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Essay by Marjorie Hakala

When Fantasy Helps Us Find Ourselves



I read *Jane Eyre* in the rain. Not the whole book, but the particularly satisfying scene about Jane turning down an insulting marriage proposal. I think I was twelve or thirteen; it was summer, circa 1997, hot and sticky-humid, and I was sitting on the back deck of my family's house, legs flat against the wood of the deck, because I had a thing about sitting on the floor in those days. I remember scooching up against the edge of the house while rain started to fall,

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trying to take shelter under the second-floor balcony so I could stay outside and keep reading.

I've always used books to help me keep track of time. It's inexact, but I can usually form a chain of association that gets me to a date, at least a year. I know that one trip to Glacier National Park happened the year Alice Munro won the Nobel Prize for Literature and I started getting caught up on her work. I remember waking up in Montana, as the sun gradually lit up the Rocky Mountains, sitting on the deck and reading about careful Canadian women who surprised themselves by having affairs. I don't generally remember when Munro won the Nobel, but unlike the trip to Glacier, it's something I can Google. (It was 2013.)

I took that trip as an adult, but books serve as markers of time for other, earlier memories, too. I read *David Copperfield* on my first trip to England in 2002 and Jasper Fforde's *The Eyre Affair* while road-tripping to the House on the Rock in Wisconsin a couple of years later. I remember all those places in a kind of dual way, the inner and outer world meshed together: the big British highway signs telling us which exit to take off the roundabout to get to Stratford-on-Avon—and David Copperfield's aunt throwing a fit because some donkeys had wandered onto her lawn. Once, as a child on an Amtrak ride across the country, I ordered oatmeal for breakfast because I was reading *Wise Child* by Monica Furlong, which takes place in medieval Scotland, and it seemed like the closest thing available to a food those characters would eat.

When I was growing up, my family went to the Minnesota Renaissance Festival every year. At the festival, when walking by the mock cottages where vendors sold art or pottery or barbecue turkey legs, I used to look up at the second-story windows and wonder if there were actual rooms up there. I wondered if you could run away and live in a place like this. There were woods around the edges of the grounds, and if you looked past the backdrops of the stages where mimes and jugglers performed, or if you just glanced between two of the little shops, you could sometimes see straight through to the wild. I liked woods anyway, but they were more enticing when glimpsed like that. I always had the feeling, when I was there, of both *being* somewhere exciting and of being *on the threshold* of something, as if I were dancing on the border of Faerie.

The Ren Fest never had any real loyalty to the Renaissance period. It begged, borrowed, and stole bits of fashion, language, music, and architecture from a thousand years of Western European history. It's less Renaissance than medieval, but it isn't really that, either. I used to see as many people there dressed like eighteenth-century pirates as like Robin Hood. Musicians played Beatles songs on the dulcimer or lute. There was a lot of dragon merchandise, because everyone knows that dragons have something to do with the Middle Ages. When I went back to the festival in the 2010s, I saw people in steampunk outfits, a Jules Verne version of Victoriana with corsets and top hats and goggles and random sprockets attached to their clothes. The only really unifying concept at the festival is fantasy, which is always a moving target.



In material terms, this meant that we roamed around imagining things while gnawing on turkey legs and treading on wood chips that the crowd was wearing into the ground, avoiding clouds of cigar smoke, breathing in a lot of dust and sitting on splintery, teetery wooden benches to watch a couple of guys throw flaming bowling pins at each other. Every time someone paid for something with a twenty-dollar bill, the vendors yelled, “Huzzah, twenty pounds for the queen!” It was a dirty, prosaic place, and the only place I know where an imaginative kid could find hundreds of adults to play pretend right alongside her.

The nice thing about magic, from what I could tell as a young reader, was that it gave such an order to existence. People in fantasy novels knew what they had to do, and it manifested in clear and physical ways. Living as a body wasn't a separate project from living as a soul; you could make a motion with your hands and say a word and affect the nature of the universe. The real world promised no such harmony. You had to do the work yourself to connect the stories you were telling to the body where you lived, and the connections weren't always obvious.

What quest were we on, we humans? Or if we all had different ones, how should a person find theirs and make it real? I read the author bios on my favorite books, trying to imagine what life as a writer was like, and my favorites were always the hardest to emulate. Bruce Coville, who wrote at least half of my favorite middle-grade fantasies, had worked as a gravedigger, toymaker, teacher, and worker on an assembly line before he became a full-time writer. A life like that seemed like an awfully good story. I wondered how he had achieved it.

From the ages of twelve to eighteen, my closest friends were people I met at an immersion language-learning summer camp where I went to study French. Camp was the only time in my year when I spoke French at all, so for eleven months out of the year, I had a language that I shared with no one around me. For four weeks in the summer, I spoke it

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effervescently, interchangeably with English, singing silly songs in it and, on one memorable afternoon, falling down laughing with the three other members of the advanced class because our teacher had convinced us that the *plus-que-parfait du subjonctif*—the pluperfect subjunctive, a tense I had never imagined existing or needing to exist—was the funniest thing in the world.

My camp friends and I all lived in different states. Every once in a while, during the long months when we were separated, one of us phone-averse introverts would get bold enough to place a call, speaking awkwardly to the parent who inevitably answered the home phone and asking for each other by our wrong, American names. But real messages came by mail. I bought nice stationery—creamy watermarked paper and envelopes lined with bright colors—and wrote on it in black or blue or purple or green ink.

Eventually, we all got the internet at home, but none of us had a fast enough connection to use chat programs; we just logged on around four p.m. and sent each other a whole lot of emails. These tended to be about imagining that we were sitting in a castle having afternoon tea together. The desktop computer hummed and smelled like hot dust, and the America Online voice announced, “You’ve got mail,” and I opened another message to read about the sound of rain on a thatched roof and putting dill on cucumber sandwiches.

I don’t remember when I started drinking tea for real, but my first favorite was Wild Cherry Blackberry. It came in a box covered with fairytale imagery—cottages and dragons and women with long hair leaning back on swings that hung from the branches of an old tree.

The scent was fragile. It was potent when you opened the box—a heady, fat cherry smell rolled out at you, dusty and organic, followed by a mild bitterness from the rosehips and chicory. To me, it smelled like magic. In the box, the scent could last for months or years. But it dissipated quickly. If I made a cup of tea, took the teabag out, decided that it hadn’t steeped enough and put it back in, I always discovered that the bag was now useless. I tried making a second cup with the same bag, and I got an infusion that was completely flavorless and mysteriously blue.

I remember a particular string of summer nights when I was around sixteen years old. It was late August, and the school year was about to start again, and once that happened, I’d be rapidly ushered through a new year full of new information and get one step closer to moving out of this house into the future I didn’t know how to imagine. After dinner, after the kitchen was cleaned, when my parents and brother went off to read or watch TV, I would make a cup of Wild Cherry Blackberry tea and go sit outside on the front steps, staring up at the stars of the end of summer.

Our house was a little way outside town. The sky was velvety black, with a texture and depth you don’t find in cities, and the stars seemed to have something to say. I wrote a letter to my friend about sitting out there with my tea: *Something doesn’t have to be true for you to know it. I know that someday I will tumble and fall into that sky.*



Art Information

- [“Cluster Series \[5\],”](#) [“Shadytree \(Wip\) \[6\]”](#) and [“Spaceface \[7\]”](#) © Troy Wandzel; used by permission.



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She lives with her cat in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where between day jobs, teaching gigs, and bike rides she is at work on a nonfiction manuscript about zoos.

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