

The Tricksters Short Guide

The Tricksters by Margaret Mahy

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Contents

The Tricksters Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	8
Literary Qualities.....	9
Themes and Characters.....	10
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	14
Related Titles.....	15
Copyright Information.....	16

Overview

In *The Tricksters*, seventeen-year-old Harry (Ariadne) Hamilton is the middle child in a family of five; she is at once awkward and romantic. She defines her romanticism in the pages of the novel she is writing—a romance populated by Lady Jessica, Prince Valery, and the dark-winged villain, Belen.

When she and her family visit Carnival's Hide, their vacation home, for Christmas and New Year's, she is astonished to find the secret characters of her novel reincarnated in the form of three mysterious brothers, Ovid, Hadfield, and Felix.

Throughout a turbulent holiday, full of the comings and goings of friends and family and the secrets and jealousies they bring, Harry struggles to solve the mystery of the strangers and to take her place in a family where she has always felt overlooked and neglected. Harry serves as the catalyst through which family secrets are revealed and the restless ghost of a murdered son is finally put to rest. Harry also changes, gaining maturity, strength, and self-respect.

About the Author

Prolific New Zealand author Margaret Mahy was born in Whakatane, New Zealand, on March 21, 1936. She has spent most of her life in New Zealand, graduating from the University of New Zealand in 1958 with a bachelor's degree and a Diploma of Librarianship.

In addition to being a writer, Mahy has worked as a librarian in various public, school, and university libraries in New Zealand and Australia.

Mahy recalls inventing and telling stories before she could read and traces her evolution as a writer in the following way: "I began as a listener, became a teller, then a reader, and then a writer in that order." Half-seriously, she describes the dilemma she faces as a librarian, "the ultimate result of this evolutionary process," in being forced to impose an order on books that defy her attempts at definition. As she explains, "Making books available in the most sensible way makes us aware that in serving one function we are distorting others."

Dislocation appears as a key aspect both in Mahy's life and in her career.

She describes herself as growing up "with a fault line running through me," where the child growing up in New Zealand shares equal time with the child who was immersed in British books because New Zealand had few of its own to offer. Her sense of dislocation extends to the complexities she discovers in trying to reconcile such seeming polarities as science/art, fantasy/reality, truth/fiction, and adult/ child. For Mahy, these polarities become instead syntheses, just as her very life and work have become a synthesis of New Zealand and Great Britain.

Mahy's writing reflects this same synthesis of seemingly diverse elements, not only in the motifs she introduces in her work but also in the diversity of genres she has chosen.

Since her first picture book, *A Lion in the Meadow* (1969), Mahy has written over one hundred works (including a handful of children's works in collaboration with Joy Cowley and June Melser). They range from such delightful picture books as the popular *17 Kings and 42 Elephants* (1972) through children's fiction, readers, short story collections, and nonfiction such as *New Zealand: Yesterday and Today* (1975).

Perhaps the most widely praised of Mahy's work, however, has been her young adult fiction. In five novels, *The Haunting* (1982), *The Changeover* (1984), *The Catalogue of the Universe* (1985), *The Tricksters* (1987), and *Memory* (1988), Mahy established an international reputation as an author whose work for young adults is both stylistically dazzling and thematically complex. Mahy has received the prestigious Carnegie Medal three times (for *The Haunting*, *The Changeover*, and *Memory*), and her works are frequently cited in a variety of Best Books lists. The best of Mahy's work explores the "dislocations" she acknowledges in her own life and consistently employs the underpinnings of fantasy and folk tales not only in those works that most directly deal

with supernatural elements, but even in more realistic works like *The Catalogue of the Universe and Memory*.



Setting

Carnival's Hide, the primary setting for *The Tricksters*, is familiar Mahy territory. The family getaway is an isolated, haunted house with a life of its own on the fringes of civilization and the sea. The home was built by Edward Carnival, an eccentric widower who decided to raise and educate his two children, Minerva and Teddy, away from civilization and according to his own educational philosophy. In the father's scheme, emotion and instinct are banished in favor of reason, and the two children are brought up in a strict, doctrinaire, and lonely manner with little contact with the outside world.

The Hamilton family, which now owns the home, recounts ritualistically the story of Teddy's alleged drowning in the cove below the Hide. He drowned at the age of twenty, a romantic and tragic figure whose body was never found and whose ghost may be lurking in the cave below the rocks.

The children Benny, Serena, and Harry, as one of their first acts when they arrive at Carnival's Hide, go down to the rock, stare in the water, and greet the ghost to warn him that they have arrived.

The place itself, the Hide and its surrounding grounds, takes on an animated and unnatural quality. Its front window is like an eye peering out over the harbor, Harry can detect a regular "heartbeat" sound that seems to come from the depths of the house, and periodically an earthquake ripples through the ground as if an animal is stirring.

The house becomes increasingly restless as it reacts to the presence of the three mysterious Carnival brothers who claim to be direct descendants of the family. Furniture and objects shift slightly from day to day, and one morning the family awakens to find the front hallway completely transformed back to its appearance when Edward lived there. Harry speculates that "the house itself was struggling to reform around a core of memory, recharged by the presence of Ovid, Hadfield, and Felix."

The surrounding landscape, like the house, reflects the emotions and disruptions of the people and spirits which pass through it. Mahy's descriptions of the peculiar light of the sea and sky reflect the turbulence and mystery of events. The sky and water are animated, angry, shot with fire, and affected by the extremes of passion, anger, and jealousy experienced by the characters. At the end of the novel, for instance, after the three brothers have mysteriously disappeared, Harry walks down to the shore and into the water to experience her "marriage" to the sea: Once in it [the sea], it flowed over her, warm and cool at once . . .

more sensuous than Christobel's silk dressing gown. The ripples wrote lines of light around her, until Harry felt that she might begin to shine. . . . A little notch in the broken skyline filled up with fire, and Harry was filled with fire too. In the end she was indeed possessed by the brute blood of the air so powerfully but so delicately it was like no

possession she had ever imagined.

Harry's experience is both orgasmic and transforming. She is filled with sexual energy, but this energy is translated into a power to see and a power to use words. Her power comes from her union with the sea and sky, from what she experiences as the supernatural presence of Felix Carnival, now reintegrated as Teddy and one with the sea.

It is in timeless settings like these that Mahy is able to slough off the ordinary, even though she still can describe sour plums and a baby's nappies, and takes the setting into the mythological and magical realm.

Social Sensitivity

The Tricksters is intended for the mature young adult, and, therefore, contains several frankly sexual, although discreet, scenes. Near the end of the novel, for instance, Felix and Harry make love in the hills above Carnival's Hide and in other scenes, there are frank discussions of sexual desire. The central secret revealed at the end of the novel involves a previous affair between Harry's father Jack and Christobel's best friend Emma. The topic, however, is approached discreetly and is central to the theme of Harry's initiation into adulthood. Mahy's teen-age heroines are strong, intelligent, and imaginative figures who actively participate in the events around them.



Literary Qualities

Mahy is a master stylist who finds magic and mystery in everyday objects.

The minor events of family life add a texture to her work and a foundation for the bizarre events that are inevitable. Mahy chooses, for example, a scene of Harry's mother Naomi and Anthony Hesketh doing dishes in the kitchen as the backdrop for the revelation of the secret of Teddy's murder.

Harry journeys to the beach in the dark with a flashlight that makes a black stick look like a lizard or a clump of seaweed look like a severed head.

These distortions of everyday objects introduce Hadfield's attempted rape.

The Christmas tree lights flashing on and off in the corner of the living room provide a surreal background to Harry and Felix's first kiss.

Mahy designs *The Tricksters* as an elaborate puzzle in which the reader must sort through conflicting truths and confusions to solve the mystery of the Carnival brothers. Books become the primary clues. Numerous allusions to children's books as well as the self-contained touchstones of both Harry's and Teddy's books are the catalysts for change. The younger children understand the world through comparisons to Alice or to Peter Rabbit, the three *The Tricksters* 4179 brothers borrow their names from books on the family shelf, and Harry begins to realize the power books have to help her understand and face the world.

The split character of Teddy Carnival also undoubtedly owes some debt to such psychological theorists as Freud, who subdivides the psyche into id, ego, and superego and sees these as warring factions of personality. The three aspects of personality as manifested by the Carnival brothers fight one another for dominance.

Mahy also uses names to signal intent. Carnival's Hide clearly marks the place as a hideaway and a place of secrets, and Harry, once she emerges from behind her curtain of hair, becomes Ariadne. The name Carnival is repeatedly defined as meaning "goodbye to the flesh," referring both to the literal meaning of fasting during Lent, but also referring to the death of Teddy.

Furthermore, Mahy's choice of the name Christobel suggests ties to Samuel Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1797-1801). In that poem Christabel invites the sinister spectral figure Geraldine to her castle home, and, as a result, the innocent maiden is seduced and corrupted. She also is rejected by her father. Beyond the connection to Coleridge's poem, however, Mahy's novel also recalls Coleridge's emphasis on the unifying and synthesizing power of the imagination. Thus, *The Tricksters* is rich stylistically and thematically, resonant in words and descriptions.



Themes and Characters

In novel after novel, Mahy has delineated strong young heroines who are struggling to forge a place in their families and in the world of adults. These are young women of remarkable intelligence and sensitivity. Harry Hamilton is such a character. She is on the brink of womanhood, but she is buried in the center of the family, unable to command attention as do her dazzling and beautiful older sister Christobel and the younger Serena. Harry feels taken for granted, the safe, secure sister who can be depended on and who is thus ignored. She is buried behind her facade. Silent, she hides behind a curtain of coppery-colored hair and her glasses, unwilling to share her face with the world. She also buries herself in her writing. Up in her attic, she creates the lushly romantic purple prose of the story of Lady Jessica, Prince Valery, and the winged villain Belen, giving full rein to her burgeoning sense of love and sexuality. At the same time that she hides herself away, she is a keen observer of others. She watches and listens from her attic and is attentive to the smallest signs around her.

Through her creative imagination, Harry conjures up the other central characters of *The Tricksters*, the three Carnival brothers, who probably represent three facets of the ghost of Teddy Carnival. Although the characters are ambiguous from Harry's perspective they represent the head (Ovid), the heart (Felix), and the "instinct" (Hadfield), three aspects of the personality of Teddy. Ovid is the dominant figure because of Edward's emphasis on reason. The strangers are only able to appear because of Harry's willingness to bring them into corporeal being through the force of her imagination.

They first try to enter the world as one man, but a terrified Harry splinters him into characters who resemble the characters in her romantic novel.

The three strangers enter the household as restless ghosts as if they are "owed something" and cannot be put to rest until this debt is satisfied. Their effect on the family is startling and dangerous. Ovid, in particular, sees himself as a trickster, conjuring up butterflies and roses, but also manipulating people for sport like a puppet-master. Hadfield is the darkest "instinct." At one point, he impersonates Felix on the beach and attempts to rape Harry. He is violence and evil personified and becomes increasingly so as the novel progresses. Harry falls in love with the Felix side of Teddy, the side most attuned to the beauties of nature and art.

The effect of the three brothers is chaos. They tamper with all of the family secrets in an obsession with causing mischief or, perhaps, exposing truth.

The three sides of the personalities are in an internecine struggle as Ovid attempts to remain "the powerful one."

He feels his power slipping away with the force of Harry's love for Felix. Felix becomes more powerful, Hadfield becomes more evil, and Ovid becomes more desperate. Ovid threatens Harry: "Felix is mine. He is me, and if you threaten me by making him want you too much, I promise you I'll destroy your family, and I'll use you to do it."



Ovid indeed carries through on his threat by exposing Harry's book to the ridicule of the family and by prompting her to reveal the secret of her father's affair with Christobel's friend Emma. Significantly, however, in the midst of the chaos this occasions in the family and the ensuing dematerialization of the three brothers, it is Felix who is now at the center of the trio rather than Ovid. Perhaps through her love for Felix, Harry has been the means for realigning Teddy's personality and partially remedying the injustices of the father.

These characters also play a central role in Mahy's concern with the theme of secrets revealed. If Harry is hiding away at Carnival's Hide at the beginning of the novel, she stands revealed at the end. Her secret novel exposed, the next morning she walks naked and without her glasses into the luminescence of the sea and experiences a clarity of vision and a renewed vigor in her power to use words. The festering family secret of Jack's paternity of Emma's daughter Tibby is also revealed, leading eventually to healing and forgiveness. It is through the confrontation over Tibby's paternity that the secret of Teddy's death is revealed.

Clarity of perception or truth revealed finds its way into other images as well. Mirrors and reflections in the water can provide either distortion or preternatural clarity of vision. "Reflections are opposites," Harry observes.

Ironically, although Harry's vision is blurred without her glasses, she is later able to perceive much more clearly without them. Light changes, images come and go, a single figure becomes refracted into three separate pieces of personality, and Christobel sees her face reflected in the face of Tibby.

Books also become mirrors of a distorted reality, both in Harry's book and in Teddy and Minerva's garden tool fantasy of the Black King, the Goddess of Wisdom, and the Boy Enchanter. At one point Felix questions Harry's assumption that she brought the Carnivals into being through the form of her characters by asking where she got the ideas for the characters in the first place. Perhaps, he suggests, the old family photos of Teddy and Minerva were her inspiration.

The Tricksters provides satisfying complexity in both character and theme, suggesting the power of the imagination over the events of everyday life. Thoughts and emotions can change the world and our perceptions of the world. As Harry discovers, that power holds both danger and pleasure.



Topics for Discussion

1. The three strangers appear mysteriously. Who are they?
2. Describe the personality of each of the three Carnival brothers. How are they different from one another and how do their personalities change?
3. How are the brothers similar to the characters in Harry's novel-in-progress?
4. Why is Ovid the dominant brother?
5. Describe Carnival's Hide. How does the house "respond" to the people who visit it?
6. Trace the Carnival family tree.

How do we find out information about the Carnivals and their life at the Hide?

7. Harry is the third of five children.

Discuss her reactions to being the middle child.

8. How does Harry change as the novel progresses?
9. Describe the other characters in the novel (Christobel, Naomi, Jack, Emma, Anthony). What makes each distinctive?
10. What do you think of Harry's novel? Why does Ovid reveal it?
11. How does the revelation of Jack and Emma's secret affect the Hamilton family?
12. Are the Carnival brothers dangerous?
13. Were you surprised by the ending and the secrets that are revealed?
14. Why is Christobel the only one in the family who doesn't seem to know Jack and Emma's secret?
15. Why is Carnival an appropriate name for the family and the home?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Carnival's Hide is a hiding place for a number of characters in the novel.

Explore the novel's image of hiding things or people.

2. Compare and contrast Harry to another of Mahy's strong heroines (in, for example, *The Changeover* or *The Catalogue of the Universe*).

3. Mahy often uses the isolated family home as a setting for her novels.

Compare and contrast Carnival's Hide to other such settings (in, for example, 4. The three Carnival brothers may be facets of one personality at war within Teddy Carnival. Explore this possibility and discuss whether Freud's division of the mind into id, ego, and superego (or any other psychological theory) offers a plausible model for this division.

5. Write a character analysis of Harry.

6. Explore how Mahy uses descriptions of the body as images in *The Tricksters*.

7. Mahy uses reflections—mirrors, water, duplicate characters—as a means of penetration into psychological reality. Explore the image as it is used in *The Tricksters* (or in other Mahy novels).



For Further Reference

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"Margaret (May) Mahy." In *Children's Literature Review*. Vol. 7. Detroit: Gale Research, 1984: 176-188. This article provides a survey of reviews and articles concerning Mahy's work.

Related Titles

Although its specific characters and setting do not appear in other Mahy novels, *The Tricksters* clearly continues a number of Mahy's interests and concerns from earlier novels. In *Harry* we have another strong, young, imaginative Mahy heroine who must cope with the pleasures and perils of family life.

She must also cope with the confusions of becoming an adult—socially, intellectually, and sexually. Surrounding these heroines, usually isolated in a family retreat at the edge of civilization, is magic and mystery, often generated through the power of the young heroine's imagination and sensitivity.

Thus, in novels like *The Catalogue of the Universe* and *Dangerous Spaces* (and in other works) characters like Harry must resolve the disruptions they originate in *Dangerous Spaces* or *The Catalogue of the Universe* in order to master and discipline their burgeoning powers.



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