

FANTASY AND HEROISM IN “THE DEVIL’S ARITHMETIC”

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Fantasy literature has become incredibly popular among young readers nowadays. Well-known examples include the recently published Harry Potter books by J.K. Rowling, the Percy Jackson books by Rick Riordan, and Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy, as well as fantasy classics published in the mid-20th century or earlier, such as J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, C.S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea books. Several of these popular fantasy novels have also been made into successful films or TV movies.

Most of these currently popular fantasy novels may be described as *heroic fantasy* (also called *quest fantasy* or *high fantasy*) stories. In a heroic fantasy, the hero or heroine is “engaged in a monumental struggle against a seemingly all-powerful evil, and the fate of an entire civilization often depends on the outcome of the struggle” (Russell 197). Good almost always triumphs over evil in the end of these stories, and the hero or heroine is often rewarded with material wealth, adulation, and/or love. Moreover, the hero or heroine’s quest in these stories is often a quest for identity as well.

Fantasy author Tamora Pierce states that young adults enjoy fantasy stories because they “respond to the idealism and imagination they find in everything they read,” and the “fuel that fires idealism . . . [is] in the mighty symbols of myth, fairy tales, dreams, legends—and fantasy” (qtd. in MacRae 2). Pierce lists certain elements of fantasy stories which attract young readers, such as empowerment; the possibility for ordinary or young people to become heroes; the presence of magic as an equalizer between the powerful and the

powerless; and the persistence of hope and optimism (qtd. in MacRae 2).

According to Bucher and Manning, fantasy books enable young adults to explore codes of behavior, the human psyche, and concepts of good and evil, particularly through the use of allegory and metaphor. Fantasy permits readers to “consider concepts that are often too scary to consider in real life. Through fantasies, readers can contemplate dark forces of evil” and discover that “courage, friendship, their own resourcefulness, and the help of trusted elders help the characters in [fantasy] books overcome these evil forces” (66).

Nevertheless, I also believe that if children and teenagers only read certain types of fantasy stories, such as the currently popular heroic fantasies mentioned above, their encounters with the possibilities that fantasy literature can offer will remain limited. While it is understandable that many of them would want to read about protagonists like Harry Potter or Percy Jackson, who acquire special powers and learn that they have incredible destinies to fulfill, young readers will also benefit from reading about protagonists who may not become great or powerful, but who are also capable of other kinds of goodness and heroism.

One brilliant example of fantasy fiction that challenges readers to redefine heroism and the encounter with a different world is Jane Yolen’s *The Devil’s Arithmetic*. This novel is an example of time-slip fantasy, also called historical fantasy or time-warp fantasy (Tomlinson 122), a type of fantasy story in which the present-day protagonist is brought back in time to a specific historical period and setting. Erlandson and Bainbridge state that this type of fantasy crosses three distinct genres (fantasy, historical fiction, and contemporary realism) and “enables the reader to step back from contemporary life and see the struggles of human existence from a more distanced, reflective perspective. At the same time, the reader remains fully engaged with the characters and the issues with which the characters are faced” (“Living History”).

The protagonist of *The Devil’s Arithmetic* is a twelve-year-old Jewish American girl named Hannah Stern who lives in a New York suburb in the 1980s. During her family’s Seder dinner, she is unexpectedly transported back in time to a Polish village in 1942, where she finds that she has been transformed into a recently orphaned girl named Chaya. Hannah and the other villagers are soon brought to a Nazi concentration camp, and Hannah experiences first-hand the horrors and the struggles that real-life

concentration camp inmates went through. But through her relationships with the other prisoners, she also learns to become compassionate and selfless. And when one of her close friends in the camp, Rivka, is sent to the gas chambers, Hannah tells Rivka to hide, and she walks to the gas chamber in Rivka's place.

At this point, Hannah is suddenly transported back to the Seder dinner with her American family in her own time. She later discovers that her Aunt Eva is actually Rivka, the girl she had met in the camp, and Aunt Eva tells her about how the camp was liberated at the end of the war, how some had survived, and how she and her brother, Hannah's Grandpa Will, had come to America and changed their names. Eva also tells Hannah, whose Hebrew name is "Chaya," that she had named her in honor of her friend who had died in her place. Because of her trip into the past, Hannah now realizes the importance of remembering and of retelling the story of an event such as the Holocaust, so that those who died may somehow continue to live on.

Deborah O'Keefe regards *The Devil's Arithmetic* as one of those "amazingly dense, dark fantasy tales [that] lead readers into depressing and terrifying levels of human experience" (136). But she also points out that through her use of the fantasy element of time travel, Jane Yolen "gets enough distance that a reader can grasp the truth and the horror without being destroyed by despair; she can provide a partially good ending where there can be no happy endings" (149). It may be easier for young readers, to identify with Hannah, a girl from contemporary America who at first is indifferent to history, including the personal history of her elder Jewish relatives such as her grandfather and Aunt Eva. By thrusting Hannah into the past of World War II Poland and into the body of Chaya, a young Polish village girl, Yolen is able to make her protagonist experience the Holocaust first-hand but at the same time spare her from actual death, which might make the story too depressing for many young readers. Instead, Hannah is returned to her own time the moment she (as Chaya) enters the gas chamber to die. As a result, she is able to survive her horrifying experience in the concentration camp and, safely back in the present, is able to reflect on the lessons she has learned from her experience, thereby inviting the readers to do the same.

The Devil's Arithmetic uses, to some extent, the "enchanted journey" motif that is present in certain well-known fantasy novels such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In fantasy stories that use this motif, the young protagonist starts out in the real world or the primary world, and then, through some

device (such as the rabbit hole in Alice's Adventures in Wonderland), he or she is brought into the enchanted world or the secondary world. After several adventures and encounters in the secondary world, he or she is able to return to the primary world at the end of the story. A somewhat similar pattern is played out in *The Devil's Arithmetic*, although the WWII concentration camp that Hannah enters is obviously darker than other stories' imaginary worlds, and certainly far from enchanted. While it is not strictly an imaginary world but a part of the real world in the recent past, it perhaps is as unreal to Hannah as an imaginary world would be, especially since Hannah is portrayed as a relatively carefree young girl who lives in a relatively small and safe environment (suburban New York) and whose main concerns are her appearance, shopping, and movies.

Natalie Babbitt describes a pattern described in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with A Thousand Faces* and found in countless fairy tales, folk tales, classical myths, and children's fantasy literature: that of the hero who is called to leave home, crosses a threshold into another world, encounters numerous trials and adventures along the way, and finally, "[h]aving survived the trials and learned the lesson . . . is then free to return to the real world or the waking state or life—however you wish to define it—to recross the threshold, bringing with him his new knowledge" (27). In short, the pattern is that of separation, adventure, and return. "In myth, in dream, in fantasy," says Babbitt, "if you are the hero, you must go home again" (28).

It is implied that the hero who returns has grown into a different person from the hero who first left home: he or she is now more mature, has learned some valuable lessons, and can now use these lessons to improve his or her life and those of others. Hannah's story in *The Devil's Arithmetic* also follows this pattern: Hannah returns home, to present-day America, and can now empathize with her Aunt Eva and her Grandpa Will. She is now ready to listen to her aunt's story about her own experience as a survivor of the Holocaust.

During her stay in the concentration camp, Hannah also performs heroic acts, even if they do not require any special talents or powers: she saves a baby from being spotted by the camp guards and sent to the gas chambers, and she gives up some of her precious food to a younger boy. And finally, when her friend Rivka is chosen by a camp guard to go to the gas chambers that day, Hannah quickly decides to take her place. She [Hannah] "lived, had lived, would live in the future—she, or someone with whom she shared memories. But Rivka had only now" (Yolen, "Devil's Arithmetic" 159). So

Hannah tells Rivka: "Run for your life, Rivka. Run for your future . . . Run. And remember" (Yolen, "Devil's Arithmetic" 159).

Earlier, Hannah, drawing upon her knowledge of the future, had told Rivka and the other girls that if any of them survived the camp, they should carry into the future the message that "we will survive. The Jews. That what happens here must never happen again" (Yolen, "Devil's Arithmetic" 157). When Hannah finally returns to her own time, she learns that her Aunt Eva was actually Rivka. By telling her story to Hannah, Aunt Eva can now share Hannah/Chaya's message about survival and remembering.

The heroism displayed by Hannah, Rivka, and some of the other camp inmates may not be the kind of heroism displayed by protagonists with special powers such as Harry Potter or the wizard Ged in the Earthsea books; or by the Pevensie children in Narnia, who lead armies and become kings and queens; or by Frodo Baggins in *The Lord of the Rings* who travels through dark and dangerous lands. In fact, when Hannah tells Rivka that they should go down fighting, Rivka points out that they have no weapons to fight with, but she argues: ". . . it is much harder to live this way and to die this way than to go out shooting. Much harder. Chaya, you are a hero. I am a hero . . . We are all heroes here" (Yolen, "Devil's Arithmetic" 142). And in the novel's Epilogue, Jane Yolen explains that resistance in the WWII concentration camps was "worse than useless because it meant involving the deaths of even more innocents" ("Devil's Arithmetic" 169). She describes the heroism of the camp inmates as a different kind of heroism:

That heroism—to resist being dehumanized, to simply outlive one's tormentors, to practice the quiet, everyday caring for one's equally tormented neighbors. To witness. To remember. These were the only victories of the camps. (Yolen, "Devil's Arithmetic" 169)

So although *The Devil's Arithmetic* may not tell the same kind of story that the Harry Potter books, the Narnia books, and other currently popular heroic fantasy books tell, it still tells a tale of adventure, courage, and heroic sacrifice. It uses the fantasy device of time travel so that the young reader can actually feel that he or she, like Hannah, is experiencing the horrors of the concentration camp firsthand. Jane Yolen writes:

If time travel novels can be said to do any one thing, that is it: they take the past and make it a *living and continuous*

process for the child. Children are mired in the present . . . By taking a child out of that *today* in a novel, a child protagonist that the reader identifies fully with, and throwing the child backwards or forwards in time, the reader is too thrown into the slipstream of yesterday or tomorrow. The reader becomes part of [a] "living and continuous process," forced to acknowledge that we are *our* past just as we *are* our future. (Yolen, "An Experimental Act")

The Devil's Arithmetic challenges young readers to look beyond fantasy stories set in imaginary worlds, in which good undoubtedly triumphs over evil and the heroes or heroines are always rewarded in the end. Sometimes fantasy can also challenge readers to think, to reflect on our own world, and to realize that although individual acts of goodness and heroism may not always save the whole world, they must be honored and remembered nevertheless. Jane Yolen herself expresses it best:

What Hannah learns, what the child reader learns, is that history is full of heroes . . . Maybe not like King Arthur. Or Robin Hood. Or Joshua at Jericho. Or Rambo. We are small heroes. That is, after all, what history is really about -- the small heroes. The ones who go across the mountains on faith and despite fear. The ones who get into a boat, believing the world is flat. The ones who gave their lives in the camps that others might live, and the ones who died in the camps just wanting to live another day. . . Children need to know that was true back then and is true today. That it will be true tomorrow. It is a *living and continuous process* that they are part of. ("An Experimental Act")

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