

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.

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.

Types & Shadows

JOURNAL OF THE FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

Issue #14, Summer 1999

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:

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.

Offer your story adventurously, and be 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 re- sponse 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.