

Tales Heard and Tales Read: From Chile to Australia: A Memoir

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ABSTRACT: This is an autobiographical reflection on my life with folktales, the trigger for my enriched experiences with reading in a new language and in the ways of imagination in my new land. For I used story to make my ongoing identity, even as it helped me to escape to a world of enchantment. Story, read or told, is the way to lands where 'everything and anything' is possible.

On the first of May, nineteen seventy-four, I stopped understanding the written word. The world changed, this happened in an instant, in the blink of an eye, on an eighteen-hour air journey from Chile to Australia. I was a nine-year-old girl—and on a cold, wet night in May I set foot for the first time on Australian soil. I neither spoke or understood English.

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My arrival in this land was a re-birth of sorts, a somewhat difficult birth and to my young self, a perilous and lonely one. This was the time of my displacement from home, from family and friends, and from the comfort of the familiar—everything seemed strange and new. I was also displaced from one of my great loves, someone instrumental in the development of myself as nascent reader, and lover of words and books, my maternal grandmother. Her face was the last I remember, and as we boarded the plane, she was crying. I shed many tears for the loss of her. I carried my grief with me; invisible to others, it throbbed slowly in my small girl's chest.

I am sure that if I had been able to look down my throat I would have seen grief caught there, all jagged shaped, pulsating in time with my own heart. Every now and then, in the months and years to come, that pain would catch and bring tears to my eyes. Stories were to be my comfort, my marvelling, and a source of miraculous happiness. My grandmother had been a teller of folk and fairy tales, my very own Scheherazade, and she passed her gift on to my mother.

My mother too had told me folk tales, usually ones that held an implicit warning about what not to do—for example, when you are sent

on an errand ‘do not stray from your task’. My mother had also taught me to read in my first language, Spanish. The first book I remember reading was the fairy tale, the *Musicians of Bremen*.¹ I still have the book; it used to have a bright yellow cover, but it is now faded to a sort of mustard dullness. It is full of beautiful illustrations. The cover has the stories’ musicians; the donkey, the dog, the cat and the rooster all standing one on top of the other, forming the terrible monster that scares robbers away from the home which would become the musicians’ own. I have an indistinct memory, almost like a dream, of myself as a little girl of perhaps four or five years, and my mother is sitting next to me. She is following the words with her hand, marking each syllable in pencil, each word of the story has little half-moon shapes under it. The little carbon moons are still there on every page. When I came to Australia, this was the book I carried with me.

Ways of Understanding

Listening to folk tales and my reading were for me associated with experiencing comfort and love, the keys to a magical world all my own to enter at my will. The inner life, which, for me, is significantly enriched through the process of reading, by experiencing story telling, and through the imagined world words evoke, is always a going beyond the limits of daily experience. As the character of Jane Eyre is made to reflect when reading—in a novel I would come to adore as a teenager—reading for me is:

to open my inward ear to a tale that was never ended—a tale my imagination had created, and narrated continuously; quickened with all of incident, life, fire, feeling, that I desired and had not in my actual existence.²

I remember the first fairy stories I loved, told to me by my grandmother or my mother. I first knew these tales orally, in Spanish, and then the same written stories in English became my entry point to my new culture. I could not get enough of *Snow White*, of *Little Red Riding Hood*, or of the myth of *Pandora*, and the glamour of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. I wanted desperately the magic that would come with the saying ‘open sesame’. I, too, wanted to enter an alternative world full of hidden riches.

Reading and story telling are also openings of doors to vast worlds of wonder; they are, like writing, creative acts where the

¹ See, Jacob Grimm, and Wilhelm Grimm, *The Complete Fairy Tales* (1812, 1815); and trans. by Jack Zipes (London: 2007).

² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Classics, 1847; repr. 2006), p.129.

reader [listener] is the space on which all the quotations that make up writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination.³

A text has no significance, no real meaning, or life, without a reader. Similarly, a tale takes on a life of its own when it is told and heard.

My initial experience of 'reading' stories was an oral one—through the stories others told me. This led to reading for myself, initially particularly comics. Gerald Murnane⁴ and Margaret Mahy⁵ have both noted the importance of the reading of comics in their childhoods, so that—through these initial pictorial strips, and written worlds of their reading experience—the adult writer—and the child reader, then

expands [their] world ... the world of [their] imagination or [their personal] mythology is made up of these strange scattered little reading experiences.⁶

As a small child, I would go with my aunt to exchange comics to a tiny wooden street kiosk in our neighbourhood. There was nothing else around but houses and this small kiosk, erected close to the road to capture passing traffic and just big enough for one person to fit inside. They only sold books and magazines. I particularly liked cartoon magazines about Donald Duck because he had three nephews, I had imagined they were my age. This is also where I developed a love for the smell of books, the musty tang has always been a source of comfort.

While some of my reading as a child is as vivid to me as a photograph of a fleeting moment, captured in time, my memory of the actual content of that reading is sometimes indistinct. Gerald Murnane, too, notes that he has forgotten much of the content from his childhood reading.⁷ He claims to no longer write fiction, giving words to what takes place in his mind only; he does not call this creative act 'imagination',⁸ as the content as plot is not what is of prime importance. As a child reader, he describes

³ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. by David Lodge (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 166-172, (p.171); and 'Gerald Murnane and the Barley Patch' (transcript), Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio National, 'The Book Show', 12 October 2009, <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/gerald-murnane-and-the-barley-patch/3083956>> [accessed 22 October 2009], p. 2.

⁴ Gerald Murnane, ABC, Radio National, The Book Show, p. 2; and Murnane, Gerald, *Barley Patch* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2009), p. 22.

⁵ Margaret Mahy, 'Over their Heads? Adult generalisation and the individual reader', in her *A Dissolving Ghost: Essays and More* (Wellington, NZ: Victoria University Press, 2000), p. 124.

⁶ Gerald Murnane, ABC, Radio National, The Book Show, p. 2.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Murnane, *Barley Patch*, p. 5.

moving amongst his characters and becoming ‘a ghostly fictional character—as the creation of a *reader* rather than a writer ... and my creator was a child’.⁹ Similarly, when I recall my childhood reading, it is as if I too had entered the text. I look down from my buoyant vantage point to the action which the author as ‘sub-creator’¹⁰ has produced and which I also create and re-create through my unrestrained imagination. If writing is ‘magic making’,¹¹ then so is reading, and likewise, story telling.

Little Red Riding Hood has always been one of my favourite fairy tales. In the story that exists both in my childhood memories and in my mind’s eye, I can see a small girl wearing a blood-red cape and a hood covering her head. She is skipping down a well-worn path through the trees in a sunny forest. She has her back to me. [Danger always lurks just behind you when you have your back turned.] I see her skipping innocently and feel fear and panic for her. Little Red Riding Hood does not know that the Big Bad Wolf is stalking her; he can reach out and grab her scarlet cape with his horrible claws, he is a ‘carnivore incarnate’¹² with large teeth and he whispers ‘all the better to eat you with’. I watch her and see that she is wearing shiny black patent leather shoes, with little silver buckles. The shoes will help her to flee from the wolf; she will be as fast as she needs to be to get away from him. I always long for shiny black shoes. I want to join the adventure, enter the alternative universe and join in the thrill of the escape, but only within the safety of my own imagination.

In my new suburban nineteen seventy four Western Sydney landscape, I encountered my own personal Big Bad Wolf in the guise of two innocent looking older girls who lived in a street I had to walk through to get home after school. A friend and I walked together; these other girls took an instant dislike to us. We never spoke to them. I thought that perhaps they knew we lived in the migrant hostel close by and this was the reason why they were so savage and vicious towards us. If the girls managed to get a hold of us, they would hit us and pull our hair, call us ‘wogs’, the spittle flying from their mouths. I did not know what this word ‘wog’ meant. The girls did not catch us very often. Until my friend and I found another way home, we would start running before we got near the place we thought was their home. My friend would shout

⁹ Murnane, *Barley Patch*, p. 15.

¹⁰ J.R.R. Tolkien, [Fairy-Stories] ‘Manuscript A’, in *Tolkien On Fairy Stories*, ed. by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson (Hammersmith, England: 1947; 2008), pp. 173-194 (p. 176).

¹¹ ‘Robert Dessaix, Observation, Wisdom and Narrative’ (transcript), Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Radio National, The Book Show, 12 March 2007, accessed 27 October, 2009, unpaginated.

¹² Angela Carter, ‘The Company of Wolves’, in her Carter, Angela, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (New York, Penguin Books, 1993), p. 118.

‘run, run, run, don’t look back, don’t stop’. I take a big breath and just run, my stomach is a heaving, churning, about to burst. I want to cry, but I do not have time to, because I have to screw my eyes up, grit my teeth and run. I have to flee from the panic nipping at my heels; ‘please, please, please’ is the magic chant going through my head.

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Those girls are now as insubstantial as a dream to me, but when I was nine years old they were as one with the Big Bad Wolf. I do not remember how my friend and I resolved our dilemma, how we survived our perilous walk home, but we did. All I recall was the image of the wolf in my head when I ran, and the soothing pleasure of reading when I got home. I imagined the girls had never read any tales of terror, could not have ever read any, or they would have behaved differently. Perhaps even then I felt—in a vague and simplistic fashion—that reading guides us ‘towards social, moral and psychological maturity’.¹³ Reading and imagination-arousing stories have been my moral compass, my guides through love, relationships, fear, pleasure and boundless joy.

Reading propelled me into an enchanted world. I travelled ‘without stepping out of my house’.¹⁴ Like Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy,¹⁵ I had entered a land where ‘time flows differently from ours. If you spent a hundred years in Narnia, you would still come back to our world at the very same hour on the very same day on which you left’.¹⁶ While I had tentatively entered this world through reading and story-telling in Spanish, my true entry came about only when I learnt to read in English. It took about six months for me to become fluent in the new language; and this is not unusual for a migrant child.

The first books I remember reading were from the Scholastic Book Club at school. I begged my parents to buy me mentioned books when the newsletters were sent home. I loved two books in particular, *Princess Tales*,¹⁷ which included the story, ‘The Twelve Dancing Princesses’ who wear out their satin shoes every night, despite being securely locked in their room. Any man who can discover their secret can choose a princess for his wife. I always thought the reward was a little ludicrous. The story is a journey through a hidden world; only the princesses can enter and

¹³ Shirley Foster, and Judy Simons, *What Katy Read: Feminist Re-Readings of ‘Classic’ Stories for Girls* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1995), p. 153.

¹⁴ Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, trans. Hardie St. Martin (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 293.

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (Hammersmith: Collins, 1950; 2001).

¹⁶ C.S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, (Hammersmith, England: Collins, 1952; 1998), p. 24.

¹⁷ *Princess Tales*, ed. by Nora Kramer (New York, Scholastic Book Services, 1975), p. 18.

leave at will, much like reading itself. The book is beautifully illustrated and most delicately hand coloured—by me.

The other book I loved was *The Phantom Tollbooth*¹⁸ by Norton Juster. This is a story about Milo, a boy who receives a gift of a magic tollbooth and then he travels through it with his pedal car to the ‘Lands Beyond’, where he has many adventures and travels through many lands including ‘Dictionopolis’ where you can buy and sell words in the local market: ‘Milo had never thought much about words before, but these looked so good that he longed to have some.’¹⁹ Milo, like me as a child, did not understand all the words he came across, but he wants to learn about them, they look ‘very grand and elegant.’²⁰ Reading helped me to fall in love with the beauty of language and the worlds and imagery writers create through words. As J.R.R. Tolkien so beautifully put it, ‘the liking of fairy-tales comes with a beginning of liking for literature’.²¹ Reading stories and hearing oral tales enhance the understanding of our world and support the ongoing making of our identities.

Verbal Magic

I could not, and still can not, get enough of the beauty of words and of the magic inherent in beautiful writing. As a child, I would do my reading in quiet places where I could be alone, without distraction. I would read to the neglect of all else, and sometimes still do. I read at school where I would sequester myself in an out of bounds area at lunchtime, a little cubby like room, there was no light, apart from stripy sunlight filtered through the gaps in aged timber slats. A teacher caught me once, but I did not get into trouble. How could they punish a child for reading? I read while I walked, I read at the dinner table, in the bath, and once I read my book at a wedding. The groom made a comment to my mother about my ‘anti-social’ tendencies, and she told him to leave me in peace.

I read by torchlight under the bed sheets. I shared a room with my long-suffering younger sister who would plead with me to turn the light off and would then tell my mother I was reading by torchlight, which she claims kept her awake. I used to wait until my sister was asleep, so I would not have to hear her incessant whining. I would turn our bedside lamp on and throw a silky scarf over the shade so that the light would not wake my sister. I fell asleep more than once after I had read a page or two and one night the scarf caught fire. The smell of something burning

¹⁸ Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth* (Hammersmith, England: Harper Collins Children’s Books, 1961; 2008).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

²¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, ‘On Fairy Stories’, *Manuscript A*, pp. 186-187.

alerted my mother, and she extinguished the small fire. I was oblivious to it and I got into trouble, but I felt no remorse for my solitary episode of pyromania. This did not stop me from trying to come up with other surreptitious ways to continue reading well past the stroke of midnight.

The Escape of the Prisoner

Hélène Cixous has written about reading as:

a clandestine furtive act ... Reading is not as insignificant as we claim ... Reading is a provocation, a rebellion: we open the book's door, pretending it is a simple paperback cover, and in broad daylight escape! we are no longer there: this is what real reading is.²²

Unbeknownst to them, my parents helped me to 'escape', they did not buy a large number of books, but I always had a library card and I became a great borrower of books. My father, who is also a compulsive reader, was also instrumental in my ongoing love affair with reading. He has always loved going to auctions and once came home with a box of books for me. I thought they must have belonged to another young girl with a taste for literature. The books included: Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did*, L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Avonlea* and *Jennie*²³ by Paul Gallico. I loved all these books and they led me to read other books such as *Anne of Green Gables*²⁴ and more Katy books. I also read all the Enid Blyton books I could get a hold of.

The two books that stand out for me from my childhood are *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* by C.S. Lewis²⁵ and the previously mentioned *Jennie*. Both books inhabit a realm of fantasy where the reader enters a landscape of enchantment and a world beyond the page. The books, like folk tales, contain moral messages, they are elemental 'black marks on a white page, but behind those or surrounding those marks is a universe of meaning'.²⁶ This meaning is one in large part created by the reader. *Jennie* is about a boy, Peter, who is hit by a truck and falls into a dream like world where he becomes a cat and meets the eponymous feline, Jennie. She teaches him how to behave as a cat, in essence how to live life. Peter's first awareness of himself as a cat is confusing for him, 'his image seemed to quiver as though things were happening to it from inside'.²⁷ Reading is, amongst other things, an act that occurs from within ourselves, 'inside us'; it is a process unique to

²² Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*, trans. by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 21.

²³ Paul Gallico, *Jennie* (London: Michael Joseph, 1950).

²⁴ L.M. Montgomery, 1908.

²⁵ First published 1950.

²⁶ Gerald Murnane, 'Gerald Murnane and the Barley Patch', p. 3.

²⁷ Paul Gallico, *Jennie*, p. 16.

each of us as readers. We can share an idea of another marvellous world through what we read, we can enter the author's universe but the way that universe looks and feels is unique to each reader and is of our own making.

The fiction I love is not about real events re-enacted but it is literature that takes me on a journey to explore an imaginary world where everything and anything is possible. I do not enjoy reading works that are plot-driven where the writer is constrained by an

unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest ... embalming the whole ...²⁸

I enjoy reading that takes me on an inner journey, on an exploration of self, character and culture. Writing, too, is like reading:

When I write I escape myself, I uproot myself, I am a virgin ... I forget all the people I love ... for the duration of the journey we are killers. (Not only when we write, when we read too. Writing and reading are not separate, reading is part of writing. A real reader is a writer. A real reader is already on the way to writing.)²⁹

This is reading, listening, and writing, about what it means to be human and to experience how others may view as our common journey through a life, one worth reading *and* worthy to be read and heard. Every book yet to be read and tale yet to be heard, is a journey not yet taken, knowledge and understanding yet to be gained; a marvellous land waiting to be experienced by us through the process of reading, story telling and listening.

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²⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. by M.H. Abrams and Stephen Greenblatt, 7th edn, 2 vols. [6] (New York: Norton, 2000), IIc, pp. 2141-2143, 2148-2153 (p. 2150); see also Gerald Murnane, ABC transcript & *Barley Patch* where he discusses his differentiation between 'hasty readers' who want a film rolled before their eyes and 'careful readers' who think and ask themselves 'what is happening' here?

²⁹ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps*, p. 21.

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