

“Falling into Place”: Margaret Mahy’s *Alchemy*

Marilynn S. Olson, Texas State University, San Marcos

Margaret Mahy’s young adult novels frequently include romance, and, unlike many of those written in America, they are not primarily about sexual abuse, AIDS, rejected gender identity, unplanned pregnancy, suicide, rape, or other dreadful consequences of being young and interested in love.¹ Mahy acknowledges some such matters, indeed a number of her characters are single mothers or their children, but she also articulates the differences between what parents want and what their children want and gives neither group the credit for having all the answers. As Tycho thinks, in *Catalogue of the Universe* (our 2005 Phoenix winner): “It was only recently he had begun to find himself keeping more and more secrets from [his mother] because they seemed to have nothing to do with the safe life she wanted for him—a life without pain, sorrow or despair, contented rather than ecstatic” (101). The reasons why Tycho’s instinctive desires are given consideration, in spite of the harrowing nature of living life ecstatically, are roughly two-fold. On the one hand, I think that Mahy assumes, unlike many people, that happiness is not the human norm. As C. G. Jung noted, because the tie between mind and instinct is full of conflict, “the principal aim of psychotherapy is not to transport the patient to an impossible state of happiness, but to help him acquire steadfastness and philosophic patience in the face of suffering” (“Psychotherapy” 81). No matter how a life is carried out, there *will* be suffering, and such a realization may well give some perspective to the perplexities of the teenaged.

Moreover, if one is assessing the things that bring suffering in a Mahy novel, by far the most important is the failure to acknowledge one’s own gifts and work out one’s own destiny. If life is carried out successfully, there will be lovely moments of ecstasy, often in connection with the natural world,² and moments of comfort, often connected with home.³ The individual will fall into harmony with the universe surrounding him or her, if only for a time. The potential for love to contribute to this harmony is demonstrated in a number of Mahy novels. *Alchemy*, published in 2005, is a particularly stylish discussion of ecstasy and self-exploration.

Alchemy concerns Roland Fairfield, a prefect, an imaginative and intelligent student, and a popular extrovert, who one afternoon shoplifts some trivial items from the local supermarket and is mysteriously confronted with the twins of these items by a teacher who had been growing into a kind of avuncular friend. In exchange for not revealing Roland’s crime to the headmaster, which would involve the probable loss of his status and his popular girlfriend and shame his affectionate mother beyond bearing, Roland is asked to check up on Jess Ferret, a girl who shares his birthday and his letter of the alphabet, an introvert who has been sitting next to him in school but not revealing anything about her life or personality for years and years.

His teacher, Mr. Hudson, says that he thinks something has happened to Jess and feels he could make some kind of intervention if only he knew a bit more about what has gone wrong. He points out that Jess and Roland both have parents who spend a great deal of time working, and that this ought to provide some common ground for conversation. He counts on Roland’s glamour to flatter Jess into being more open with him than she is likely to be with a teacher. Naturally, Mr. Hudson’s intentions are *not* altruistic, and thereby hangs much of the excitement of the tale.

Although the text does not reveal this (except by the suggestiveness of the title), the story line of the novel is a witty recapitulation of the steps in the alchemical process traditionally supposed to lead to the creation of the Philosopher's Stone. For the person who realizes this, there are all kinds of little joky details: making coffee, for example, is an example of a chemical distilling and refining process, but when characters in the story come together to share refreshments, they are naturally also in the process of trying to make some kind of change in their relation to one another. The characters' geographic locations, metals in their vicinity, and liquids consumed are part of the fun.

This kind of material alchemy is alluded to briefly in the text, when Roland sees beakers and chemical apparatus in a room that was once Jess's father's home laboratory, but Jess's own claim to be an alchemist is not based upon chemistry experiments. Although she is the "scientific" and "mathematical" one of the pair, a reversal of Jung's idea of the anima that Mahy also uses in *Hurricane Peak*, Jess seeks an extrasensory apprehension of nature, instead. As in Michael Bedard's *Redwork* (or, for that matter, David Almond's *Skellig*), William Blake's poetry is used as a concrete example of Jess's magical combination of astronomy, philosophy, and imagination.

Magic in Mahy's books often has to do with gaining power through this kind of close, sympathetic connection with nature: this is the case in *Changeover*, for example, as well as *The Haunting*. On the one hand, young readers are shown examples of adults with "golden spaces" in their minds (that is, the potential to perform this kind of natural magic), who did not seize these inherent splendid powers and failed themselves and, in turn, their loved ones. As Jung notes of Faust, "he may wake up one day and find he has missed half his life." (*Transference* 281). Readers are also shown young people whose circumstances are keeping them from having the confidence to claim the golden destiny. This may be the result of bad luck and birth order, as it is in the case of Tycho in *Catalogue of the Universe*, or parental mistakes and bullying, as it is in *The Changeover*, *The Tricksters*, and *The Haunting*. In Roland's case, it has been a too early assumption of adult responsibility, a frightening incident in his childhood that yoked his magical abilities to his father's betrayal of the family, and the distraction by inessentials that fall to his lot as a popular boy. He increasingly realizes, however, that none of his public life has authenticity. As Jess notes during her attempt to make Roland understand his own potential: "what really matters with the talent I'm talking about is that it sort of completes you. You have to recognize it in yourself and move into it. Then you set it free, and you set yourself free too." (141)

Sorting out the person that one was born to be, and seizing the rightful power, is the process that Jung called individuation; he thought that this process was mystically revealed in the illustrations and commentary in various historical works of alchemy, which he collected and studied. Mahy's *Alchemy*, as I have noted, follows the chemistry experiment steps of the material alchemists, but it more importantly also traces the process toward individuation in depth psychology, as found in the illustrations of the 1550 alchemy manuscript *Rosarium Philosophorum*. Jung interpreted these pictures in his important text *The Psychology of the Transference* (1945).

Mahy's novel uses Jess and Roland as the King and Queen of the pictures in a more conventionally mythic way than Jung, who felt they represented the relationship of the psychotherapist and patient while they worked through the process of transference. But the characters in her novel can also be seen as complementary parts in a single individual's mind. As

symbolically illustrated, the transformative process is frankly erotic, a connotation that Mahy keeps while talking about largely mental inter- and intra-personal states. For example, when the villain of the piece attempts to strip Jess's alchemical power,⁴ she describes it as a rape, a rape that nearly happened because her parents' separation and her lack of friends had made her particularly vulnerable to the older man's friendly attention. The course of the young people's romance underlies their own ability to achieve individuation. The use of the ritual conjunction of the King and Queen, at any rate, does mythologically and psychologically explain why sexual love is not the beginning of muddled and tragic events in Mahy's novels but can be a key to redemption and wholeness.

If the high school context of Roland's life essentially distracted him from finding himself (as Richard Peck has noted, "nobody grows up in a group")⁵, Jess's opposite experience of the same environment also demonstrates its shortcomings. Besides the obvious difficulty of having a teacher who is trying to prey upon her, Jess was fundamentally set back by the ordinary school experience, as Tycho was in *Catalogue of the Universe*. She explains, "In the beginning I came to school like a lot of little kids do, thinking I was so wonderful that people would see my wonder and like me for it. But of course they didn't" (149). Her determination to simply resist interaction and turn inward, however, is also not a productive solution. This may be, in part, because sitting around feeling superior (like Roland's pre-shoplifting persona) is a fundamental denial of the unconscious and demonstrates a lack of self-knowledge that is inimical to any kind of growth or wisdom.

Jess's near-fatal mistake, however, is to try to control her own life by using her superior power on her parents rather than trying to negotiate with their messy and selfish desires. The mistakes—both Jess's and Roland's—are catalysts for change, as well as providing saving self-knowledge. By the altruistic desire to rescue the other (or their own unconscious selves), both young people become whole. By their achievements, their families may also be restored. As Jung put it, "It often seems as if there were an impersonal karma within a family, which is passed on from parents to children. It has always seemed to me that I had to answer questions which fate had posed to my forefathers, and which had not yet been answered, or as if I had to complete, or perhaps continue, things which previous ages had left unfinished" (*Memories* 233). He adds, "Inner peace and contentment depend in large measure upon whether or not the historical family which is inherent in the individual can be harmonized with the ephemeral conditions of the present" (*Memories* 237). Life as a surprising and mutable process is a hallmark of Mahy's work, yet there are moments of rest between rounds.

This kind of brief, reductionist approach to a clever piece of work should be taken only as a jumping off place for reading the novel. Heather Scutter remarked more than a decade ago that *Memory* was Mahy's closest approach to a meta-narrative. Although Jung's influence is pervasive in Mahy's canon, I think that Heather would agree today that *Alchemy* is closer still. I think that this has been, on the whole, a positive contribution to thinking within young adult novels; it adds both passion and a measure of common sense to an odd genre. In discussions of self-esteem, it is important to point out that denying guilt does not cure it. In warning about the perfidiousness of sex, it is foolish to deny the desirability of love. In spite of our heartfelt desire to keep our children safe, it is dishonest to imply that safety does not have losses of its own. Beyond solace for present pain, we should also note the allure of the incredible and unanticipated mysteries of life.

Footnotes

¹ For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Roberta S. Trites' *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. 84-116.

² Such moments are frequent in *Alchemy*. They are related to those described in Jung's writing: "At times I feel as if I am spread out over the landscape and inside things, and am myself living in every tree, in the plashing of the waves, in the clouds and the animals that come and go, in the process of the seasons" (*Memories* 225).

"I felt as though I were floating in space, as though I were safe in the womb of the universe – in a tremendous void, but filled with the highest possible feeling of happiness. 'This is eternal bliss,' I thought. 'This cannot be described; it is far too wonderful!'" (*Memories* 293).

³ [Jung on his home] "From the beginning I felt the Tower as in some way a place of maturation—a maternal womb or a maternal figure in which I could become what I was, what I am and will be. It gave me a feeling as if I were being reborn in stone. It is thus a concretization of the individuation process, a memorial *aere perennius*. . . a symbol of psychic wholeness. (*Memories* 225).

⁴ The villain who is after Jess is a politician and shares some qualities with the villain of Mahy's *Changeover*. A clue to the point where each went wrong originally can also be found, perhaps, in Jung. He says, "In knowing ourselves to be unique in our personal combination—that is, ultimately limited—we possess also the capacity for becoming conscious of the infinite. But only then!

Uniqueness and limitation are synonymous. Without them, no perception of the unlimited is possible—and, consequently, no coming to consciousness either—merely a delusory identity with it which takes the form of intoxication with large numbers and an avidity for political power (*Memories* 325).

⁵ *Invitations to the World*, 70.

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