

Magic mirrors: Society reflected in the glass of
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Magic Mirrors: Society Reflected in the Glass of Fantasy

Jane Yolen

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Magic Mirrors: Society Reflected in the Glass of Fantasy

Jane Yolen (bio)

It surprises no one that authors are mired in society and that their work

reflects current thinking. Though one must always take into account that books will be a year or more in production, such titles as Norma Klein's *Mom, the Wolfman, and Me* and Judy Blume's *Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret?* followed closely on the heels of the sexual revolution; Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely* and *The Planet of Junior Brown* appeared after the onset of President Johnson's "Great Society," and fictional accounts of child abuse, Indian rights, women's issues, and nuclear concerns all have been published in the decade of public awareness and social legislation on such issues.

It is a bit more difficult to track such authorial politics in fantasy books; but the issues and prejudices are still there if one digs deeply enough. Fantasy authors reflect the society they live in just as authors of realistic fiction do, though their work is like the wicked queen's magic mirror that did not always give her the answer she expected.

In Charles Kingsley's *Water Babies*, the picture of society's underbelly and the plight of the poor chimney sweeps is only the outward reflection, the first casting of the mirror. Kingsley's anti-black, anti-Jewish, and anti-Catholic attitudes, quite typical of a Victorian gentleman, are easy to excise in bowdlerized editions of the book. But he also disguises his good fairy in the one impenetrable mask he can devise, that of an Irish washerwoman, and thus shows his anti-Irish and anti-female sentiments in the magic mirror.

Rudyard Kipling's otherwise brilliantly conceived fantasy *The Jungle Books* is marred for the in-depth reader by its jingoism and wog-hating attitudes. The feral child Mowgli is a "Godling" but he is also *only* an Indian, and Kipling's white English sentiments can be seen in the portraits of the other Indians in the book who are without exception venal, stupid, cruel, or helpless.

Hugh Lofting's *Dr. Doolittle* and Mary Travers's *Mary Poppins* share a cultural bias against peoples of color, though it was years before those beloved books were taken to task for their prejudices. The original Oompalompas in Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* have

skin that is "almost black" and are "Pygmies . . . [i]mported direct from Africa." Imported as if they were no more than yardgoods. In later printings of the book, their skin color and place of origin are changed, but not the fact of their importation¹.

That is the bad news. The good news is that fantasy books deal with issues as thoroughly as realistic fiction-but one step removed. Randall Jarrell's *The Bat Poet* is about the artist in society. Robin McKinley's Demar books (*The Blue Sword*, *The Hero and the Crown*) are about active women in restrictive societies. Patricia Wrightson's *A Little Fear* is as effective and affecting a piece about old age as one might find.

It is the phrase "one-step removed" that we must consider. Fantasy fiction, by its very nature, takes us out of the real world. Sometimes it places us in another world altogether: Demar, Middle Earth, Earthsea, Prydain. Sometimes it changes the world we know in subtle ways, such as telling us about the tiny people who live behind the walls of our houses and "borrow" things. Or that in a very real barn, but out of our hearing and sight, a pig and a spider hold long, special conversations. Sometimes what makes a book a fantasy is the traveling between planets (Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*), between worlds (the Narnia and Oz books), between times (Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* or Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*); or the traveler him/her/itself is from somewhere else, such as Nesbit's psammead.

By taking that one step away from the real or actual world, the author allows us to pretend that we are not talking about the everyday and the society in which we live. It is...

approach as these should have such compatible themes may well indicate that we too people have common thoughts about the requirements and ethics of surviving a nuclear war, if not about how best to prevent the need for such survival.

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Ivan L. Glazer, a professor of education at Rhode Island College, is the co-author of translations to Children's Literature (McGraw-Hill) and current chairperson of the Noble Tradebook in the Language Arts Committee of the Children's Literature Assembly.

Magic Mirrors: Society Reflected in the Glass of Fantasy

by Irene Yoies

It surprises no one that authors are moral in society and that their work reflects current thinking. Though one must always take into account that books will be a year or more in production, such titles as Norma Klein's *Mortals*, *Waltman*, and *Me and Judy Blake's Are You There God, It's Me, Margaret?* followed closely on the heels of the sexual revolution; Virginia Hamilton's *Zeely* and *The Planet of Junior Brown* appeared after the onset of President Johnson's "Great Society," and fictional accounts of child abuse, Indian rights, women's issues, and nuclear concerns all have been published in the decade of public awareness and social legislation on such issues.

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That is the bad news. The good news is that fantasy books deal with issues as thoroughly as realistic fiction—*but one step removed*. Ronald Jerrill's *The Red Fox* is about the artist in society. Robin McKinley's *Demar* books (*The Blue Sword*, *The Hero and the Crown*) are about active women in restrictive societies. Patricia Wrightson's *A Late Four* is as effective and affecting a piece about old age as one might find.

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By taking that one step away from the real or actual world, the author allows us to proceed that we are not talking about the everyday and the society in which we live. It is simply a convention we all agree to. A mask. In eighteenth century Venice, when masked balls were common, it became a convention that a person who



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