

The F Word: Writing Fantasy for Children

The Patrick Hardy Lecture 2011

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Hello. It's an honour to be here with you this evening. So: 'The F Word': Writing Fantasy for Children. I should say it's thanks to my wife, Gina, that I'm talking about this. A few weeks ago the committee asked me what I'd be speaking on and I looked at them in that appealingly blank way I have. You see, I often have trouble with titles. My view is they're naturally the last thing to come, after I've finished everything else. Otherwise, how can you truly know what the story or lecture's about?

I reckon it's a valid position, but I *do* take it to extremes. For my first novel I remember sitting in Lincoln's Inn Fields during my lunch hour frantically writing out a long list of possible titles while my editor, the lovely Delia Huddy, waited patiently by a telephone in Pimlico, with the book due off to production that afternoon. It was a story about a nasty dragon, trapped underground, and I went through every conceivable scaly, fiery permutation until, at about three minutes to two, I hit on *Buried Fire*. I think Delia liked the title, but the tremble in her voice was probably just relief.

Come to think of it, most of my books since have had naming issues, too. 'The Bartimaeus Trilogy: *The Amulet of Samarkand*' probably holds the record for percentage of incomprehensible words within a given title. *The Golem's Eye* is still 'Gollum' to many. I was happy with *Ptolemy's Gate* until someone asked me if he walked funny. I wanted to call *Heroes of the Valley* 'Halli's Saga', but was dissuaded in case anyone associated it with genteel cruise-ship holidays.

So anyway the CBC wanted a title for this talk, and I didn't have a clue. I sat about staring into space with my mouth open for an hour or so, then went to ask Gina. Within thirty seconds she'd given me a list of about six plausible titles, including The F Word, about Fantasy; No More Mr Nice Guy, about creating anti-heroes; Character Character Character, about the most important rule in fiction; and – oddly – Keeping It Up, which she claimed was about sustaining literary quality while writing an ongoing series.

I went for the fantasy option in the end, since that seemed to give me the most wriggle-room. All very well. But what was it actually going to be *about*? Looking back over past speeches for inspiration I was rather daunted by the range of styles and breadth of subjects. Taken all in all, it seemed my only hope was to attempt something combining high moral seriousness, piercing social commentary, erudite literary references, cheap

jokes, gratuitous references to popular culture and possibly even footnotes. Something for everyone, in short.

And it would be nice to make it *relevant* too. That's been on my mind a bit recently. How relevant is it possible for a guy to be, who makes his living writing stories about sarcastic djinn? While I was pondering this talk, we had the August riots across London, when it seemed that half my target audience, demographically speaking, were out and about torching branches of Foot Locker and Ladbrokes. We've also just had the 10th anniversary of 9/11, of course, as epoch-making a date as I hope any of us ever have to experience. Big things going on. Real things. Real issues. And here I am pondering about fantasy books. How do you make that relevant to anything? Should relevancy even be the objective? What's the point of fantasy? What's the point of writing it now?

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I suppose we should begin with defining our terms, and that's not as simple as it seems. For a lot of people, and this probably includes the fairly hefty number who approach me at events, wielding the Bartimaeus books, saying 'I don't normally *like* fantasy, but...' the word is not necessarily a compliment. It has connotations. It has a track record. It has previous. To them it basically boils down to something involving hairy dwarfs, dragons, orcs, wizards with big hats and, if you're really unlucky, roaming gangs of singing elves. Well, this *is* certainly one kind of fantasy, that can't be denied. And one of the questions I want to ask is why it arouses such hostility.

When I was 17 I took my gangling limbs, big hair and cheap suit to an interview at an Oxford College. We discussed Auden, Swift and Shakespeare. So far so good. Then they asked me what else I read. I mentioned Tolkien. It was a fatal mistake. A rookie error. The interviewer made a face like he'd sat on a revolving pinecone. "Oh Christ," he said. "Not Tolkien." He didn't quite pull a lever and springboard me straight out through the stained glass window, but he might as well. I vaguely remember mounting a desperate rearguard action featuring Mervyn Peake, but I knew the damage had been done. One specific type of fantasy – with its strengths and weaknesses – dominated all in those days, and not everyone approved.

But if you were to ask kids today what fantasy means to *them*, they're not going to be so restrictive in their terms. This lucky generation have got Rowling, Pullman, Meyer, Horowitz, Blackman, Shan, Ness, Higson, Ibbotson and Pratchett to choose from, to mention but a few: they know full well that many different styles and types of fiction fall

under the ‘fantasy’ banner. You may not like all of them, but there’ll be *something* there for you.

I’m going to follow Iona and Peter Opie for my definition – admittedly they were talking about Fairy Tales at the time, but since I’m going to claim that Children’s Fantasy Fiction is the modern equivalent of the oral folk and fairy tales of the past, I think it’s ok to nick it – and say that most Fantasy ‘contains an enchantment or other supernatural element that is clearly imaginary’. The Opies also point out (and you can see from this how closely fairy tales and modern fantasy are intertwined) that such stories generally feature a hero who is ‘almost invariably a young person, usually the youngest member of the family, and if not deformed or already an orphan, is probably in the process of being disowned or abandoned.’ I’d say that just about fits the bill.

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As an adult I write fantasy books, and as a child I read them, and the two facts are clearly connected. But looking back on it, the *kinds* of fantasy that appealed to me have varied wildly at different stages in my career, and I think it would be interesting to give this a quick overview.

People who’ve heard me talk before will know that at the smallest provocation I like to bring out ‘treasures’ (and never has a pair of inverted commas had to work so hard) from the distant past: some of my earliest creations. **[Here I heave out an ominous-looking bag.]**

All writing is, at heart, a response to other stories – to ones that you’ve been told. It’s a desire to fill in the gaps they’ve left, to add your voice to the long, unbroken chain of tales stretching back into the dark. Above all, it’s about recreating the magic: you’re looking to ensnare other people the way that *you’ve* just been ensnared. It’s a compulsion that began early with me, and thanks to my honourable, slightly psychotic family tradition of never throwing anything out there’s usually evidence to show what I was reading and enjoying at any given time. So I’ve had a bit of a rummage, and located what I think is my first ever fantasy story.

Here it is. Note the fine wallpaper cover. Everything stapled together courtesy of my mum. It’s called *The King’s Dragon*, and I’m guessing I did it when I was about 5. We’re talking mid-70s here, a time characterised in children’s fiction by lots of worthy, issue-driven narratives exploring gender, race and class... Well, none of that rubbish for me.

[Reads out excerpt from *The King’s Dragon*, a fine work, which begins:

‘Once upon a time in a forist there lived a dragon. he lived in a cave. he eat meat. he flew away over the trees till he got in to a village in Scotland. he flew down on to a volcano to have a drink of gas to make his firy breth. Some people saw him and ran away to tell some hunters to cach him but the dragon herd them comeing and flew away to a Scotland village. some zoo people cort him and put him in the zoo...’

You’ll be pleased to know the dragon promptly escapes and flies to Spain, where, among other deeds, he rescues the Spanish queen from a nasty ogre.]

Dragons, Ogres and Scotland: for me this was the stuff of fairy tale. A year or two later I was writing this one: *The Three Wishes*, in which the narrator meets a genie called Fred. [**Holds up *Three Wishes***]. Quite apart from the sobering fact that my subject matter hasn’t changed in about 30 years, this one’s structurally pretty good. The genie’s rescued from a bottle having been trapped there by an evil spirit in the days of King Minos. At the story’s climax they go back in time to the day *before* his imprisonment, foil the baddie, and save Fred’s bacon. I’d struggle to devise a better plot finale now.

You can see from this that my preferred reading matter in my very early years were fairy tales, myths and legends. From memory I also liked Enid Blyton (whose *Faraway Tree* and *Wishing Chair* stories are genius fantasies even today), Kenneth Grahame, C S Lewis and Tolkien’s *The Hobbit*. Maps seemed to feature in many of the books I liked. I remember poring over EH Sheppard’s map of The River Bank in the endpapers of my *Wind in the Willows*; Tolkien’s maps of Bilbo’s journey and the Lonely Mountain; and trying to visualise (because I don’t think Pauline Baynes had done a sea-chart at that point) the sequence of islands on the *Dawn Treader*’s voyage. At the age of 10 I was making my own Dawn Treaderish map of islands (note more wallpaper: there’s probably a thesis to be written about the importance of home decoration to the development of young minds) [**Shows map**]. I also created ancient treasure maps using time-honoured methods of baking them in the oven till the edges burned.

Most of these fantasy books I mentioned are strongly rooted in *place*, and most of these places are *idylls* of one sort or another. Okay, there may be weasels in the Wild Wood, or red goblins burrowing under the roots of the Faraway Tree, but these are enchanted locations which small children can explore in safety. This exploration of magical places is the heart of children’s fantasy, which in turn is the mainstay of British Children’s Literature going back to Kingsley and Carroll. Traditionally it got you up to the age of about 10 or 12, and then it petered out, just as children’s literature more or less

did. You then proceeded to what, on the spur of the moment, I'm going to term 'Gatekeeper Fiction': adult, often genre, titles that were accessible to the adventurous young. *Sherlock Holmes* is a classic example. Once you got past them, you were on your own in the wilds of adult literature. Fantasy, for most, was left behind.

So I think, from the traditional perspective of adult lit, children's books was seen as a pretty little enclave, populated with whimsical fantasies, that had little connection to the serious business of what came after. *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, changed that, but only sort of. It was both eminently accessible to children (I read it when I was 10), and a book of such length and complexity that it was firmly in the adult category too. The cult that built up around it on student campuses in the 1960s and 70s sealed its status and led to an endless and ongoing stream of imitators, busy pouring out epic worlds filled with derivative wonder and peril. Plenty of adults loved this for sure. But from an outsider's point of view, all *LOTR* did was create an extension to the children's books enclave, a long spur reaching into adult regions. Rather in the way that the movie 'District 9' features ghettos of alien 'prawns', ostensibly tolerated, but actually belittled and demeaned, so a fantasy ghetto was created, seemingly populated by chirpy, beardy types who hadn't really bothered growing up, and who spent much of their time playing role-playing games.

Well, yes, I loved *Lord of the Rings* and, yep, I still loved it when I went to my Oxford interview. But I'd already realised, back in my mid-teens, that it represented a kind of wonderful cul-de-sac. Tolkien had gone as far down one particular route as it was possible to go. I knew this because for a couple of years I'd devoured every other epic fantasy I could find. There was nothing better than discovering a new 15-part series by Terry Brooks, David Eddings or Raymond E Feist... writers like these gave me precisely what I wanted. Ornate maps, reluctant heroes, nasty monsters lurking in weird locations. All good stuff. And yet...

I heard a programme on the radio recently about Inter-railing. Apparently it's the 40th Anniversary of the scheme. One ticket, one month, any trains you want across Europe. A brilliant idea. I went inter-railing when I was 20 and had a great time, apart from having my passport and wallet stolen in Yugoslavia, and having to spend 2 days sitting on park benches in Belgrade waiting for money to be wired over, meanwhile consuming nothing but dry bread and cheap wine and gauntly watching the Serbian girls go by. Well, even that was okay, to be honest. One long month of fresh horizons, new experiences, and strange and wonderful places, of which the most magical was Delphi, and the most

memorable Prague. I spent three days in Prague, and was so enchanted by it that 10 years later I sent Bartimaeus and Nathaniel there.

Well, my theory, which I offer you for free, is that all those Tolkienesque epic fantasies are the literary equivalent of inter-railing. They give you thrills aplenty, and they lead you off to obscure and exciting regions, but they do so in a way that's fundamentally pretty safe. The maps you use have a certain familiarity even before you start. You can predict the routes and byways. You know what the parameters are, and you know that after many pleasant adventures, you're going to find your way home again. It's all quite reassuring.

Come to think of it, Diana Wynne Jones (of whom more later), made a similar tourism analogy in her excellent *Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, so maybe I can't claim to be original here. But I think the crucial point is that, just as inter-railing is perfect for the young, so this type of fantasy is ideal for people of a certain age. The kid just entering adolescence wants two things: some kind of heroic template to measure him/herself against, and also a safe but stimulating retreat from an increasingly uncertain world. These sorts of fantasy landscapes are morally very clear cut and governed by easily fathomable rules. Unlike the increasing chaos of your personal life they're fundamentally *orderly*. You know where you are with them.

In the two or three years I spent in this mental landscape, I never tried creating an epic of my own. I think it was too much like hard work. What I *did* do, and this was still very much within Tolkien's sphere of influence, was fall in love with this book: *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* [**Shows it**]. It wasn't the first interactive gamebook out there – that honour belongs to Transworld's Tracker Books like *The Secret of the Seventh Star* [**Shows this too**] – but what blew me away was its fantastic interactivity. You could roll dice to fight monsters. You collected treasures. You were (as it said on the back) the Hero. Above all, you got to choose how your adventure progressed by selecting paragraphs. That concept fascinated me, and I immediately began making my own.

Here are some. [**Shows such classics as *Tower of the Undead*, *Pyramid of the Mummy*, *Abbey of the Werewolf*, *The Road to Wyvernsdyke*...**] Boy, did I love these. In many ways, they were my first properly successful books. True, they weren't original in the slightest, but they really worked. They had lots of different threads, and no loose ends. They taught me about creating complex alternative narrative structures, which dovetailed repeatedly at the correct points. They taught me how to combine improvisation and good structure, since I made them up as I went along, but kept tabs on

the multiplying routes by drawing maps like the ones at the back here. They taught all kinds of stuff, but what I *really* learned was the sheer pleasure to be had in systematic playfulness, in the art of making things.

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By my mid-teens I'd got bored with epic quests. I was beginning to realise that other kinds of fantasy were more interesting: the weird gothic constructions of Peake, for example, and the supernatural tales of both M R and Henry James. And then there was an area that was only of passing interest at the time, but which is central to me now: playful fantasy, fantasy with jokes.

I think the monumental scale of Tolkien's world had provided other writers with a formidable challenge. Try to compete with him, and your aching high seriousness usually deteriorated into high camp. An alternative approach was pioneered by Alan Garner, who wrenched fantasy away from invented other lands and back into our own modern, mundane world. In *Elidor* he does this literally. In *The Owl Service* myth and ordinary life interlace to eerie effect. Garner himself retreated into ever greater subtlety – in his own way he was just as serious-minded as Tolkien – but these early works were brilliant stuff, and many authors still follow his trail today.

Terry Pratchett went a different route. His Discworld began as a piss-take of the whole Tolkien subculture, but quite rapidly (about the time, in *Mort*, when he introduced the moody, anthropomorphic Death, who talks in CAPITALS) it began to acquire a gravity of its own. Soon it wasn't a simple pastiche at all, but a proper, functioning secondary world with its own geography and rules, in which genuine adventures could take place alongside satirical sideswipes at almost anything.

But Pratchett wasn't the first to introduce humour. That honour, I think, goes to Diana Wynne Jones, who, in my opinion, combines the best qualities of Garner and Pratchett, in that her children's fantasies fuse wild humour and playfulness with modern, everyday settings. She was doing this very early, from the mid-70s. Her Chrestomanci series, featuring kid magicians uncovering their powers, prefigures Potter by 20 years. My favourite, though, is *The Ogre Downstairs*, in which warring step-siblings acquire magical chemistry sets. The 'Ogre' is the stepfather. It's got wonderful set-pieces, like the time a spilt test-tube brings a host of toffee-bars to life, and they start wriggling round the house like sticky brown snakes. But what glues it all together, what gives it weight and resonance, are the troubled relationships between the children, and the way they learn

to tolerate each other. There's the comedy of the magic, and there's the comedy of real life: and it's the collision between the two that really makes this book sing.

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I'd read Diana's books when I was quite young, and I'd enjoyed a few Pratchetts in my teens, but then I rather forgot about them as I homed in on A-levels and my English Lit Degree. What I never lost sight of was the rather obvious fact that fantasy was integral to all literature. It's fused into its blood and bones, into its DNA. World Lit begins with the quests of *Gilgamesh* (one of Bartimaeus's favourite masters, incidentally), and English Lit kicks off with the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* – which with its dragon and monster-slaying is a kind of unofficial godfather to Tolkien and the rest.

I was reminded of *Beowulf* when the London riots were happening. The destruction was staggering, and like most people my immediate reaction was rage and bafflement. Afterwards, there was a lot of discussion about the motives of those who took part. Papers like *The Guardian* looked for the personal stories and narratives that might provide some level of explanation. By contrast *The Daily Mail* ran articles labelling the rioters as mindless animals, who – by implication – didn't have stories at all. This conception of a feral underclass rising out of the night to attack and destroy the sparkling products of our civilisation (well, Ladbroke, anyway) put me in mind of Grendel in *Beowulf*, who we first meet as he listens in the shadows to the happy songs and storytelling going on in Heorot. This is Kevin Crossley-Holland's translation:

Then the brutish demon who lived in darkness
 impatiently endured a time of frustration:
 day after day he heard the din of merry-making
 inside the hall, and the sound of the harp
 and the bard's clear song. He who could tell
 of the origin of men from far-off times lifted his voice,
 sang that the Almighty made the earth,
 this radiant plain encompassed by oceans;
 and that God, all powerful, ordained
 sun and moon to shine for mankind...

The warriors in Hrothgar's hall are part of God's narrative. They're part of the unfolding story of Creation, and the nightly retelling of this divine plan by their poets binds them

into it. Society is fused together by its stories: that's how everyone figures out who they are and how they interrelate with others. Grendel, alone in the swamp, is an outcast both from the story and from society: all he has is his hatred, which drives him to keep attacking, murdering assorted Danes night after night, until Beowulf comes along and kills him. And that's it. It's over for Grendel. He has no back-story, just a lurch-on part in somebody else's hero tale.

But of course the monster, like everyone else, *does* have a story, if you bother to look for it. A version of it was told by John Gardner in his novel *Grendel* forty years ago. And, the righteous fury of the *Mail* notwithstanding, the rioters have their stories too, and their stories are linked to ours. The trouble is their rioting is itself an attempt to deny this. It's a denial of any connection to other people. It's a denial of community and a denial of consequence. By giving themselves up to violence, by ripping apart the streets they live in, the participants are making a pretty clear statement that they're not part of whatever collective story might be going on, and that anyway they loathe and despise it. It's a howl of total separation.

My novel *Heroes of the Valley* looked at the way stories build society, how they glue the fabric together, brick by brick. That's how we define ourselves, that's where we get our confidence and security. And if you don't buy into the cultural myths that everyone else espouses, you're likely to have a tricky time. In the book, my protagonists, Halli and Aud, are sceptical about the tales of monstrous Trows and mighty heroes that purportedly explain why their isolated community works the way it does. Whether or not they're right to doubt this – and I try to keep the reader guessing as long as humanly possible – their independence of mind brings down upon their heads all kinds of criticism – and danger. Communal tales tend to be self-enforcing. Once they're fixed, they don't like change.

There are all sorts of ways to abuse the power of stories. The men who flew planes packed with human cargo into the sides of buildings ten years ago had stories to sustain *them* too, stories in which a paradise filled with compliant virgins featured heavily. Aside from the stupidity of such notions, the painful *literalness* of all zealotry shines through here. A particular story is disseminated and it's believed. There's no room for ambiguity, or alternative readings, or flexibility of thought. No room for playfulness. And when those things go by the board, morality tends to vanish too.

Playfulness. When I was at university, I became more and more attracted to fiction which displayed certain qualities. One book that greatly influenced me, in retrospect, was Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. This was a series of essays about

values in fiction he considered worthwhile: Lightness, Quickness, Exactitude...

Lightness and Quickness in particular struck a chord with me. It wasn't about triviality; it was about lightness of foot, verbally speaking. It was about ways of nimbly transcending all the constrictions and limitations and disappointments that the world throws at you: not denying them, not pursuing visions of heavenly virgins (isn't there a terrible, deathly weight in that image?), but using the imagination to momentarily spring free. This is a serious business, but it's playful too: and in literature I think it's historically best exemplified by folktales, and today by Children's Fantasy.

Calvino was a big fan of folktales – he compiled the definitive Italian compilation, full of magic, humour and earthy details. It's a collection that exemplifies a point the Opies make in their introduction to *The Classic Fairy Tales*. People who think of these stories as airy wish-fulfilment are fooling themselves. They're down-to-earth and overwhelmingly *practical*. Virtues that are rewarded “are presence of mind, kindness, willingness to take advice, and courage.” Rewards sought after are ‘wealth, comfortable living and an ideal partner’. Yes, they're about magic, but they're also about how the real world works; they're handbooks about how to survive and flourish. They're about our *connections* and *obligations* to others, exactly as *The Ogre Downstairs* is.

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All authors have to find their own voice, and at the beginning of my career, my books pulled in two different directions. On the one hand I began producing various gamebooks for Walker, exploiting the success of *Where's Wally*, but equally inspired by my love of *Asterix* and the *Beano*. They were full of jokes, games, comic strips, riddles. They had a nice lightness of touch. Meanwhile I was working on my first fantasy novels. *Buried Fire* had a Garnerish feel; *The Leap* was a psychological fantasy which could be read either literally, or as hallucinations in the mind of a grieving girl. They were successful books, but somewhat serious-minded. Certainly they were a world away from the playfulness of the game-books, and I don't think they introduced anything particularly *new*.

Then Bartimaeus turned up.

Many times over the years I've told anyone willing to listen – and, it's fair to say, anyone who wasn't – all about the day in late 2001, when – walking slowly home in the rain – I came up with a couple of ideas. Here's the book I jotted them down in, as soon as I got back, 5 or 6 pages of frenzied scribbling. [**Reads out first paragraph of notes, which describes the vexed relationship between the narrator, a sarcastic, put-upon demon or spirit, and his human masters, the magicians.**] That was the nuts and bolts

of it, though further along I also remarked that I was going to make my wicked magicians into politicians. It wasn't a particularly difficult jump. It had struck me that in the real world anyone who could control magical slaves wouldn't be some bearded recluse hanging around a boarding school in a pointy hat; he or she would seize power in Whitehall, become prime minister, wear Armani suits and generally be something like Silvio Berlusconi, only with an entourage of imps instead of prostitutes. Actually, when *The Amulet of Samarkand* came out in Italy and I went over to do interviews, I got precisely zero questions about children's fiction, and an entire day of questioning about politics, satire and which of my magicians was most based on Tony Blair.

But such delights were in the future. What happened straightaway, as soon as I began writing, was the wonderful discovery of Bart's voice. He emerged fully formed: a 5,000-year-old djinni with a massive chip on his shoulder, and nice line in energetic sarcasm. Within a few lines he'd torn a strip off his master (a scrawny 12-year-old kid magician), name-dropped King Solomon, referenced his exploits in Uruk, Karnak and Prague, and thrown in a couple of freewheeling footnotes for good measure. I had absolutely no idea what his story was going to be, but I knew instantly that *he* was something new.

With Bart as my guide, I discovered that it was possible to write something that was both serious and funny at the same time. He was belligerent, anarchic and impertinent, forever seeking to undermine authority. He was full of mercurial energy. He had a Protean quality, able to change shape at the drop of a hat. Only his voice remained constant, as he messed about with the text, talking directly to the audience, fully aware of his status as narrator within a book. Rationalising him now, I think he exactly embodies that playfulness that I admire in fiction, light on his feet, full of jokes and levity, but also serious of purpose. His qualities also happen to be exactly those of the young and disaffected, but crucially, and despite himself, this spikiness is softened by his awareness of others and even by compassion for those he professes to despise.

After Bart, for me, the djinni was out of the bottle. It was hard to imagine going back to a narrative style that didn't acknowledge the flexibility of such a voice.

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When *Amulet* first came out, I was privileged enough to appear on a panel with Diana Wynne Jones. Already ailing, she appeared wearing a neck brace, but was nonetheless effortlessly formidable, and also utterly charming and encouraging to a young writer. On stage, in response to a question about her writing methods, she made an interesting statement. She claimed that she never planned out anything in advance, but just wrote as

the muse took her. I confess I was slightly amazed by this, and remain so. For me the muse is only half the story.

When I go into schools and kids ask me about how I write my books I usually hold up a chapter plan like this, [**Shows a Ptolemy's Gate one**] with all the little boxes neatly showing what I *think* each chapter's going to be about. And I can see the teachers all nodding in a pleased sort of way, because it symbolises that orderly, systematic kind of thinking that you need at school, and in life in general.

But in fact – and I'm with Diana on this one – a chapter plan is *never* the first part of the creative process. The beginning is always sitting about and riffing with ideas, then staring out the window, then scratching my armpit and picking my nose, then going off on tangents again. Once, and once only for me, such messing about produced something fully formed. That was when I wrote the first four chapters of *The Amulet of Samarkand* in two days and pretty much never changed a word. But usually what I'm left with is a pile of fragments. And sooner or later I have to gather all the good pieces together and, with the aid of diagrams and chapter plans, laboriously turn them into something coherent.

For me, this dual process is an essential component of good fantasy writing. You're employing two opposite sensibilities – the improvised and the rational – two opposing methods of creating. And this collision echoes the themes of the subject, which is about the collision of the imaginary with the everyday. Just as the real confronts the unreal in your fiction, so the free-form approach to creativity confronts the analytical. What's the outcome going to be? Funny? Thrilling? Scary? Poignant? Maybe all at once? To find out, you have to be open to improvisation, and also to being precise and controlled. You can't ignore the one and you mustn't quash the other. If you do, you'll always err towards extremes – to whimsical fantasies where anything goes, or rigid systems that lack spontaneity and genuine magic.

In the Bartimaeus books, I accidentally hit on a good way of representing this tension within the story itself. It's the confrontation between Bartimaeus and his master Nathaniel. Bart's character is effervescent, witty and free-wheeling. Nat is a controlling, tight, anxious and somewhat prissy little boy. True, he's also hard-working and idealistic, which are potentially positive traits, but these attributes are swiftly corrupted by his surroundings and by his own anger and ambition.

As I've said, I was liberated by the arrival of Bart's voice. I felt like I poured a lot of myself into him. When I'd finished the book I gave the manuscript to my mum. She read it, and I awaited her verdict with the polite agitation of the dutiful son.

She said: "You know, he's very like you, isn't he?"

I nodded modestly. Well, it was true enough. Witty, fascinating, engaging... silently I counted off Bart's list of qualities.

"Yes," she said, "you were just like Nathaniel when you were young."

Right, so that would be the anally retentive, charismatically challenged one. But actually it's a fair point. Serious, anxious, buttoned up ... I *was* very much like that when I was about 13. (Just as I'm quite unlike that now.) Without realising it I'd given Nathaniel all the faults I'd had. In fact years later some kid pointed out to me that I'd practically given him my name as well: the overlap between 'Jonathan' and 'Nathaniel' had completely escaped me. And there's a deeper parallel still. Story-telling is a kind of magic: you can see from all this [**gestures at childhood stuff**] that as a boy I wanted to have that power. I wanted to be a magician just as much as Nathaniel does. And like him I was prepared to work at it, though the work manifested itself as play.

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A few people objected to Bart's prolific use of footnotes when *Amulet* came out, though my child audience didn't seem to mind. Some people even suggested that I'd nicked the idea off Terry Pratchett, who uses them from time to time. In fact I was more likely influenced by none other than Honorary Friend of Children's Fiction Martin Amis, who'd peppered them throughout his memoir *Experience* a couple of years before. (There's got to be a telling irony there but, being a Children's Author, I'm not quite sure what it is.) But actually my attraction to footnotes goes back much further, to my university days, when they were often the best bit of many dragging essays. And further still: aren't they actually a kind of branching narrative, albeit no-through-roads that you have to double-back from, and so a direct descendant of all the gamebooks I was doing years before?

Incidentally, branching narratives are now the way that literacy is going, aren't they? That geeky choose-your-own adventure subculture of the 1980s has morphed into the dominant day-to-day reading experience for most people, thanks to the electronic revolution. Go on the Internet, and you're faced with multiple choices. Each page branches into others. You follow links, retrace your steps, weave narrative routes of wondrous complexity. Modern reading requires sophisticated skills of map-reading. Not for nothing do we use Safari and Explorer to help us get around.

The consequences of all this will be profound: on the plus side, it may encourage flexibility of thought and the ability to perceive lateral connections. And the drawbacks? Loss of the ability to think in depth, maybe. An increasing inability to concentrate on one set thing and follow it to its conclusions. An acceptance of a world where everything is of equal value, where science, literature, pop culture and porn are all the same easy click away.

This new online fluidity is an extension of what's been going on in urban areas for generations. Back in 1974, Jonathan Raban wrote *Soft City*, about the experience of living in London or any other vast metropolis. He visualised these places as constructions in the mind, stage sets where any kind of story could be played out. If you can cope with this, if you can fashion a narrative that gives you a coherent place in it, the liberation on offer is staggering. If you can't: well, no one else is going to do it for you. You're left alienated and adrift, and in extreme cases, as the recent riots demonstrated, ready to kick the stage set in.

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It strikes me that what I'm doing with *Bartimaeus*, and what in their very different ways the other writers of Young Adult fantasies are doing right now, is creating a type of literature that's particularly well suited to this fluid age. Yes, we're still creating tales of magic – there's nothing new in that – but they're distinct from the marvellous idylls of traditional children's fiction, and they're distinct from those epic fantasies that sprang up after Tolkien. For one thing, our fantasy's a lot messier. It blends genres. It mixes humour with serious stuff, horror with romance. You've got zombies, and vampires, and wizards, and also modern day kids, and relationships and politics and I don't know what. Philip Pullman showed you can even please the literati by throwing in references to Milton and Blake. He built his whole trilogy around Blake's dictum: 'I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man's', and this is what we're *all* up to, really, building systems of our own. That's what I've been doing all my life, ever since my first little stories bound in wallpaper.

How relevant is it? Just as relevant – or irrelevant – as storytelling's ever been. Our books don't provide a magical panacea for society's problems, but they *do* reflect what's going on around us and, more importantly, *inside*. Our concerns, our fears, our dreams, our frailties. They're conjured up, transformed. Our dread of death becomes an ogre at the roadside. Politicians warp into magicians. The Church, the family, modern war, the

media... nothing's sacred, nothing's exempt from the investigative prism. Everything's fair game.

And underlying that multiplicity, today's fantasies still follow the folktale rules: the traditions of story that were old in the time of Gilgamesh. They offer marvels, but they're still grounded in real, practical concerns: what makes a good life, what qualities do we need, how should we behave with others, how do we become the person we should be? Those themes are why folk tales are universal – there are Chinese versions of Cinderella stretching back a thousand years. And it's why this modern incarnation is so ubiquitous, why it's read so widely, why it fills the multiplexes too.

I'm going to finish with two quotes. The first is from Robert Louis Stevenson, describing how he conceived of *Treasure Island*. In my opinion, this is the wellspring from which all modern fantasies derive: a book of huge energy and mythic power, with (in Jim Hawkins) the first great child narrator, and (in Long John Silver) the first great antihero. Okay, it hasn't got any actual magic in it, which slightly flies in the face of my definition at the beginning. But hey, I'm a writer. I move the goalposts from time to time.

Treasure Island's a perfectly created fantasy world and a complex, disquieting study of charismatic evil smuggled in under cover of a bloody good story. It's everything I'd aspire to write. Here's how it began. In 1881 Stevenson was staying in Scotland with his family – his parents, wife and his 12-year-old stepson. To amuse the boy he often joined him in games and activities, such as making coloured drawings.

“On one of these occasions,” Stevenson later wrote, “I made the map of an island; it was elaborately and (I thought) beautifully coloured; the shape of it took my fancy beyond expression; it contained harbours that pleased me like sonnets; and with the unconsciousness of the predestined, I ticketed my performance ‘Treasure Island’. I am told there are people who do not care for maps, and find it hard to believe... No child but must remember laying his head in the grass, staring into the infinitesimal forest, and seeing it grow populous with fairy armies. Somewhat in this way, as I pored upon my map of ‘Treasure Island’, the future characters of the book began to appear there visibly among imaginary woods; and their brown faces and bright weapons peeped out upon me from unexpected quarters, as they passed to and fro, fighting, and hunting treasure, on these few square inches of a flat projection.

The next thing I knew, I had some paper before me and was writing out a list of chapters...”

He then began to write with great excitement and ‘sweet complacency’. Years later he said ‘it seemed to me as original as sin; it seemed to belong to me like my right eye’, and his joy in the writing is palpable when you read it now.

I think it’s both lovely and appropriate that this great book began with play – and with a map. One way and another maps have been running all the way through this talk – the ones I gazed at as a child, the diagrams at the back of my gamebooks, the virtual maps we make as we Google our way around. All writers are cartographers, all acts of creation the inking out of a new landscape, filling in its blank, white spaces. Modern fantasy exists on the boundaries between the real and imaginary, the internal and external, between childhood and adulthood, past and present. It’s a messy sort of terrain, hard to pin down, but if you’re very lucky, and work hard, you can sketch out something just as vivid, beautiful and worthwhile as an Ordnance Survey map.

Second and final quote. It’s the Opies again, and I give it because their summary of the power of fairy tales seems to me to sum up the power of fantasy too.

It encourages speculation. It gives a child licence to wonder. And this is the merit of the tales, that by going beyond possibility they enlarge our daily horizon. For a man not given to speculation might as well walk on four legs as on two. A child who does not feel wonder is but an inlet for apple pie.

‘It gives a child licence to wonder.’ Does that make me feel I’m doing something relevant? Yeah, I reckon so.