

When is a book not a book?

The novels of Welwyn Wilton Katz

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On June 12, 1987, I talked with Welwyn Wilton Katz in her home in London, Ontario, amidst preparations for her daughter's birthday party. We discussed black magic, witchcraft, pure evil, jealousy, greed, and manipulation — all common elements in her novels. These elements have aroused mixed feelings in some of her readers, Katz told me. She was indeed surprised to be called a "pervert" by an irate bookstore patron who did not think anyone, especially writers of children's books, should write about evil, magic, and violence.

This is a familiar argument: children's books should not contain evil or violence, for the readers may be influenced to become violent themselves. Another argument is that because fantasies are "unrealistic", they are escapist literature and may cause children to hope for dream worlds or unrealistic solutions, instead of learning to cope with real problems. Both of these viewpoints are based on a consideration of fantasy and reality as separate entities.

It is difficult, however, to pin-point the dividing line between fantasy and reality, or — more to the point — to define what is "real." Katz and I discussed the nature of reality, its evasiveness and elusiveness, and the fact that people have different perceptions of reality. Katz believes, as is becoming more and more evident in her work, that fantasy and reality are not separate entities, but constantly blend or interact. "I like the interplay of fantasy and reality," Katz said, and readers delight in her subtle interweaving of the natural and the supernatural. In all Katz's books real children struggle with very human problems, some of these problems existing in the "real" world of adolescent awkwardness and difficult family relationships and others arising from a confrontation with unseen and/or supernatural forces.

Indeed, even in "real life," it is not a simple matter to isolate fantasy from reality, extraordinary from ordinary. For instance, in Katz's real life, it was a missing Indian mask that led to her writing *False face*, the book which would win the first International Children's Fiction Contest and hence a prize of \$13,000, publication in six countries, and a trip to the International Children's Book Fair in Bologna, Italy. This mask had been withdrawn from exhibition at the Museum of Indian Archeology in London,

Ontario, because the family that owned it feared that its public display would distort or destroy its religious significance and healing power. When Katz saw the empty display case, she imagined a dangerous mask discovered by a vulnerable young girl, and her book *False face* was conceived. To Katz the story of the real mask is as magical as the fantasy in a children's book. Likewise, her experience visiting various groups of standing stones in Britain and the sensations she experienced of a supernatural power emanating from those stones were as miraculous to her as the events in her book *Sun God, Moon Witch*. Katz and I agreed that supernatural elements pervade our real lives. We have both met, here in Ontario, people claiming to be witches and have heard of observations of the Black Mass.

If there is an interplay of fantasy with reality in ordinary life, it is just as likely that fantasy will be mixed with reality in the world of books. It is strange, then, that fantasy should be called a perversion. Since the beginnings of the literature we know, from fairy tales through the works of E. Nesbit, C.S. Lewis, Alan Garner, Madeleine L'Engle, Susan Cooper, and many others, fantasy has never been merely escapist literature, nor has it included senseless violence or meaningless depictions of evil. In Katz's books the young protagonists are learning to make moral choices, to recognize the reality of evil and human weakness so that they may become mature enough to cope with, and perhaps even change, their world. The supernatural elements guide the children to a recognition of realities that are invisible in the everyday, material world, realities that are universal, timeless, and spiritual. What might be called "fantasy" in Katz's books is actually an expression of a higher level of reality, one that is best grasped through intuition and perhaps best depicted through use of the supernatural. In *Sun God, Moon Witch*, for example, the god and the witch represent aspects of human nature, as well as cosmic energies. Katz's depiction of them as human-like is a way of making them visible and therefore comprehensible to readers. The fantasy elements in each book are real, as well as symbolical, and affect — even sometimes explain — the "real" events and relationships.

Still, fantasy books, and children's books in general, are not always taken seriously by adult readers. According to Katz, Janet Lunn was once asked, "When are you going to write a real book?" Are children's books not real? "When is a book not a book?", a riddle the protagonists of *Witchery Hill* must solve, is in some ways an unanswerable paradox: a book is more than a physical object, can exist without maintaining a physical presence, and always points beyond itself. Fiction and real life, like fantasy and reality, are inseparably intertwined.

As a writer, Katz has been growing increasingly more skillful at showing the inseparability of fantasy and reality, the interrelationships of the two

levels as they play with and against each other. With each book her writing style and her development of structure have become more technically sophisticated and her themes more subtly presented. Recently, she has begun to focus more fully on the realistic aspects of the stories, while, paradoxically, developing more successfully the fantasy elements and their linkage with the real world. She is becoming more and more adept at combining the two lessons she learned as a public-school mathematics teacher: to listen to children (a lesson which helped her with the realism of her novels, especially in the creation of characters and the writing of dialogue); and to structure (a lesson she learned from planning her teaching day and from thinking about her discipline, mathematics, which she said "is magical...you can start with nothing and create a whole world").

Katz began creating worlds by writing a very long adult fantasy novel, then a very short children's book. Her first book, *The Prophecy of Tau Ridoo* (Tree Frog, 1982) was the first book of a trilogy, of which the other two were completed and contracted, but never published because of the publisher's financial difficulties. In this book Katz created a world that she referred to as "pure fantasy": the children, like the children in C.S. Lewis's Narnia series, enter another world through a passage in a house and undertake a journey to save a world from darkness and authoritarianism. The children are "real", but never three-dimensional, while Tau Ridoo is an obvious fantasy world replete with a witch-helper, a prince, and toys which have come to life. It is an allegorical world, in which light has been held captive in a hall of mirrors. The children, of course, triumph and return to their shadowy real world, in which their sick mother has now recovered. This book is certainly less realistic and less serious than Katz's later books, but the dialogue is lively and amusing and the relationships among the children playfully and colorfully described.

The next book Katz wrote was *Sun God, Moon Witch* (Douglas & McIntyre, 1986). This book did not at once find a publisher. It was set aside until after *Witchery Hill* came out; Katz then revised it, but in the end the early version was the one published. In *Sun God, Moon Witch*, the protagonists do not need to enter a fantasy world; rather, the supernatural level enters their world and affects their lives. Except for certain crossovers, however, the two worlds remain separate, even though the main character, Thorny McCall, must confront moral issues that bridge the gap between the two levels of reality. Thorny, in the realistic realm, is a young girl abandoned by her mother and raised by her manipulative, egotistical father. She is sent to stay with her Aunt Jenny and cousin Patrick in an English village near some ancient standing stones while her father and his new bride are on their honeymoon. On the supernatural level, Belman (who is really the sun god in human form) has come to the village to destroy the standing stones which are under the influence of his mother, the moon

goddess, in order that he may overpower his mother and control the earth. The two worlds come together in Thorny's moral dilemma: in order to save the world from destruction, she must recognize Belman's similarity to her father and perceive and reject the manipulative charm both men hold over her.

Katz tackled some difficult technical problems in this book in her attempt to maintain the otherworldly quality of the supernatural level and introduce the moon goddess figure, who appears to Thorny in supernatural form. The fantasy-reality issue is further complicated by references to folklore about standing stones, scientific theories about earth forces, the magical effects of dowsing and charms, and the yin and the yang. Katz binds these elements together into an uneasy alliance in which the reality of a person's psychological make-up and the presence of such emotions as jealousy, possessiveness, and blind love have a direct effect on a human being's ability to bring under control the supernatural threats to the world. Patrick's jealousy of Thorny's attraction to Belman, and Thorny's need for security and unselfish parents almost prevent Thorny from saving the Stones, and thus the Earth, from destruction.

The book ends with a successful and spellbinding interplay between human and supernatural forces, as we, and the protagonists, realize that the sun god and moon witch, the yin and the yang, the male and female principles, do not constitute a simple opposition between good and evil: either has the potential for bad and good, death and life — it is the balance of those opposites that brings peace and harmony: "Each is worth nothing without the other, yet together they are everything. Let the halves struggle how they will, it is the union that triumphs." If that balance is achieved, the power of evil is neutralized, and life continues.

Witchery Hill (Groundwood, 1984, reviewed in CCL no. 42, 1986), published before but written after *Sun God, Moon Witch*, is also set in an English village and contains some similar themes and motifs — adolescent relationships, divorced parents, stepparents, confrontations with magic and evil, and the necessity of making moral choices. However, the fantasy world is not separate from the real world in this book, but has become an integral part of that world, existing even inside family members and villagers. For instance, when Mike and his divorced father visit family friends in England — Tony, his daughter Lisa, and his second wife Janine — Mike and Lisa discover the existence of a coven and witness black rites and violent power struggles. The children learn that the evil that exists within some human beings can harm, even kill others: Janine, a "real" wicked stepmother, will use violence and magic to gain control of the coven and to possess the secret book of magic, *Le vieux Albert*. To find *Le vieux Albert*, this key to dangerous magic, the children must solve the riddle, "When is a book not a book?" Katz does not hold back in *Witchery Hill*: there is

violence (the sacrifice of a puppy, the death of Lisa's father, an attempt at human sacrifice, a terrifying duel between witches) — and there are realistic problems (Lisa's diabetes, Mike's father's inability to believe the truth, and the problems resulting from divorce). The events in *Witchery Hill* seem more horrifying than do those of *Sun God*, *Moon Witch* because in *Witchery Hill* the evil is hidden inside the real world. *Le vieux Albert* is not a book that is safely behind covers, but is a book that lives inside human minds and controls human lives. Although *Witchery Hill* ends with the triumph of good over evil and reconciliation of father and son, boy and girl, Katz has left the final outcome open to various possibilities. The potential for evil and violence is always present. The future for Lisa and Mike is uncertain. The reader does not close this book with a feeling that the story has ended, for the unfinished story enters our world and our lives, leaving us to wonder.

In writing her next book Katz says that she "took a giant leap." Her style becomes poetic and her structure complex, as she abandons traditional plot structure for an adventurous jumping about in time and in levels of reality. Though she makes use of the Arthurian material favored by so many writers of children's books, including Rosemary Sutcliffe, T.H. White, and Susan Cooper, her treatment of the material is not traditional. In *The third magic* to be published by Groundwood in 1988, the complex patterns of worlds and times shift and play with each other when a young girl is caught in the wrong time, having been accidentally transferred to another world in another century.

False face, the most recently completed novel, and the winner of the International Children's Fiction Contest, contains another innovation for Katz: it is set in her hometown of London, Ontario, a place she thought too boring to write about until she explored the underlayers of myth and human relationships revealed through the Indian mask mentioned earlier. Katz thinks she has "gone far" in this book, but in this case she means "gone far" in her depiction of the difficulties and cruelties in human interactions. This is a book in which the realism is more frightening than the fantasy, in which 13-year-old Laney's discovery of an evil Indian mask may be less frightening than are her interactions with her divorced parents. The powers unleashed affect the real world of the characters, in whom the potential for evil, hatred, and power are present.

It seems that the more Katz enhances the realism in her books, the stronger and more believable is the fantasy — and perhaps that is the paradox of the fantasy-reality relationship. The principle of magic, "As above...so below," referring to the correspondence of everything on earth to its cosmic or heavenly counterpart (planet, star, angel, etc.), is an important principle in all these novels, with their intimations of such relationships (e.g., sun and moon to stones and human interactions). To this we

may add, "As out there...so in here": in Katz's novels objects, such as the mask and the stones, often symbolize human emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. In ancient times magic was not separated from human life (or from human psychology, as we would call it now). The two worlds were and are one. With each novel Katz is getting closer to showing the truth of that ancient view.

If there is not a clear dividing line between reality and fantasy, or between fiction and life, then how can we answer the question she poses in *Witchery Hill*: "When is a book not a book?" In *Witchery Hill* the "book" in question exists not as an external object, but as a mental construct. Katz's books, too, live on in the minds of the readers, who carry with them these blends of fantasy and reality, violence and love, until they coalesce into a richer new world.

Katz and I did not try to find answers to these perhaps unanswerable questions: we concluded our conversation of June 12th when we heard the sound of children arriving downstairs for a birthday party, oblivious to those dark forces unleashed in the fantasy worlds created in the upstairs study.

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