Dangerous Spaces Short Guide

Dangerous Spaces by Margaret Mahy

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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Overview

In Dangerous Spaces eleven-year-old Anthea Wakefield must come to terms with the death of her parents in a boating accident. She must also adapt to a new life in the ancestral family home in rural New Zealand with her Aunt Molly, Uncle Lionel, and cousins Flora and Teddy, not to mention the ghost of Grandfather Lionel, who stays in the house because he cannot bear to let others make any changes. Stifled and harried by a disorganized and alien life in her new home, Anthea seeks refuge in a dream world called Viridian, created by Old Lionel's long-dead brother Henry.

Anthea enters the dream world through the inspiration of dead Henry's stereoscope pictures of ancient monuments and exotic landscapes, and finds, at least initially, a world of panoramic vistas, pure air and snow, and ample space. In a journey down from the dazzling mountains toward a sea (and its mysterious island) which beckon in the distance, Anthea is drawn increasingly into a puzzling and more threatening world populated by the ghost of dead Henry.

Even as Anthea begins to reconcile herself to her life with her new family and to cope with her grief over her parents' death, she becomes trapped in the fantasy world. As she struggles to escape, Flora and the ghost of Old Lionel come to rescue her from the dangerous spaces of Viridian and achieve a resolution that restores the dead to Viridian and the living to their parallel place on Wakefield's Point.

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 has 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 a work of nonfiction, 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

Dangerous Spaces is a book about places. Although nominally set in rural New Zealand, the settings have a sense of timelessness that transcends any particular place. The two primary settings are the family home on Wakefield's Point and the parallel dream world of Viridian. The two places coexist in parallel realities and at times cross over and influence one another.

The family routinely accepts that the family home is haunted. Broken appliances, quarrels, and delays in accomplishing projects are all attributed to the ghost of the patriarch of the family, Old Lionel. Molly, in the opening scene of the novel, laments the broken toaster: "How did a nice boy like you Illustration by Linda Thomas for Dangerous Spaces by Margaret Mahy. Viking: New York (1991).

[young Lionel, Molly's husband] ever come to have a father who goes around fusing toasters when he should be busy pushing up roses?" Old Lionel's presence is an old family joke, but Flora can never go by the portrait of Old Lionel in the hall without feeling his eyes following her. She regularly believes she sees the shape of Old Lionel materialize in various places in the house.

The ghost of Old Lionel will not leave the family home because he wants to continue to oversee any changes made in the house. Thus, when young Lionel wants to repair the wiring and plumbing and recase the walls, he gets the job halfway finished and then attributes his lack of will to finish the walls to Old Lionel's disapproving presence.

In the image of the walls, Mahy develops the sense of the house itself being a living entity: ". . . living in Flora's house was like living inside a sort of skeleton, skin gone, and bones, nerves, and blood vessels revealed."

The house seems part and parcel of the family itself: a record of the history and memories of three generations of Wakefields.

The house is situated in an isolated spot, near the sea, far from the school bus stop, in view of a peninsula and island. Young Lionel, on his way to work in the mornings, goes through a ritual at the top of the hill dividing the house from the road to the city. He puts on his "accountant's uniform," polishes his shoes, and resets his focus on his job only when he is safely beyond the dust of the home. It is as if he changes from one person to another at the top of the hill.

If the home is at the edge of civilization, it is also at the edge of Viridian.

Viridian, the second major setting of the novel, is the imaginary world created by Old Lionel's long-dead younger brother Henry, inspired by a series of stereoscope pictures which are still part of the family's belongings. Flora and Anthea discover the pictures,

which serve as a kind of entryway into the magical world. Each girl enters by observing the picture that is most significant to her—Anthea through the picture of the crack in the world and Flora through the picture of the herd of wild horses. Other pictures also inspire landscapes in Viridian—the Alaskan Gold Stair Trail and the coliseum, for example.

Viridian, however, also bears obvious resemblances to the real-life landscape of Wakefield's Point. The peninsula and island appear in both worlds, and the two settings occasionally superimpose themselves on one another.

For instance, the forest Molly and the girls plant becomes the forest that undergirds the coliseum in Viridian.

Viridian is a constantly changing landscape, described in elaborate detail in each of Anthea's voyages there, a vast land connected only by the single road that leads from the pure mountain temple where Anthea begins to the edge of the sea with the island in the middle. Anthea's Viridian journey is a descent reminiscent of quest romance from the pure, uncrowded mountaintops down into a threatening world of war and garbage and death—a wasteland.

The novel concentrates on these two worlds and how they influence and interpenetrate one another. Dead Henry has created the world, but Anthea has the force to change Viridian through her desires and imagination. It is even possible to read Viridian as a completely imaginary psychological journey on Anthea's part, although that reading is complicated by the corroboration of Flora's experience. Flora, Anthea, Old Lionel, and Dead Henry are all able to move from one world to the other, even during waking hours, and the two places seem to exist in the same space at the same time.

Much of the thematic impact of the work has to do with the young characters' being able to sort out and accept their appropriate spaces. As long as they are unable to do so, the spaces are "dangerous." Only when Anthea, rescued by Flora, returns to Wakefield's Point, and Old Lionel abandons his roost in the family home and accompanies Henry to the island can the dislocation of the two worlds be mended.

Anthea's physical return from Viridian corresponds to her psychological and emotional acceptance of the death of her parents and her new life with Flora and her. family.

Social Sensitivity

Dangerous Spaces offers sensitive insights into the process by which Anthea deals with the death of her parents. Anthea at first refuses to accept their death, then becomes angry at their abandoning her, and finally accepts their death, reconciling herself to her future with her new family.

Part of Anthea's reconciliation also requires her to accommodate the less affluent and less ordered lifestyle of her cousin and to recognize the values that her new family can bring to her life. She must learn to live less like a princess and more like a member of the family who must work and contribute for the good of all.

The mystical or occult aspect of the novel may be troubling for some readers, especially as it is presented not as only the aberration of Anthea's psyche but as a vision shared by Flora. As Josephine Raburn suggests, Mahy's work is probably influenced by pagan and tribal (Maori) religious beliefs which, while reflecting traditional New Zealand cultural influences, may come in conflict with certain contemporary religious values.

Literary Qualities

Mahy's use of the metaphor of the journey as a process of self-discovery forms one of the central images of Dangerous Spaces. It is a dream journey that Anthea undertakes eagerly. She even goes to bed early to escape the prison of her everyday space and to experience the vistas and purity of her dream world Viridian. The journey takes on the quality of a medieval quest with Henry (whose Viridian name is Griff after the mythological griffin), Lionel (as Leo the knight figure in Viridian), and the land in the shape of a sleeping dragon. The Viridian spaces, however, become increasingly more crowded and more threatening, culminating in a war and a vast garbage dump (wasteland) of human debris. As Anthea begins to establish firmer connections with her new family, the lure of Viridian becomes less tantalizing. Significantly, the weeping statue that Anthea encounters at the beginning of her journey reappears at the end as a smiling image of herself, metaphoric evidence of the healing she has undergone.

The fantasy elements of the work hinge on the imaginative powers of the dreamer and the confusion between waking and sleeping. It is first through the imagination of Henry that Viridian is created, inspired by the stereoscope pictures of ancient monuments and landscapes. Both Anthea and Flora have the power, however, to impose their imaginations on Viridian and to change it. Through the power of the mind, Anthea creates a living forest under the coliseum, and Flora enters the dream world as a woman warrior on a wild horse. The point of view shifts, moving from Anthea to Flora, helping us understand the emotions and thoughts of both girls, but also helping to forge a link between the two. Their separate experiences help confirm the reality of the dream world.

Each girl is experiencing the same thing, and each girl is able to enter the dream world independently. The fantasy world and the everyday world occupy the same time and space, reinforcing Mahy's implication that the mind sensitive and receptive to magic will discover it anywhere.

Mahy has a knack for intertwining the natural and the supernatural in image and detail. The real pictures of the stereoscope, for example, become the raw materials for the construction of Viridian as well as the porthole into the fantasy world. Old Lionel's ashes have been buried under the rose bush at the corner of the house; logically, then, Old Lionel's ghost has a smoky smell when it reappears in Viridian.

Everyday battles over plum jam or plumbing add a sense of depth to the narrative but also contribute to the overall design. The girls' battle with the rooster, for instance, adds humor, but it also showcases Flora's courage and Anthea's fright. The rain at the end of the novel serves the practical purpose of filling up the water tanks after a drought, but it also offers a metaphoric cleansing of the ghost and a metaphoric representation of the healing role of tears in Anthea's grief.

Mahy provides the details of everyday life not only to provide a rich sense of physical place but also a sense of the richness of the unseen world.

Themes and Characters

As is typical in many of Mahy's works, the novel is rich and complex literarily, inviting the reader into a challenging experience. Mahy is particularly successful in her depiction of young female protagonists who are faced with upheaval in their lives and who must cope with their challenges with imagination and sensitivity. Dangerous Spaces offers two such characters in the two cousins, the romantic and dreamy Anthea and the energetic and bold Flora.

The two are initially opposites both physically and temperamentally. Anthea is the golden-haired princess, the rich and romantic orphan from the perfect home. Flora is the mousy, freckled farm girl who resents the encroachment of her cousin on what she sees as her space—her home and family. Flora envies Anthea's romantic persona, her golden, flowing hair, her pin-tucked nightdress, her reluctance to offer to help with farm chores, her veiled disdain for Flora's life. Clearly, however, Anthea also envies Flora's boldness.

Flora can even confront the rooster without fear!

The two girls, despite their seeming hostility for one another, are often thrown together because of their similar age and their proximity in the house. They sleep in separate rooms, but a hole in the wall between them allows them to monitor one another.

Mahy adds an intriguing pattern to the characterization in the novel by pairing two young boys with the two young girls. The boys, however, are both ghosts—Dead Henry, the girls' great uncle who died as a young boy, and a youthful version of Old Lionel, the ghost of their grandfather, who haunts the house in order to protect it from potential changes by the new generation. The ghost of Lionel appears both as the elderly spirit of the haunted house and as a thirteen-year-old boy in the dream world of Viridian. Anthea joins Henry in Viridian as they make their way toward the mysterious island at the center of that world. Lionel aids Flora in rescuing Anthea from going to the island, and he takes Anthea's place with Henry, leaving the house exorcised. Much of the action of the novel involves the shifting in pairings of these four major characters so that the ghosts can be rightfully laid to rest and that the living beings can find less dangerous and more accommodating spaces.

The "dangerous spaces" of the title form a central motif in the novel.

Anthea is unable to find a space for herself with her aunt, uncle, and cousins after the death of her parents. She feels like an outsider, a child whose parents betrayed her and abandoned her to a crude and ugly life in a home where walls sit exposed waiting for repair and the plumbing backs up.

Anthea seeks her space in the dream world of Viridian, not realizing that that space presents even greater danger. Viridian pulls her further and further into dangerous spaces of war, human detritus, and the self-destruction of the island at the center.

Thematically, the work takes up another frequent Mahy theme, the family as a source of both healing and hurt. In a 1987 interview Mahy explains, "Family life is where you get your greatest blessings, but it's also where a lot of people sustain their greatest damage."

Anthea and Flora must both cope with the everyday hurts of family life—the quarrels, the setbacks, the frustrations of sacrificing oneself for the good of the family. In this aspect of the novel, Mahy introduces the minor characters of Anthea's aunt and uncle, Molly and young Lionel, and Flora's baby brother Teddy. Molly is a Mahy earth mother similar to the mother in The Catalogue of the Universe. She plants and cooks, cans plums and fixes plumbing, gets irritated and becomes distracted. She also, however, can be the loving force whose comforting hug helps overcome Anthea's fears and helps reconnect her to the world of the living. Lionel is less a presence than Molly, but he is a kind and patient, if ineffectual, figure of eccentric disorder in a house where commotion and chaos rule.

The family offers both Anthea and Flora a space of refuge and a sense of continuity. Their history is tied to the house and to a common ancestry, to memories and memorabilia of Old Lionel and Dead Henry, to the childhood memories of family dinners and common experiences. It is through the sense of family and place that Anthea is saved from the death wish of joining Dead Henry and perhaps her parents on the island and ultimately from the oblivion of crawling through the hole at the center of the zero.

All of the characters live with fears of various types. Henry fears journeying to the island alone, Anthea fears having no space to call her own, Flora fears being supplanted by Anthea, and Old Lionel fears the changes that would take place in the house if he leaves it unprotected. All of these fears are eventually overcome by characters' making connections with others. Instead of operating as four isolated entities in a disrupted universe, the proper alliances of brother to brother in the world of the dead and cousin to cousin in the world of the living are ultimately restored. Flora rescues Anthea and takes her back to Wakefield's Point and Lionel rescues Henry and accompanies him to the island.

The interplay and disruptions of the two worlds provide the scene for Anthea's metaphoric journey through grief. What begins as denial and anger over the death of her parents ends in acceptance and resolution.

Topics for Discussion

1. In what ways do the worlds of the family house and that of Viridian cross?

2. Describe Veridian. How did it come to be and what is it like?

3. What influence does Anthea have on changing Viridian?

4. What is the significance of the island in the middle of Viridian?

5. How does Anthea get over the grief of the deaths of her parents and come to accept living with her new family?

6. Why is Henry (Griff) still in Viridian?

7. How do Anthea and Flora finally become friends instead of enemies?

8. Anthea's family life and Flora's family life are very different. Describe each.

9. Why does Anthea bring out the honey pot at the end of the novel?

10. What is the importance of the rain at the end of the novel?

11. Discuss the image of the veiled statue.

12. Mahy uses color extensively as an image. Identify the ways in which colors are used in the novel.

13. Trace your response to the novel as you read it. Were you confused?

When did you begin to understand the nature of Viridian and the ghosts who inhabit it?

14. Is Anthea's journey into Viridian real or imaginary?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Mahy often uses the isolated house as a setting in her novels. Read other Mahy novels like The Tricksters or The Catalogue of the Universe and compare and contrast the use of the houses as settings.

2. Does Dangerous Spaces reflect the cultural influence of New Zealand?

3. Psychologists like Elisabeth Kubler-Ross have identified the various stages of the grieving process. Does Anthea go through this process?

4. Draw a map or picture of Viridian, locating the key places mentioned in the novel. Describe its physical terrain.

5. Investigate the reference to the stereoscope picture of the Golden Stair Trail in Alaska. What was the Golden Stair Trail and how does it relate thematically to the novel?

6. Write a report on the stereoscope.

Try to locate one.

7. Explore the use of imagery in the novel. You might look at images of color, nature, the human body, or geology.

For Further Reference

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"Margaret Mahy." In Fourth Book of Junior Authors & Illustrators. Edited by Doris de Montreville and Elizabeth D. Crawford. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978. This article provides a brief but insightful critique of Mahy's major work through 1978.

Marquis, Claudia. "Feminism, Freud, and the Fairy Tale: Reading Margaret Mahy's The Haunting." Landfall, 41 (June 1987): 186-205. The article explores Mahy's development of a feminist heroine in a discussion which could apply to a number of Mahy's novels.

Raburn, Josephine. "The Changeover: A Fantasy of Opposites." Children's Literature in Education 23 (1992): 27-38. Raburn analyzes The Changeover as Jungian quest romance with influences of Maori animism, preHellenic moon mythology, Christianity, and modern science. Her discussion of the female psyche and female initiation applies to other Mahy heroines.

Roback, Diane, and Richard Donahue.

Review. Publisher's Weekly 238 (February 1, 1991): 80. The reviewers criticize the "initial tedious and disorienting descriptions of Viridian," but praise the combination of "magic and drama" in the final chapters.

Sullivan, Mary. Review. Times Literary Supplement (July 12, 1991): 20. The review briefly summarizes the novel.

Vasilakis, Nancy. Review. Horn Book 67 (May-June 1991): 330. Praises Mahy's skill at "blending the real and the supernatural" and calls the novel "life-affirming."

Related Titles

At least two other novels, The Catalogue of the Universe and The Tricksters, bear similarities to Dangerous Spaces.

Concerns of family and the continuity of family history in ancestral houses form primary themes. Mahy is most successful delineating young, female protagonists, although Anthea is somewhat younger than Harry in The Trick sters and Angela in The Catalogue of the Universe. Because Anthea is a younger character, the novel lacks the aspects of romantic love found in the other two novels. The intensity of the fantasy element varies as well, but Mahy regularly insists on exploring the mysterious, almost mythical quality of our lives.

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