

The Money Spider

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Good evening. It is a pleasure to be with you again, and a further pleasure to be flattered by the close attention you have been paying to some of my work. As Benjamin Disraeli said of royalty, “When it comes to authors, lay the flattery on with a trowel.”

Last time I had the privilege of addressing the Association, I climbed on my high horse and preached you a sermon that wouldn’t have come amiss from the pulpit of a humanist cathedral, all about the role of Ideas with a capital “I” in children’s fiction: Ideas, such as fighting racial and sexual equality, or saving the planet, or religious tolerance, etc., etc. In effect, I preached you a sermon against using fiction to preach sermons. I’m astonished that I had the nerve to hold forth like that in front of an audience who knows so much more about the subject than I do. Of course, I’d barely turned seventy and was still perhaps tinged with of the heedless arrogance of youth.

Or to put it more simply, I couldn’t think of a high horse to climb on this time.

Instead I will try to talk about ideas with a little “i”, the ideas that fans mean when they ask one “Where do you get your ideas?” I’m afraid I can’t do this coherently without repeating some of the stuff already on my website. Inevitably I will base this on my own experience, especially with *Eva*. I won’t take it for granted that all of you have read the book, let alone liked it. That would be a very unhealthy state of affairs.

I call my talk “The Money Spider.” You must have money spiders in the States, but my wife tells me you don’t call them that. They are those almost invisibly small arachnids that you find hanging from the ceiling in your house or out in the woods somewhere. They’re called money spiders because it’s said to be bad luck to harm them, but if you treat them right they’ll bring you money.

The FAQ section of my website is written, perversely, in verse. The one called “Where do you get your Ideas?” runs as follows:

A money spider hanging in mid air.
Like a retinal fleck it dangles from the lamp
In the blank bathroom, neither here nor there.
You reach to take the thread. Your fingers clamp

On nothing—nothing to feel or see—and yet
The thread is there, because the spider heaves
Beneath your hand. You take and loose it at
The sill, to live what life a spider lives.

A symbol surely, or a metaphor
At least. The groping mind grasps nothing. Still,
The thread of thought must have existed, for
This fleck now dangles here, this page its sill.

Most of my books began like that. There is of course a spectrum. One or two were commissioned. *The Seventh Raven*, about which I spoke to you last time, developed fairly deliberately from my involvement with the local children's opera, its themes evolving in the writing.

AK is right at that end of the spectrum. If you have studied my website really assiduously you will know that it began when I was listening to the BBC World Service while I was getting my solitary lunch ready in my London flat, and someone was talking about the children who were being conscripted into the various guerrilla groups operating in Uganda. I heard her say, "Even a hardened government soldier may hesitate a fatal half second before gunning down a child." The hair on my nape prickled—it is doing so now as I type this—and I knew I had to write about such a child. That was my money spider. This time it had a definite idea, a visible and tangible thread.

Almost at once it was in danger of being taken over by an Idea with a capital I, the realisation that I could use it to try to communicate to kids in the liberal sheltered West what it was, and still, alas, is actually like to be involved in the appalling problems that beset huge areas of Africa, and why they are not going to be solved by large doses of economic aid, market-oriented economics, and liberal democracy.

Almost at once a plot evolved. I wasn't interested in the bang bang derring-do of guerrilla war. I wanted to find out what happens to my boy, Paul, when the war ends, and he has to start living a normal life after all the horrors he has seen and the hardships and dangers he has endured. Symbolically he would bury his gun and go to school. His mentor would join the government, there would then be a brief period of peace and hope, and then a military coup. Paul's mentor would be arrested, and Paul would go and dig up his gun and travel to the capital and somehow or other smuggle the gun in to his mentor, who would use it to shoot his way free while Paul and his allies created a diversion.

From then on the book became a balancing act, an exercise in keeping the big I under control and letting the little I run free. Take my heroine, Jill. She is there because I needed a companion for Paul, and I like writing about spunky girls. But from the first I knew that she was also there to represent the tribal diversity of most countries in Africa, their deep-rootedness in ancient hostilities (still tragically rampant in, for instance, Kenya and Zimbabwe) and so on. I didn't realise that she would also, by the end, come to represent the fact that it is the women who bear the brunt of the whole bloody tragedy. Raping a woman is an even more satisfying assertion of domination than urinating on her dead husband. Jill did in fact get raped in an early draft, but I was persuaded it was unnecessary. Quite right. That's the sort of big I that is much better left unstated.

But there was another big I that insisted on full embodiment, represented by the eponymous gun. More and more as I wrote, I came to realise that my original plot, though it might be a perfectly good plot *qua* plot, was in the other sense of the word thoroughly bad. (G. K. Chesterton said that if a man were to shoot his aunt at sixty paces with a bow and arrow we would call him a good shot, but not necessarily a good man. Don't you love that "not necessarily"?) The problems of Africa are far too hugely and dramatically tragic for me to suggest they could be solved by another dose of military derring-do. Africa is the true heroine of my book. I must find some other way.

I do not hold with the widespread underlying assumption that art is its own justification. Like all human activity, even perhaps dreams, it has moral responsibilities. The end justifies the means only to the extent that the means do not corrupt the ends, as they almost inevitably do. You have only to look round the world to observe how fanatical terrorism and some of the countermeasures against it, for instance, are tarred with the same brush. Luckily in this case the big I turned out to be much better than my original ending.

This isn't always the case. I fiddled with the denouement of *Annerton Pit* for vaguely similar, though less important, reasons, and it didn't really work. Still, it was the right thing to try to do. My reasons remain valid.

That's one end of the spectrum. About the other end you might as well ask where do dreams come from? And what are they for? Indeed, my first adult book began as a momentary, daytime vision and my first children's book as an actual dream. For forty years I have earned my bread by dreaming public dreams. The primary function of my books, indeed of all fiction, is to provide exercise for the reader's imagination, in the case of children to help to strengthen and develop it, and thereafter to keep it fit and active because our imaginative life is an essential aspect of our humanity. What storytellers do is controlled dreaming. Dreams for others to share. It is no surprise that a book should arise from a dream.

Some books begin with only what you might call the idea of an idea, a hunch, that there might be a book in them thar hills. You start to write as a way of prospecting. The idea of *Bone from a Dry Sea* appears to be deliberately schematic—that I set out to write parallel stories in alternating chapters, the first describing the adventures of a group of our very early ancestors, and the second those of a team of archaeologists investigating the site where they lived, with the social interactions, the alliances, and intrigues of the apparently sophisticated scientists, mirroring those of the primitive humans. But that wasn't what I set out to do. I simply wanted to write about the theory that at some point in human evolution our ancestors had passed through a semi-aquatic phase, scavenging in the shallows of the seashore for their food, and that that explains various oddities about us that separate us from the other apes.

I had no plan at all in my head when I settled down and wrote an account of a shark hunt. Only when I read through what I'd written did I realize since my characters lived long before the evolution of language there weren't going to be any conversations and that this would make for a rather monotonous narrative. On the spur of the moment, I started to write about a modern girl visiting her father, who is taking part in an archaeological dig in the area where my proto-humans lived. The archaeologists couldn't all just be nice guys digging up bones in happy harmony. They'd have to have characters, interactions, and so on. A struggle for leadership is a permanent feature in ape societies, including ours. The mirroring process was already well under way, and I was several chapters in before I noticed what was happening.

This brings me to *Eva*. Like *AK* it began with a single intense moment of revelation, but it couldn't have been more different. *Eva*, you might say, is the by-product of the by-product of my being asked to re-tell the stories of the Old Testament, which I did in the different voices of different people telling the stories for specific purposes while they still existed only in the oral tradition. The by-product of that was my being asked to try the Arthurian cycle. I thought I could do it the same way, telling the tales as they might have been told at various stages as they developed from their origins in Celtic mythology to the stories we know. It didn't work. There is almost nothing between those dark Celtic roots and the astonishing flowering in Malory and the French romancers. So I did something else.

The by-product of that was that I remained dissatisfied. I still wanted to take some central myth and explore the various forms it had taken over the centuries. I settled on the myth of the first woman—in our case, Eve. At that time the news media were full of the discovery, from the study of human female mitochondria, that all of us and everyone who has ever lived are descended through a single female who lived in central Africa some 60,000 years ago. Of course the newspapers dubbed her African Eve.

So somehow my central character would have to meet her, and the Eve of *Genesis*, and her equivalent in other cultures and religions around the world. She—it would have to be a woman, of course, a girl named Eva—would need to get about not only in time but between the worlds of myth and reality. So time-travel was out. Besides, the mechanics of time-travel tend to take over the story. That left dream, in one form or another. Not a plain dream—too wishy-washy and insubstantial to bear the weight of a functioning plot. There had to be a reason why Eva should dream those particular dreams. Suppose humankind had evolved too fast, like a forced plant, with the result that our DNA didn't have time to bed in properly, and at some point in the future it has become unstable, so that more and more of our children when they reach adolescence are falling into a coma as those later, post-Eve, sections unravel. Then Eva's dreams can be part of this unravelling process as she regresses through the millennia. Right?

No, wrong. It's a rotten idea. Utterly unmanageable. Nevertheless, I obstinately started writing, as I'd several times done before, hoping that somehow the process, the sacrificial commitment of time and energy would breathe life into these dry bones. I set about establishing Eva's coma, and a bit of explanation about the cause of it, and her acquaintanceship with chimpanzees (because African Eve and her fellow proto-humans would be partly simian in their behaviour, and she'd need to be able to relate to them), when it happened.

I remember the event vividly. Its force and suddenness were as shocking as if a voice had spoken in the empty room. One moment I was hunched over my typewriter, hesitating over a choice of words, and the next I was sitting bolt upright, my body rigid, staring at the wardrobe door. I may even have spoken the words aloud.

“By God, I know what they've done to this girl!” I had my idea.

I went straight back and started again. I still had no idea what was going to happen, but I knew there was a book there, a book about a girl learning to live in the body of a chimpanzee.

A few shreds of my earlier idea remain, the animated cartoon of Adam and Eve that Eva watches near the beginning, and more importantly the rather vague business about the human race losing the will to live. I'd made the mistake of asking a scientist about my notion about our DNA beginning to unravel and was told it was complete nonsense, so very reluctantly I dropped it and settled for the banal alternative of Eva being in a coma as the result of a car-accident. But really I shouldn't have worried. The science in science fiction doesn't have to be real science. From a storyteller's point of view, warp drive and seven league boots perform the same function.

I suppose if I were to do a poll of ordinary readers asking what they thought the underlying theme of the book was, most of them would answer some version of Animal Rights, or, more generally, Green Issues. Or, possibly that it's about an adolescent moving out of the shadow of her parents and discovering who she is. From my point of view, the first two were

simply plot machinery there because there has to be a story. I never even thought about the third until someone suggested it after I'd finished the book. I was writing about a girl living in the body of a chimpanzee. Everything else simply arose from that and had to be dealt with. And, with luck, used.

Take animal rights. That obviously had to be dealt with. Seven children out of ten, surely, reading about Eva's discovery of what had been done to her, are going to say, "Hey! What about the chimp?" Even if that isn't the case, I would certainly have wanted to answer the question. What sticks in my mind from the first zoo I remember being taken to was the sight of a beautiful leopard endlessly pacing a figure of eight across its small cage. Here's a poem I wrote over twenty years before *Eva*, in response to a line in a newspaper. Quote:

"Mr Jiggs, the orang-utan at Regents Park zoo, died yesterday, having amused thousands."

Monboddo, by the way, was a crazy Scottish nobleman whom Johnson and Boswell visited on their tour of the Hebrides.

EPITAPH FOR MR JIGGS

Monboddo believed the orang-utang was human,
Had a sense of honour, knew how to play the flute,
And differed from us only in perfect manners,
And in being mute.

But Mr Jiggs sat in his iron compartment,
A hill of indigo flesh and gingery hair,
And answered the stares of the peanut-happy people
With a soft brown stare.

In youth he would clown for his visitors, but later
Grew indolent and dangerously surly,
And died of heat-stroke in his seventeenth summer,
For an orang, early.

What a piece of work is man, that he should imprison
This wild, magnificent, human-seeming brute
For all those years in a desolation of boredom
And consider him cute.

So I obviously had to get the question of Animal Rights in. But it has its prominence solely because I could use it as the engine that drives the plot though I wasn't at all confident that it had the muscle to do so. Perhaps my own concern with the subject gave it some extra beef, but that's not the sort of thing you can rely on. But I was doubtful about it. Similarly with the ecological element. The story had to be set in the future for the experiment with Eva to be remotely possible, so it was natural to have a grossly overpopulated, media-dominated world with scarcely any room left for wild nature. Again, I wasn't at all confident about it. It felt thin to me, and cliché-ridden, but it seemed the best I could do. I remember various other dissatisfactions, but that's enough to be getting on with.

Now, it may seem eccentric, even ungracious, on my part to fly the Atlantic at my age and at considerable cost to you in order to accept the honour you have done me and then stand up and whinge about everything that's wrong with my book, but that is not what I'm doing. What I'm talking about is a rather extreme instance of what I think must be the normal—There! Got the word in!—the normal experience of any writer who has what he thinks is a terrific idea and then has to find the means of embodying into a story. The better the idea, the more inadequate the means are going seem to him.

This is entirely proper. He cannot afford to think that the idea will carry the book, like one of those grand old actor-managers taking a rubbish company touring round the provinces, putting on the classics with himself in the star part, and the audience waiting to burst into cheers when he comes on, while everything else is a perfunctory shambles.

Perfection? There is no such stuff.

But good enough is not enough.

Think any other way, and you find yourself settling for the barely adequate. But inevitably the more serious the worries that you have while you were writing the book, the more they are going to colour your feelings about it later on.

And then perhaps some of my discomfort with *Eva* arose from it's being nothing like the book I intended to write. In something like the way the *Eva* herself is haunted by the ghostly presence in her body of Kelly, the chimpanzee to whom it originally belonged, so *Eva* is haunted by the exploration of the myth of Eve that never got written. There are places where it is almost palpably there.

Finally there is *Eva's*, to me, bewildering success in the United States. It had excellent reviews and sold pretty well elsewhere and was translated into several languages, but I don't think it aroused anything like the same level of *interest* in other countries. Adult interest, that is, not fan letters (Not that I've ever had the amount of fan-mail that my wife, for instance, gets.) I've read serious discussions of it written well after it was published. Year after year the American royalties for it have exceeded the rest of my old backlist put together. I have spoken to and corresponded with Americans who gave the impression, though they were too polite to say so, that for them *Eva* was *the* book. The others were more or less OK, but *Eva* is the one that matters. (In the UK it's the *Weathermonger*, but that's a first book. I'm sure you're all too sensitive to an author's feelings to start instantly talking to them about their first book.) After all that I was astonished to find, when Roberta wrote to tell me that *Eva* had won the Phoenix, that it was eligible. I was convinced it must have won something important enough to disqualify it. Though, of course, I've been superficially pleased by all the attention, deep down I've found it oddly unsettling. I can't help asking myself, "Why? What makes it different?"

So for twenty years, whenever I've wanted to dip into one of my books (I sometimes do this, I'm afraid, for solace and comfort when I'm tired or depressed), I've never chosen *Eva* and picked it up with reluctance in order to be able to write this talk. And then, to my relief, read it with pleasure. I won't say that all my doubts evaporated, and I now believe it to be the best novel since *Middlemarch*, but it's OK.

What makes it work, I've decided, is the thing I've been talking to you about. The single come-out-of-nowhere idea. A girl living in the body of a chimpanzee. Whatever doubts I may have had about anything else, this was the one thing in which I believed absolutely all the time I was writing. The result is that the weight of its imaginative authority solidifies and confirms all the stuff that was worrying me. It holds all the lighter elements into place as the gravity of the sun holds the planets on their courses. (OK, that's a ridiculously over-the-top simile, but you know what I mean.)

It seems to me, by the way that you should welcome this state of affairs. If I myself don't know what I'm *really* writing about, you have every excuse for deploying whatever critical theory you believe in to elucidate my inner motives.

One last thing. Money spiders. I was told about them by my old nanny, in my childhood in Gloucestershire, but she never told me what was the right thing to do with one. So hanging it from the windowsill was the best I could think of. Recently I asked my Hampshire house-cleaner if she knew about money spiders, and she said that what you were supposed to do was pick one up by its thread and wind it three times round your head. Metaphorically I suppose that's more or less what I did with the Eva idea. And it certainly brought me some money.

So, appropriately, since we're dealing with a fantasy novel, I raise an imaginary glass and offer you a toast.

Ladies and gentlemen, The Money Spider!

The idea! (With a small "i," of course.)