities, enduring as a philosophical and psychological mystery and a location where magic is very much alive. Today, individual identity, defined as 'access to [ones' own] real needs and feelings and the possibility of expressing them' (Miller 1981, p.59) takes on crucial significance as contact with various different value systems and the concomitant responsibility for defining one's own ethics and sense of what is right increase. If magic allows us to express our deepest needs, then these works featuring time dislocation tell

us that, as the century has progressed, we do not, like the children of *The Story of the Amulet*, crave adventure and excitement, but rather desire a clear, whole sense of ourselves and of our values which highlight our loving bonds with others. These help us find our place in a time in which the accelerating forces of change, relentlessly obliterating the familiar, often seem to represent the only constant.

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