

Jane Langton's *The Fledgling*: What If? Then What? So What?

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Jane Langton's *The Fledgling*, a 1981 Newbery Honor Book, is again recognized for its excellence as the 2000 Phoenix Honor Book. In children's literature, Jane Langton is best known for her series of five fantasies about the Dorian-Hall family, who, while living in modern-day Concord, Massachusetts, are highly influenced by the history and philosophies of the nineteenth-century transcendentalists. *The Fledgling*, with eight-year-old Georgie Dorian as the protagonist, is the fourth and finest book in the series.

In 1973, Jane Langton wrote a two-part essay for *The Horn Book Magazine* in which she analyzes the basic tenets of fantasy for children. She distills the discussion down to three fundamental questions to be asked and answered of fantasy: "What if? Then what? So what?" (Langton, "The Weak Place" 433). How then does *The Fledgling* measure up to Jane Langton's own criteria for excellence in fantasy?

Langton borrows from E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* to establish the dividing line between reality and fantasy:

There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs forever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in that curtain which are marked by magic rings, and amulets, and the like, almost anything can happen. (qtd. in Langton, "The Weak Place" 433-34)

There is a weak spot in the curtain for Georgie, who is obsessed with flying. She has even practiced by jumping down the stairs and off the porch railing: "She had flown. There was no doubt at all. She had drifted to the top of the house, and then she had floated to the ground, coming to rest on the grass in the front yard like a feather or a piece of milkweed down . . ." (61). When a talking Canada goose breaks through the curtain between fantasy and reality, Georgie, who is at one with nature, is not surprised.

The Canada goose, whom Georgie names the Goose Prince, taps on her bedroom window one night to ask if she'd like to go flying. During this first journey, he takes Georgie to Walden Pond. The fantastical idea that an eight-year-old girl could go flying on the back of a goose is carefully laid out by the author. There is emphasis on Georgie's size: "Georgie was eight years old, but she looked much younger—six, or even five—she was so small and skinny" (12). Mr. Preek, President of the Thoreau State Bank, emphasizes the size difference between Georgie and the goose in a letter to his personal secretary, Miss Prawn: "She is a very small child, you will remember almost weightless, compared to the immense size and wingspread of the giant bird" (60). The *what if* of a giant goose taking a young girl flying develops logically out of the story's plot.

In her essay, Langton discusses the *then what* of fantasy: "He [the writer] must rack his brain to answer the question, 'Given such-and-such a situation, what would

really happen?’ It is the *really* that is to be stressed. *Realism sharpens fantasy*” (Langton, “The Weak Place” 571). Langton continues with her emphasis on realism: “The most important key to the *then-what* question is the realness of the characterization” (“The Weak Place” 571).

In *The Fledgling*, Langton is a master at weaving together fantasy and reality. The goose’s motivation for adopting Georgie is clear. In the first chapter, the goose finds a bright, glowing object, bobbing near the shore of Walden Pond. He realizes: “He must give the present to someone. Not just anybody. Oh, no! It was too good for just anybody. He must give it to someone who would understand how precious it was. Someone who would take good care of it. But who? That was the question” (2). He longs to find someone who deserves this present; his relationship with Georgie convinces him that she is the one. The goose is also alone, an outsider to his flock of younger geese with half-grown fledglings in tow. He is the oldest of his flock, while Georgie is the youngest of hers. In Georgie, he has a fledgling once more. In fact, when his flock of geese continue south, the Goose Prince stays behind out of love for his human fledgling. The relationship between Georgie and her Goose Prince deepens with each journey to Walden Pond, the perfect place, Thoreau would agree, for a union of souls. During these nightly excursions, the Goose Prince teaches Georgie to fly, or to be more exact, to float on a column of air and fall through the sky:

“Just slip off and glide,” said the Goose Prince. “You’ll see. The wind is just right. It will hold you if you try it now.” And then he warbled it again in his soft fluting voice, “*Flyyyyyyyyyyy*” . . . Letting go, she slid down the feathery slope of his back until she felt something nudge at her from below. It was a pillow of air, lifting her, holding her steadily and firmly like the palm of a supporting hand. Then at last all the stringy little muscles in Georgie’s body loosened. Spreading her arms, she floated on the column of air. (91-92)

Langton’s best writing for children are in these convincing mystical scenes of Georgie and her Goose Prince at Walden Pond. The scenes are carefully rooted in Georgie’s love for and understanding of nature: “Georgie was a little wild thing, too, like the geese, thought Uncle Freddy. She knew something he didn’t know. Or something he had forgotten. Something too young and wild for him to remember. Oh, he’d give anything to remember!” (102)

Georgie and the Goose Prince are well-developed characters, as are Uncle Freddy, his orphaned niece and nephew, Eleanor and Eddy, and his wife and Georgie’s mother, Alexandra Dorian Hall. While Eleanor and Eddy try to protect Georgie and bring her down to reality, both Uncle Freddy and Alexandra, guided by their passion for transcendentalism, understand that Georgie has a very special relationship with nature. Georgie’s mother knows that the goose comes for Georgie at night and worries about her safety, but she lets her go, realizing that their relationship is “a precious thing” (102).

In addition to sharply drawn characters, for the *then what* of fantasy to work, the child reader must want to continue reading, “to be caught on a hook of suspense”

(Langton, "Weak Place" 571). Langton develops this suspense through the characters of Miss Prawn and Mr. Preek. After witnessing Georgie jumping off her porch and floating up to the roof, Miss Prawn decides Georgie is either a fairy or a saint. She devises a plot to make money by selling water that Georgie as saint has blessed. Georgie obstinately refuses to cooperate. Langton again highlights the craziness of Miss Prawn when she gets into a wrestling match with Georgie, Eleanor, and Eddy. She grabs hold of Georgie and cries to the family: "I warned you about the full moon. The child was taking off. She was flying away. She was going home to the fairies. Didn't I tell you to watch out? You can't say I didn't warn you!" (122)

Mr. Preek is a much more serious problem. He simply cannot understand Georgie and feels he must save her from the evil goose. As hunting season approaches, suspense mounts when Mr. Preek buys a gun and begins stalking Georgie and the goose. Tension builds when Mr. Preek thinks he sees two geese flying over Walden Pond and shoots. Georgie, plunging between her Goose Prince and Mr. Preek, is shot in the arm. This ends Georgie's flights to Walden Pond; her family swarms around to protect her.

During Georgie's separation from the Goose Prince, she experiences a growth spurt. She realizes that she is now too big for flying, either on her own or on the back of the Goose Prince. Planning one last meeting with her Goose Prince to say good-bye, she waits until after midnight of the last day of the hunting season. Georgie and the goose meet briefly, long enough for him to give her the present and ask her to take care of it. What Georgie doesn't realize is that this is the night daylight savings time ends. Mr. Preek is hiding behind a hedge and when the Goose Prince begins to fly off, he shoots. The beloved goose drops to Georgie's feet, dead. Mr. Preek's mission to protect the children of Concord from evil beasts is complete.

While critics and reviewers have criticized Langton's characterizations of Miss Prawn and Mr. Preek as mere symbols or caricatures, they do develop in the course of the story, in the case of Miss Prawn from a meddling neighbor to a nearly insane woman and in Mr. Preek "from a bumbling nuisance into a real villain" (Rees 86). The goodness of Georgie and her Goose Prince is balanced by the evil of Miss Prawn and especially Mr. Preek. As noted by book reviewer Patricia Manning: "While Mr. Preek and Miss Prawn are one-dimensional, their hard edges contrast perfectly with Georgie's thistle down quality and the sleek softness of the great goose" (73).

In Langton's analysis, the *what-ifs* and the *then-whats* of fantasy add up to the *so-what*. She asks: "What is it that makes a book unforgettable? . . . What makes for quality?" (Langton, "The Weak Place" 573). For Langton, the unforgettable elements of a fantasy are founded in the author's personal vision, her interests and obsessions (Langton, "The Weak Place" 573). In *The Fledgling*, Langton successfully plays with her personal interest in the transcendentalists of Concord, Massachusetts, especially Henry Thoreau and *Walden*. Uncle Freddy and his wife run The Concord College of Transcendental Knowledge. The busts of famous transcendentalists are like ghosts in the Victorian home. In fact, Georgie shares her hopes and experiences with the bust of Henry Thoreau. Georgie and the Goose Prince often rest on the site of the house Thoreau built on the

shore of Walden Pond. Moreover, Georgie is a young transcendentalist in her appreciation of nature and in her struggle to transcend herself. Langton's passion for transcendentalism permeates the novel.

According to Langton, the second element that makes a fantasy unforgettable is its message or lesson. She states: "Meaning is not easy. Sometimes the attempt at it is too vaguely vast, too preachy-teachy, too thin and scant" (Langton, "The Weak Place" 575). It is here in the theme that *The Fledgling* fails to meet Langton's own criteria. I agree with critics Alethea K. Helbig and Agnes Regan Perkins that "the final revelation of the gift seems contrived" (216). The conclusion of the rubber ball becoming the world and Georgie promising to take good care of it becomes a didactic moral lesson. This ending is too "preachy-teachy."

What if? Then what? So what? In *The Fledgling*, we experience the magic of a talking goose breaking through Nesbit's gossamer curtain. By developing the relationship between this magical bird and a very real child, Langton takes the reader along on those beautiful, nocturnal flights over Walden Pond. Here there is a perfect blending of the fantastic and the real. But then, Georgie's world collapses when evil destroys her tenuous connection to a dream. So, through her recognition of evil, Georgie experiences the end of childhood. The beauty of the novel and its theme is in the relationship between Georgie and the Goose Prince and their mystical journeys. Thoreau's own words as quoted in the foreword of the novel are a reminder of a child's special relationship with nature: "I think that no experience which I have today comes up to . . . the experiences of my boyhood. . . . Nature developed as I developed, and grew up with me. . . . In youth, before I lost any of my senses, I can remember that I was all alive." Georgie is a fledgling no longer, but the memory of this childhood experience will last a lifetime.

Works Cited

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