

Margaret Mahy – Doyen of Children’s Literature, Master of Rhythm and Rhyme

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Key words : Mahy children’s literature New Zealand

The heart and soul of a country and its people can be gleaned in many ways, but no more so than through its music, art, and literature, and especially through the literature of its folk and kinder. Margaret Mahy, a New Zealand writer of world renown who died recently after a long and prolific writing career, wrote almost exclusively for children and young adults. This paper explores her popularity and appeal to both an international and domestic audience, and looks specifically at what makes her, ultimately, a New Zealand writer.

Margaret Mahy (1936-2012) had an extraordinary talent for capturing the sounds, rhythms and content that appeal to the young. She had an amazing imagination and was an equally extraordinary wordsmith, grafting her plots, characters and locations in smooth and beautifully written rhythm and prose. She wrote over 100 stories for which she won numerous awards, among others, the Carnegie Medal of the British Library (three times), The Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, The Ester Glen Award (five times), the Hans Christian Andersen Award, and the coveted New Zealand Post Children’s Book Award (in two categories). She was presented the Order of New Zealand, the country’s most prestigious award, in 1993, and was awarded Honorary Doctorates from the Universities of Canterbury and Waikato. Her works have been translated into 15 languages and are still very much enjoyed today (ref: Arts Foundation, NZ Book Council). Later in her life, Mahy became much involved in screen writing, including the adaptations of several of her novels (ref: NZONSCREEN).

Critiques of her works by general readers can be found on most publisher’s websites, even for books that are now in double digit reprints, and there is much anecdotal information by people who have met her. However, literary critiques are few. It is expected with her death on 23rd July 2012 from cancer at the age of 79 that her works will generate more academic research as scholars seek to understand her enormous contribution to the world of children’s literature. To children, however, Mahy’s works will live on in color, rhythm and excitement – an enduring

testament to her literary genius.

Mahy, whose mother was a teacher and father a bridge-builder, grew up the eldest of five siblings in Whakatane, New Zealand just as the country was awakening to itself in a post-colonial shake-off of imperial British influence. She was reputed to be rather unremarkable at school, except for English, where she penned her first story, *Harry is Bad*, at the age of seven, and she was a prolific reader, especially of traditional British literature. She gained a BA in English and Philosophy at the Universities of Auckland and Canterbury in 1974, and after a period of further study became a librarian. She then settled in Governor's Bay in Banks Peninsula near Christchurch. This is an idyllic sea/hill location of many bays in a geographic area of volcanic eruptions, craggy hills and swampy lowlands. It is a sleepy, brooding land; punctuated with houses hidden behind lush exotic trees, and in summer, blue skies and enchanting sailboats. It is a land colonized by both Maori and European. Over time, this landscape began to weave a hold on Mahy, a woman with an Irish name and British roots, influencing her sensibilities and leading her to awaken to the rhythms, myths and magic of her native land.

Mahy was a woman ahead of her time, freely electing to be a solo parent of two daughters born six years apart and fathered by the same man she claimed to hold a fondness for throughout her life, but with whom she did not live and never married (Taylor, 2012). Raising children alone obliged Mahy to work a long day, so she wrote long into the early hours of the morning, until she became a professional full-time writer in 1980 at the age of 44. She valued her time as a librarian, and remained intensely interested in reading programs for children for the rest of her life. She gave frequent readings for children at libraries, often wearing a multi-rainbow-colored wig, and was a practical and active supporter of fund-raisers for children's books. No doubt these experiences gave Mahy a window into the world of children, which enabled her to write books that so very much appealed to them. Mahy, however, said she believed her stories were already there within her – a product of upbringing and worldview, a comment indicating a very postmodern viewpoint.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her love of science and philosophy, Mahy was intrigued with all things mysterious and mythical and was able to express the weird and wonderful in the form of ghostly stories and strange happenings. Mahy was deeply connected to her British ancestry – often seeing the world in the trappings of rural England and its long mysterious traditions. She grew up with Winnie the Pooh, the works of Beatrice Potter and C. S. Lewis, and was very familiar with Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. She wrote of animals, plants and creatures not found in New Zealand, and was initially passed over by NZ publishers for not sufficiently representing a distinctive New Zealand literature: a point reinforced by the

influence of her illustrators, who were, by the publisher's selection, often British. However, as her years progressed she came to include the idioms and landscapes of her native New Zealand. In this sense we can see in her a truly New Zealand writer removing a postcolonial straight-jacket in much the same way as did her famous compatriots Katherine Mansfield and Janet Frame, both of whom also came to see the myths and landscapes of their inner lives as rooted in New Zealand. Mahy, however, never lost the rhythms and sounds of the old world, so clearly demonstrated in her children's books, and, since British children's literary culture is widely dispersed globally in both English and in translation, this has contributed to her continuing universal appeal as a writer of children's literature.

The remaining of this paper will look at the universality of her work, and then at the local connection, through her infant's books; *The Lion in the Meadow*, *Bubble Trouble*, *Down the Back of the Chair*, and *A Summery Saturday Morning*, and through three of her young adult's books; *Organ Music*, *The Catalogue of the Universe*, and *Kaitangata Twist*.

The most noticeable aspect of her infant's books are that they are colorful, imaginative, full of pulsating rhythms best appreciated by reading aloud, and that they are equally appealing to children and their parents. *A Lion in the Meadow*, her first published children's book written in 1969 remains an all time favourite, both in New Zealand and abroad, but it channels nothing that is distinctly New Zealand. The story is of a young boy who invents a lion to excuse his fear of going into the meadow alone to play. His mother negates the existence of a lion, where upon the boy simply expands his description of it in ever increasing intensity.

The little boy said, "Mother there is a lion in the meadow"

The mother said, "Nonsense, little boy"

The little boy said, "Mother there is a big yellow lion in the meadow"

The mother said "Nonsense, little boy"

The little boy said, "Mother, there is a big, roaring, yellow, whiskery lion in the meadow"

The mother said, "little boy you are making up stories [...] go into the meadow and see for yourself"

The little boy said, "I'm scared to go into the meadow because of the lion which is there".....

The mother then invents a dragon to take the boy's attention from the lion, but he simply incorporates the dragon into his fear. To resolve the exacerbation of fear inherent in having both a dragon and a lion in the meadow, Mahy has the lion enter the house as a pet living in the cupboard, and the dragon is left happily undisturbed in another meadow. The text is written in rather formal language and in its repetition is reminiscent of the nursery rhyme *The*

Three Little Pigs, although the resolution is distinctly modern with a friendship forming between the boy and his alter ego, the lion. This work is a good example of British influence in Mahy’s writing, and the illustrations, always an important part of the success of Mahy’s books, show typical rural English scenes in strong vibrant colors familiar enough to be easily understood, enjoyed, and appreciated by a wide international audience.

Bubble Trouble, winner of the 2009 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for Best Picture Book, is another story in which Mahy calls on her European background to create a story of generic international appeal. It is set in “anywhere-ville” and relates, in very compelling rhyme, the story of a little girl who blows a bubble big enough to encapsulate her baby brother and blow him away. The illustrations are cute and cheerful and the story continues with various efforts to retrieve the baby. Blowing up and floating away is a popular theme in British children’s literature such as in *Mary Poppins* and *Harry Potter*, enabling this story to have a universal appeal. The text starts off as an extension rhythm, much like *the Lion in the Meadow*:

Mabel was sitting at the table blowing bubbles. The kitty was sitting on the table watching and the baby was watching the kitty....

Then, the story launches into a direct traditional nursery rhyme genre. There is repetition of a *B* alliteration throughout the text, and the beat can be chanted like a traditional tongue twister, such as *Peter Piper*, in two/four timing.

Little Mabel blew a bubble and it caused a lot of trouble

Such a lot of bubble trouble in a bibble-bobble way.

For it broke away from Mabel as it bobbed across the table,

Where it bobbed over Baby, and it wafted him away

Compare with: Peter Piper

/ - / - / - / - / - / - / -

Peter Piper picked a **piece** of **pickled** **pepper**

- / - / - / - / - / - / - / -

A **piece** of **pickled** **pepper** **Peter piper** picked

- / - / - / - / - / - / - / -

If **Peter Piper** picked a **piece** of **pickled** **pepper**

/ - / - / - / - / -

Where’s the **piece** of **pickled** **pepper**

/ - / - / -

Peter Piper picked

It is not clear if Mahy used close analogies to established English rhyme intentionally, or if it arose out of her own background as she once intimated. Either way, it is a good example of keeping alive the traditions of New Zealand’s European forefathers, and ensuring the traditional rhythms of the English language are preserved and learnt.

Another example of rhythmic similarity to British traditional rhyme can be found in *What’s at the back of the Chair*, written in 2006, although some parents have expressed concern that the content matter, dealing with a father’s financial difficulties, is beyond the understanding of small children. Mahy, however, said she did not intend to confuse her young readers and so employed what she called a “consensus reality”, where what is real in the story is all technically possible, and where what is not real is truly mystical and supernatural (Mahy, 1991). To this end, she downsizes neither vocabulary nor content. She does, however, make the content “palatable” for children by setting it in the familiar environment of family, and by using clear and appealing rhythms. Indeed, the words are often challenging, but no more so than those of Dr. Seuss, or Mary Poppins’ “supercalifragallisticexpialidocious”.

In this story the father, facing hard times, loses his car keys and is advised by his daughter to look down the back of the chair for them, and for whatever else might be found there. It is written in the rhythm of the traditional rhyme *Pop goes the Weasel*. This ditty, in cockney rhyming slang, first appears in the 1700s, with ‘pop’ being a slang word for pawn, and weasel and stoat a substitute for coat. Coats were worn only for “Sunday best”, so when times were hard, the poor would pawn their coats on Monday and claim them back before Sunday. Hence the phrase: “Pop goes the Weasel” (ref: Rhymes and History). This scenario, whether or not Mahy herself intended it, clearly relates to the plight of the father in her story, who perhaps would have pawned his coat for funds if he had been living in the 18th century. Instead, with the insistence of his children, he finds ever more exciting things in the back of the chair, eventually finding an uncle’s will which leaves him enough money to put his life back in order. The story portrays children partaking in their family life in a real and joyful manner.

But what is this? Oh bliss! Oh bliss!

(Down the back of the chair)

The long lost will of Uncle Bill

(Down the back of the chair)

His moneybox all crammed with cash

Tangled up in a scarlet sash

There’s pleasure, treasure, toys and trash

Down the back of the chair



'Round and 'round the cob- bler's bench, the mon- key chased the wea- sel, The



mon- key thought 'twas all in fun. Pop! goes the wea- sel. A pen- ny for a spool of thread, A



pen- ny for a nee- dle, That's the way the mo- ney goes. Pop! goes the wea- sel.

Finally, in *A Summery Saturday Morning*, which won the New Zealand Post Book of the Year Supreme Award in 1998, Mahy compiles aspects of rhythm, color, and joy in traditional English rhyming in the New Zealand setting of Banks Peninsular –her own stomping ground. She enters the story and takes a group of mixed race children and two dogs on a walk where they stir up a gaggle of geese who angrily chase them about. The drawings are vibrant, recognizable and quintessentially New Zealand. The rhyme is clearly identified as that of *Here We Go Round Mulberry Bush*. As with many of her other rhyming verse books, the words are too challenging for youngsters to chant, but not beyond those of an adult or older child. Clearly, this story has been written specifically to be read to a younger child, and to thus enable both the reader and the listener to enjoy the text and the experience together.

We take the dogs down the wiggly track,

The wiggly track, the wiggly track

One dog's white and the other dog's black

On a summery Saturday morning



The mud begins its guggliwugs

Its guggliwugs, its guggliwugs

Our sandals slide like slugiwugs

On a summery Saturday morning



Mahy is also known for her novels for young adults aged 8-13, but many of these works are also palatable to older teenagers and adults, particularly any adult with a love of the macabre, ghosts, and the weirdly wonderful and scientific. Although most noted for the supernatural elements in her books, Mahy continues to maintain a clear truth for her supernatural situations and a clear truth for her real situations, which almost all have a family element, and a strong, if not sometimes argumentative, relationship between the child and the parents(s). At all times, she maintains a smooth, expressive prose, elements of rhythm, and, her family dialogue withstanding, correct, formal grammar. They are books easy for parents and teachers to recommend, some being generically suitable for an international audience, others carrying a more specific New Zealand flavor.

The book *Organ Music* written in 2010 is very short, only 91 pages of a B6 size, and is written for an international audience of very precocious 8-10 year-olds. It is the story of two bored young teenagers testing life by stealing a car, only to have the car take over and drive them to a forestry research facility where they enter a macabre and fantastic dream-like situation

in which they are set to become organ donors to brain dead patients; their useless “delinquent” lives being forfeit in favor of more deserving persons. Mahy loved word play and indulges it here in the title, where organ music is heard throughout the ordeal, while the story is about organ “donation”. The protagonists are grounded in their efforts to return to their families, but rely on the ghost of a previous victim of this murderous scam to help them do so. Thus the story also engages a very fantastic aspect. Mahy connects the story to modern references such as TV forensic detective dramas, and with idioms adapted to the NZ audience such as replacing the standard “two shakes of a jiffy” with “two shakes of a lambs tail”. She also taps into the junior readers’ book repertoire by including the “Latin” chant of the magician, found in Harry Potter and elsewhere, for firing power words directly to the mind of the antagonist; first on pg.75 with ‘*Cantankerous! Cantakofulum! Furioso!*’ Then on pg. 78 with *Destructosaurus! Ichthyosaurus! Tyrannosaurus Rex!*

In the first chapter Mahy introduces a song with a strong two/four beat reminiscent of the traditional rhyme *Diddle Diddle Dumpling my son John*. Initially heard on the CD in the stolen car, it alludes to what is to come:

‘You’ve got to shove the CD in first’, said Harley [...]

‘Cool!’ yelled Harley, as David strained to make out the words

<p><i>/ / / / / - - /</i> Dilly, dilly! Dilly, dilly! Come and be killed <i>- / - - /</i> For you must be stuffed <i>- - / - - - /</i> And my customers be filled</p>	<p><i>/ / / - / - /</i> Diddle Diddle Dumpling my son John <i>/ - /</i> Went to bed <i>- - / - /</i> With his britches on</p>
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Mahy also includes humor attractive and suitable for the junior reader, such as the word play on Bach/bark on pg. 56, further adding general appeal to the story.

‘I hate that music,’ panted David

‘Bach!’ whispered Harley

‘Bark?’ David turned his head towards Harley, but could see only blackness. ‘Woof woof?’

‘Bach! You know. Bach, the composer. They’ve been playing that ever since we came in here.

And Mozart, I think. Nothing but organ music anyway.’

The Catalogue of the Universe, first published in 1985, is a book for older teenagers, and contains the least supernatural elements of all her novels. It comes with straight forward chapter titles like *Family Matters*, *On Being a Child of Love*, and *Foreign Relations*, along with more intriguing titles such as *The Wobble in the Cemetery of the World*, *A Road of Blood and Flowers*, and *a Leap into the Abyss*, highlighting Mahy's dual focus in her books between factual truths and supernatural truths. This work covers all the issues typical teenagers are concerned with; who am I, am I good enough, what am I doing, does s/he love me. What's the matter with my family! There is little plot to the story; rather time is spent on the development of the characters and their inner feelings and growth. The dialogue and setting carry some specific New Zealand references, such as going on holiday to the Sounds p.126, (the Bays at the top of the South Island of New Zealand) to soak in the sun just before the Christmas rush (NZ is in the southern hemisphere – Christmas is in summer and holiday destinations are crowded at this time), and words such as “stock” (live-stock, not money shares) on pg.94, and the novel also contains long musings on philosophic and scientific issues which play into the title of the book, although one protagonist, Tycho, observes pg.136 [that] “*I have a book called the Catalogue of the Universe...and there's not one mention of happiness in it*”

The plot is back grounded with a pretty girl (Angela) living in a dysfunctional, but loving single parent family in a rundown house: *Angela's home that had never quite got as far as being a proper house* (pg.10), with a strong but changing connection to her mother and a longing to meet her absent father, and her friend, Tycho, a nerdy, not particularly physically attractive young man with a love of astronomy and living in an equally dysfunctional family, who is dealing with growing pains, a serious crush on Angela, and an equally strong but changing connection to his parents. The story complicates with Angela looking for her absent father and finding him, Tycho feeling powerless to help her with an ambition he knows is doomed to bring heartache, and then climaxes with their mutually fulfilling sexual encounter. The story unravels with a car crash that leaves Tycho, as the chapter title states, *A Three-minute Hero* (making him suddenly respectfully suitable for a cool girl like Angela), and concludes in a resolution of conflict with the various parents in their lives. The prose in this work is particularly expressive, even beautiful, and it is satisfying to know that young adults are being exposed to such excellent writing.

Finally, we look briefly at *Kaitangata Twist* as an example of Mahy's developing sensibilities as a specifically New Zealand writer. This book won the 2006 New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young Adults. The content is suitable for any young audience, but particularly for New Zealanders who are seeing highlighted in the story another form of

“colonialisation” in their country – the encroachment of suburban development and the “eating up” of natural landscape. Briefly, the plot is about 13 year old Meredith, of mixed parentage, who “hears” and “experiences” the stirrings and hunger of Kaitangata, a small island off the shore near her house, just as the bay is marked for subdivision by an aggressive real estate developer who also “owns” Kaitangata and plans to build a private mansion there, and as her father and sister fight to prevent both plans. For anyone who knows the Banks Peninsular area, the setting is recognizable, as is the situation. For in 2005, when the book was written, a fight was indeed occurring between some local residents in one of the bays and a developer planning a new subdivision that would impact their views and lifestyle. Eventually the subdivision was approved, and today new homes are appearing in the bay; a fact of which Mahy would have been aware.

This realism, again in a family setting, is juxtaposed with the fantasy of a living, breathing, people-eating island called Kaitangata (kai is Maori for food, and tangata the word for people). According to Mahy’s imagination, in old times the island was the site of Maori cannibalism, and as it still retains a taste for blood, the deceased spirits residing there occasionally cause it to twitch in a shift of time/space reflected in the protagonist Meredith’s dreams, and felt by other sensitives as little twitching earthquakes. The ability of Meredith to hear the island’s awakening at the prospect of having the developer’s family living there, allows her to learn about another time in the 1880s when there had been a plan to build on the island, and to “experience” through dreams how the young daughter of the then developer went missing – swallowed up by Kaitangata’s aggressive and defensive blood lust. The island’s supernatural twitching, Meredith’s dreams, sleep walking and obsession, move in tandem with the father’s and sister’s very real and practical eco-warrior efforts to scare away the developer. In the climax Meredith experiences the island devouring the developer, and the story ends with the developer leaving, and the sister breaching the boundaries of law and civil order forcing the father to realize they cannot peacefully prevent “progress” and to withdraw his objections. With the developer gone and Kaitangata safe from interference, its blood lust wanes and once again it becomes quiescent.

“It was low tide in the harbor. Out beyond the tree-tops the mud seemed somehow iced with light. Two grey herons scavenged busily, and beyond them lay Kaitangata, looking perfectly at ease with the changing world. From this angle, Meredith was tempted to think that the island, as bored with all the arguments as Allan Ponty, had yawned and turned its back on them, and then effortlessly dropped off to sleep” p.129.

The story is compelling, and the writing is fluid and vital. The book was adapted

rather freely and extensively by Maori TV into a 13 part children's series in 2010, although Mahy herself said of the adaptation that the Maori elements "are expanded in a way I couldn't or wouldn't have even tried" (Fae, 2010). While sentiments are expressed as Maori, they are equally Celtic British; where the call of the land and sea is just as compelling and mysterious, and where stories abound of the land's need to replenish itself with blood and revenge. Thus, in Kaitangata, Mahy demonstrates a truly postcolonial New Zealand/Aotearoa literature; a literature that shines in its natural landscapes and mix of family settings, characters and plots, but pays due respect to its dual forefathers, both Maori and British.

Conclusion

It is regrettable that Mahy is no longer with us. Her daughter reports she had a few works "in the pipeline" at the time of her death, so perhaps we will be able to read new works in the future. If not, the world is already blessed with the works of a truly gifted writer, and her rich legacy leaves us with the opportunity to visit her imagination and read her engaging prose and rhyme anywhere there is a bookstore or a library.

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Acknowledgement:

I acknowledge and thank the writers of the numerous Christchurch Press and Dominion Post NZ online releases and blogs published immediately after the death of Mahy in July/Aug. 2012, which I read, and found very helpful. The analyses are, however, original and entirely my own, for which I take full responsibility.