"Mum’s a silly fusspot": the queering of family in Diana Wynne

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Abstract
In Four British Fantasists, Butler cites Diana Wynne Jones saying that her novels ‘provide a space where children can... walk round their problems and think “Mum’s a silly fusspot and I don’t need to be quite so enslaved by her notions”’ (267). That is, as I will argue in this paper, Jones’ work aims to provide readers with the emotional, narrative and intellectual resources to achieve a critical distance from their families of origin. I will provide a brief survey of the treatment of family in Jones’ children’s books, with particular reference to Charmed Life, The Lives of Christopher Chant, The Ogre Downstairs, Cart and Cwidder, Drowned Ammet, The Homeward Bounders and Hexwood, and then narrow my focus to two of Jones’ classic 4 treatments of family: Eight Days of Luke and Archer’s Goon. I will read these books in terms of the ways in which their child protagonists reposition themselves in relation to family in the course of their narratives. Drawing on Esther Saxey’s recent narratological analysis of the coming-out story in Homoplot, I will argue that the way in which Jones shows her protagonists both coming to terms with their families of origin and creating new kin networks or ‘chosen families’ makes her books particularly hospitable to queer readers – or at least to this queer reader.

Keywords
queering, wynne, fusspot, mum, silly, diana, family

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Diana Wynne Jones
Conference Schedule

Friday 3rd July

2.00-3.15pm, Room 3D36
Registration and Refreshments

3.15-4.30pm, Room 3D33

Charlie Butler: Welcome to the Conference!

Charlie Butler is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of the West of England, Bristol. Charlie is the author of six fantasy novels for children and young adults, as well as the academic study Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in the Children’s Fantasies of Penelope Lively, Alan Garner, Diana Wynne Jones and Susan Cooper (2006), and numerous articles and chapters on children’s literature.

Deborah Kaplan: Disrupted expectations: young/old protagonists in Diana Wynne novels.
The works of Diana Wynne Jones consistently break genre expectations regarding the age of the protagonists and a secondary characters. Some texts, such as Dark Lord of Derkholm with its cross-generational heroes, violate the genre’s expected relationship between the age of the implied reader and that the protagonists. In other other texts, including Hexwood, the protagonist’s true age is hidden from everyone, including the protagonist himself. These two texts aren’t unusual in a body of work which includes timeshifting flashbacks, adults regressed to toddlers, and a century-old adolescent. This paper explores the function of age and expectation in Jones’ works, primarily focused on this pair of texts. It examines how a text with an adult or age-shifting protagonist implies a child reader in a genre with fairly solid conventions for protagonist age. It examines the texts’ building of sympathy for mixed-generational groups, instead of presenting adults as antagonists, mentors, or parental figures. It explores how the reader’s interpretation of a protagonist does or doesn’t change when that character belatedly shifts from young adolescent young adult. Finally, this paper examines the unusual nature of all of these treatments of age, and examines them in the context of fixed genre expectations.

Tui Head: The Girl in Adventure Fiction
One of the central dilemmas of modern feminism is the desire to adequately value unpaid “women’s work” while simultaneously affirming the abilities and rights of women to succeed in paid work outside of the home. Marilyn Waring wrote, in her book Counting for Nothing, that women’s work – cleaning, cooking, childcare – is vital to continuing prosperity (of all kinds, including economic), but is invisible in all the ways we attempt to account for productivity – usually because it is unpaid. Unpaid labour, usually domestic, usually done by women, represents a significant fraction of the economy but goes uncounted and unvalued. Even as women have entered the workforce in increasing numbers, and they begin to be understood to be economically valuable, domestic labour remains undervalued (as evidenced by the comparatively low pay rates of housekeepers, cleaners, nurses, and so forth, as compared to carpenters, plumbers, or doctors.) I am interested in the ways young adult and children’s fiction affirms or criticises women’s work and women’s roles, especially in adventure fiction. In these stories children are left to more-or-less to their own devices, and their means of taking care of themselves are illuminating.

I will explore, first, the motherly girl in mid-twentieth-century adventure stories, looking at Susan Walker (of Arthur Ransome’s “Swallows and Amazons”, published between 1930 and 1947), Anne Kirrin (of Enid Blyton’s “Famous Five”, 1942-1963), and Susan Pevensie (of C. S.
Lewis’ “Chronicles of Narnia”, 1950-1956). These girls take on a maternal role, supervising and caring for their siblings and friends in the absence of adult figures; their labour epitomises the concept of “women’s work”, as it might be applied to children’s fiction. They are the voice of common sense and of regular meals, but rarely do they have an active role in the narratives. I hope to pay particular attention to Susan Walker and Anne Kirrin, and their opposite halves, tomboys Nancy Blackett and George Kirrin; the interplay between the domestic role and the tomboy role is a microcosm of, and unintended metaphor for, feminism’s vacillation between the paid worker and the unpaid labourer.

Secondly, I hope to explore the ways modern adventure fiction interrogates the standard maternal girl role that the Susans, and Anne, exemplify, particularly in the work of Diana Wynne Jones. Jones’ work rests firmly in the tradition of the earlier novels, albeit with an increased presence of adults (who are, instead of entirely absent, generally metaphorically absent, fumbling, disbelieving, or actively antagonistic towards child protagonists. Here, Jones’ work conforms to a more modern tradition of casting children against adults.) Her novel The Merlin Conspiracy explores gender and difference in a wide range of ways (for example, her elaborate setting of “male” and “female” magics in the Merlin/Magids, and the Dimbers; her emphasis on the “balance” of magics speaks to a strong valuation of women’s work, but an equally strong gender essentialism). Most pertinent to my thesis, however, is Arianrhod Hyde and her relationship with Grundo, a younger boy she had more or less adopted as a child. When Jones eventually reveals that Grundo has been enchanting Roddy to take care of him, she creates a powerful criticism of the way the maternal role might act to hijack young women from their own purposes (as well as a potential implied criticism of social strictures which encourage young women to take these roles.) Meanwhile, in the recent novel House of Many Ways, Jones depicts an amusing reversal of women’s and men’s work, as Charmain goes out to work, deputising the stranger Peter to fulfill her responsibilities towards housework (she is house-sitting for an ill relative.) The novel is surprisingly invested in domestic labour; Charmain’s struggles with the rather dirty and messy house represent a significant fraction of the book’s tangential material. I believe the complicated ways Peter and Charmain echo and satirise typical attitudes to women’s work may present interesting explorations of the feminist dilemma I mentioned.

5.00-6.00pm, Room 3D33

Keynote Address: Nicholas Tucker

“Diana Wynne Jones - Life into Art”

6.00-7.00pm, Felixstowe Court

Buffet Supper. (Cash bar available from 6.00-11.00pm.)

7.00-8.30pm, Room 3D33

Archer’s Goon (BBC, 1992): Episodes 1-3
Beth Lockwood: Monstrous Mothers and Gumptious Grannies: Female Caregivers in the novels of Diana Wynne Jones

As long as there have been fairy tales, there have been monstrous mothers; women who represent the antithesis of all that motherhood purports to be. Many of Diana Wynne Jones’ novels tap into this long established tradition with some truly diabolical mothers at the centre of her texts, who have anything but their children’s best interests at heart. This paper examines the depiction of the inadequate mother figure in this author’s novels.

Fairy tale protagonists usually have to rely upon their own ingenuity to protect themselves from their mothers’ evil intentions. Diana Wynne Jones however often offers help to her heroes in an unlikely form. A strong patriarchal figure, Jones’ gumptious grannies are a force to be reckoned with. Any notions of hovering sedately in the background are firmly dispelled as the often marginalised older female character comes into her own in her novels.

With a range of examples but focusing mainly upon Ivy, Laurel and Gran in Fire and Hemlock, this paper discusses some of Jones’ most complex creations proving appearances can be extremely deceptive.

Beth Lockwood is a PhD student based at Bristol UWE, under the supervision of Dr Charles Butler. Her research focuses on the relatively new theory of fantastic realism in Children’s Literature, combining reader response with traditional literary theory. Diana Wynne Jones is one of the four authors which her thesis focuses on. She also works as a visiting lecturer in the Education Faculty at UWE teaching on a variety of Children’s Literature modules.

Iain Emsley: The portrayal of the wizard as father figure

Wizards are often portrayed as all knowing figures to whom the central characters turn in times of crisis. The guide their charges through the difficulty that they face at the time, becoming surrogate fathers. In Diana Wynne Jones’s novels, as Farah Mendlesohn notes in her study of Diana Wynne Jones’s work, father figures often ignore their charges, creating a self delusion of grandeur.

In this paper I am going to look at how Wynne Jones constructs the wizard as a father figure in Hexwood, The Merlin Conspiracy, Howl’s Moving Castle and Charmed Life. In each novel she constructs the father as a threatening figure though impenetrability or violence. Deconstructing these positions, she shows the wizards to either be absent or neglectful fathers, trying to govern their children without giving them the agency to function as themselves, usually allow the child to fall into harm. Whilst this happens, they are reconstructed as somebody who cares for their children and recognise their own failings. They give their charges the agency to act on their own through knowledge and the ability to challenge them. The wizard is forced to recognise and act on their own neglect of their parental duties and pass on information to their child.

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9.00-10.30am, Room 3D36

**Susan Ang:** “It’s getting a little stuffy and mouse-ish in here”: Dogmata, Catastrophe and the Renaissance of Fantasy

This paper proposes to consider the way in which the notion of renewal/rewriting is put to work in the fantasy of Diana Wynne Jones. As theme, this drives many of her works — *Hexwood, Fire and Hemlock, Dark Lord of Derkholm, Tale of Time City, Archer’s Goon* — the list could go on indefinitely. But it is also there as an energy shaping what she is doing with regard to the genre itself, whose tropes and structures are dismantled, critiqued and re-assembled in new forms to renew what is in danger of becoming/has become stale and tired. Renewal is thus present as performance as much as theme.

The paper will examine how these ideas are played out in the larger body of Diana Wynne Jones’s work, while concentrating on a few texts, particularly *Hexwood*, in which fractured narrative and use of the wasteland motif are put to useful effect, *Fire and Hemlock* in which the notion of ‘rewriting’ has an especial aptness, *Dark Lord of Derkholm* in which the traditional shapes of fantasy may be read as the real ‘Dark Lord’ against which Jones’s text pits itself, and *Deep Secret* whose Escher-esque coils are both symbol of stagnant loop and path towards renewal.

**Margaret Williamson Huber:** Authority And Power In The Worlds Of Diana Wynne Jones

This paper explores Diana Wynne Jones’s conception of the proper relationship between king and mage, or secular authority and sacred power, that figures so prominently in her work. Anthropologists call this form of governance dual sovereignty, a separation of powers between the spiritual, usually construed as authority, and the secular, usually regarded as power. It is found all around the world in a wide variety of cultural contexts. In most cases, authority and power complement each other, neither able to function without the other. Authority ordains but is impotent; power unregulated is unproductive. Although in some ways the two are equal, in most of these cases the authority is in some sense superior because, in the opinion of those constrained by the system, authority must regulate power, but the reverse cannot be true. This hierarchy is not universal, though; and indeed Diana Wynne Jones’s imagined kingdoms reverse it. The analysis considers the logic of such an arrangement, and suggests that it has its motivation in the British relationship between the monarch and the lords spiritual.

Margaret Williamson Huber received her D Phil in social anthropology from Oxford University. She teaches anthropology at the University of Mary Washington, where she founded the anthropology program in 1974. Her areas of specialisation include native North America, peoples of the South Pacific, American popular culture, gender, and symbolic systems. Her book *Powhatan Lords of Life and Death* was published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2003.

**Martha Hixon:** Power Plays: Paradigms of Power in Three Jones Novels

As Charles Butler has noted, Diana Wynne Jones’s work “has always been characterized by an interest in power and its abuse” (*Four British Fantasists* 267). This paper will examine some of the power paradigms evident in *The Pinhoe Egg* (2006), *The Merlin Conspiracy* (2003), and *The Game* (2007).