



Reflections on the Magic of Writing

Books Reviewed:

[Reflections on the Magic of Writing](#) [1]

Issue:

[195](#) [2]

Reviewer:

[Geoff Fox](#) [3]

~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Sometimes directly, sometimes obliquely, the reader comes to know Diana Wynne Jones through this book in ways which few conventional autobiographies allow. In the separate pieces which comprise **Reflections**, she reveals so much about her childhood, her adult family life, the genesis of her books and her writing practices that readers will surely feel they can identify the sources which sustained this prolific writer of fantasy through 30 years of her working life.

Her preface begins: 'In 2009 I was told I had cancer. In 2010 I was told I had only a few months to live.' She died in 2011. Some of that precious time was spent in sorting through her manuscripts prior to donating them to the archive at Seven Stories. Among her papers, she found 'a pile of the various lectures, articles and reviews I had written between 1978 and 2008'. She was helped, it seems, in her selection from these by the scholar and novelist, Charlie Butler, who contributes an introductory essay which is at once enticing and unstuffy, without a single anxious reference enlisting the support of other academics. The closing pages include Butler's interview with the author, shortly before her death, which reflects a friendship as well as providing sharp insights.

The range of work is extensive, as a few chapter titles might suggest: 'The Shape of Narrative in **The Lord of the Rings**'; 'A Day Visiting Schools'; 'A Whirlwind Tour of Australia' (the texts of three lectures); 'Characterisation: Advice for Young Writers'; 'Something About the Author'; and two clear-eyed tributes from her sons after her death.

The Introduction emphasises her range, stamina, creativity and invention, her magic and her humour. She wrote forty books in forty-one years. She herself declares that the strongest thread in this collection is 'the need for fantasy in all its many facets and its value for children and adults alike'. The reviewer is obliged to read the book in a shortish space of time. But a richer, more appropriately reflective way of reading would be the occasional visit for a chapter or two. A further advantage would be to reduce the irritating consequences of a problem of which both Butler and Wynne Jones are aware. Like most speakers who give many talks, she returns 'in some instances several times' to the same anecdotes and this inevitably becomes tedious. Repeated anecdotes tend to turn into fictions themselves. Some are worth retelling (at least once). Tolkien, for instance, lecturing to the undergraduate Wynne Jones at Oxford (or mumbling to the blackboard, rather) was so incoherent and inaudible that she was sure he was trying to lose his audience so the course would be closed and he could get to his study to get on with more interesting stuff.

Very often, the stories are about her mother and father, who 'to her perspective, though not her sisters' were often

cruel, stingy of both affection and cash, and wholly self-absorbed. The frequency of her anger towards her mother is confirmed by her son Colin, who felt his grandmother (whom he liked) was the reason why Wynne Jones' 'Arcadias are so dark, and why her fictions associate imaginative children with lonely defiance and with sadness'. She used her fiction, he says, 'to take revenge on people she felt had injured or offended her', which included his teenage self. With considerable generosity, he concedes that 'fiction is not meant to be fair'. Her account of visiting schools and being met by teachers who aren't expecting her and who haven't read her books and who abandon her to dozens of children who also haven't read her books is funny, and many of us have been there. But it's also a caricature.

Reading at reviewer's pace, I was at first entranced (Neil Gaiman's Foreword is right 'she is 'ferociously intelligent'), fascinated by her insights about writing and fantasy; then came a period of distancing in the face of her vehement confidence; and ultimately a sense that the more uneven final picture of the author was both trustworthy and provocative. **Reflections** is certainly a compelling read for anyone interested in writing, in how an author sees children as readers, in fantasy, and in the shifting fashions of the children's lit scene from the seventies to the present day. And, of course, it is essential reading for all those, many of them adult, devoted to Wynne Jones' work.

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '19): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/195/childrens-books/reviews/reflections-on-the-magic-of-writing>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/reflections-on-the-magic-of-writing>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/195>

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