

“Everything seemed possible”: Child Agency in *Bridge to Terabithia*

Katherine Paterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* is a work of realistic fiction that behaves like fantasy. It employs common tropes of the children’s fantasy tradition, in which child characters often leave the “real” world for an alternate magical space, participate in adventures, and return again to normalcy. In Paterson’s novel, child protagonists Jess and Leslie crown themselves rulers of Terabithia, a make-believe magical kingdom that serves as a retreat from real-world pressures and an avenue for spiritual growth. Despite being only a figment of the children’s imaginations, Terabithia shares the structure and narrative role of an archetypical fantasy space and echoes elements of Narnia, Neverland, and Wonderland.

While borrowing from the tradition of children’s fantasy, *Bridge to Terabithia* stands apart from its predecessors by giving its characters mastery over their fantasy space. It does not fetishize the innocence of children, nor does it presume any inherent differences between adult and child mentalities. In fact, since Jess and Leslie deliberately model Terabithia after C.S. Lewis’s Narnia, the novel calls into question how “original” a child’s imagination really is. Yet despite being influenced by the ideas of adult children’s authors, Jess and Leslie have a degree of agency rarely found in classic children’s fantasy. Whereas the heroes of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia* grapple with fantasy worlds where the rules are already set, Jess and Leslie have the power to create, control, and commandeer a fantasy space for their own purposes. Furthermore, they are self-aware enough to interpret the fantasy’s significance in their lives—a critical task traditionally left either to adult characters in the story or to readers. As such, *Bridge to Terabithia* draws from and innovates children’s fantasy; it proposes that, rather than limiting child agency, ideas that first came from adults may inspire children to manipulate, innovate, and even subvert those ideas at their pleasure.