

Reader at Large

Musings on Diverse Worlds

BY DEIRDRE F. BAKER

At a lecture at the Osborne Collection of Early Children's Books in Toronto recently, Peter Schakel of Hope College, Michigan, described C. S. Lewis's understanding of the function of imagination and fantasy. "Imagination supposes a desire for 'otherness,'" Schakel said. "For Lewis, it enables us to leave our world to survey the depths of other worlds and to feel with those entirely other than ourselves."

I admit that my own response to this was to snort. I thought about just how not "other" the Beavers, with their boiled potatoes, fried fish, sewing machine, and commitment to the story's approved values, are to the visiting Pevensies and the assumed reader. In fact, just how truly "other"-oriented *is* children's fantasy? Does it really reflect current ideals of multiculturalism and diversity?

We can map a history of attitudes toward race and diversity by means of fantasy for children. "Now in these subterranean caverns lived a strange race of beings," George MacDonald writes in the opening chapter of *The Princess and the Goblin*, first published in 1872, only thirteen years after Darwin's *Origin of Species*. "There was a legend current in the country that at one time they lived above ground, and were very like other people." MacDonald's



goblins are tax-evaders and rebels; rather than serve a king whose policies they deem unjust, they move underground. They devolve physically: "They had greatly altered in the course of generations . . . they were now, not ordinarily ugly, but either absolutely hideous, or ludicrously grotesque both in face and form," we're told. The goblins are "not so far removed from humans," however, and despite their great cunning, cleverness, and interest in devising "trouble for their neighbours," those who remain behind after the rout at the story's climax eventually grow "milder in character." "Their skulls became softer as well as their hearts . . . and by degrees they became friendly with the inhabitants of the mountain." Race and evolution go hand in hand here, as they do in late-nineteenth-century explorations of "primitive" man.

MacDonald, a minister whose theology was so inclusive that he was eventually kicked out of his parish, evades racial determinism by allowing his "other race" the ability to change in culture and in form, to conform more closely to the desirable attributes of the not-goblin race (humans) above ground. Not so his literary descendants Tolkien and Lewis, whose stories depend on fairly strict racial categories, and who imply an

inseparable link between race and culture. In *The Hobbit*, hobbits, dwarves, elves, goblins, and so on have singular, essentialist racial and cultural attributes. "There it is: dwarves are not heroes, but calculating folk with a great idea of the value of money," the narrator tells us. Or, "goblins are cruel, wicked, and bad-hearted. They make no beautiful things, but they make many clever ones . . . It is not unlikely that they invented some of the machines that have since troubled the world, especially the ingenious devices for killing large numbers of people at once, for wheels and engines and explosions always delighted them. . . ." Tolkien's chatty, affective narrator freely reveals his disapproval or approval of each race's culture: the language of the Wargs is a "dreadful language"; it sounds "terrible" to Bilbo, "as if all their talk was about cruel and wicked things, as it was." Conversely, "Elvish singing is not a thing to miss, in June under the stars, not if you care for such things . . . Elves know a lot and are wondrous folk for news." Tolkien allows for some interracial mixing—Elrond has "both elves and heroes of the North for ancestors" and Bilbo is thought to have a fairy ancestor, which explains his "unhobbitlike" adventurous nature—but even that just shows how race will out.

In Lewis's Narnia, race is of crucial importance. We understand early on in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* that although Narnia has an effectively multiracial population of fauns, dryads, naiads, beavers, lions, leopards, birds, Father Christmas, dwarves, wargs, witches, and who knows what, it can be ruled well by only one race: the human one. In addition, part of the outrage of the White Witch's totalitarian rule is her mixed blood. "She comes of your father Adam's first wife, her they called Lilith. And she was one of the Jinn. That's what she comes from on one side. And on the other she comes of the giants. No, no, there isn't a drop of real human blood in the Witch," says Mr. Beaver. "There's no two views about things that look like humans and aren't," he goes on to say. "In general, take my advice, when you meet anything that's going to be human and isn't yet, or used to be human once and isn't now, or ought to be human and isn't, you keep your eyes on it and feel for your hatchet." Lewis's, or perhaps Narnia's, attitude toward mixed breeding is all too apparent here: it's bad.

Given our current hopes for multiculturalism and diversity, we wouldn't expect to find such an unabashed argument against miscegenation approved in a children's story these days. In fact, use of the word *race* at all in such a context would probably make us twitch—even though many contemporary fantasies, while doing away with the language of race, might be willing to demonize the

other in the manner of Tolkien and Lewis. Lewis's notions of the peaceful cohabitation of a multiracial population also give us pause: as many a critic has noted, his depiction of Narnian culture for all species is overwhelmingly British. Fauns, beavers, and dwarves alike have a penchant for meals of piping hot tea, bacon and mushrooms, toast and porridge and marmalade roll.

These days, the fun many writers have inventing different kinds of beings for their worlds is tightly tied to a certain kind of celebration of cultural diversity. In Tamora Pierce's Alanna stories, Alanna gains stature as a warrior partly through her openness and interaction with the fighting methods—magical and bodily—of the diverse cultures of the countries around her native land. An embodiment of a particular American ideal, Alanna absorbs the culture and language of those "others" from whom she learns to such a degree that in the end, they cease to be other. She is brought into the circle, just as we see incidences in historical fiction of the white man being made an honorary Native American. "Captured by fierce desert dwellers," as the blurb reads on the back cover of *The Woman Who Rides Like a Man* (1986), Alanna "is forced to prove herself in a duel to the death—either she will be killed

or she will be inducted into the tribe . . . As her mythic fate would have it, Alanna soon becomes the tribe's first female shaman—despite the desert dwellers' grave fear of the foreign *woman* warrior. Alanna must fight to change the ancient tribal customs of the desert tribes—for their sake and for the sake of all Tortall." Alanna's appropriation of the magic and fighting skills of various cultures shows a respect for diversity in one way; but this blurb makes clear that, in other ways, it's a means by which Alanna imposes her own values on those who accept her.

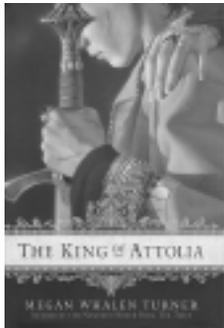
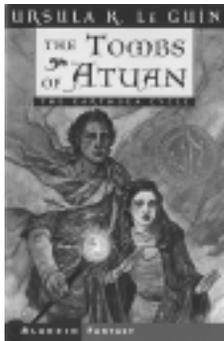
One could give numerous examples of fantasies in which variant cultures and the relationships between those who must bridge or accommodate those cultures are central to the story. Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell's episodic *Edge Chronicle Beyond the Deepwoods* becomes a sort of tour of multiculturalism, as Twig proceeds on his odyssey through the woods and witnesses the ways and (racial) attributes of the many different humanlike creatures who dwell there. Sometimes, as in J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter stories, we have explicit engagement of the issues of racial tolerance and determinism. Detestable Draco Malfoy's insistence on "pure-bloods" and his repeated taunts of "Mudblood" to Muggle-born Hermione instruct young readers in the desirability of acceptance across race and culture. So, too, Hagrid's difficulties dealing with the public's anxiety and rage about his Giant mother bring matters of interbreeding to the fore. And while Rowling focuses this moral lesson most clearly on the pure-blood/Mudblood argument, she seems to be showing through the token inclusion of students who are of nonwhite heritage (judging by name, at any rate), such as Cho Chang and the Patil sisters, that Hogwarts is an inclusive environment—or at least that its exclusivity is not related to aspects of race and culture that trouble the real world. (There is nothing deeply non-European about these characters, on the other hand.)

But all these examples reveal an absence of racial and cultural diversity in their protagonists. The black, Hispanic, and Asian fifth graders cited in Lelac Almagor's article "The Mary Sue Project" (November/December 2006 *Horn Book*) have good reason to feel they must become fair-haired and violet-eyed in order to play the hero's role in a fantasy. It's a rare world in which we find a hero of nonwhite appearance—although it does happen occasionally, as we see in Virginia Hamilton's *Justice Cycle* and Nancy Farmer's *The Ear, the Eye and the Arm*. In two of Tamora Pierce's later series, *Circle of Magic* (1997–99) and *The Circle Opens* (2000–03), four magically gifted adolescents from diverse racial, ethnic, and social

backgrounds come together to be educated. Briar has “golden brown” skin and “glossy black” hair (*Briar’s Book*), and Daja Kisubo is a “tall, broad-shouldered black girl” (*Daja’s Book*). But in Pierce’s story racial diversity is subordinate to diversity of economic and social class: Briar is a former street thief; Daja is an out-cast Trader (a nomadic, mercantile people); Sandry is a member of the aristocracy; and Tris is urban middle-class. Pierce’s stories show how these four must give up their class prejudices, submit themselves to training together, and use their diverse gifts (another way Pierce represents difference) to thwart an enemy they hold in common, for values they hold in common. Both Rowling and Pierce seem to refer to our world’s consciousness of racial

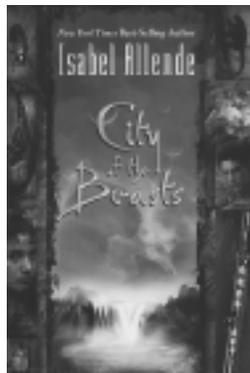
difference with the express purpose of showing that it can or should be irrelevant.

In some cases, where the politics of inclusivity is not in the foreground of the story, the racial attributes of nonwhite heroes are rendered virtually invisible. Both Ged of Ursula K. Le Guin’s Earthsea series and Eugenides of Megan Whalen Turner’s *The Thief* and sequels are described explicitly as “dark-skinned.” Indeed, in conversation Turner has said that the images in her head of the Eddisians were “deeply influenced by the people of the Himalayas.” But the brown skins of Ged and of Eugenides are downplayed by the books’ current cover art, which shows Ged to be as bronzed as a white surfer (*The Tombs of Atuan*, 2001 edition) and Eugenides to have a noticeably pink and white complexion (*The King of Attolia*, 2006). While the texts give nonwhite readers the opportunity to see themselves reflected in these heroes, the cover art is telling them something else.



But of course diversity is much more than a matter of skin color: it’s a matter of culture. And despite some fantasists’ messages about the happy, productive intermingling of diverse cultures, writers of children’s fantasy show a considerable lack of diversity in the cultural imagery they employ. What is it about the European medieval world—with its knights, horses, swords, castles, and Merlinesque magic, with its nonindustrial setting and culture—that makes it so compelling to those who write fantasy? Or is epic

fantasy by nature irremediably derivative? When I survey the annual haul of review books I receive about other worlds, I notice that those with imagery from a culture other than European, and other than a medieval model, are few. That is not to say such fantasies are non-existent—Sophie Masson's *Snow, Fire, Sword* (2006) is set in Indonesia and employs the imagery of Indonesian mythology, leading Philip Pullman, blurbed on the book jacket, to comment that "it isn't the usual fantasy setting." Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu invents a quasi-African jungle setting with tropical plant and animal magic in *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005); and in animal totems Eagle and Jaguar, in *City of the Beasts* (2002) and sequels, Isabel Allende employs imagery from the religions of indigenous peoples of South America. Laurence Yep's Tiger's Apprentice trilogy is born out of ancient Chinese mythology; in the 1980s, Patricia Wrightson used images from aboriginal Australian mythology in her Books of Wirrun. The engagement of cultural imagery outside the tradition of the medieval European epic is perhaps what has the most potential to offer readers a real vision of "otherness."



Diversity is there in children's fantasy, but you have to look hard to find it. When I first started thinking about multiculturalism and diversity in children's fantasy, I mentioned it to an eighteen-year-old friend. "That's easy," she expostulated energetically. "There isn't any!" Well, there is, but only in a way. Diverse beings in diverse worlds can be ways to make us think about race relations, multiculturalism, and diversity in theory, at least—but do they also help us dodge the issues that confront us in a less comfortable way in the real world? The very absence of diversity in imagery as well as in lead characters indicates that as readers—perhaps even as writers—our "desire for otherness" is limited and that, despite Lewis's contention, many of us aren't able or willing to go very far to feel, truly, "with those entirely other than ourselves."

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