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# ‘Change the Story, Change the World’:

## Witches/Crones as Heroes in Novels by Terry Pratchett and Diana Wynne Jones

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Representations of the witch in the western European fairy tale have been stereotypically negative: the witch was depicted generally as an ugly crone and always as malevolent.<sup>1</sup> The black cloak and pointed hat associated with the witch continue to be linked with a menacing expression and bad intentions.<sup>2</sup> Although there have been some attempts to rehabilitate the witch in children’s literature, until recently most of these have been superficial. In various picture books, for example, witches feature as central characters, but the stories generally play, usually to comic effect as in Freeman’s *Tilly Witch* (1969), on associations of the witch with mischief and ill-temper. Even where the witch is positively represented, her goodness is frequently contrasted with more traditionally malign witches, as in Preussler’s *The Little Witch* (1961), and Stevenson’s similar though more light-hearted *Yuck!* (1985). Nevertheless, there have been some advances: Stephens has observed the consciously revisory stance of some recent novels, which substitute for the crone-witch a conception of the witch as wise woman. As he notes, such fictions provide social critique (Stephens 2003, p.201). In many cases, however (notably in Furlong’s *Wise Child* [1989]), the wise witch is still portrayed as rejected by her society, underlining her role as outsider and emphasizing that she remains a problematic figure.

Two other books – Terry Pratchett’s *The Wee Free Men* (2003) and Diana Wynne Jones’s *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986) – may be usefully compared with certain earlier attempts by children’s authors to reconsider the image of the witch. Both these books deploy the figure of the witch not only in strikingly positively ways, but with an unusual self-consciousness in relation to the cultural tradition. Pratchett and Jones use the figure of the witch/crone, the epitome of negative stereotype that Stephens notes is explicitly critiqued in Tomlinson’s *Summer Witches* (Stephens 2003, p.198), as a way to interrogate cultural convention. They suggest to their young readers that stories, and the social conventions they represent, may themselves be resisted in the course of establishing individual identity.

Pratchett’s *The Wee Free Men* makes clear from the start the problematic location of witches in story: his novel assumes his readers are familiar with fairy tales and invites them to critique the assumptions of such tales.

The protagonist, nine-year-old Tiffany Aching, actively desires to be a witch:

*It had started with The Goode Childe’s Booke of Faerie Tales. . . . all the stories had, somewhere, the witch. The wicked old witch. And Tiffany had thought: Where’s the evidence?*

*The stories never said why she was wicked. It was enough to be an old woman, enough to be all alone, enough to look strange because you had no teeth. It was enough to be called a witch.*  
(Pratchett 2004, p.37; Pratchett’s emphasis)

What people *call* each other has a very real effect on their lives: Tiffany is well aware of the fate of Mrs Snapperly, suspected of witchcraft, whose house was burnt down and who died in the snow. ‘I think she was a sick old lady who was no use to anyone . . . She just looked like a witch in a story’ (Pratchett 2004, pp.47-48). Tiffany is irritated by several fairy tale conventions, but chooses to identify with the witch. As she tells the witch Miss Tick, ‘She couldn’t be the prince, and she’d never be a princess, and she didn’t want to be a woodcutter, so she’d be the witch and *know* things . . .’ (Pratchett 2004, p.38; Pratchett’s emphasis).<sup>3</sup>

Tiffany’s own hero is no character in a story, but her own recently dead grandmother, a shepherd:

*‘Granny Aching would have done something about monsters in our river [. . .] Even if they are out of books.’ And she’d have done something about what happened to old Mrs Snapperly, she added to herself. She’d have spoken up, and people would have listened. . . . They always listened when Granny spoke up. Speak up for those who don’t have voices, she always said.*  
(Pratchett 2004, p.43; Pratchett’s emphasis and ellipsis)

Tiffany’s ambition to be a witch is in fact an ambition to be Granny Aching to her community. She remembers Granny’s claim that ‘we have a duty’ to protect the sheep (Pratchett 2004, p.69), and extends this to others. Thus, the main story of *The Wee Free Men*, Tiffany’s venture into fairyland to recover her stolen brother, is energized by her determination that she has a responsibility to what is hers. The queen of fairyland attempts to defeat her by



defining this determination as selfishness: ‘Your picture of the world is a landscape with you in the middle of it, isn’t it? . . . You thought you were the heroine of a *story*’ (Pratchett 2004, p.276; Pratchett’s emphasis). But Tiffany is able to redefine selfishness—typically a negative trait in fairy tales, especially when manifested by girls<sup>4</sup>—as responsibility:

*All witches are selfish, the Queen had said. But Tiffany’s Third Thoughts said: Then turn selfishness into a weapon! Make all things yours! Make all lives and dreams and hopes yours! Protect them! Save them! Bring them into the sheepfold! Walk the gale for them! Keep away the wolf! My dreams! My brother! My family! My land! My world! How dare you try to take these things, because they are mine!*

*I have a duty!*  
(Pratchett 2004, p.282; Pratchett’s emphasis)

Tiffany’s potential to be a witch is perceived initially via her shrewdness and use of logic. What Miss Tick identifies as her ‘First Sight’ is, however, most importantly manifested in her ability to see what is really there, not someone else’s ideas—the kind of ideas that killed Mrs Snapperly. The power of story, it seems, distorts and destroys; Tiffany’s witch ability, as well as her goal, is to resist such power. But the novel does not simply value cleverness or even scepticism; what makes Tiffany in fact ‘the heroine of a *story*’ is courage based on a powerful sense of responsibility. For Pratchett, it is this ethic that defines the witch: rather than being simply a social reject or a cursing crone, the witch takes responsibility for the well-being of the community. Outside the community only in so far as she sees beyond it, the witch oversees the life of her society. Such responsibility overrides the conventions of fairy tale, which so dangerously shape as well as imitate the conventions of society.

The power of story and a sense of personal responsibility are also at issue in Diana Wynne Jones’s novel *Howl’s Moving Castle* (1986). The story centres on a young girl named Sophie, who believes herself doomed to fail because this is what happens to eldest daughters in fairy tales. At the beginning of the novel Sophie’s stepmother tells her that she will inherit the hat shop in which she has been

working, whereupon Sophie grows increasingly passive and despairing. However, when Sophie is transformed into a crone, she does not react like a traditional fairytale heroine waiting to be rescued; she tells her image in the mirror ‘Don’t worry old thing . . . this is much more like you really are’ (Jones 2000, p.33), and leaves to seek her fortune. Despite her aches and pains, Sophie is both more active and more optimistic as a crone: she invades the dreaded moving castle, owned by the wizard Howl, in search of a comfortable armchair, confident that ‘Wizard Howl is not likely to want *my* soul for his collection. He takes only young girls’ (Jones 2000, p.38). To be a young girl, a potential heroine in the world of stories—or merely a potential failed sister—is experienced by Sophie as confining; to be a crone, outside the limits of maiden, wife, or mother, is to be liberated. Later, she muses ‘It was odd. As a girl, Sophie would have shrivelled with embarrassment at the way she was behaving. As an old woman she did not mind what she did or said. She found that a great relief’ (Jones 2000, p.66). In some children’s fiction a child magically becomes an adult who is seen as a figure of free power, and has to learn about constraints on that role; by contrast, Sophie gains from losing her girlhood.

In taking on the physical constraints of the crone, Sophie feels herself free to be personally expressive and so recovers her own agency. Although initially indignant when seen as a witch, she later accepts the label and so prepares herself unknowingly for the discovery that she can in fact work magic. She eventually regains her own body through the conscious use of magical power. (It should be noted that except for the Witch of the Waste who enchants Sophie, the several witches in the novel are all viewed positively by other characters.) Only when Sophie accepts her own success, as woman and witch, can she return to her youthful self and acknowledge its beauty, telling Howl that her hair is not ginger but ‘red gold’ (Jones 2000, p.299).

Although the spell that visibly transforms Sophie is cast by the Witch of the Waste, there are numerous hints that Sophie herself is partly responsible for her enchantment. Reading backward, the reader can work out that Sophie has bewitched herself into the belief that she is ‘Like an old maid’ (Jones 2000, p.19) – her exceptional timidity dates

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from the moment she tells her reflection this – and that being the crone is ‘more like you really are’ (Jones 2000, p.33). What is interesting is the reason behind Sophie’s self-enchantment: as in *The Wee Free Men*, this novel involves a critique of the conventions of story and, by extension, of the often arbitrary customs that shape social roles.

The setting of *Howl’s Moving Castle* is established from the beginning as a magical one, and specifically one governed by story:

*In the land of Ingary, where such things as seven-league boots and cloaks of invisibility really exist, it is quite a misfortune to be born the eldest of three. Everyone knows you are the one who will fail first, and worst, if the three of you set out to seek your fortunes.*

*Sophie Hatter was the eldest of three sisters. She was not even the child of a poor woodcutter . . . True, her own mother died . . . and their father married his youngest shop assistant . . . Fanny shortly gave birth to the third sister, Martha. This ought to have made Sophie and Lettie into Ugly Sisters, but in fact all three girls grew up very pretty indeed. . . Fanny treated all three girls with the same kindness, and did not favour Martha in the least.*

(Jones 2000, pp.9-10)

Right from the start, we are told both that ‘Everyone knows’ that fairytale patterns are true, and that this is not always the case: Sophie and Lettie are not ‘Ugly’ despite being Martha’s stepsisters, and Fanny is not the Wicked Stepmother who is cruel to her stepchildren. This gives us two hints: first, that Sophie is wrong in her assumptions; second, that what ‘Everyone knows’ is not necessarily true. The first informs the plot as it relates to Sophie, telling us that her view of her life is unnecessarily gloomy, and the second the plot as it relates to Howl, of whom we and Sophie learn things that ‘everyone knows’ in the next few pages. Again, what ‘everyone knows’ will turn out to be wrong; as Sophie eventually realizes, Howl is ‘heartless’ only because he has given his heart to Calcifer, a fire demon, in order to keep him alive. When the Witch of the Waste’s fire demon takes the heart, Sophie is able to give Calcifer more life, saving both Calcifer and Howl and

incidentally, apparently, restoring herself to youth even before the destruction of the enemy fire demon restores others enchanted by the Witch. Sophie thus reveals herself as indeed a witch, and more significantly as the heroine of her own story; as her sisters have believed all along, their destinies are not determined by fairy tale conventions but by their own decisions and desires.

Both *The Wee Free Men* and *Howl’s Moving Castle*, then, invite reevaluation of our conceptions of the witch/crone, demonstrating how even the demonized figure of the witch can be a hero and critiquing the narrative and social conventions that shape both communal and individual expectations. Both texts extend this reevaluation significantly beyond most earlier attempts to revise the image of the witch. They may be valuably compared with two well-known children’s novels featuring apparently positive depictions of the witch: Elizabeth George Speare’s *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* (1958) and E.L. Konigsburg’s *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, William McKinley, and Me, Elizabeth* (1967; first published in Australia as *Jennifer, Hecate, Macbeth, and Me*). These novels provide important parallels with *The Wee Free Men* and *Howl’s Moving Castle* respectively, but with significant differences.

In both the mid-century novels the figures identified as witches are treated positively, although in different ways. In *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* to be a witch is to be an outsider in a society itself seen by the outsider-protagonist, Kit, as rigid and repressive. The ‘witch’ Hannah represents generosity, tolerance, and appreciation for beauty in a society (Puritan Connecticut Colony) that appears to permit none of these things. In *Jennifer, Hecate . . .* the role of the witch is deliberately played by Jennifer and learned by Elizabeth, the narrator. The witch identity here is a way for two friendless children to gain power, initially over one another, but also over others. Similarly, in *Howl’s Moving Castle* the protagonist is a figure who feels herself to be in one way or another isolated and powerless. Where Sophie believes herself to be doomed to failure because she is the eldest sister, Elizabeth is ‘hungry for company’ (Konigsburg 1973, p.10). Sophie, Elizabeth, and Jennifer are able to gain power through identification with the role of the witch in *Jennifer, Hecate . . .*, the crone in *Howl’s Moving Castle*.

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Meanwhile, in both *The Wee Free Men* and *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* the witch's position as outsider appears to be valued: both stories seem to be about resistance to a too-paranoid society, signalled in *The Wee Free Men* by Tiffany's reaction to Mrs Snapperly's fate. In *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* the gentle tolerance of Hannah is set in sharp contrast with the rigid morality of Kit's Uncle Matthew and the jealous hostility of Goodwife Cruff. The eventual accusation that impulsive, generous Kit is herself a witch who curses children makes clear both the absurdity of the label and the personal spite frequently responsible for its application. In *The Wee Free Men*, Tiffany is aware from the beginning of her community's rejection of the witch, and aware too of the intolerance that can result in too harsh an application of justice—though her memories of Granny Aching's interventions also demonstrate that her society can learn to be tolerant and even merciful.

However, despite the apparent parallels between these pairs of texts, their eventual goals are very different. In *The Witch of Blackbird Pond* Hannah is revealed to be simply an old woman demonized because of her beliefs, and the job of the protagonist and the novel is to demonstrate this. Hannah is more like Mrs Snapperly than she is like Miss Tick or Mistress Weatherwax in *The Wee Free Men*. The underlying story of the novel is Kit's discovery of a society and a way of life that can fit her personality. The attempt by some members of this society to label Kit a witch is in effect an alternative categorization of her position as outsider — a categorization neither she nor the reader accepts. By contrast, *The Wee Free Men* validates not just the outsider, but the witch as witch. In aspiring to be a witch Tiffany is taking on both power and responsibility. Kit's trajectory also involves responsibility: she learns to take on some at least of the Puritan values. But this is very different from Tiffany's decision to take on not just the name but the role of the witch, and Pratchett's concomitant validation of that role. Similarly, in *Jennifer, Hecate . . .*, the children are able to discard the roles of master and apprentice witch when Elizabeth discovers Jennifer's secret. Elizabeth and Jennifer then shed the power relationship that has governed them and even play with other girls. 'Neither of us is lonely any more. . . . Neither of us pretends to be a witch any more. Now we mostly enjoy being what

we really are' (Konigsburg 1973, p.96). The goal of the novel has been for Elizabeth to overcome her temporary situation as outcast. Like *The Witch of Blackbird Pond*, in other words, *Jennifer, Hecate . . .* is more about fitting into a society than about rejecting or controlling it.

*Howl's Moving Castle* presents the role of witch/crone in a different light. It is true that Sophie returns to her younger incarnation at the end of the novel, but she does not lose the power that she has gained. Sophie's constraint as young woman has been due to her own belief in the controlling power of story, a belief not shared by others in her community. It is Sophie's acceptance of what 'everyone knows' but few apparently believe that has left her feeling isolated and unable to act.

The importance of the witch as witch is even more visible in *The Wee Free Men*, where Tiffany's witch role expands in the course of the novel, and it is noteworthy that in the novel's sequel, *A Hat Full of Sky* (2004), the initial social problem of *The Wee Free Men* appears to have been solved. After Tiffany returns to her community at the end of *A Hat Full of Sky* the villagers become quite proud of her: Tiffany is one of them, so if she is a witch that must be an acceptable role. 'We got a witch now, and she's better'n anyone else's! No one's throwing Granny Aching's granddaughter in a pond!' (Pratchett 2005, p.348). The idea of the witch as outsider or as needing to respond to a social constraint is discarded; Pratchett's focus instead is on the positive value of the witch.

Both *The Wee Free Men* and *Howl's Moving Castle* thus deploy the figure of the witch/crone as part of a critique of the conventions specifically of fairy tale, even while both make extensive use of fairy tale images and possibilities. Being the crone allows Sophie to free herself of the inhibitions of her self-conception as doomed eldest sister and make a new life for herself; for Tiffany, becoming a witch represents precisely resistance to stultifying and destructive social conventions. Both novels draw on fairytale plots—the stolen child, the transformed heroine—and revel in the fantastic and magical, yet highlight the power of story to constrain and confine. Their use of the figure of the witch focuses this critique by making clear the extent to which the conventions of story can shape, as well as

reflect, potentially destructive social conventions. Sophie's transformation reveals among other things the freedom of old age, which fairy tales, deriving their assumptions from a pre-industrial culture, generally ignore. Tiffany's explicit interrogation of such assumptions produces a re-valuation of what the most reviled figure of fairy tale, the witch, may mean. Both characters thus take on agency in defying their environments through identification with the elements traditionally rejected by fairy tale; they recreate their own identities in defiance of cultural conventions.

The contribution these novels make to contemporary children's literature is therefore significant. Both authors invite the child reader to recognize and critique the conventions of story as they reflect and shape the conventions of society, and especially to resist the constraints such conventions place on their own agency and development of individual identity. As the witch Granny Weatherwax tells Tiffany in *A Hat Full of Sky*, 'There's always a story . . . Everything's got a story in it. Change the story, change the world' (Pratchett 2005, p.338). In *Howl's Moving Castle* and *The Wee Free Men*, Jones and Pratchett seek to change the world of story.



#### NOTES

- Porter notes that "Witch personae could . . . blossom as comic grotesques at the very time when real witches were disappearing from the daily fears of the educated. . . . Meanwhile the shawl-clad crone . . . lived on in Romantic fairy-tales, children's fiction, and, in the twentieth-century, Disney" (Porter 1999, pp.246-247).
- Purkiss remarks that "despite the subtleties of radical feminists, historians and modern witches, the dominant image of the witch is still of a shrieking hag on a broomstick" (Purkiss 1996, p.276).
- Tiffany's comments suggest that her book is similar to Lang's *Blue Fairy Book*: Lieberman observes that in this influential collection "Beautiful girls . . . are chosen for reward" (Lieberman 1972, p.385).
- See for example the punishment of Beauty's sisters in Beaumont's popular "Beauty and the Beast" (Beaumont 1974, p.150).



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