



Two Children Tell: Adventures as Sparrowhawk

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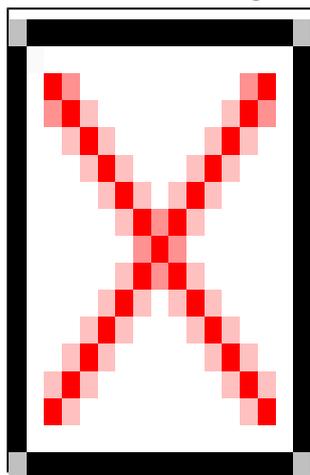
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Adventures as Sparrowhawk

Virginia Lowe continues her series examining children's relationship with language, drawing on recorded observations of her own children's developing use and understanding of words. Following Ursula Le Guin's death in January, she remembers the impact Le Guin's books had on Nick and Rebecca.

'You're always Sparrowhawk!' Nick's friend Tom remarked. Tom, of course, had chosen to be current hero Luke Skywalker in their game of Dungeons and Dragons (both about seven, Nick 7y8m). In games alone on the trampoline or role playing with friends, Nick was almost always named Sparrowhawk.

A Wizard of Earthsea begins, after a description of the island of Gont and its wizards, to describe 'the greatest, and



surely the greatest voyager - the man called Sparrowhawk, who in his day became both dragonlord and Archmage. His life is told in the *Deed of Ged* and in many songs? [p.11]. On the second page we learn 'He grew wild, a thriving weed, a tall, quick boy, loud and proud and full of temper?' - which also describes the young Nicholas very well. The other children called Ged Sparrowhawk, because the earliest spells he learnt were to call animals to him, using their secret 'real' names, and among those that came were the wild birds, the sparrowhawk amongst them. 'So he came by the name that he kept in later life as his use-name, when his true-name was not known.' [p.16]. Nick has also similarly loved all animals, which is reflected in his staunch veganism for twenty-odd years. When we reached the pet Otak's death:

N: It's like the end of **Star Trek** [film seen previous week] when Spock died. Then my eyes were watering. My eyes are watering now. When somebody I love - somebody I like best out of a film dies, my eyes always water. They're watering now. If he still had it, it might be able to drive the shadow away - fight the shadow. Yaaa! (fighting noises).

This was the beginning of a long argument between Rebecca (10y8m) and Nick (friendly, they were both enjoying it) on whether a shadow could have a shadow, whether it was a creature or just a ghost. The text at one stage describes 'the body of the gebbeth has been drained of true substance and is something like a shell or a vapour in the form of a man?' [p.121]

N: A shadow does have a shell, does it?

R: So what?

N: You were saying it was virtually the shadow.

R: Virtually. The shell was probably dissolved in acids or something, and it would become part of the shadow.

The discussion developed into a game. Rebecca slipped the round padded chair cover off the basket chair, and put it on her back (a frequent game when she was younger).

N: You're a gebbeth turned into something else ? with a shell! Hi turtle!

R: I'm not, I repeat not, a turtle! [great giggles]

N: Hi snail!

R: I'm not, I repeat not, a snail!

N: You're a human being.

R: I'm not, I repeat not, a human being! [more giggles]

N: Then you're Ged.

R: I'm not, I repeat not, Ged.

N [jumping on her]: Then who are you?

R: Ged-off [I'm not sure she meant a pun or not. Anyway it was very funny]

N: Ged-off ? who's he?

J: Ged's cousin?

We have already, in the first few pages, been given three names for the boy, beginning with Duny, the one given him by his mother before she died. Calling things by their true names is important throughout the story ? it gives you power over them. Nick sometimes got confused about who was being referred to, as almost all characters have at least two names, both used from time to time. This is one thing which made it the most challenging story he had heard up to then. He seemed however to be following the plot well, and even quoted bits back to me, and to Rebecca, when he was making a point. Rebecca also enjoyed it, saying

R: That book's good. I liked the first part when he was at school.

Nicholas especially enjoyed studying the several maps and finding the islands mentioned. At one stage, when Ged is doubting his ability to cope with the shadow:

N: I'm not afraid, because look! [takes the book from me and reads from the back cover, as he obviously has before] ?Strives to destroy the evil shadow-beast he has let loose on the world.? So see!

He obviously read this as Ged destroying the shadow, not only trying to. I didn't comment.

We continued the trilogy in the following months, and John organised that Nick gave me one of Le Guin's Hainish stories each Christmas (Nick very much admired their covers). Of course I knew **The Left Hand of Darkness** and **The Dispossessed**, along with her other adult tales. Her father was an academic anthropologist, so we know all the minute details of life on these often most unusual planets, despite the people being essentially human-like.

Ursula Le Guin died in January aged 88. 'Imagination' she said, 'working at full strength, can shake us out of our fatal, adoring self-absorption, and make us look up and see'with terror or with relief'that the world does not in fact belong to us at all.'

Dr Virginia Lowe lives in Melbourne, Australia. She is the proprietor of [Create a Kids? Book](#) [3], a manuscript assessment agency, which also runs regular workshops, interactive writing e-courses, mentorships and produces a regular free e-bulletin on writing for children and children's literature generally. Her book, **Stories, Pictures and Reality: Two Children Tell** (2007) is published by Routledge (978-0-4153-9724-7, £29.99 pbk).

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