

## *Memory and the Blurring of Genre*

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In this year's Phoenix Award winner, *Memory*, Margaret Mahy stages a complex series of ethical dilemmas centered upon the tensions between *remembering* and *imagining* the pasts that we bring forward into our present day identities and experiences. Nineteen-year-old Jonny Dart is haunted by the tragic death of his luminous but slightly callous sister, whose desire to push the edges of her own daring leads to a fatal fall from a rock ledge into the ocean below. The fall is so quick, so unexpected, that it has no story of its own, so over the five years since the accident, Jonny has spun a cocoon of story around it, imbuing the mundane and random nature of the accident with mystical significance. Perhaps the games they played—he, his sister, and his sister's best friend, Bonny—had caused this outcome; their performances, in which Bonny was an ethereal, fortune-telling priestess, Janine a bold adventurer, and Jonny the Wolfman at their side, had somehow come together in this tragic yet inevitable moment.

Alternately, he has spun a story of his own culpability, that he had somehow pushed Janine over the edge. Bonny had, after all, invented a lie for him to tell the police in order to forestall endless questions. Instead of saying that he was on the crumbling outcropping alongside Janine, Bonny had told him to say that he was up above on the grassy cliff with her, well on this side of the "danger" sign. Had Bonny seen something, had he done something, that made such a lie necessary, rather than simply an expedient hedge against questions? He did not know for sure after all these years. He remembered only that he had always longed to be dangerous and wild, but he knew he was kind of a wimp, so he had made Bonny and Janine call him Wolfman in their games and stories. He also remembered that he had always been jealous of his sparkling sister, so he could well imagine that it was possible that he had pushed her. As he says to Bonny later, "I could remember not doing it, but I could remember doing it, too" (255).

The distinction between the memory of an event as it actually happened and the memory enshrouded in story is a critical one for Jonny. He fears his own ephemerality. As children, he and Janine were minor celebrities, having tap danced on a commercial. Now, he is

a surreal man whose feet stuttered like typewriters, though the story they wrote down vanished as soon as it was told. It was too shy a story—too full of contradictions which cancelled each other out—to stand being put into words. In the very moment of being communicated, Jonny's story disappeared. (261)

Without his sister, without his being implicated with her, he questions his own value.

Thus, Jonny is trapped in the space of uncertainty surrounding his sister's death: "Sometimes he saw himself spread-eagled against that moment, trying to press himself through it so that he could get on with whatever might be on the other side" (25); at other times, he "wondered if he had managed, after all, to press himself right through the memory of Janine's fall only to come out on the other side, displaced or even mad" (25). The problem for Jonny, as for many of us when it comes to memory, is that "imaginary things, once properly imagined, could grow as powerful and lucid as if they were true. He had always been the victim of stories, not only other people's, but his own as well" (4).

For Jonny, then, memory has become a blur of genres—nonfiction, fantasy, mystery, and perhaps even murder mystery. Mahy complicates this tangle of genres even more by turning Jonny's quest for the truth of Janine's death into a kind of fairy tale. On the fifth anniversary of the accident, Jonny gets drunk and decides to seek out Bonny, whom he has not seen since that day. When he goes to her parent's house, however, they refuse to give him her address. He finds it anyway, on the inside cover of their phone book, but as he is drunk, he does not remember writing it on his hand, and when he finds the blurry remains of the inscription after he recovers, he does not remember what it is for.

Bonny's parents deliver him to a taxi stand where he passes out, and when he awakens, he meets Sophie, an elderly woman pushing a shopping cart through an empty parking lot in the middle of the night. Their encounter suggests the young hero's first meeting with the crone: "Are *you* the one?" she asks, in cryptic folktale fashion. Jonny quickly discerns her dementia and follows her home, ostensibly to keep her safe, he tells himself, but moving "like a man bound by enchantment" (57). His enchantment continues, and as he helps Sophie, he is rewarded for his instinctual kindness in the way of the fairy tale hero: it turns out that Bonny lives next door to Sophie, and she does eventually help Jonny sort out his memory of Janine's accident and get on with his life.

In her essay, "A Dissolving Ghost," Mahy articulates the fairy tale elements of *Memory* clearly, recognizing and defending the mixed genres of the book. She notes that this book, more than any of her others, lays claim to social realism. She herself had an aunt who suffered from Alzheimer's disease, and she had heard the story of a group of dodgy young adults in Christchurch who had moved in to the home of an elderly woman with dementia. Whatever their initial intentions, they were, like Jonny, caring for the old woman and had become protective of her—if anyone were going to exploit her condition, it would be they.

When Mahy was taken to task by a reviewer for the overly quick resolution of Sophie's predicament, she defended her plot on two fronts— first, the realism of her own experience, and second, by demonstrating that her story was not *only* social realism but social realism filled out with a folktale form, which, she says,

...gives me a code by which to decipher experience. I used it in part to interpret my experiences with my aunt, so when I came to tell the truth, as it were, about those experiences, I could not do so without conscious and unconscious reference to folktale. (149)

Not only in fiction, then, but also in life does memory become a blur of genres. Herein lies the complex ethical subtext that permeates Mahy's novel: The crux of Jonny's problem is that he cannot distinguish imagination from reality and is under the sway of a false memory. It is, however, a memory that empowers him, makes him special and dangerous, and sets him apart. It holds him but also upholds him.

His life can thus become a folktale but also a modernist novel. As Mahy constructs Jonny's story, she deploys the central characteristics of modernist fiction. Highlighted in both Jonny and Sophie's pasts and presents, for instance, is the impossibility of access to truth. Jonny's long-term memories are confused in a tangle of

stories, and Sophie's are being dissolved by her disease. The truths of their lives are thus becoming increasingly inaccessible to them.

A second characteristic of modernist fiction, enacted both in the form of the novel and in the form of Sophie's everyday existence, is the dissolution of linear narrative and its eruption into multiple perspectives. Mahy inserts the structured memories that contain Jonny's stories, as well as random memory snippets and catch phrases from Jonny's song on his Walkman, into her narrative, producing an orderly chaos akin to Sophie's home, where cheese can be found in soap dishes, a dead blackbird in the refrigerator, and orange peels in a desk cubby. The containers are there ready for use, but what they should and do contain has gone askew.

To Jonny, this real-life version of surrealist art makes it seem as though "he had cut through the defenses people put up against natural anarchy to the true disintegrating center of things" (264), a condition he recognizes all too well as his own defenses seem to be crumbling. Both he and Sophie have become unreliable narrators of the conditions of their own lives, unable to distinguish between fiction and reality.

What makes for fascinating fiction, however, as Jonny discovers, is often untenable for living one's life. Fortunately for Jonny, he finds Bonny through Sophie. Bonny is Jonny's access to truth, but to be able to hear her as something other than a mystic oracle, he has to pass through his experience with Sophie, his angel of wisdom. Sophie's real memory loss throws into sharp relief the ethics of Jonny's choice to live within his self-aggrandizing confusion. Submitting to his tangled memory, letting himself be haunted, loses its romantic nuance as he faces up to the daily care of a woman who is as likely to go out naked or with her undergarments on the outside as not, who is being victimized by a gang of thugs posing as landlords collecting rent whenever they need beer money, who is convinced that Jonny is her long-lost, forbidden love come back to woo her. Accepting the truth of Janine's death—that it was merely an accident, that Bonny is merely a girl and not a powerful sorceress, and that he was merely a boy and not a murderer—both releases and diminishes him.

The memory of Janine's death gets smaller, Jonny tells Bonny, but in addition: He didn't bother to say that he felt smaller, too. In the beginning of his quest, swollen with apparitions, he had stalked through the city, and it had given in to him—had offered Bonny and Nev, to match up with the ghosts of memory. Exorcising these ghosts, he was set free of them at last. Yet he had lost something, too, for part of their substance had come out of him in the first place. Besides, being haunted had had a seductive glamour about it. Jonny had seen there was a chance to escape from the desolate patches of life by becoming a demon, impervious to pain, but in the end he had dwindled back to being something more ordinary, and was glad to be restored. (276)

When memory becomes a tangle of genres—and when does it not?—certain experiences fall into place and become meaningful. Sophie's condition helps Jonny see the ethical risks inherent in that form of meaning-making, however, and shows him, instead, the grace and value of ordinary memory.

## References

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