

pany behind.' (157) And these words pronounced by the old star Ramandu bring to the foreground that old prophecy about Reepicheep who doubts not a moment to volunteer for the task: 'While I can, I sail east in the *Dawn Treader*. When she fails me, I paddle east in my coracle. When she sinks, I shall swim east with my four paws. And when I can swim no longer, if I have not reached Aslan's country, [...] I shall sink with my nose to the sunrise.'<sup>13</sup> (162)

And now it is the time for the parting of ways for the fellowship of the Dawn Treader. Caspian and most of the crew accompany Reepicheep and the children as far as the Silver Sea, but once there the king is reminded of his duties: his quests and adventures have led him into the realm of the unknown but he returns home for rest and peace, courtesy and council, the sports, the dances, and the songs. He is bound under oath to Ramandu's daughter, his betrothed, and also to his people, whom he promises that he will return to his native land in a year and a day. It is his Chief Mouse who wakes him up with his words: 'You are the King of Narnia. You break faith with all your subjects, and especially with Trumpkin, if you do not return. You shall not please yourself with adventures as if you were a private person.' (182)

As for the Mouse, he vanishes after rushing up the side of a wave, a wave not made of lilies, as the rest of the Silver Sea, but green and smooth.<sup>14</sup> (185) And the children put an end to their adventure by sharing a very special meal with a lamb, an albatross before them, and always a lion, the Lion, 'towering above them and scattering light from his mane' (187) the ultimate, yet unknown until this very momentous scene, goal of their quest. This fleeting and piercing glimpse of the longed-for joy all those sea voyagers sought precedes the little adventurers' return to the primary world of 1942 England and closes the Narnian adventures to some of them for many years to come.<sup>15</sup> (188)

To conclude, we may recall Manlove's observation that all of the Narnian books express a wish to re-enter childhood and a yearning for a simpler, more pastoral realm.<sup>16</sup> Children and childlike characters alike have tried to build multiple bridges between islands and peoples, between different levels of existence, even between their inner feelings, sometimes with the help of Aslan, the Great Bridge Builder. In this respect, the adventure is a success. Departing from our reality, they have travelled the imaginative realm to achieve a brief, delightful glimpse of the Real World. Free at last, healed and recovered from worldly diseases, united in Aslan's big enterprise, they all become the true makers of their achievements, with the simplicity of a child, bridging gaps, waters abating.

<sup>13</sup> Reepicheep's knightly spirit has been a constant feature in the book. His romantic predisposition is shown many times, for example, when playing chess with Lucy: 'the Mouse did something quite ridiculous like sending a knight into the danger of a queen and castle combined. This happened because he had momentarily forgotten it was a game of chess and was thinking of a real battle and making the knight do what he would certainly have done in its place. For his mind was full of forlorn hopes, death-or-glory charges and last stands.' (55) <sup>14</sup> The last sighting of Reepicheep recalls Arthur's passage to Avalon, and also some of the final scenes from Tolkien's masterpiece. <sup>15</sup> See also C.S. Lewis, *The last battle* (London: Collins 1990). <sup>16</sup> Colin Manlove, *The chronicles of Narnia: the patterning of a fantastic world* (New York: Prentice Hall 1993), p. 3.

## (W)Rites of passage in Siobhán Parkinson's novel *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows and One Witch (Maybe)*

PATRICIA KENNON

A central theme in Siobhán Parkinson's children's novels is the necessary but often difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. In her preface to her novel, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows and One Witch (Maybe)*, or *4321*, Parkinson explicitly discusses the importance of rites of passage that symbolically mark children's transition to their adult community. Parkinson notes that regardless of what form these ceremonies might take in a particular culture, whether a test or the official grant of 'adult' knowledge such as the 'secret stories' of their tribe, nevertheless 'every child has to make the journey from childhood to young adulthood for himself or herself.'<sup>1</sup> In this adventure story, three children on holidays in a coastal town, Gerard, age 11, his sister Elizabeth age 12, the 13-year-old Beverley, together with a local teenager, Kevin, embark on a day-long expedition to a mysterious nearby island. The children's journey of exploration or 'pilgrimage' to the island, as Elizabeth calls it (100), is also an allegorical journey of personal exploration that results in a profound reassessment of their understandings of themselves, the other children and the world around them. This novel is a sophisticated but accessible metafiction that deliberately draws attention to the self-conscious nature of the construction of individual identity and to the similar practices involved in the creation and shaping of narrative.

Metafiction is a term given to 'fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.<sup>2</sup> In showing how literary fiction creates its imaginary worlds, metafiction helps us to understand how the reality we live daily is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'. Parkinson's novel may be characterized as a work of metafiction in its exploration of children's potential as storytellers, listeners and as active agents in the process of forming and sharing narrative.

Intertextuality, a term first introduced by French semiotician Julia Kristeva, is a related characteristic of metafiction. Kristeva declared that 'all signifying systems are constituted by the manner in which they transform earlier signifying systems

<sup>1</sup> Siobhán Parkinson, *Four kids, three cats, two cows and one witch (maybe)* (Dublin: O'Brien Press 1997), p. 6. Hereafter referred to as *4321*. <sup>2</sup> Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction* (London: Methuen 1984), p. 2.



... [A]ny text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another'.<sup>3</sup> Intertextuality, in positing that a text is always part of, and in relationship to, other texts, challenges the notion that the text is an autonomous and self-regulating organism. Kristeva's concept of intertextuality divides the text into two axes: a horizontal axis, which is the linear connection between author and reader through the text, and a vertical axis, which connects the text to other texts, or the 'intertext'.<sup>4</sup> Every text is informed by other texts that the reader has read, and by the reader's own cultural context. Therefore theories of intertextuality problematize the status of authorship and blur the traditional boundaries and autonomy of a text as the presences and voices of author, reader, text and other texts are interwoven.

A powerful metafictional device for exploring the complex relationships between the author, reader, text and intertext is that of a teller within a framing narrative. This allows both the author of a novel and the reader to reflect on the self-conscious nature of shaping stories and by extension, the corresponding processes of articulating personal experience. The figure of the self-aware narrator emphasizes the self-conscious and intertextual process of narrating a story by constantly drawing attention to the tale's fictionality, thus 'laying bare ... the methods and conventions of fiction-making'.<sup>5</sup> This 'Russian doll' structure of a story-within-a-story has a long and distinguished literary history. Well-known collections of tales such as the anonymous Arabic *The Thousand and One Nights*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* can be termed metafictional in that they are concerned with exploring the practice of storytelling and its relationship with the formation of identity. In *4321* the children themselves are aware of their position as tellers of tales working and narrating within a legacy of literary traditions. Elizabeth repeatedly relates their experiences of storytelling during their journey to the mysterious island as being like a 'pilgrimage with stories ... just like *The Canterbury Tales* ... We're just like pilgrims, aren't we?' (100) This device of the teller-within-the-tale affords Parkinson a powerful opportunity to explore the fictive workings of children's imaginations and to give attention to the self-generating storytelling voice of her young protagonists. In a sense, the rites of passage that her child-characters must undergo are also 'rites' of passage, as they self-consciously comment on their own development and narration of their own personal stories.

While the concept of metafiction may appear difficult for young readers, their grasp of sophisticated narrative techniques, gleaned in many cases from films and television, can no longer be underestimated. In much contemporary children's literature, there has been a significant movement away from a traditional emphasis

<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', *Desire and language*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, tr. Thomas Gora et al. (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), 64–91, p. 66. <sup>4</sup> Kristeva, 'Word, dialogue, and novel', p. 69. <sup>5</sup> Rüdiger Imhof, *Contemporary metafiction: a poeological study of metafiction in English since 1939* (Heidelberg: Winter 1986), p. 80.

on closure, fixedness and didacticism towards a more interactive and dynamic reader relationship with fiction. And, as Peter Hollindale has remarked, the best type of children's story 'invites the child to explore himself through exploring the story'.<sup>6</sup> Such texts, as well as those that involve more conventionally linear and 'seamless' narratives, can inspire children to discuss the complexities employed by an author. Metafiction implies that the author is playful with language and the conventions of storytelling. Such games as metafictional texts play in turn stimulate the child-reader to notice the simultaneous processes of creation and construction that constitute an authorial endeavour, and could present the possibility of writing fiction as within the child's ability. Experimentation with narrative conventions is an important part of the learning process.

Many children's writers have explored the development of child-characters who display an interest in the writing process, and much critical study has addressed the various effects of first-person narration and the impact of different kinds of narrators on the child reader's response to the story.<sup>7</sup> However, there has been comparatively little scholarship specifically devoted to the metafictional qualities involved in the creation and shaping of narrative told through the voices of child-protagonists. Anita Moss has stated that few children's books 'can actually be said to concentrate on the process of their own making'.<sup>8</sup> Parkinson's exploration of her child characters' potential as storytellers in their own right in *4321* is a valuable redress of this often neglected capacity for self-articulation and assertion.

For a text to explore the literary possibilities of metafiction successfully, it needs to be anchored in familiar traditions that readers recognize. Many metafictional writers for children have found that the literary tradition that young readers are likely to find the most accessible and familiar is that of folk and fairy tales. Retellings of fairytales from new perspectives and a metafictional exposure of their narrative strategies have become familiar and popular in children's literature ranging from picture books to novels.<sup>9</sup>

Much scholarship has been devoted to the study of myths and fairy tales as symbolic expressions of initiation rites or other cultural rites of passage.<sup>10</sup> It is

<sup>6</sup> Peter Hollindale, *Signs of childhood in children's books* (Stroud: Thimble Press 1997), p. 105. <sup>7</sup> Andrea Schwenke Wyle engages with the matter of different kinds of narration in 'Expanding the view of first-person narration', *Children's Literature in Education*, 30 (1999), 185–202; and 'The value of singularity in first- and restricted third-person engaging narration', *Children's Literature*, 31 (2003), pp. 116–41. There are also several articles relating to this topic in the special 2003 narrative theory edition of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. <sup>8</sup> Anita Moss, 'Varieties of children's metafiction', *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 18: 2 (1985), 79–92, p. 88. <sup>9</sup> For example: Janet & Allan Ahlberg's *The jolly postman, or other people's letters* (London: Heinemann 1986); Jon Scieszka & Lane Smith's *The stinky cheese man and other fairly stupid tales* (London: Puffin 1993); William Golding's *The princess bride* (London: Bloomsbury 1999). <sup>10</sup> For example, Mircea Eliade has claimed that these rites of passage involve a metaphorical death of an old, unevolved self in order to be reborn into a higher level of membership of the adult community. Eliade emphasizes these rites' profound psychological and emotional resonance. See Eliade's *Myth and reality* (New York: Harper & Row 1963).



widely agreed that such traditional tales have much to offer child readers in helping them to work out their inner struggles and anxieties as they attempt to evolve from untested selfhood to participation in society at a more empowered level.<sup>11</sup> Many critics have attributed the ongoing appeal of fairytales to the powerful dramatization of psychological landscape that this genre provides, for example, Bruno Bettelheim has influentially argued the psychological importance of fairy tales as a kind of therapy that enables the child reader to deal with the various problems associated with growing up and the development of responsibility and self-worth. According to Bettelheim, fairy tales are about journeys of self-discovery and involve the recognition and confrontation of internal anxieties and desires. Bettelheim declares that 'in a fairy tale, internal processes are externalized and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its events.'<sup>12</sup>

Although Bettelheim's approach has been valuable in its exploration of what he calls 'the uses of enchantment', his Freudian interpretations of the tales have been criticized as reductionist, didactic and dogmatic by many critics. For example, Jack Zipes has attacked Bettelheim's assumption that fairy tales carry a kind of 'universal human truth', as if they had been formed long ago as an expression of a collective human voice, giving shape to unconscious desires shared by all humans. While Bettelheim acknowledges the existence of numerous versions of a particular tale, according to Zipes he fails to consider the extent to which a particular version has been adapted to reflect its teller's culture and personal idiosyncracies.<sup>13</sup> Although Bettelheim believes that fairy tales are very beneficial to all children, feminist critics such as Maria Tatar criticize Bettelheim's Freudian readings of fairy tales for their patriarchal denigration of the feminine.<sup>14</sup> The folklorist Alan Dundes has also demonstrated that Bettelheim may have plagiarized work from an earlier scholar writing in German.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, Bettelheim's theoretical analysis of the appeal and attraction of fairy tales for children omitted an important dimension to this experience of stories, that of children's potential to be the tellers of fairy tales and not just submissive listeners to the voice of authoritative adult storytellers. A metafictional author's

<sup>11</sup> For studies on the psychological value and appeal of stories for young readers, see Robert A. Segal, *Psychology and myth* (New York: Garland 1996); Betsy Hearne, *Beauty and the beast: visions and revisions of an old tale* (Chicago: U. Chicago P. 1989); Jane Yolen, *Touch magic: fantasy, faerie and folklore in the literature of childhood* (Little Rock, USA: August House 2000); Phil Cousineau and Stephen Larsen, *Once and future myths: the power of ancient stories in our lives* (Berkeley, CA: Conari 2001); Nicholas Tucker, *The child and the book: a psychological and literary exploration* (Cambridge: CUP 1990). <sup>12</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The uses of enchantment: the meaning and importance of fairy tales* (London: Penguin 1991), p. 25. <sup>13</sup> Jack Zipes, *Breaking the magic spell: radical theories of folk and fairy tales* (Austin, TX: U. Texas P., 1979). <sup>14</sup> For example see Maria Tatar's *Off with their heads! Fairytales and the culture of childhood* (Princeton: PUP, 1992) and Marcia K. Lieberman, "'Some day my prince will come": female acculturation through the fairy tale', *Dan's bat on the prince: contemporary feminist fairy tales in North America and England*, ed. Jack Zipes (New York: Methuen 1986), pp 185-200. <sup>15</sup> Alan Dundes, 'Bruno Bettelheim's uses of enchantment and misuses of scholarship', *Journal of American Folklore* 104 (1991), 74-83.

use of a new and unexpected vantage-point, in particular, from the neglected perspective of storytellers who are also children, can provide new insight on familiar archetypal materials and story patterns.

The characters in Parkinson's novel *4321* both self-consciously and unconsciously draw on and are influenced by the conventions of fairy tales when they tell their respective tales. For example, all of the children begin their stories with a formulaic fairy-tale mantra, 'once upon a time', or 'once there was a [stock fairy tale character]', and their four tales all involve fairytale motifs such as enchanted animals, princes wooing princesses, metamorphoses etc. Also the other children, as the audience listening to the tale, are alternately satisfied with or critical of the plots and endings of the various tales, depending on whether the tale is consistent with or subverts their expectations of how fairy tales should operate. The children's articulate and analytical response to the 'rules' which should govern fairy tales co-exists with their simultaneous enjoyment of the stories. This could be due to their age, as they are all on the cusp of or at the beginnings of adolescence. Some critics have suggested that children respond more powerfully to different kinds of stories at different ages, and that younger children have the most affinity to fairy tales.<sup>16</sup> However, this does not lessen the imaginative pull that fairy tales seem to have had on both children and adults. The familiar and repetitive story patterns and motifs of fairy tales do not cause modern readers to lose interest; moreover, they seem to serve as reliable and reassuring symbolic anchors which can resonate with deep emotional and psychological meaning.

In *4321*, Kevin is initially hesitant about relating a story because he does not feel talented enough to do so. However, Beverley encourages him not to be intimidated and instead to take this 'story-telling voice' (81) one step at a time, significantly advising him to start with the well-known and ritualistic beginning to a fairy tale, 'once upon a time'. (82) Kevin quickly overcomes his apprehension and soon impresses Beverley with his compelling story of a family of mermaids whose father leaves one day to live another life with a different family on the land. This story is a symbolic version of the prosaic reality of Kevin's family history wherein his father left his wife and children to go to live a separate life with another family in England. In incorporating the conventions of fairytales and assuming the role of narrator of the story, Kevin is enabled imaginatively to articulate and symbolically to confront his internal anxieties through the telling of his tale, and he gradually becomes more reconciled to seeing his father in a more sympathetic and less judgmental light. Kevin's qualities of understanding and empathy are demonstrated when he tactfully helps Beverley who suffers an embarrassing spell of ver-

<sup>16</sup> For example, see E. Andre Favat's *Child and tale: the origins of interest* (Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English 1977). Favat applies Piaget's theories of development to children's affinities with different kinds of genres of stories. He argues that children reach the peak of their liking for fairy tales between the ages of 6 and 8 years because the reasoning and belief system of these tales are the ones most compatible with the age group of children's thinking patterns.



tigo when climbing down to the beach, and also when Kevin overcomes his fear of thunder in order to help Gerard find his cat lost during the climactic storm later in the novel.

Elizabeth's tale about four siblings (two boys and two girls) magically transformed into animals similarly draws together fairy-tale motifs such as a wolf in a nightshirt from 'Little Red Riding Hood'. The cottage made of sweets from 'Hansel and Gretel' also emphasizes the value of empathy, support and friendship among children. Elizabeth's tale may also be regarded as a retelling of the Grimm brothers' tale 'Brother and sister' and shares much common ground with its fairy tale source, but also deviates from this tale in intriguing ways. The respective sets of siblings in the two tales wander in a wood, are tempted by alluring streams or the analogous enchanted 'wishberries' (44) of Elizabeth's tale and character who succumb to this temptation are changed into animals. Bettelheim interprets the sister in the Grimms' tale as an embodiment of the superego that warns the brother (representing the id) not to 'be carried away by his wish for immediate gratification', and declares that this tale presents the inevitable conflict between the 'animalistic tendencies of man' and our better, higher nature.

Inherent to Bettelheim's psychoanalytic reading of this story is his acceptance of the unavoidable antagonism between the violence of the id and the self-control of the superego.<sup>17</sup> However, Elizabeth's retelling of this tale involves a far more tolerant, harmonious and less divisive understanding of the siblings' urges and drives. In her version the children are not turned back into humans, despite Gerard's expectation that this is the traditional path the story would follow. The siblings in her tale have been changed into the animal most like their personality and far from being disturbed or barbarized by their conversion into beasts, they hardly seem aware or affected at all by their transformation. The four siblings are each explicitly connected to one of the four characters in the novel, with Kevin symbolized by an elegant heron, Gerard as a lovable hamster and Beverley as an industrious pig. Elizabeth herself has become a glamorous and delicate fawn, which, significantly, is the same animal that the reckless brother in the Grimms' tale was transformed into, due to what Bettelheim perceives as his self-destructive lack of control. In Elizabeth's version of the story, however, the complex relationship between the primitive and the civilized in human nature is not seen as an aggressive struggle for dominance in the confrontation between superego and its antithesis, and is instead a more balanced and peaceful meeting. Far from Bettelheim's emphasis on the punitive dimension to the development of self-control and maturity, Parkinson's novel reassures the child reader that rites of passage do not always have to be dominated by the harshness, pain and repression that characterize Bettelheim's understanding of the transition from child to adult.

Throughout her novel, Parkinson sensitively addresses the children's responses towards the alluring and simultaneously threatening nature of anything that is

<sup>17</sup> Bettelheim, *The uses of enchantment*, p. 80.

regarded as different or Other and therefore suspect. The island itself which is the arena of the children's pilgrimage contains appealing but also menacing aspects which the children must confront in order to transcend their fears and thus fully understand and strengthen their own relationships with their selves and each other. Parkinson's island location, whose power is derived from its difference from normal, everyday reality, is informed by this motif's long literary history as a complex symbol, representing both a place of refuge from the noisy demands of civilization, and also a place of isolation, wilderness and loneliness.

Interestingly, it is the youngest character, Gerard, who seems to be least resistant to or apprehensive about the island's unsettling yet compelling atmosphere. Gerard attributes the children's uncharacteristic telling of tales to the creative influence of this different place which 'makes people tell stories. It must be a story island.' (189) Indeed, the children at times are so affected by the apparent power of their storytelling that they are half-afraid that the events in their respective tales may actually come to life and recur in reality. For example, Elizabeth is struck by the uncanny coincidence of hurting her leg in real life just after she had told her story, in which her counterpart character, the fawn, also wounded its leg. Worrying about the possibility that her story is 'sort of coming true' (93), she develops a 'theory that you might get stuck inside a story, and if people died in the story, then you might never come out of it again'. (108-9). All the children are confused as to where these unexpected and compelling tales come from, and they suspect that the sole inhabitant of this 'enchanted' island may be responsible, and that Dymphna is an 'enchantress. She enchants people to make them tell stories.' (148)

The children, who have heard the eccentric Dymphna's local reputation as a witch, attribute mysterious and magical powers to her. The recurrent motif of the wicked witch in fairytales reflects a powerful cultural suspicion of independent women who seem to have access to knowledge that is not regulated by patriarchal society. Witches in fairy tales are traditionally regarded as irrational, dangerous, sexually aggressive and strongly linked to nature. These associations are consistent with the various strange events that seem to occur around or through the agency of Dymphna. The storm that rages around her cottage at the climax of the novel seems to have been conjured up by Dymphna, as if her previous 'wild dance' around the kitchen 'had been a wind-dance, calling up the wind from the corners of the earth'. (153) Dymphna herself alludes to the fairy-tale atmosphere that surrounds her when she first greets the children who have intruded into her cottage, asking in a deliberately 'squeaky baby-bear voice': 'Who's been sitting in my chair?' (128) The irony of this reference to the tale of 'Goldilocks and the three bears' is further underlined when Kevin proceeds to break one of her spindly chairs. Her cottage in the woods, befitting a witch, is also surrounded by flowers that shine in the dark 'like Hansel and Gretel's pebbles gleaming in the moonlight'. (184-5)

Interestingly, Dymphna shares the children's enjoyment of fairy tales and she also draws on the tradition of Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales when she delivers her story of the trials of a duckling that is 'unducklike'. (178) However, in

Dymphna's version, the duckling is not happily revealed to have been a swan in disguise, but instead chooses a life away from duck society, where she can live as she chooses without fear of censure. Dymphna's tale of the duckling's yearning for peace and autonomy symbolically reflects her own choice to live alone on the island away from the noise and prejudices of 'civilization'. Her casual comment to the children that 'every time you tell a story, you're telling people something about yourself. Didn't you know that?' (181) strikes to the heart of the power of stories and their complex relation to the articulation of identity.

Both the island and its 'witch' inhabitant are embedded in a history of folklore, mystery, gossip and superstition. The island's name, 'Lady Island', associates it with the Virgin Mary and the structured world of Christianity: pilgrims used to come to the island's 'holy well' for healing. (145) However, it also may suggest a more generalized association with the primeval territory of the feminine as traditionally aligned with the unconscious, the mysterious, and the Other. Significantly, this source of creative though mysterious energy located in the island empowers both the male and female characters to narrate their own experiences through the imaginative process of storytelling. Parkinson's emphasis on the importance of an inclusive, gender-balanced and co-operative community of storytellers and listeners as necessary for the development of all her child characters, instead of focussing on the traditional depiction of the growth of merely one protagonist, draws on recent feminist reassessments of the historically denigrated status of female storytellers. Roberta Seelinger's study of child-characters' development of voice and agency in a range of contemporary children's fiction, for example, leads her to conclude that 'a feminist children's novel [is one] in which the main character is empowered regardless of gender.'<sup>18</sup>

Much critical study has been devoted to reactionary cultural attitudes that inform both the often negative portrayal of female characters in such literary traditions as myths and fairytales and of female authors and storytellers. While Joseph Campbell in his influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* seemed concerned only with charting the archetypal journey of the male hero, for example, feminist critics self-consciously reflect on narration as a form of identity formation, and have striven to expose the inherent reactionary nature of traditional hero stories that neglect, ignore and even deplore the potential of women also to be capable of heroic and notable qualities.<sup>19</sup>

In *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature*, Margery Hourihan observes that the storytelling pattern of the heroic quest, so influential in patriarchal western societies, relies on a dualistic approach to experience that is

<sup>18</sup> Roberta Seelinger, *Waking Sleeping Beauty: feminist voices in children's novels* (Iowa City: U. Iowa P. 1997) p. 4. <sup>19</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The hero with a thousand faces* (London: Fontana 1993, 1st publ. 1949). For feminist criticism of the chauvinistic attitudes innate in traditional stories as myths and fairy tales, see Marina Warner's *From the beast to the blonde: on fairy tales and their tellers* (London: Vintage 1995) and Marie-Louise von Franz, *Problems of the feminine in fairy tales* (New York: Spring 1972).

embedded in binary oppositions, where 'civilized' qualities such as rationality and objectivity have been historically privileged and associated with the masculine, while their perceived antitheses, emotion and the arational domain, have been traditionally seen as inferior and thus associated with the feminine. Hourihan argues that the different but equally worthy experiences of the female hero have the capacity to subvert these traditional and limiting dualisms and instead promote a more inclusive and less prejudiced approach to gender roles.<sup>20</sup>

In 4321 Parkinson seeks to dismantle and subvert expectations and assumptions about the traditionally 'natural' masculine character of heroism. Like Parkinson's novel, Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* trilogy incorporates many archetypal patterns such as the threatening yet alluring nature of the Other, the heroic voyage of exploration and the motif of the island. Both authors also emphasise the power of language as a means of creative empowerment and self-knowledge, and both propose a harmonious equilibrium between the conflicting pulls of rational, civilized self and irrational, mysterious other, rather than the traditional dualistic tension between these two forces. Yet Le Guin had to reassess her choice of the conventional male hero story that underpinned the structure of her trilogy, and felt compelled later to write a fourth novel, *Tehanu*, which explored the possibilities of female heroism, in order to counter and redress the gender imbalance in the imaginary world she created.

In contrast to Le Guin's adherence to conservative storytelling patterns in the *Earthsea* trilogy, Parkinson does not confine the scope of her narrative to the limited and traditional perspective of a single male heroic protagonist. Instead the reader is presented with a wide range of points of view, as all the characters in the novel, both male and female, get to tell their own stories. Beverley especially sees herself as at the centre of a 'hero story' and as leader of the expedition into the island, thus assuming a dynamic authoritative role that is usually associated in adventure stories with young male protagonists. Similarly, her thinly-veiled counterpart in her tale does not display the expected passivity of the traditional princess in distress who waits to be rescued by a suitably heroic prince, but instead is a resourceful and confident protagonist who uses her powers of invention and clear thinking to solve her own problems. Interestingly, it is the two girls who decide upon and organize this endeavour, while the two boys are initially not enthusiastic or even interested in exploring the island. At first Kevin and Gerard are almost peripheral to this adventure, or are unwanted by the girls. Beverley sanctions Gerard's participation in the expedition because she agrees with Elizabeth that: 'we'd better have a boy, even if he's only a little squirt, for doing the dirty work, you know.' (15) However, this prejudice against the boys is gradually eroded by the children's experiences, with both the boys and girls coming to work together as equals enriched by their growing co-operation and friendship. In the last chapter

<sup>20</sup> Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the hero: literary theory and children's literature* (New York: Routledge 1997).



of the novel, the previously dismissive Elizabeth praises Gerard's intelligence and Beverley even hugs him goodbye, while Beverley especially has markedly overcome her initial snobbish dislike of and discomfort with Kevin. By the close of the novel they are presented as friends who have each seen each other's weaknesses and yet still respect the other's possession of 'heroic' qualities. 'Pilgrim children' (118), the boys and girls have all had to face their fears and flaws during their adventure on the mysterious island, and have been enriched and strengthened by their experiences.

The 'miracle' of the cure of Elizabeth's wounded ankle brought about by using the water from the reputedly holy well beside Dymphna's cottage is not the only example of their physical regeneration but also their psychological revitalization and empowerment. During the four children's discussion of their epiphanies on the island after their return to Tranarone, Gerard reminds the others that he has not had a single attack of his chronic asthma 'in three weeks, since the day on the island, in fact'. (187) Therefore a child reader is likely to conclude that creative processes such as storytelling can be a source of strength, self-knowledge and a powerful opportunity for self-expression. At the end of the novel the pragmatic Beverley also knows 'that three weeks ago she could never have had such a peculiar conversation but that was before...before everything, well, just before.' (192) This use of the highly charged number three is appropriate in light of the archetypal forces at work during their literal and symbolic journey. Through their enlightening encounters with Dymphna, the island and each other, Kevin, Beverley, Gerard and Elizabeth have all successfully passed through their rites of passage and are ready to enter the uncharted territory of young adulthood and beyond.

## Islands, Ireland and the changing state of writing for children

A.J. PIESSE

Islands don't just appear, hovering up greenly out of the seas like the back of some monster of the deep, giving a long, slow heave. Beverley knew that. She knew the island had always been there. It was just that she'd never taken all that much notice of it before.<sup>1</sup>

Two years after the publication of Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, the denial of a self-creating island at the beginning of Siobhán Parkinson's *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (Maybe)* – whether it is produced by 'nothing but its own desire'<sup>2</sup> or not – introduces deftly the two main *topoi* in Parkinson's novel. Consciousness of self-knowledge on the part of the four main protagonists, and self-conscious acts of reading on the part of the readers are the binary actions that call text into being throughout.

Island writing, clearly, doesn't just 'appear' either. From Thomas More's *Utopia* to Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*, from *The Comedy of Errors*, *Twelfth Night*, *Pericles* to *The Tempest*, through *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Coral Island* and its 'evil twin' *Lord of the Flies*, on into the admittedly shallower waters of Blyton's *The Island of Adventure* and *The Secret Island*, the separated land mass has served as *topos* for investigation and experimentation. Arriving by water naturally lends itself to protean shifts of shape or reascent rites of some form or another. The relationship of the lesser land mass to the greater regularly stands as an indicator of social differentiation, or of sequestering, or of a greater or lesser establishment or institution. In physical, rather than metaphysical, terms, the tides controlling that separating stretch of water can deny immediate or even eventual retreat to the very adventurers whose access it prompts, whether literally or figuratively.

When Eilís Dillon wrote *The Island of Ghosts* in 1990,<sup>3</sup> Irish writing for children was about to experience its own particular renaissance. This was not unconnected to Ireland's financial boom, which saw the twentieth-century pattern of emigration begin to reverse, and Ireland's interactions with Europe, economically, politically and intellectually, begin to flourish. Dillon's novel writes into the main-

1 Siobhán Parkinson, *Four kids, three cats, two cows, one witch (maybe)* (Dublin: O'Brien 1997), p. 7. 2 Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: the literature of a modern nation* (London: Cape 1995), p. 124. 3 Eilís Dillon, *The Island of Ghosts* (London: Faber 1990).