

Going Round by the Byways

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Acceptance Speech for the Phoenix Award, Buffalo New York, June 8, 2001*

One great thing about this award is that it's unlikely to be won by some twenty-one-year old first time author with a pretty face and a five hundred thousand dollar advance.

Gosh, I was pleased when I got Alethea's letter. I actually wept for joy. Twenty years isn't a huge span of time, but my, it's better than the average eighteen-month shelf-life that seems to be the norm these days. All those words, that once went living and vivid onto the page, dwindling away into the dark. So the first thing to say is thank you: Thank you from the bottom of my heart for lighting your candle in that dark.

I'm told you'd like to hear about the book itself, how I came to write it, and so on. OK, but I've a superstitious feeling against talking about my books for their own sake, taking their worthwhileness for granted, as it were. They may be worthwhile, but it's not for me to say so. So I thought I'd say a bit about something more general, something that I believe really matters in our field, and use my experience with *The Seventh Raven* as an illustration.

But before that I'm going to tell you the first half of a story. You'll think it has nothing to do with why we're here, but wait. A dozen or so years ago I went to a production of *Hamlet*, by a Romanian company. In Romanian. Without sub-titles. Tough going, you think? Not at all. It was terrific. It was one of the most exciting Shakespeare productions I've ever seen, and I saw Gielgud's *Lear* with Alec Guinness as the Fool, and Olivier's *Coriolanus*. The Romanian *Hamlet* had originally been produced at the height, or rather in the depths, of President Ceausescu's regime, the most gruesomely oppressive of all the Eastern bloc, and it took the appalling risk of turning itself into a surreal parable on that regime. Claudius was Ceausescu himself. The Queen was his equally dreadful wife. The King recruited Rosencrantz and Guildenstern into the *securitate*, his secret service. The last words of the play, you remember, are spoken by Fortinbras: "Go, bid the soldiers shoot." Fire, that is, a cannon to announce the deaths of King and Queen and Prince. Here, as Fortinbras came on, you could hear from outside the cheers of the multitude at the overthrow of a tyrant. But he came on in jackboots. A henchman shot Horatio in the back of the head. Then those closing words were barked out, and from the streets you heard the clatter of machine-guns as the cheers of the people changed to screams.

No doubt the production I saw was a good deal more pointed than the one that had been put on actually under the regime, but even there it made its point with audiences. Everybody flocked to see it, talked about it, speculated when it would be closed down. The only reason it wasn't was that Ceausescu was at the time attempting to ingratiate

himself with the Western democracies as a benign and cultivated ruler prepared to stand up to Moscow, a line we at least partly fell for. There was a State visit to London, and a banquet of honor at the Palace. (Honestly, the Queen must sometimes think she would sooner be cleaning sewers.) Anyway, Ceausescu was persuaded that the news that he had suppressed a production of *Hamlet* would be counterproductive, so the play kept going. People saw it again and again and again. The director of the company, who also played the part of Hamlet, became a sort of secret folk hero. Though his likeness seldom appeared in the official media, almost everyone in Bucharest, and many in other parts of the country, knew what he looked like.

So that's the first half of the story. We'll come back to the sequel later.

What I'd like to talk about, then, is the place and handling of ideas in children's books. That's Ideas with a capital I. The purpose of life. The good society. The nature of nationhood. Our duty towards animals. Our inklings of a spiritual world. All that. There are two such ideas permeating *The Seventh Raven*. The legitimacy of violence for political ends, and the duty of the artist to society.

The stuff about violence was inevitably there from the beginning, so that's where I'll begin, with the W11 Children's Opera Group. W11 is a London postal district, just westward down the hill from the Notting Hill you saw in the film. It is divided fairly sharply between stately streets built by developers to attract the expanding middle classes of the nineteenth century, and much more working class housing to the north, though the developers to the south greatly overestimated their markets, and many of their houses remained unsold for more than a decade and then were divided into apartments. But on the whole the distinction persists. To the south, pretty terraces inhabited by families who have nannies until the kids go on to private education, and state education and council housing to the north. The square in which the opera church stands is, I think, among the handsomest in London. It has entrances from east, south, and west, but none to the north, because the square stands bang on the social divide, and immediately behind its back garden walls, at the time when it was built, lay the great Pottery Lane piggery, categorised in a Parliamentary report of the time as the worst slum in Europe.

(Notice that just by setting my book in this place I had already unwittingly embarked on a symbolic representation of the sheltered elite who have time for art, remote from the woes of the outer world.)

These lovely houses are occupied by television directors, creative advertising people, actors, arts administrators, and so on. Or more likely, in my day, by couples where the woman might well have been one of those things if she hadn't become enslaved by the demands of being a wife and mother. Some might teach piano, or mend porcelain in their spare time, but very few had full-time outside jobs. It was their frustrated creative energies, combined with high standards and genuine talent, that brought the Opera Group into being about five years before I became involved with it. (It's now into its twenty-fifth year and in celebration will be putting on this year's opera not in the usual church but in one of the smaller theatres in the Royal Opera House

complex.) Though all the personnel have changed and changed and changed again, it is still the same self-perpetuating gang of musical Mums who imbued it with an apparently self-sustaining, self-breeding enthusiasm that spread not only through the hundred-odd children in the cast, but all the rest of us helpers and hangers on. When it caught fire, it blazed. It really did.

I became involved when the woman who'd directed the first few operas moved elsewhere and the mums asked me to take over. As a director, I was a disaster—I won't go into details—but after a couple of years they rightly demoted me to stage manager, which I was reasonably good at. One year I lost twelve pounds in the month running up to the performances, and I don't have that much to spare. But it was worth it. More than worth it, to share in that level of creative excitement. I also wrote a couple of libretti, which I'm not ashamed of.

All this was in the fairly early days of hijacking and hostage taking. I don't remember at exactly what point it struck me that a churchful of children would be a suitable target, and there was a possible story there. One of the big attractions was that I wouldn't need to do any research. As usual, I started straight in, building up the opera, finding the voice of my narrator. Obviously there would need to be terrorists, and equally obviously—to me at any rate—they would have to be people who believed they had good reasons for what they were doing. Crazy destructive anarchists and other sorts of total baddies don't interest me. (A couple more Ideas with a capital I: All worthwhile moral questions are complex and ambivalent. There is never enough justice to go round.)

Most people think they know where they stand on the Middle East. I wanted more uncertainty, and an imaginary country is much easier to manipulate than a real one, so some central American dictatorship was the obvious answer. No terrorists in their right minds would deliberately hijack a mob of kids in a major city, so obviously they must be trying to do something else and get stuck with the results when it goes wrong. Kidnapping an ambassador's son was another obvious answer. The child has to be highlighted before anything happens—hence the discussion of whether he should be admitted or not.

And there, suddenly, without realising it, I find myself introducing my two Ideas. The Mums have chosen their cast, selecting the final entry with a pin. Should they now deselect her, in order to make room for the ambassador's son because pressure is being put on them to do so by our Foreign Office? One of the fathers has arrived to put the Foreign Office case. The opposite case has to be put. I chose, at random, the designer, and equally at random gave her a name, Mrs. Dunnitt. The argument is settled by the opera's composer, who is just as much a crazy for art as later on the terrorist Angel is a crazy for her cause. A careful reader of the book will spot both these points and will assume that I named Mrs. Dunnitt deliberately, because it is going to turn out that she is the one member of this privileged and cosseted mini-society who has actual experience of the workings of a brutal dictatorship, and that in choosing the composer to settle the argument on the wholly irrational grounds of pure art, I was giving a preliminary signal of my main underlying intention.

Absolutely not. Far from it. Neither Angel nor the intention existed at that point. You could say both these trivial details were complete flukes, or you could say that something in me well below the conscious level was already aware of where my story was going to take me, and was making my decisions for me.

Oh, if it could only have been so the whole way through! If only I could have found a way of developing the story so that the ideas simply permeated the whole structure, like the veins of gold in a mountain, which had seeped in among the rock when everything was liquid in the heat of creation, and set there, for my readers, with luck, to notice the glint of an idea in the surface and then themselves mine into the mass and discover the wealth beneath.

That is, of course, the unobtainable ideal. At some point or other your ideas will emerge into the open and force you to deal with them consciously. You have to think about what you are saying. But thought is a great bully, a control freak. It wants to take over, to train and drill the imagination. Imagination isn't like that. Imagination is a wild wood with wonderful creatures in it. It is a great sea, "that dolphin-torn, than gong-tormented sea," and it washes all sorts of strange things up onto the shores of the conscious mind. When you set out to write a book you find yourself stranded on an uninhabited island in the middle of that ocean, where you have to build yourself a shelter. Do you start by drawing a careful plan of a house on the sand, and then search for the materials it demands? That's what thought wants you to do, but you know better. So you look around and see what materials are available—palm-leaves, perhaps, for the roof, or reeds for thatch—and you beachcomb along the shore of your imagination, where, if you're in the kind of luck that writers need, you'll find wonderful things, things that thought would never have thought of but which turn out to be just what you needed for your door-lintel, or whatever.

This is why fiction written to embody and propagate an idea will almost always be dead wood, however cunningly carved into the semblance of a tree. It is as if you tried to make a mayonnaise by breaking egg-yolk into a bowl of oil. No amount of whipping will make the elements bind. No, the ideas must drip slowly into the story as the imagination stirs and stirs.

It is no part of fiction's job to tell the reader what to think. But it can be fiction's job to show the reader how to feel, because that can only be done through the imagination. This is why censorship, though it is on the whole bad for society, because of the way it sanctions and institutionalises hypocrisy, may at the same time be good for art, because it forces the artist to bypass the roadblocks that authority has set up on the highways of rational argument, and sneak round by the twisting tracks of the imagination. There was a wonderful example of this in Britain a few years back when the first bans on tobacco advertising came in. Up till that point our cities and highways had been plastered with banal posters of tough men, tanned women, slinky jet-set people, puffing away like mad on little white tubes. Suddenly these were replaced by a wealth of surreal images, striking, animating, life-enhancing, as the advertisers switched channels into the dream world of the imagination that we all inhabit, and spoke to us there. I remember, among

several others, a slanting shower of giant cigarettes sluicing down onto rain-slick black umbrellas, and a confirmed smoker saying that she'd never seen anything that so powerfully evoked the pleasure she got from the first puff of the day.

Sorry. Back to my book. The surest sign of the sauce beginning to crack is the introduction of a character who speaks for the author, who, as I say, stands up and tells the reader what to think. By the time I was half way through, my two Ideas had sufficiently forced themselves onto my consciousness for me to know that the book couldn't be resolved without their being somehow dealt with. No feat of derring-do on the part of Doll and her friends, however thrillingly staged, would have compensated. But I still feel that there should have been a way in which this could have been achieved through events, integral to the story, and not, as I eventually had to settle for, by Danny, the terrorist leader, staging a show trial so that the arguments on both sides could be openly put. Indeed, I fear that Mrs. Dunnitt by the end comes perilously close to speaking for the author. Almost the sauce cracks.

This matters. It matters to the book, and it matters more generally to all of us who deal one way or another with children's literature. As you will have gathered I feel strongly enough about it to bring this ancient personal skeleton in to prance at your feast. An acceptance speech isn't a work of fiction—at least this one isn't—so I can allow myself the impertinence of telling you something I would like you to think. It is to beware of books that spring from the Idea with a capital I, however much you yourself may agree with that idea. Remember that young readers are not primarily interested in ideas. Consciously they are interested in the story, less consciously in the excitement of the shared imaginative process, through which the ideas can then dart and flash like fishes through a reef in the light of their inner vision. Only if it springs from the imagination and so becomes part of the story will an idea embed itself and take root in their minds.

This is the process that is at the very root of our art. It is vital that our young should learn to use and practise it. The intellectual life cannot be fully and healthily lived unless it accepts into itself this area in which the intellect does not rule. And that acceptance by the individuals who compose it is central to the creation of the good society, to the understanding of our neighbours, of cultures alien from our own. There may come times when it will be all that stands between them and insanity. Indeed, we ourselves have lived through such a time, though fortunately for us not in our own countries.

This is where we come back to our story about the Romanian *Hamlet*. One by one the countries that composed the eastern bloc began to loose themselves from their chains, but knowledgeable commentators declared that such was Ceausescu's hold on the country that he would be able to hold out. They were wrong. Astonishingly, last of all the Eastern bloc, the grim regime began to crumble. There was chaos and tumult in the streets, government snipers on roof-tops trying to pick off the ringleaders, government broadcasts about a little local disturbance, soon suppressed, journalists taking over other news stations and announcing the revolution. Nobody knew what to believe. In the

middle of all this the actor-director of the *Hamlet* production was recognised among the milling crowds, and hurried off to one of the now independent TV stations to tell the people of Romania what was really happening. This man who, using the medium of his art, had spoken for and to his oppressed countrymen through their imaginations, was the only person in the whole nation whom everyone could trust to be telling the truth.

This is the thing that you and I, and every citizen, are both guardians and beneficiaries of. We cannot teach it to our young, in the way that we can teach them geography or mathematics, because the imagination doesn't work like that. What we can do is see that the means are there, richly there, readily available, lying not only on their desks but at their bedsides, for them to learn it for themselves, which they will do because they are human, and the hunger for this gift is in their genes. It is integral to their, and our, humanity.

*This speech first appeared in the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 26 #3 (2001): 117-20 and is reprinted with permission of Peter Dickinson.