

Book review:

Myths & Stories, Lies & Truth

by Norman Talbot

1999 James Backhouse Lecture

© 1999 by Australia Yearly Meeting. 95 pages.

Reviewed by Esther Mürer

Myths & Stories, Lies & Truth is an expanded version of the 1999 James Backhouse Lecture sponsored by Australia Yearly Meeting. Norman Talbot was professor of English at Newcastle University before retiring in 1993 to become a full-time poet and writer of fantasy and science fiction.

His lecture presents an impassioned defense of "unfactual truth," which Quakers have historically found it difficult or impossible to recognize as truth at all. "Only a book which is not factual can be true," Talbot declares. Fantasy and science fiction, in particular, are modes of "spiritual and philosophical play" which nourish the Quaker kinds of seeking.

Moreover, fantasy and science fiction provide alternatives to the totalitarian worldview advanced by modern mass media via a "fast food diet" of formulaic dream stories set in familiar "realities", providing no challenge to the imagination and lacking even such basic structure as a beginning, middle and end.

To the charge that fantasy fiction is escapist, Talbot replies that "escapism is obviously a moral term, about running away from the real business, the grim facts, of life," from injustice and misery:

A story is like a carrier bag, portable and satisfying in itself, that deserves to be carefully made and attentively used. There are bags that contain more than you would ever have thought possible. Of others you may treasure only one or two items: the only thing I like about the Red Riding Hood story is the dialogue between the girl and the wolf in grandma's clothing.

Your imaginative world, as your own Supreme Fiction can evoke it, is unique and yet, in the shared ministry of teller and audience, communicable—not because you have found a definitive generalisable truth to preach but to know it is yours and call it a story implies a way to share it, and readiness to trust people to understand it and apply it in their own way.

But that last task is not easy: remember that those who receive it have to reconstruct it in their own image. As a poem of mine says of audiences,

We have to have free will
we have no choice in the
matter.

Offer your story
adventurously, and be

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Nowadays even a jailer knows he needs to entertain the convicts, but he prefers trivial, packaged entertainments. Above all he avoids two things major fantasy offers: such wild and imaginative leaps as might give slaves "ideas", disturbing their resigned normality, and such richly consolatory stories as could suggest sympathies beyond prejudice, blinkered fear, and xenophobic self-love.

ready to forgive us if we are unsatisfactory audiences. And even if at the moment no one seems ready to understand your story at all, you never know where it will go or how it will change. After a few more metamorphoses, it may reappear in a new variant, wondrous to you, and a delight to your Eternal Co-Author and Final Audience.

— from *Myths & Stories, Lies & Truth* by Norman Talbot

Fantasy at its best offers an opportunity to walk in the mocassins of others ("a far more healthy activity than jogging"), to enter into alternative worlds, to reconstruct familiar myths from alternative points of view. As illustration Talbot examines the changes rung on the biblical creation and fall stories in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and in the work of two Quaker science-fiction writers, Joan Slonczewski and Judith Moffett.

Talbot sees a deep link between fantasy and Quaker vocal ministry, which at its best he calls a uniquely powerful and organic form of communication. Quaker worship is a "free attentiveness" which empowers us to discover, accept and share our own stories, while "incorporating the help of God, our eternal Co-Author and Audience." The hearer's response is itself a unique creative act of imagination and reconstruction, so that the story becomes a "shared ministry of teller and audience."

Talbot's wide-ranging book (which also contains a chapter on "The Arts of the Early Quakers") yields fresh and vital insights into the latent synergy between Quaker spirituality and the arts.

Types & Shadows is published quarterly by the Fellowship of Quakers in the Arts. Subscriptions are available through membership in the FQA.

From our Western Sister FQA:

What Is Quaker Art?

A report by Marybeth Webster, Grass Valley (CA) MM

Nine answers to the above query were given at an interest group at College Park Quarterly Meeting held in May 1999 at Quaker Center, Ben Lomond, CA:

Marybeth: I'm primarily an Art Therapist. I also sculpt and draw. I make collages of photos I've taken of ancient petroglyphs. I've been thinking that another name for Great Spirit or The Light is *The Muse*. When I am deeply moved by an idea, emotion, or image, I'm inspired to make an art piece which in turn shows me wider meanings. Maybe this is the ongoing divine revelation Quakers abide by. Now, at almost age 70, my art, my profession, my Quakerness, and my heart are all intertwined.

Sandy: Is [Quaker art] an oxymoron? Quakers don't indulge in frivolous activities! Yet my book illustrations, my storytelling, my stage pieces are all about Quaker business, serious, socially significant change. I see Pacific YM as a tribal gathering. Quaker is my ethnic group. So my art is ethnic art. Does it have a pattern? What is the purpose of painting a picture, say, of a tree?

Joan: *Quantum Theology* says, "Dance is the first, most ancient, and most enduring form of religion." I lead Sacred Circle Dance, a dance molded to my being which is Quaker, a truly spiritual experience, very centered and simultaneously floating. I dance alone to rejoice, to grieve, or when we've had a gnarly meeting; that feeds me, but it's nothing like dancing in a circle. That takes me to my core faster than anything I've ever done. My dance is an expanded way of being Quaker.

Eddie: What art does for the artist is give a sense of timelessness and your own little piece of infinity. When I focus to draw, I really LOOK. I experience something beyond words. Art speaks to what is God in the viewer too. Art doesn't have to go through the logical filter. It can go straight to the heart. The viewer too can experience things in a different way just as the artist did when producing that work.

Shama: I'm drawn to trees, an ancient symbol, the Tree of Life. I fear my art wouldn't be acceptable to Quakers. Being female in a violent male world is important to me. What would happen if I showed a painting of a woman becoming a tree, bleeding into the ground? Not many Quakers seem *into* their bodies. Also, I'm not orderly. I start and don't finish—maybe due to my fear about its acceptability. Images move through me. I can paint them but I don't know what they'll look like. They just come out. What appears appears. In order to feel more comfortable for me as a Quaker, all of me has to be part of it. Artistic expression is a big part of me.

Mark: We talk of art that Quakers make. Maybe Quaker Art could be what Quakers look at. Eric Segal said, "Art is a statement by a skilled or sensitive person before a sensitive audience." Certain pieces have a quality that's very moving, cuts right into me. Art combines the artist's skill and intent, plus what the spectator is looking for. Maybe we should watch Quakers and see which kinds of art they're drawn to.

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Tom: When I started studying theater 25 years ago I was just discovering Quakers. I wasn't seeing much connection. In acting you perform somebody else's script. That's more like other churches. Then I discovered ensemble improv theater. This is Quaker theater! I did a Masters on the parallels of the two processes: both are for that time and place only, and you don't try to replicate it. You're never sure you'll be with the same people each time. Both are concerned about truthfulness, truth and fiction. If I'm writing fiction, am I writing untruth? Fiction can connect people with truths better than factual writing—like wisdom tales, analogies. Quaker art is unritualized. George Fox spoke out against the misused art of his day trying to replace God with frivolity, to entertain without content. Only in this century have we begun to find the full range of art.

Lisa: I'm a songwriter. I know a few other Quaker songwriters. There's a common thread they use to talk about their work. The tradition of the Queries that influences us, either using questions or responding to repeating Questions of Life. I've been curious about FQA. I don't see the common threads across the arts. Maybe we're all seeking integrity in the creative expression to the ideals we strive to live in our lives.

Suzanne: Only twice in three years have I performed improvisational movement with sound in Quaker forums that invited performance. Movement is driven by impulses that come almost at a cellular level. At times it's possible to embody spirit. My painting isn't at all Quakerly; people look at my big abstracts and say "What's that all about?" It's from the Shadow side, comes from the primeval ooze we all come from.

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