



Authorgraph No.144: Garth Nix

Article Author:

[Geoff Fox](#) [1]

[144](#) [2]

Article Category:

Authorgraph

Byline:

Garth Nix interviewed by **Geoff Fox**.

Garth Nix interviewed by Geoff Fox<!--break-->

For a man who's been at Number 3 on the **New York Times** bestseller list and is published in a dozen languages, there's an engaging modesty about Garth Nix. 'I write well enough to convey my story? I'm not a brilliant stylist, but I really respect writers who are. If I could write three pages as good as the last three pages of Alan Garner's **The Owl Service**, I'd be a happy man.'

Garner was one of the many authors Nix discovered on his daily visits to an excellent local children's library on his way home from school in Canberra in the early seventies. He's always been an eclectic reader, and he's always read fantasy. Many of his favourites were Brits: Tolkien (whom he now consciously avoids imitating), Garner, Diana Wynne Jones, Susan Cooper and, from the States, Ursula Le Guin. To this day, he finds it hard to pass by a clean second-hand copy of one of the treasures he found in that Aladdin's Cave of a library. There is, in the richest sense, something childlike in the way he now talks about his own writing: 'Story? it's what it's all about. We're hard-wired for narrative, beginning, middle and end.'

The apparent simplicity needs a closer look. Sustaining a reader's headlong journey through 'The Old Kingdom' trilogy? from 368 pages of **Sabriel** to 528 pages of **Lirael** with the traveller left hungry for **Abhorsen**? is no naïve skill. Being a fine uncomplicated storyteller is only one of the faces of Garth Nix, for in several aspects of his life, he slips deftly from one register to another. When we met for a couple of hours at HarperCollins, his talk was mostly serious and self-aware; but it was punctuated by conversational forays reflecting the mischievous game-player occasionally evident in 'The Old Kingdom' trilogy and far more obviously in 'The Keys to the Kingdom' series whose first title, **Mister Monday**, appears in the UK this month. He reads widely in children's literature, but also in philosophy, theology and history? especially military history. He is deeply reflective and yet clearly enjoyed the extrovert worlds of part-time soldiering ('we built things and blew them up?'), public relations consultant and literary agent. He enjoys solitude, but he's rooted in family too, living a few minutes from Sydney's Coogee Beach with his publisher wife Anna and the infant Thomas.

In the Old Kingdom, readers find themselves in the dangerous kind of secondary world they have previously explored with Tolkien and Le Guin. When Garth Nix was growing up in the Canberra school system, the cultural bias of the curriculum was still heavily European; he met and enjoyed Shakespeare, Dickens and Austen there. Those schools valued both tradition and excellence? no surprise in a Commonwealth capital city crowded with influential government employees. He thinks of his work as 'another small branch on a big tree which is firmly rooted in European myth and folklore. I feel I'm connected to the world, part of a worldwide genre which a younger, contemporary Australian would be less likely to travel.' Nevertheless, he would argue that there *is* an Australian quality to his work. It's not so much in the geography as in the 'self-deprecating, sly jokes rather than the outright levity of the sense of humour' (so forget the Aussie Press and the Rugby World Cup).

Seventies Canberra and its schools suited him and his family well. He grew up in a home where books were everywhere, and where mother and father crafted words and images as a matter of course. He speaks of his parents with affection and admiration. His mother was always reading or 'busy with some artwork'; she has become an internationally collected papermaker and water-colourist, devising artworks with the paper she makes herself. His father, a reader of fantasy and Science Fiction 'well, of everything, really' worked for the government in scientific research. Father would write his papers at the kitchen table or, to the occasional exasperation of his three sons, in front of the television, looking up every now and again to demand, 'What's just happened?' In such a bookish home, Garth became a reader and, he says, a daydreamer. He resisted, or maybe just ignored, the cultural pressures towards team sports, preferring the more individual pleasures of cycling and fishing. His parents encouraged his exploration of private pathways, for even as a child, he knew he travelled through books.

Some of those youthful trails led towards the writer he has become. For three or four years in his teens, he and a group of friends were into 'Dungeons and Dragons', with Garth often as Dragonmaster, devising the scenarios. He sees this as a valuable part of his apprenticeship, learning the craft of tight plotting. Even then, he managed to sell articles about D&D. In 1983, at the age of 20, he sold a story for £90. A golden career beckoned, but the next twenty or thirty stories didn't sell; yet he always seems to have had that impulse common to so many successful novelists, the sheer need to keep writing, keep telling, even when no-one's reading or listening.

In the early '80s, he set off on what was then the traditional Australian pilgrimage around the UK, preferring a battered Austin to the conventional VW Campervan. This was not a search for family roots, however. For him, the trip involved rereading many of his childhood favourites, *in situ*. All through his journey, he wrote, mostly on an old Silver-Reed typewriter which, to his continuing regret, he sold to buy the bus ticket for the last lap to Heathrow. His mother observed that he came back to Australia 'a much more reasonable human being'.

Ragwitch, one of his early novels (not yet available in the UK), partly grew from that early journey around Britain. It was 'my attempt to write a harder-edged C S Lewis'. Though he does not think Lewis stands much re-reading 'and he's a committed re-reader' he does love those through-the-wardrobe or down-the-rabbit-hole routes from our world into another. So it's no surprise that in **Mister Monday** we move from a troubled version of our society into the mysterious world of 'The House' and back again. Quirky Suzy Turquoise Blue ends up in the House because she was one of those children who 'followed the Piper', which turned out to be not such a bad idea, given all those rats. The House itself is wholly devoted to paper pushing, in several senses, and there is perhaps something here of Dickens' Circumlocution Office. Nix is particularly fond of bureaucracies gone mad and indeed of little literary *hommages*, from which his editors have sometimes had to restrain him.

By now, he is very familiar with the rhythms of his own writing process (1). He might start with an image. **Sabriel** began with a photograph (discovered when he was looking for something else) of Hadrian's Wall; on one side a lush green meadow, on the other, snow-covered hills. He has learned to trust the 'what if?' questions and to know that, in time, answers will come and connections be made. When his grandfather died a slow death after a series of strokes, he turned with sharpened focus to the nature of an afterlife. Down that road lay notions of necromancy. But then, he wondered, what if there was an anti-necromancer somewhere who dealt with the dead to make sure they stayed dead? When that line of thought came together with Hadrian's Wall, **Sabriel** began to stir.

There might be a year or more's gestation. Then some chapter outlines ('so that I can depart from them?'), then 80% of the writing time to draft the first half of the book. The second half comes in just three or four months, with the last third taking no more than perhaps two or three weeks. So he might be 'writing' when he's doing the washing-up, staring out of the window ('but I'm not there at all?'). That is balanced by the disciplined daily writing routine he shares with Pullman and so many others.

British readers of fantasy still have only a few Garth Nix titles. But **Sabriel** was first published in Australia in 1995, so that when you come across a boarding school with classes in Charter Magic, you need to remember that, to Garth Nix's satisfaction, he comfortably predates JKR and all her works. British publishers were anxious that the rights in Australia, New Zealand, the States and Canada had already gone 'a major reason for the delay. Elsewhere, his readers are very

numerous. The books have been prize-winners in Australia and the States and **Sabriel** was nominated for two awards in 2002 in the UK. **Mister Monday** and its sequels **Grim Tuesday**, **Drowned Wednesday** and the rest ? the titles came first, stored away in the crowded notebooks from which he works ? may well find an even greater readership than the trilogy, given the infectious energy and wit of the narrative. He receives too much mail to answer, though all of it is read. He?s amused and amazed by his correspondence. ?Can you send me a copy of **The Book of the Dead** because I want to learn necromancy??; ?I?m 35 but I loved **Lirael**. Am I crazy??; ?I think a film of **Sabriel** would be great, and I?ll be ready to play her in two or three years. Please wait.? That last correspondent, typical of many from America, has a point. The books would work wonderfully as film.

There?s little risk of success spoiling Garth Nix. He?s a listener as well as a talker, self-contained and resourceful. The modesty may spring from the genes and the upbringing, but it also draws upon experience. His work as a literary agent taught him that spectacular success leaves you with further to fall. At the heart of it all for him remains the satisfaction of telling the tale: ?If I believe it while I?m telling it, they?ll believe it as well?; ?I?m writing for myself, but I serve the story?; and ?If I can, I like to deliver an emotional charge at the end ? if I can make myself feel the emotion at the end of my book, I?m always happier. If I can weep, or laugh, or both, when I?m writing?,? he pauses, ?I guess that could be dangerous though, but, well, you know...?

(1) See members.ozemail.com.au/~garthnix/writing [3]

Geoff Fox edits the journal, **Children?s Literature in Education**, and is an honorary Research Fellow at Exeter University School of Education.

The Books

(published by HarperCollins Children?s Books)

?The Old Kingdom? trilogy:

Sabriel, 0 00 713730 3, £12.99 hbk, 0 00 713731 1, £5.99 pbk

Lirael, 0 00 713732 X, £12.99 hbk

Abhorsen, 0 00 713734 6, £12.99 hbk, April 2004

?The Keys to the Kingdom? series:

Mister Monday, 0 00 717501 9, £5.99, inc. CD Rom

Grim Tuesday, June 2004

Drowned Wednesday, January 2005

Photograph by Robert McFarlane.



[Garth Nix.JPG](#) [4]

Page Number:

6

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/144/childrens-books/articles/authorgraph/authorgraph-no144-garth-nix>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/144>

[3] <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~garthnix/writing.html>

[4] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/sites/default/files/Garth Nix.JPG>