

## Monica Hughes's *The Isis Trilogy*: Feminist Rite of Passage?

Anita Tarr

Monica Hughes's *The Isis Trilogy* began with the 1980 publication of *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, continued in 1981 with *The Guardian of Isis*, and ended in 1982 with *The Isis Pedlar*. The trilogy chronicles the life story of Olwen Pendennis on the planet Isis, from age sixteen to old age and death. Olwen was orphaned as a baby on the planet when her parents, the first human inhabitants of Isis, were killed by a storm. Since then, Olwen has been raised by Guardian, a human-appearing robot who serves, in Hughes's own words, as "[h]er protector, her mother and father, her teacher, her close friend" ("Writer's" 16). Together Guardian and Olwen manage the lighthouse on Isis, which sends out reports of the planet's conditions to space travelers needing assistance. So far, no ship has stopped at Isis. Olwen has been the only human there, and she is happy in her companionship with Guardian, who provides her with everything she needs. But all this changes, when a spaceship of eighty humans from Earth lands, planning to set up the first colony on Isis. Olwen falls in love with Mark London, a young colonist, but their romance fails when he rejects her; in fact, all the colonists reject her. She and Guardian remove themselves from the human colony. Olwen finally understands the difference between loneliness and being alone—Hughes's self-confessed theme for the novel.

The reason for Mark's rejection of Olwen is what makes this first novel so meaningful for adolescent readers, as it focuses on what Mary Pipher calls "lookism" and examines the human and especially male preoccupation with physical appearance (98). Hughes also examines ecological issues—that is, the impact of colonization on the environment. These two issues—physical appearance and ecology—are tied together smoothly through gender. Even though Olwen is human, she was born on Isis and has adapted herself to the planet. This is opposite to the human colonists, who, of course, begin altering the planet to suit their needs. The planet Isis is not ideal for humans; although it has oxygen, it is in orbit around a very hot sun named Ra, which also rains down damaging ultraviolet rays. Only the valleys, where the colonists settle, offer a suitable atmosphere and are protected enough for human occupation. But Olwen does not live in the valleys. She dwells in the high mountains, where there is little oxygen and harmful sunrays. She is not limited to valley living and can roam wherever she wants; she is free. She is able to withstand the harsher conditions of the mountains because through the years Guardian has changed her genetic structure so that on the surface she is more like a lizard than a human. Her skin is hard and scaly, her lungs are large, her hands are clawed, and she is green in color. The only remnant of what we would recognize as human female beauty is her long auburn hair. But as Guardian reminds her, she is functional and is thus beautiful. She has adjusted to the planet. In fact, Hughes is fairly obvious in making readers see that Olwen IS Isis.

Guardian has allowed Olwen to grow up confident and free, but he has told Olwen neither what he has done nor that she might appear different to other humans. He also knows that the colonists, being human, may have prejudices, so before Olwen meets them, he makes her wear a body disguise, a mask that makes her skin appear white and

soft, not green and scaly, telling her that it will protect her from stray germs. Thus, when Mark London meets Olwen, he sees that she matches his ideal of the beautiful woman. They quickly fall in love. Their love is doomed, of course, for when Mark encounters Olwen without her mask, he is horrified at her appearance. All the colonists reject her, even after she rescues a small boy during a storm. So Olwen and Guardian leave the colony and move far away. Herself rejected, Olwen decides to reject the colonists and their patriarchal attitudes. The colonists will make their own way without the light of Olwen to lead them.

This might sound pretty hopeless, but it is quite clear who is wrong-headed and who is wise. Mark London is superficially drawn to match his shallow character, and Olwen gets all our sympathy, especially since readers might be suspicious but are not actually told of the genetic changes Guardian has made until Olwen herself is told about two-thirds into the book. And when Olwen finally sees herself in a mirror (Guardian has allowed none in the house), she at first sees herself as “Other” (Hughes’s word) in comparison to the colonists. She does not recognize herself. But when she examines her glorious green skin, her double eyelids, her auburn hair, she sees no “deformities” but only beauty and function. She runs to Guardian and tells him, “Thank you for my body. It’s beautiful!” (85). In one fell swoop Hughes shatters the patriarchal tyranny of the mirror. It is a shining feminist moment. In *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction and Beyond*, Marlene Barr defines feminist science fiction as “feminist fiction [including science fiction] that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal one we know, yet returns to confront that known patriarchal world in some cognitive way” (11). Because Olwen removes herself from patriarchal structure and influence and embraces her own female power, *The Keeper of the Isis Light* is undeniably an example of feminist science fiction.

It is tempting to identify the entire trilogy as a feminist statement, but I don’t believe this is the case. The Isis Trilogy is female, it is archetypal, but it is not necessarily all feminist. By making this judgment I do not mean to be negative or diminish the three novels’ importance both for adolescent reading of gender issues or for science fiction. Reading about Olwen Pendennis can be crucial for adolescent gender studies. The problem is that by the second novel, *The Guardian of Isis*, Olwen has become a secondary character, and by the third novel, *The Isis Pedlar*, she is dead. Raymond E. Jones, who has written more about Monica Hughes than any other critic, identifies Olwen’s character as a female archetype. Claiming that Olwen’s development is “a victory of independent female identity,” using Annis Pratt’s terminology, he examines how she moves through “the central archetypal phases of female identity: maiden, mother, and crone” (170, 169). Olwen’s first sixteen years have been idyllic, living with her perfect father figure Guardian in an Edenic Isis. With Mark London’s arrival, she “becomes a maiden” when she falls in love and even ponders radical surgery to make her again a normal human. After Mark’s rejection of her, she denies human society and goes on a physical and spiritual journey, finding a green world lover (an animal), and she is reborn. When she rescues the boy Jody during the storm, she “becomes mother and nurturer” (177). “Finally, she becomes crone, the woman who wisely knows the value of

her own experience and can offer it to others.” She realizes that she can intuit when dangerous storms are coming and can alert the colonists (177).

Nevertheless, in *The Guardian of Isis*, it is Jody, the grandson of the boy Olwen rescued in the storm, who is the primary character and whose rite of passage is central. Olwen acts as a type of guide for him and helpmeet. Jody is a young man in the colony who is cast out because of his sacrilegious views. He journeys into the mountains—by this time he has adapted enough to withstand the lack of oxygen—and finds Olwen and Guardian. They help him return to the colony and save it from being flooded. While talking with Jody, Olwen and Guardian discover that Mark London has used his power to manipulate history and has lied to all of them. After Mark rejected Olwen, he felt betrayed and foolish, and his humiliation turned into an all-out assault against Olwen. Through his powerful office as President, he dispensed with all modern technology and forced the colony into a primitive rural state, accompanied by primitive gender relations. The colony is now radically patriarchal, with Mark himself as a kind of Old Testament leader. Women are nothing more than servants. In just a few generations, he has altered the colonists’ beliefs by brainwashing the young into a new religion. In typical patriarchal fashion, Mark has renamed both Guardian and Olwen: the colonists refer to Guardian as The Shining One and Olwen as That Old Woman or The Ugly One. They believe that Guardian is the one who created Isis; Olwen has become the great destroyer, Death.

Hughes has remarked that she chose the name Olwen for its female, Celtic quality and Mark London for its Roman sound, implying that the conflict in the first novel reflects the domination of female cultures by patriarchal Roman conquest (Jones 175). Jody’s participation in this conflict is notable for two reasons: his name, Jody, is androgynous, and he is black. He is on the border in terms of both gender and race. Thus, he is the only one who can see beyond the mask that Mark London has invented to shield his people from the truth about Isis. Jody was cast out from the colony because he asked too many questions and surmised that an object declared sacred by Mark London actually has a function and can be used to help the colony. But to question is to defy, so he is ostracized. In his journey of spiritual growth, Jody seeks wisdom from Olwen and superhuman power from Guardian. He is reborn into a man as he conquers his fears and is welcomed back into the colony. Even though he is in all ways the hero of the story through this rite of passage, he cannot tell of his exploits to his fellow humans, for fear of upsetting their now-established culture too abruptly. But the end of *The Guardian of Isis* states that “not too far into the future, he would lead his people out of their narrow Valley and show them the rest of their new world” (140).

At the beginning of the third book, *The Isis Pedlar*, readers might be disappointed to learn that Jody was not successful in leading his people away from patriarchy and oppression but has been relegated to the sidelines of power, while Mark London’s son has become president. The London regime has been solidified, Olwen has died, and the colonists have settled into an agricultural phase with no memory of where they came from originally. Jody’s nephew David is the protagonist of this story, along with another young female, Moira, a traveler who has come to Isis. Moira’s father is a trickster, a ne’er-do-well who sees the colonists as easy prey. Moira and David get Guardian’s help

in rescuing the colonists—this time from being hoodwinked by Moira’s father. Moira is courageous and intelligent, but she is no Olwen. In the end, although only fifteen, she decides she is tired of traveling with her father and is content to settle down with David and live the simple life. She has separated from her father, whom she has for years served as a mother figure, only to take on the traditional role of wife. It is as if Olwen never was. Fortunately, as a result of the meddling of Moira’s father, the London dynasty comes to an end, and Jody finally comes into power, promising a future of change. Guardian actually decides to leave Isis and takes Moira’s place as her father’s conscience and caretaker as he desires to travel and see the galaxy. To say the least, the third novel is a disappointing conclusion to the story of Isis.

Both *The Guardian of Isis* and *The Isis Pedlar* shove females from center focus in order to highlight a male character. Granted, Jody and David ask questions and are not content with the oppressive social order Mark London has imposed, and Jody does seek advice from Olwen and reveres her. Nevertheless, the patriarchal culture is not changed because of a female character but because of a male character. The succeeding two novels are not so much a conflict between male and female values as between opposing males and their power. Hughes deftly veils the issue of race by isolating Jody and David from the rest of the community. They are resented by the Londons not because they are black but because they are inquisitive, determined, and sensitive. Their discontent with London’s power is what makes them outcasts, but it is subtly conveyed that Mark dislikes them for deeper reasons. Therefore, the prejudice that Mark displays is not just gender but also racially oriented—all the trappings of patriarchy.

The most puzzling character in all three novels, and the one that truly ties them together, is Guardian. He is first an ordinary robot who is reprogrammed by Olwen’s mother on her deathbed to be Olwen’s protector. He does serve as both parents to Olwen, but as he adapts her to Isis, he also becomes her creator. Later, after Olwen and Guardian leave the colonists, Olwen becomes the superior figure, and Guardian acts as her devoted servant, but it appears more that they are long-time lovers. Even though he is not human, he seems to be the most admirable male character of all. He provides for every desire for Olwen and is the perfect companion for her, and yet he is not functional sexually. The green-world lover for Olwen is not all that makes her happy. That is, the perfect lover for Olwen, as well as the god-figure to all the colonists, is, curiously, a eunuch.

Marlene Barr asserts that “Feminist science fiction writers are lost in space”—ignored both by feminist critics and postmodern critics, simply because they write science fiction. Feminist science fiction written for children is ignored triply—by feminists, by postmodernists, and often even by children’s literature critics. Like Jody in the story, it is a border subject. It is difficult to find *The Isis Trilogy* even in libraries. It is extremely gratifying to hear that it will, as a result of its winning the Phoenix Award, be reissued in paperback. *The Guardian of Isis* and *The Isis Pedlar* are significant, but *The Keeper of the Isis Light* is an especially important book, one that is not just eminently teachable, but rewarding in itself for all of us to read. It is also important for us as a story of female coming of age, of colonization, of gender issues, and of adolescent

development. It is a memorable book. I am proud to be part of the committee that selected it for the Phoenix award this year.

## Works Cited

- Barr, Marlene S. *Lost in Space: Probing Feminist Science Fiction*. Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1993.
- Hughes, Monica. *The Guardian of Isis*. 1981. London: Methuen/Magnet, 1983.
- . *The Isis Pedlar*. 1982. New York: Atheneum, 1983.
- . *The Keeper of the Isis Light*. 1980. London: Mammoth/Mandarin, 1991.
- . "The Writer's Quest." *Canadian Children's Literature* 26 (1982): 6-25.
- Jones, Raymond E. "'True Myth': Female Archetypes in Monica Hughes's *The Keeper of the Isis Light*." *Science Fiction for Young Readers*. Ed. C. W. Sullivan III. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993. 169-78.
- Pipher, Mary. *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*. New York: Ballantine, 1994.