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## Full of Adventures, Full of Wisdom: Children's Literature as a Homeward Voyage

By Tim Wadham

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An image from Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* haunts me every time I read it. Will Stanton, finding himself on a snow-covered hill, looks up to see two giant wooden doors standing on the slope. They have no handles, and on their surface are carved symbols "in endless variation." Will pushes against the doors; they swing open. He hears a phrase of music. He finds himself in a great hall, tapestries hung on either side. Images from these tapestries leap out at him: "a silver unicorn, a field of red roses, a glowing, golden sun" (28). It is the beginning of Will's initiation into the ways of the "old ones."

Cooper's great wooden doors are but one example of the thresholds through which the heroes of children's literature must pass in the course of their journeying. Whether a passage from ignorance to knowledge or from one world into another, it does not matter; the growth comes from risking that passage.

Children's books are full of various types of journeys. The journey could even be said to be the prevalent theme of children's literature. The most common type of journey found in children's books is the voyage homeward, a motif not limited simply to the plots of children's books. The act of writing a book for children becomes a journey homeward for the author, as the author travels inward to reach nearly forgotten memories of childhood. Reading books can also be seen as a homeward journey for children. Certain books awaken primal impulses and convey precise emotions in ways children can never articulate on their own.

This homeward voyage motif can be divided into two types of journeys, often intertwined in the same story. One is the outward journey, a variation of which is the theme of the "quest." The other journey is something that takes place inside the protagonist, a journey of a spiritual nature, often from innocence to experience or to greater understanding.

### The Outward Journey

Joseph Campbell developed a model for understanding the nature of the outward, or physical, journey as it appears in children's literature. In his 1949 *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell examined myths and folktales from around the world and found that uncanny parallels existed among them. From this study, Campbell generalized a pattern he termed "the hero-journey."

This pattern, as Campbell sees it, begins with the hero receiving a call to adventure. The call can come in a variety of ways. Sometimes a herald, representing the awakening of mystical forces, can be the agent of the call. For Jim Hawkins in *Treasure Island*, the appearance of a strange man asking after the welfare of his mate Bill heralds the departure from ordinary events. The call itself can also be accomplished by accident. Witness Taran following the escaping pig, Hen Wen, in *The Book of Three*. Taran is plunged into five books' worth of adventure by this little chase, ironically just after he says that he is never destined to "know anything interesting, go anywhere interesting, or do anything interesting" (19).

The Hero next crosses a threshold into what Campbell terms a "zone of magnified power" (77), where the hero leaves his comfort zone to venture into the unknown. It can be a place in the real world the hero was previously unfamiliar with, such as the world beyond the Castle for Gaylen in Natalie Babbitt's *The Search for Delicious*. The place can also be a fantasy world or even a dream state. Maurice Sendak makes a persuasive statement for the recognition of the dream state as part of a child's fantasy world in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Here, there is truly a thin boundary between the known and the unfamiliar.

Leaving home can be difficult, but the hero has to leave if growth is to occur. Jim Hawkins,

## 2 Brigham Young University

in *Treasure Island*, expresses this difficulty: "I had thought up to the moment of the adventures before me, not at all of the home I was leaving. . . and now I had my first attack of tears" (52).

Once in an unfamiliar setting, the hero embarks on what Campbell terms "the road of trials." The variations in this phase of the journey are endless. The hero can receive supernatural aid. A wise helper can guide the hero through his perils just as the wizard Gandalf guides Bilbo in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. From this phase of the journey emerge three main purposes for the expedition: it becomes a journey of instruction, a journey of initiation, or a journey to accomplish a specific task. Frequently these purposes overlap.

The journey of instruction is a journey in which the hero learns something about him or herself, about others, or about life—something that will have a lasting impact. Driving forces behind the scene often cause the hero to have his adventures precisely because he has a lesson to learn. Norton Juster's *The Phantom Tollbooth* is a classic example of this. In this book, Milo is transported by means of the tollbooth into "the lands beyond," where he learns that there is too much that is exciting in life for one to sit around the house and be bored. At the end it becomes apparent that the tollbooth appeared to teach Milo a lesson, and it implies that many other children need to learn it as well.

A more common theme is the journey of initiation. In this journey, a child passes over a threshold from innocence to experience, leaving their childhood behind to become an adult. Crossing over this threshold is tenuous, for certain things must be left behind forever. There is much sadness in the passage, but also a sense of its inevitability. Lloyd Alexander's characterization of Taran provides us with a good example. At the beginning of *The Book of Three*, Taran is portrayed as an impetuous youth with little experience beyond that of tending pigs. At the end of his adventures, when offered a reward by the mighty Prince Gwydion, Taran replies, "I ask no reward, I want no friend to repay me for what I did willingly, out of friendship and for my own honor" (214).

The journey to complete a task is very common in fantasy literature. The story of the heroic quest has almost become a separate

genre. Yet the quest hero follows the same basic pattern.

Adventures must eventually come to an end. There comes a time when the hero realizes it is time to go home. It may be difficult for the hero to leave the realm he or she has visited, but the journey is not complete unless the return is made. Tolkien describes how Bilbo ached "in his bones for the homeward journey" (273). When Bilbo eventually comes in sight of Hobbiton, his village, he sings a wistful tune about what it is to arrive home after an adventure. Heroes naturally return from their adventures with a "boon." The boon can be physical, or it may just be the wisdom that comes from the adventure. In *The Hobbit*, Gandalf sees within Bilbo the wisdom boon he received from his adventure: "My dear Bilbo! Something is the matter with you! You are not the hobbit you were" (284). In this statement we find the key to the journey—some sort of change occurred in the hero as a result of his travels. Otherwise, it would have not had a purpose.

## The Inner Journey

The issue of growth, a change by the end of the adventure, is a key to the hero experience. At the end of E.L. Konigsburg's *From the Mixed-up of Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*, the title character addresses the children and says, "Everything gets over, and nothing is ever enough. Except the part you carry with you" (139-140).

The Jewish mystics' (Kabbalists) manner for analyzing scriptural texts can also serve as a model for describing the process of this inward journey. Kabbalists believe there are four levels in which a text can be explored—the literal, the legal, the allegorical, and the mystical (Scholem, 54-57). These levels can be easily understood by mentioning their literary counterparts. On the literal level one attaches no extra meaning to a text. The legal level is analogous to the literary simile, where two things are compared and contrasted. The allegorical level is an expansion of the simile, which leads to a total comprehension that can be described as mystical.

Underscoring these levels is the necessity of the hero-journey. If some change is to occur in a

child protagonist, or if the child protagonist is going to come to some new level of understanding about the world, then there must be contrasts. One progresses from the literal level to the mystical level by means of expanding contrasts. This is why the hero is forced to leave home; home does not provide enough contrast. Contrasts are found in the outside world. These contrasts allow the hero to come home a changed person.

In children's literature, often one cannot identify each of the four steps from literal to mystical, showing how the child protagonist develops in understanding. This kind of growth is usually implied. One example, however, shows this precise progression, even to the point of the protagonist making the decision to act. In Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Jesse is forced to deal with the death of a dear friend, Leslie. Together they created a fantasyland called "Terabithia." After Leslie's death, Jesse goes to Terabithia alone. He begins to think, and at first he is very introspective. He remembers how, at the beginning of school, he had been "a stupid weird little kid who drew funny pictures. It was Leslie who had taken him from the cow pasture to Terabithia and made him a king" (126). It was Leslie who had pushed back "the walls of his mind [to] make him see beyond to the shining world. . . . Now it was time for him to move out. . . . It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength" (126). It is easy to see how Leslie offered Jesse a contrast. She lifted him up to a whole new level of perception.

### Conclusions

Children's books are often based on some type of journey. Joseph Campbell aptly described the physical journey, and while his work is relevant, one thing is lacking. Certainly it is intriguing to note the prevalence of the hero-journey pattern in children's fiction, but what is the purpose behind the journey? Three possible purposes have been suggested. Regardless of the type of journey, the protagonist experiences some inner growth. The Jewish mystic model is one example of the inner process that can occur during the journey. The hero eventually returns

home a changed person because he or she is lifted to new levels of perception during the course of the adventures.

But what of the reader, and, most important, what of the child who experiences these literary journeys both inwardly and outwardly? Books can provide the contrasts in children's worlds that lift them to new levels of perception. In the modern world, separation from parents and real adventure are rarely the reality for most children. The hero-journey does occur, however, in a small way in their everyday lives. Children leave home, go to school, learn new things and return home with their own assortment of boons. What happens if these boons are not appreciated or acknowledged by those around them? Older children begin to feel a need to break away from parental influences and go out on their own journeys. The impact of the hero-journey touches children in ways we can only begin to understand. The importance of children's literature, especially that containing elements of the hero-journey, is found in its ability to provide a sense of completeness and its ability to provide vicariously the contrasts children may lack in real life.

To pass from one state of the hero journey to another, or to move up the levels of perception, requires that one pass over a boundary. Often it takes all one's courage to risk the passage, especially when it can represent the loss of innocence and the gaining of experience. There is no looking back. After crossing the threshold, we find ourselves in a world of fresh images; we are ready to be instructed. The riches await those who are willing to cross from darkness into light.

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4 Brigham Young University

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see action, to experience adventure, and to walk on the moon. "My great-great-grandmother jumped over the moon. If she can jump it, I can walk it," she reasons. When Rob, Martha's owner, tries to tell her that only astronauts can go to the moon, Martha won't listen. "But I never promised you the moon!" Rob pleads to no avail. Martha is utterly unshakable—"NO MOON, NO MILK!" she cries. Rob takes Martha to vacation spots around the country in a desperate effort to quell her bovine desires of lunar travel. Martha remains moonless and Rob remains milkless until they find themselves—and a compromise—in the American Mooseum of Natural History.

Luella is the faithful cow who provides milk for Mama May and her countless numbers of children in *Kiss the Cow!* To coax milk from Luella, Mama May sings two songs, and then, after her pail is full, she kisses Luella right on the nose. Annalisa, who "[isn't] the youngest, and she [isn't] the oldest, but she [is] the most curious and the most stubborn," thinks this practice of cow-kissing is "terribull." Still, Annalisa wants to know what it is like to milk a cow, so, against Mama May's orders, she goes up one day to milk Luella. Annalisa does everything right—she sings the songs and fills the pail, but she refuses to kiss Luella. The next day, Luella won't milk for Mama May. Annalisa has to decide what is more important to her—feeding her family or not kissing a cow.

The cheerful illustrations complement the easy-to-read, easy-to-like text. Teague and Hillenbrand's people are friendly, and their cows priceless. Individually, *No Moon, No Milk!* and *Kiss the Cow!* are the cream of picture books. Together, holy cow! It's an unbeefable combination.



Submitted by Sarah Olson

**Cows on Strike!**

Complementary Fiction

- Babcock, Chris. *No Moon, No Milk!*. Illustrated by Mark Teague. Crown, 1993. ISBN 0-517-58779-3. Not paginated. **Grades K-3.**
- Root, Phyllis. *Kiss the Cow!*. Illustrated by Will Hillenbrand. Candlewick Press, 2000. ISBN 0-7636-0298-1. 32pp. **Grades K-3.**

Martha wants the moon. Luella wants to be loved. And Rob and Mama May, their respective human caregivers, want Martha and Luella to do one thing—milk. *No Moon, No Milk!* and *Kiss the Cow!* are two delightful picture books that portray the loving relationships of humans and their idiosyncratic cows.

Martha, the main character of *No Moon, No Milk!*, is tired of the pastoral life. She wants to