BEING EDITORS #1

Diana Wynne Jones

This is the first issue of Being Editors- a children's literature zine. Each issue will focus on a different author, the first being Diana Wynne Jones, with future issues being on Oliver Postgate, C.S. Lewis/Philip Pullman and Edith Nesbit. The title of the zine comes from the chapter of E.Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* where the Bastables decide to restore the family fortunes by producing a newspaper/proto-zine and soon discover why no-one makes any money from making zines.

I've tried to keep the balance in writing between academic-style analysis and fun. I'm not going to refer to the author as Jones, and there's no footnotes *. On the other hand, don't expect to find any gushing prose about (or bad drawings of) how (imaginarily) handsome Chrestomanci is. I'm also not going to apologise for any spoilers, it's almost impossible to write essays about books without discussing what happens in those books. Also no fan fiction, because I'm unreasonably prejudiced against it. I have also preserved the original American or British English of the contributors (a big thanks to to them, as well, by the way).

I started making the zine in 2009, when I interviewed Diana. I wrote some things here and there, but didn't get anything finished. I knew she was in bad health, and I hoped to get this finished so I could give her a copy before it was too late. Life got in the way however, and Diana sadly died before I could finish the zine. I hope she would enjoy it.

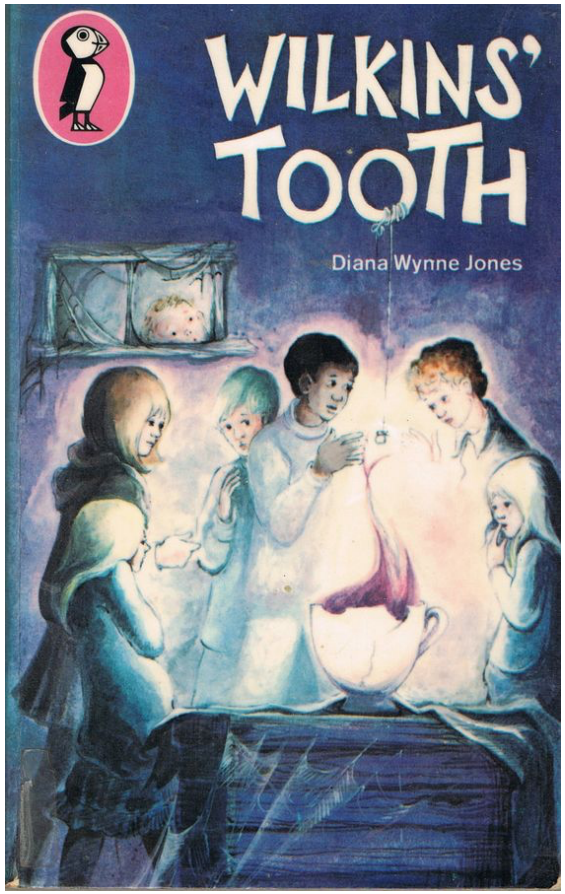
(Note to self: do not procrastinate)

* Although I do dearly love footnotes, they are not best suited to zines

How I Started Reading Diana Wynne Jones

I had learnt how to read before I went to school, but I didn't let my parents know, because I was utterly convinced that they would stop reading to me at bedtime if they knew that I could do it for myself. I would pretend to refuse to learn with them, and then practice by myself with an odd assortment of books including a Wuzzles annual. I really don't know why my four year old self was so devious (it also made my reading a bit wonky). Of course, when I started school that September (1989 if you really want to know) my parents told the teacher I couldn't read at all. On the first day I was heartbroken because my friend from nursery school got a reader about cats and dogs to take home, and I didn't. So I set about learning to read properly as soon as possible, and soon moved on to Puddle Lane readers, which were much more fun than the dog ones because they had magic and actual plots.

Once my parents were satisfied that I was reading, they got me a library card. Well, it wasn't a card at that point, it was a stack of tiny manila paper envelope-card things- high tech!. My dad doesn't read much, but my mums devours several novels a week on average, mostly of the Catherine Cookson/couple restore a barn in France type, and she was keen to get me reading as much as possible. (She will not read anything with any kind of fantasy element, on the grounds that it's "all made up"). The library had a cosy little section for children, with boxes in the centre full of books as well as the shelves, and chairs to sit on. The first book I borrowed was Beatrix Potter, and I liked it so much I was bought a whole set of them. For about 6 months though I thought Beatrix Potter was the name of a genre of books about animals, rather than being a person's name. I think I couldn't believe that one person could create so many books when it took me such a long time to copy out sentences at school. The second book I chose was *Wilkin's Tooth*, by Diana Wynne Jones. It was a Puffin paperback, and the cover looked intriguing.



(It was this one)

I enjoyed the book so much that I worked my way through all the other books of hers that the library had, rereading them again and again. Often I would be loath to return the borrowed editions of the books, and would renew them as many times as humanly possible. *The Ogre Downstairs* was also one of my early borrowings, and became an all-time favourite, as did *The Lives of Christopher Chant*. I also started reading *Fire and Hemlock* when I was about 8 or so, but I didn't really understand it at the time, and it wasn't until I read it properly 3 or 4 years later that it started to properly click. *Wilkin's Tooth* is actually one of my least favourite of hers now, but it obviously enthralled me aged 6. Over the years, the library would replace copies and sell the old ones for 10p, and I always eagerly snapped them up.

Bibliography

With handy tick list for your pleasure

- ☐ 1970 ***Changeover*** (for adults)
- ☐ 1973 ***Wilkin's Tooth*** (USA: Witch's Business)
- ☐ 1974 ***The Ogre Downstairs***
- ☐ 1975 ***Eight Days of Luke***
- ☐ 1975 ***Cart and Cwidder*** (Dalemark book)
- ☐ 1975 ***Dogsbody***
- ☐ 1976 ***Power of Three***
- ☐ 1977 ***Drowned Ammet*** (Dalemark book)
- ☐ 1977 ***Charmed Life*** (Chrestomanci book)
- ☐ 1978 ***Who Got Rid of Angus Flint?***
- ☐ 1979 ***The Spellcoats*** (Dalemark book)
- ☐ 1980 ***The Magicians of Caprona*** (Chrestomanci book)
- ☐ 1980 ***The Four Grannies***
- ☐ 1981 ***The Time of the Ghost***
- ☐ 1981 ***The Homeward Bounders***
- ☐ 1982 ***Witch Week*** (Chrestomanci book)
- ☐ 1984 ***Archer's Goon***
- ☐ 1984 ***Warlock at the Wheel***
- ☐ 1984 ***The Skiver's Guide***
- ☐ 1985 ***Fire and Hemlock***
- ☐ 1986 ***Howl's Moving Castle***
- ☐ 1987 ***A Tale of Time City***
- ☐ 1988 ***The Lives of Christopher Chant***
- ☐ 1989 ***Chair Person***
- ☐ 1989 ***Wild Robert***
- ☐ 1989 ***Hidden Turnings*** (ed.- short stories by assorted authors)
- ☐ 1990 ***Castle in the Air*** (sequel to Howl's Moving Castle)
- ☐ 1991 ***Black Maria*** (USA: Aunt Maria)
- ☐ 1992 ***A Sudden Wild Magic*** (for adults)

□ 1993 ***The Crown of Dalemark*** (Dalemark book)
□ 1993 ***Hexwood***
□ 1994 ***Fantasy Stories*** (ed- short stories by assorted authors)
□ 1995 ***Everard's Ride*** (short stories)
□ 1995 ***Stopping for a Spell*** (collection of Chairperson, The Four Grannies, Who Got Rid of Angus Flint?)
□ 1996 ***The Tough Guide to Fantasyland***
□ 1996 ***Minor Arcana*** (mostly reprinted short stories)
□ 1997 ***Deep Secret*** (for adults)
□ 1998 ***The Dark Lord of Derkholm*** (for adults)
□ 1999 ***Puss in Boots*** (retelling- £1 book for World Book Day)
□ 2000 ***Mixed Magics*** (mostly reprinted short stories)
□ 2000 ***Year of the Griffin*** (for adults)
□ 2003 ***The Merlin Conspiracy*** (children's sequel to Deep Secret)
□ 2004 ***Unexpected Magics*** (US short story collection)
□ 2005 ***Conrad's Fate*** (Chrestomanci book)
□ 2006 ***The Pinhoe Egg*** (Chrestomanci book)
□ 2007 ***The Game*** (novella)
□ 2008 ***House of Many Ways*** (sequel to Howl's Moving Castle)
□ 2010 ***Enchanted Glass***
□2011 ***Earwig and the Witch***
□2012 ***Reflections: On the Magic of Writing***
□2014 ***The Islands of Chaldea*** (with Ursula Jones)

Interview with Diana

1) You always base one character in each book on a real person to keep the other characters in line, and you've said in previous interviews that your mother never seems to get that a lot of the female villains are based on her. Has anyone else ever twigged that a character was based on them, and what was their reaction?

People only very rarely seem to recognise themselves in my books, although a lot of other people recognise them instantly! The only one who did -and worried about it- was one of my granddaughters, who did see that she might have had something in common with the Izzies in *The Merlin Conspiracy*. I hurriedly pointed out to her that I had two sisters and that the Izzies also owed a lot to them. My husband was always convinced that he was the original of the Ogre in *The Ogre Downstairs*, even though I assured him he was not. The Ogre was in fact a composite of How-not-to-do-it as a parent.

2) A lot of fans of your books like to play fantasy casting with various characters, with Christopher Eccleston from Dr Who being a particular favourite for Mordion. Do you have any favourite actors to play a particular character?

I'm afraid I'm very out of touch with actors these days. One thing I will say, though, and that is if a real life actor were to play Howl in *Howl's Moving Castle*, I would not chose someone pretty, like Howl in Miyazaki's animation: I would choose a Welsh actor with a long, bony face, handsome enough in his way, but not **pretty**. I think the fans' choice for Mordion is a very good one.

3) You've said in older interviews that various things you made up for books have come back to hit you like Tom Lynn (like accidentally breaking your neck and not noticing like Christopher Chant). You've been pretty prolific with new books in the last few years (*Merlin Conspiracy, Conrad's Fate, Pinhoe Egg, the Game, House of Many Ways*), have any things from those come back at you?

No, none of these books have yet come back to hit me. It makes me quite worried, because the longer it takes, the harder it hits when it does. I can't help speculating about what might happen. Would I vanish away into the mythosphere, switch to another world where I was a maidservant, or simply get lost in a house of many ways? About *The Pinhoe Egg* I can console myself. People have showered griffins on me, in pictures, as stuffed toys and as clever puppets. Just as the book was being published, one of my Japanese translators sent me a marvellous musical box made of a real duck's egg, which plays *Over the Rainbow* when you twist the top. The translator meant it to commemorate *A Tale of Time City*, but it was equally appropriate to *The Pinhoe Egg*. While I wait for the other books to hit me, I tell myself that this manifestation from *The Pinhoe Egg* is relatively benign and I might, with the other books, have a pleasant experience for once (probably in my dreams!). But not, I think, when *The Merlin Conspiracy* comes true. It means, at the least, a gammy hip.

Actually, it's no good trying to second guess these things. This jinx is as cunningly various as my travel jinx, which springs a new surprise any time I go anywhere beyond Bristol. Last time the building next to the place I was due to talk in burst into flames just as I crossed the city boundary. It was probably also *The Sage of Theare* coming true out of *Mixed Magics*.

4) From all accounts, your parents didn't bother to provide you with many children's books. What children's books do you desperately wish you had been able to read as a child?

Oh, I do wish I had been able to read C.S.Lewis's *Narnia* books as a teenager. They were all getting published from the time I was thirteen. As it was, I came upon them when my own children were quite young and I read them aloud at bedtime, with a curious double vision: on the one hand as my adult self, and on the other seeing and being very impressed by the reactions of my children. I learnt a great deal from this, but it was not the same as reading them as a child.

5) In previous interviews you've said that you've got a whole drawer full of rejected bits from books that never quite went right. Have you ever rescued any of them at a later date, and managed to make a book or short story out of them? If not, do you think you ever will?

I have more than a drawerful of writings that never made it: I have half a cupboardful as well. It is not exactly that I rejected any of them. Mostly they just stopped being interesting after two pages, or two chapters, or sometimes even halfway through - and if a story doesn't interest **me**, there's no chance it will interest anyone else. Sometimes, though, events have intervened to stop me writing something.

Quite recently, last year in fact, I turned out my cupboard, which is something I look at much less frequently than the drawer, and I came upon Chapter One of a book that startled me by needing to be continued so much that I had to go on with it with a sprained arm. I couldn't think why I hadn't continued it before. After thinking it over carefully, I realised that I had been snatched off into hospital (I think with my second broken neck) before I had done more than the first chapter. Surgery very much stops everything in its tracks **and** impairs your memory. So I went on with it and it became my latest book, now with publishers, which is called *Enchanted Glass.* I have no idea if it went on the same way as I had planned, but I suspect not. It just rushed on to the page.

6) What's the best book you read in 2008?

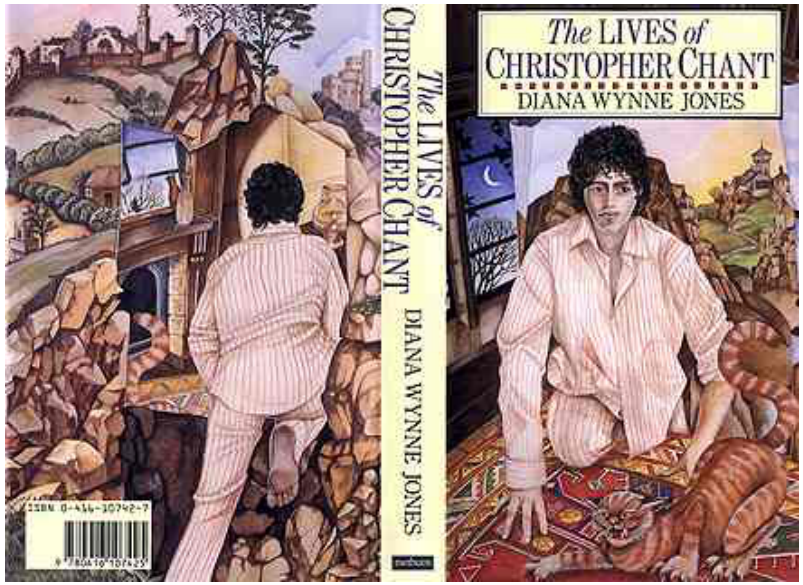
The best book I read in 2008 was sent to me as a printout by a writer called Kage Baker, from America, who wasn't sure if it was any good or not and wanted me to tell her. It was called *The Hotel Under the Sand* and it was **excellent**. It was the most unusual book I had read for a long time. As you can probably tell from the title, it is utterly original, but it is also wonderfully well written and full of amazing ideas. I wrote back at once to tell her it ought to become a classic, like *Alice in Wonderland* or *The Wizard of Oz*. I think she was surprised.

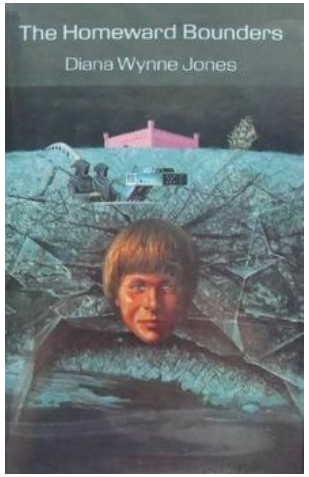
Diana Wynne Jones and the Curse of the Terrible Cover Art

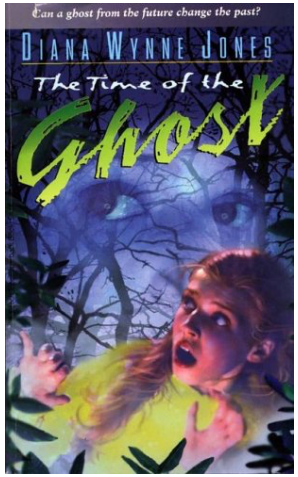
In the UK, some of Diana's books have been cursed with some atrocious cover art over the years. It must be some kind of jinx, like her travel one, because they were released by respectable publishers, and other children's books I read when I was younger don't seem to have had such ugly covers.

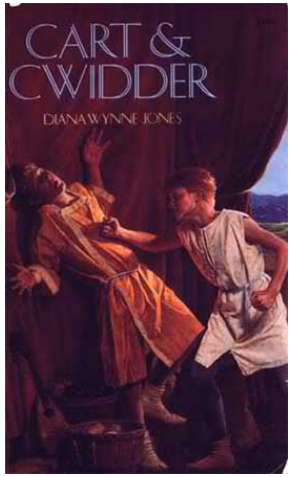
Here's a rogue's gallery of some particular offenders- the pictures may not be so clear when printed in black and white, but you can easily find them in full colour awful glory on Google, which is where I found the images.

The Lives of Christopher Chant:
This was the first one that made me notice the phenomenon. The artist had a good idea: Christopher coming through the wall into an Edwardian-looking room, alarming Throgmorton. The cat looks nice and evil-tempered, but there's something off about the perspective of the room, and Christopher has a wonky face, and is shaded so he looks seriously ill.







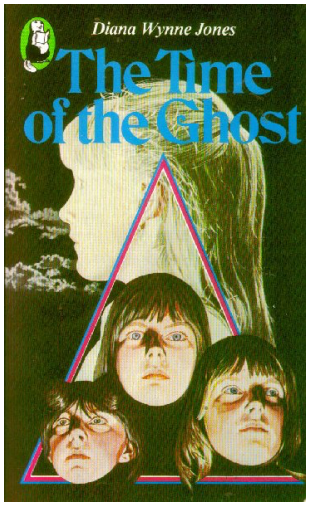


The Homeward Bounders:
Bad 80s school painting assignment alert! Dingy colours, more wonky cross-eyed faces, horrible stippled teal background.

Time of the Ghost:
Like a low-rent Point Horror book. Perky blonde girl looking mildly shocked.

Cart and Cwidder:
Stab-punches and jazz hands. What do you mean, you don't remember that bit?

Some honourable mentions:
I like the co-ordinated metallic look the Chrestomanci books have now.



My copy of **Fire and Hemlock** has a good cover- the scene where Polly spies on Tom. The viewer is inside the Hemlock picture (albeit with a red fire background rather than the blue-green specified in the book), with Polly peering in, eerily lit up with some cow parsley around. For a bonus point, Polly looks both like a plausible human being, and like her description in the book. However sadly I can't find a decent resolution version of it online.

I also like this cover for **Time of the Ghost.**

Things reading Diana's books has taught me

Not that I am some super-wonderful person who follows all of this all the time (well, ok, I always keep my toffee bars away from radiators), but they're good things to bear in mind when I do remember.

1) Question!
2) Sentimental bullshit is indeed manipulative sentimental bullshit
3) Hexagonal turns are exactly the sort of thing to do on a parquet floor. (Just be careful of the ink)
4) How you word things matters. Describing things well is powerful.
5) Don't let people try to embarrass you out of things. (Not an easy one to follow 100% of the time)
6) Only poor, weak thinkers despise fairy tales.
7) Being a grown-up isn't about being dull and respectable.
8) Don't let toffee bars anywhere near radiators.
9) How something looks from outside or romanticised in story form is often very different to how it feels to live it.
10) Just because something is the socially acceptable thing to do, doesn't mean it's the right thing to do.
11) You don't need to be fully conscious to successfully eat a whole fried breakfast.
12) Think!

My Favourite: Fire & Hemlock

I have two favourites, Fire & Hemlock & the Ogre Downstairs, which are favourites for totally different reasons, so to be fair, I'll write about both.

I first tried reading *Fire & Hemlock* when I was 8 or 9 or so, and ended up giving up after the first chapter. I knew it was too old for me, and that I wasn't getting it. The mental image of Polly picking the pictures stayed with me very vividly though, and when I came to re-read it when I was about 12, it was like meeting an old friend, but with the added bonus that the plot was entirely new to me (a wonderful situation to be in). I think I had read more than enough folk tales to get what Tom's status was very quickly, though.

The best way I think I can describe the charm of *Fire & Hemlock* is joyful yet chilling at the same time. Certain scenes and atmospheres it creates still send shivers up my spine, but it's also a warm book in many ways. The part where Polly breaks into Hunsdon House to steal the photo is total perfection in my mind. When Polly describes her feeling of performing in the school play as a strange charmed sensation where everything happens in precisely the right place is exactly how I see that scene. I always see it as the central counterweight scene to the book in many ways. I've always been fond of chiastic structures in writing (chi is the greek letter χ, a chiasmus is a structure where the second half of the text somehow inverts the first half, whether in structure or meaning, often with some kind of turning point in the centre), and I always feel like this scene is the centre of the x. Probably my other favourite scene is when they discover Piper's Hardware, and are shellshocked in the cafe afterwards, and order a bizarre selection of things.

I love books where magic is subtly entwined with everyday life and it's sometimes ambiguous as to whether there is any magic at all. These qualities of both magical realism and ambiguity are central to Fire & Hemlock. Polly questions her own memories and perceptions several times in the book, and Laurel is able to get away with her actions exactly because she is able to make people question their perceptions of what she's doing- something known in psychology as gaslighting after the Patrick Hamilton play. The whole premise of the book is that Polly's memories have been changed. They have been changed very subtly, and subtlety and depth of different layers are other important qualities of the book. Hints are carefully woven into the story, starting with Laurel's names (Peri + the King, anyone?) and the only way Tom can tell Polly of his situation is to hint through the books he sends, most

importantly *the Golden Bough*. The way Ivy behaves often mirrors Laurel, and she also often tries to manipulate Polly's memories and perceptions to suit herself. Quite a personal reason why I love the book so much is that my own parents bear a strong resemblance to Polly's. They're not quite so extreme, but there's a strong similarity. It's good to be shown that this kind of behaviour isn't normal or right.

It's a book that can bear repeated re-reading. As you get older, new layers suddenly reveal themselves, because you suddenly recognise references you didn't get before. Interestingly, people who read the book younger tend to see Tom and Polly's relationship as mainly romantic, and people who read it older often see a certain creepiness about it. The book even fools you as to Tom's age, it turns out that he was only about twenty four at the beginning of the book. Twenty four seems old when you're a child, but young when you're near or older than that age, and it suddenly hits you how creepy it is that Laurel took Tom when he was about fifteen.

Another factor in my love for *Fire & Hemlock* is that it's based on the poetry of T.S.Eliot. I was first introduced to his cat poems at junior school, and then read *the Four Quartets*, *the Wasteland, Prufrock* and the rest as a teenager and instantly loved them, especially as the Wasteland was written on a bench on Margate seafront, near where I grew up. Reading *the Four Quartets* was again like meeting an old friend, because I already recognised the visual images, and added a whole new dimension to my favourite book. T.S. Eliot was a repulsive person in many ways, but he's still one of my favourite poets.

I don't think I could ever forgive anyone who made a bad film or TV adaptation of *Fire & Hemlock*. I think it would make a better tv show than film at any rate. A ninety minute film wouldn't have enough time to develop the layers of suspense.

My Favourite: The Ogre Downstairs

I first read the Ogre Downstairs when I was about 7 or 8. It was my all-time favourite that year, along with George's Marvellous Medicine. I obviously had a bit of the mad scientist in me as a kid. I wouldn't get that much out of re-reading George's Marvellous Medicine, but I will happily re-read the Ogre Downstairs

When I was growing up, I had a lot of toys from the seventies. I was a child of the eighties, but I had an older half-brother and sister, and cousins who had grown up in the seventies, and as my family never throw anything away, I had almost all of their hand-me-down toys. The one exception was the chemistry set my sister had had. I longed to have my own, especially after reading *The Ogre Downstair*s, but I was never allowed, because apparently my sister had caused havoc with it, burning little craters in things and creating a bizarre indelible mark which resisted painting over. So I was never allowed one.

I restricted my casual science activities to looking at things in the garden with a microscope and making "shrinking potions" made out of shampoo and food colouring in Panda Pops bottles inspired by both *The Ogre Downstairs* and *George's Marvellous Medicine.* I still longed to cause some chemical havoc though. The closest I ever got was mixing bicarbonate of soda with vinegar for the classic volcano experiment, and using vinegar to make crystals grow on rocks.

The thing that still appeals to me about *The Ogre Downstairs* is the sense of *joie de vivre* and cheerful chaos about it. It's inevitable that the kids are going to get into trouble with their magical chemistry sets, and the trouble is exactly the sort you *would* get into. You just know there's no way you could successfully explain to your stepfather how you ended up stranded on the roof. Sometimes it borders on cliché, like when Malcolm and Casper swap bodies, but then little details or unexpected turns subvert it or send the story in a different direction. The bit with the lurid pink Ogre's Eyeballs footballs still makes me howl with laughter, as does Gwinny deliberating whether to buy caviar or crisps.

On holiday a few years ago, finding myself alone in the holiday cottage with golden sunshine and a shiny parquet floor, I found myself sliding around in my socks and unable to stop mentally commanding the crowned heads of Europe to admire my hexagonal turns. In antique shops I also like to spot hideous metal items that would beat the cow creamer/sicker for awfulness if turned into gold.

There was also something warm and familiar about the setting. Casper is/was a kid after my own heart. As a grownup I'm tidier, but I wasn't when I was younger, and I had quite a lot of lego and spirograph pieces about the place. The toffee bars were also extremely familiar. Highland Toffee Bars cost around 5p in the 80s as far as I recall, and were a mainstay in both the local Post Office and the tuck shop at school. Even a small child's tiny amount of pocket money would buy you a good handful. I would buy several and think of them slithering about the place. Somehow it never put me off eating them.

The way everyone lives is quite 70s and Womble-like as well. Casper has a stack of carelessly treated vinyl, and Douglas invites people around to play songs on acoustic guitars and then head off to a disco, guitars on their back. In my head, India Rubber sound like Syd Barrett era Pink Floyd. (I can't stand anything created by Roger Waters, by the way. Just so you know).

Underneath the comedy and the fuzziness though, there's a careful exploration of dysfunctional family relationships that gives the book the perfect dark edge. Gwinny sincerely means to poison the Ogre, and her tearful confession to him is the turning point that makes him suddenly become a sympathetic character. The Ogre and Sally's marital problems aren't just minor surface arguments, there's some real bitterness there, even though it eventually has a happy ending once they understand each other better and can afford a bigger house and step out from each other's feet.

My Favourite: The Homeward Bounders

Kyra Jucovy has an MA in English literature from Yale University and spoke at the 2009 Diana Wynne Jones conference on Archer's Goon and 1984, later publishing her paper on this topic in the Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts. She currently works as a teacher of English and literature teacher at CHIJ Saint Joseph's Convent, a secondary school in Singapore. She has also worked in the publishing industry and as a volunteer teacher in Changsha, China.

My favorite DWJ book: I've been a Diana Wynne Jones fan for 21 years now, and I've been through a bunch of favorites in that time, but, as an adult, I definitely would pick *The Homeward Bounders*. I have to admit that I think of it as the perfect book, without a flaw. I find it so wonderful because I think it works on every level. As usual, I adore DWJ's writing simply on a prose level - her perfect one-liners like "I always wonder why it's Art to take your clothes off: they never put in the goose pimples" and brief moments of poignancy like "If my mother had to cut up her old skirt to make Elsie a dress in order to afford them, we never went without boots. And I used to take that for granted. I've gone barefoot enough since, I can tell you." Despite the ultimately tragic ending, the humor of the book is strong throughout - I particularly love Joris' running gag of, "Oh, as to that. . ."

I also love all the characters. Even relatively minor characters like Adam and Vanessa seem to be sketched in perfectly, and the other characters are even stronger. If Prometheus is supposed to be a transcendent figure, he actually succeeds in this goal - rather than being annoyed by him, I like him and approve of everything he does. He's a real hero. Jamie is, too, in an engagingly flawed way. I like the way his life is utterly ruined by curiosity and risk-taking (twice, in a way) and, as a result, he ends up almost going too far in the other direction and being a timid rule-follower. It's such neat characterization. In the end, of course, he winds up as an incredibly admirable hero himself, and I think DWJ does a great job of making a hero who is complex and interesting and real and yet profoundly heroic. Helen and Joris are both amusing and believable, and Konstam is hilarious as well as an interesting hero in and of himself.

Possibly because of my strong empathy for the characters, I also think the book is plotted about as well as can be - whenever I re-read it, I find myself going slowly through the last few chapters just to savor the near-unbearable suspense. I love the way that the reader, as well as Jamie, sees increasing hints of the truth of his situation throughout the section when he's returned to his own city, but it isn't fully revealed until that moment when he admits it to himself. I think the brief conversation between Jamie and Adam and Vanessa's father is an amazing moment, plot-wise - not overdone in any way and, on a reread, an emotional moment that works as a breather before the rush of the climax. I love the complexities of the metaphysics that are necessary to the plot - which, of course, leads me to the final level on which I see the book as a success: the thematic.

Although I adored the book the first time I read it at the age of eleven, it wasn't until I was an adult and first encountered on DWJ's own website her admission that the book is about the ways in which hope can be an evil and lead to dangerous acceptance of situations that I started to consider it philosophically. As I continued to study literature and criticism, I was excited to be able to connect the book more firmly to what I was reading about Neo-Platonism and Shelley, and the moment when a friend of DWJ's got her to confirm for me that the book was explicitly written in dialogue with Shelley was one of the greatest of my life.

Nowadays, I'd say that the book not only forms a big part of my own love for Shelley - I am reminded of DWJ's own admission that her books were written in part to give readers a sense of recognition once they started reading the works they were in dialogue with - but has played a major role in the formation of my worldview in general and the way I think about issues such as hope, idealism, and reality. Basically, then, this book has affected me in every way - I will forever be grateful to DWJ for having written it.

My favourite: Howl's Moving Castle

Eden Burnett is a student and aspiring writer from Pennsylvania

It's hard to pick a favorite book by Diana Wynne Jones because I love everything I've read by her so far. But if I had to choose, it would probably be *Howl's Moving Castle*. It was the first book I ever read by her and it may sound silly to some, but the book changed my life.

On a warm May afternoon in 2009, I set out for the library with a list of books I wanted. Among those books were *Howl's Moving Castle*. At the time I had never heard of Diana Wynne Jones. I only knew that I had loved the *Howl's Moving Castle* movie when I watched it and decided to check out the book it was based on.

I can still remember borrowing the book like it was yesterday. The book must have been new, or at least hardly read, because its spine was still perfect, the pages were clean and it had a feeling of being unread. From the first paragraph, I knew I would love it. So much is already going on in the first paragraph of *Howl's Moving Castle* and already the reader has to feel sort of sorry for Sophie - she is the eldest after all!

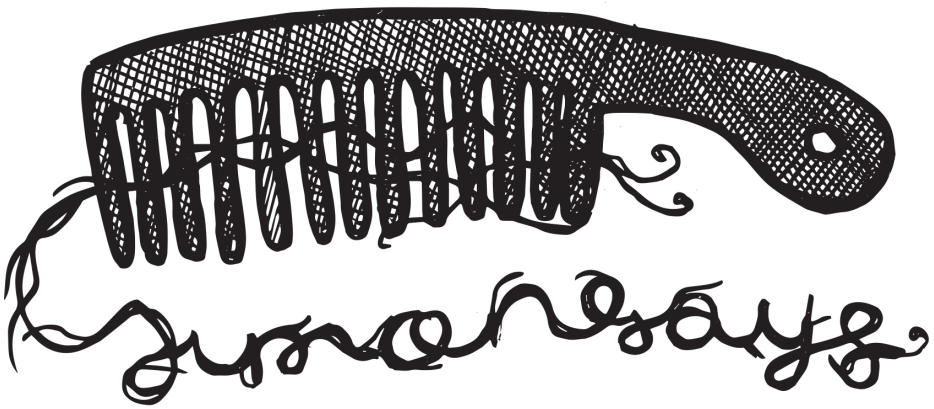
It took me four days to read the book and each of those four days I awoke, ready to read more of Sophie's adventure. I didn't want the book to end. But it did and I had to return it to the library. A few months later, however, I bought my own copy of the book.

For years I wanted to write, I wanted to be an author. I had given up on my dream of becoming an author because of what a published author had told me - "You'll never be a writer!". Being young at the time, I believed it. But after reading *Howl's Moving Castle*, my desire to write burned again. Shortly after I began writing a fantasy trilogy and I've never been happier. I credit my happiness and finding my love for writing again to *Howl's Moving Castle*. And of course, Diana Wynne Jones, a woman I never knew, but who greatly inspires me.

Howl's Moving Castle is a wonderful fantasy book that has amazing characters. My most favorite character would have to be Sophie - I felt a connection to her instantly and felt like I could relate to her. I'm not the eldest child, I'm the youngest, but Sophie worries about being a failure, not finding her fortune and I think we all worry about things like that at times.

My favourite: Witch Week

Hannah is a social worker who lives in Scotland, she writes the excellent Not Lonely zine and has a blog at notquiteayesblogspot.com



Choosing just one Diana Wynne Jones book to write about was difficult. She is one of my favourite children's authors (alongside Roald Dahl and Enid Blyton, in case you were wondering) and I read and re-read her books many times as a child (and some as an adult too). So, although *Witch Week* has been my book of choice, I must also give special mentions to *Charmed Life* and *Hexwood*. *Charmed Life* is set in the same universe as *Witch Week* (and was in fact to thank for making me realise *Witch Week* wasn't "real" more on that later) and features a power-hungry big sister, a world in which one can hire magic tutors and an "ordinary" girl who finds herself in a parallel universe. *Hexwood* again has a (mostly) "ordinary" female protagonist who discovers at the book's outset strange goings-on in a nearby wood whilst confined to her bed through illness. It is testament to DWU's skill as a writer that I enjoy her books so much, as in general fantasy leaves me cold - I never even managed to get into Terry Pratchett.

Witch Week contains many elements that appeal to me when it comes to books and films: central characters who don't quite fit in with their peers, a closed setting (in this case a boarding school, I have a soft spot for stories set in prisons and hospitals) and the ultimate triumph of the protagonists, despite their being underestimated by those around them. I could particularly relate to the main female character, Nan, who is unpopular and bad at sports, and revelled in the knowledge that she had a secret skill rendering her more powerful than those around her. Unfortunately for Nan, her skill is witchcraft, and witchcraft is not only illegal but punishable by death. The novel follows an inquisition at Larwood House boarding school (a dilapidated institution providing education and shelter to the orphaned offspring of executed witches), alongside Nan's and her male counterpart, Charles, discovery and development of their own witchcraft skills. There is more to it than that, but I won't spoil the ending for those who haven't read it yet.

DWJ's writing is beautifully detailed, I felt that I knew every inch of Larwood House from the dormitories to the dinner hall, and knew Nan like I knew my best friends. The level of detail also makes *Witch Week* highly believable, and in my case *too* believable. I first read *Witch Week* when I was seven - my reading age was greatly ahead of my actual age, but unfortunately in other areas I was not as mature, particularly when it came to knowing the difference between fact and fiction. After a couple of readings of *Witch Week* I came to believe that I too, may well be a witch (I was fascinated by the supernatural as a child, and often tried to cast spells and made a voodoo doll of a particularly horrible teacher) and was thus likely to be burnt at the stake if discovered. I believed this wholeheartedly for a not insubstantial amount of time, until my powers of reasoning caught up with my literacy skills. The realisation that *Witch Week* was set in an entirely fictional universe (or at least a world different from that which I live in) came partly from my reading of *Charmed Life*, which explains more fully the parallel universe theory behind both books (and others in the *Chrestomanci* series). You'd be forgiven for being surprised that being terrified half to death by *Witch Week* does not negate it from being my favourite DWJ book, or indeed from being one of my favourite children's books; but the induced fear showed me the power of books. Not only the power to scare, but to conjure up detailed and highly believable worlds which, once possessed of fluent reading skills, I could escape into at any time.

Witch Week As the Anti-Harry Potter

When I was a kid, we had a whole book-shelf full of Enid Blyton books, mostly cheap paperback copies from the seventies (those Dragon Books ones which every school library had). We had the whole sets of the *Secret Seven*, *Famous Five*, *Five Find-Outers*, *Mallory Towers*, *St Clare's, Faraway Tree* etc, etc. I always preferred the detective or magic books, but my (much older) sister was in love with the boarding school stories. I liked the sense of endless possibility that was in the stories where children visited a new magic land each time, and the way that logic and luck could go together to provide a satisfying solution to an initially baffling mystery. I think she liked the feeling of loyalty and moral development of characters or something haven't really asked her- I'd have to explain why I wanted it, and what I was writing then, and I know better than to bother my family with these things.

My sister begged my parents to send her to boarding school, but they never obliged. We didn't have the money and they tried to convince her it wasn't all lashings of ginger beer, rescuing people from the edge of cliff tops and jolly japes, that in fact boarding school could be pretty dull and unpleasant, but she wasn't having any of it. I didn't need any telling. Boarding school was my personal idea of hell. The idea of living at school, and having all my time scheduled by the sort of people who time-tabled the school day brought me out in a cold sweat. The idea of living with all the people I disliked having to see every day didn't exactly appeal either. I didn't have an awful time at school, but if it had been my whole life I certainly would have loathed it. Boarding school also seemed to involve a lot of sport. I am certainly not the jolly hockey sticks type, in fact I was an expert at the art of avoiding school PE lessons. I think if you're a sporty, bluff sort, with limited emotional depth, and a keen eye for clawing your way up the social ladder, then you're guaranteed to do fine at a typical boarding school. Everyone else, watch out.

I'm too old to have read the *Harry Potter* books as a kid, and as it says in my interview with Diana, it's different reading a book like that (n her case, the *Narnia* books) when you're older You still enjoy and admire it, but it doesn't shape your thoughts like it does if you read something when you're still very young and impressionable.

Hogwarts is a wonderful place, full of magic and wonder and details where the students seem to truly feel at home where Harry feels he's living his true life far away from his depressing returns to "reality" with the Dursleys. I'm sure there are now vast swathes of children who long to go to a boarding school because it might be a bit like Hogwarts. *Witch Week* probably more accurately represents the reality, however. Harry goes to school to escape his miserable home life, but most of the characters in *Witch Week* have home lives they'd much rather return to, but can't, because the repressive society has taken them away from them. Estelle's mother is in prison for helping witches. Nirupam's brother was burnt at the stake. Charles is labelled a problem child who needs to be sent away because he's traumatised at witnessing a witch burning. Nan's family are stigmatised for being descendants of famous witch Dulcinea Wilkes. Brian's mother had to escape, and his father was being blackmailed into living a life of poverty. And so on. If magic weren't considered problematic in their society, despite being so common, none of the students would be labelled as problem children and have to attend the horrible, punishing school. At the end, when the two worlds are realigned, the classroom dynamics are far less dysfunctional and all the characters seem happier.

The children in *Witch Week* aren't at the school because of a special talent for magic, in fact they're "problem children" prone to being corrupted by magic, whose magical tendencies should be squashed out of them at every attempt, to prevent them later being burnt at the stake. The dominant and popular students are the most conventionally behaved and the most narrow-minded, who protect the social order by ostracising anyone like Nan or Charles who doesn't exactly fit the mould and creating a very precise set of social norms and rules with full collusion from most of the teachers (white knitting, girls must giggle and be good at rope climbing, Simon is the boss and is automatically the best at everything without needed to prove it) with shame poured on anyone who doesn't meet them. Dan, the rebellious character, also lives in regard to the rules: he does everything he can to kick against them, thereby following them in reverse.

Both stories have as a main character a quiet boy who wears glasses and does magic. Harry is a unwilling celebrity, sporty, with a tight group of friends and usually well-liked, he is good-hearted but impulsive, and doesn't always think things through. He's singled out as a special hero from birth, based on circumstances rather than special talent. Charles is a rather different proposition. He's isolated and misunderstood, and has retreated so far into himself in disgust at his surroundings that he's in danger of losing all empathy for other people. When you see events from his perspective you totally understand how he's come to be like that, but he's on a dangerous path, and is not a likeable person. His magic is the strongest, but he also has the most potential to misuse it.

The school also isn't a beautiful remote castle, in fact it's a typical British secondary school with dodgy heating and changing rooms filled with ingrained sock smell and a soggy playing field. In the *Harry Potter* books Quidditch is incredible fun, and Harry is a naturally gifted sportsperson who finds fulfilment, identity and popularity in being on his sports team. Seen from the perspective of unsporty Nan (whose body won't co-operate) and Charles (whose body is capable, but whose spirit is unwilling) sports lessons in *Witch Week* become a punishment governed over by the second-rate sadist PE teacher well known to most people who attended school in the UK (and I imagine most other countries too, I can't speak from direct experience), and another arena where characters like Simon and Theresa take every opportunity to further grind down the socially excluded. Charles is later humiliated by being made to copy out lines from a typical interwar British boarding school story that presents sport in the same narrative tradition that *Harry Potter* later draws on.

British school food is famously bad. The UK gained a bad reputation for cuisine after the Second World War due to various factors such as rationing, and although restaurants and home cooking have more than recovered, school food hasn't really. The archetypical British school dinner involves mystery meat served with over-boiled cabbage, and rice pudding that looks like sick for dessert (a lot of schools have progressed to a modern edition that includes mystery meat nuggets, but it's still often awful, despite the best efforts of people like Jamies Oliver). The food in Witch Week is from the same menu. Attending school in the 1940s, under rationing, where people got a well-balanced diet but dull and sparse diet, with no second helpings and very small amounts of treats like chocolate, Diana used to get second helpings by describing other food in disgusting ways, and then eating other students' helpings when they lost their appetite. Nan gets the same ability, but in a compulsive and unwanted way, because her natural talents for writing, magic (both actual magic, and the magic of imagination) and invention are being stifled by the school and her social environment, so it comes out as uncontrollable describing.

The food in *Harry Potter* is traditional British food too, but it's delicious, the recipes that people actually like and cook for themselves (often the elaborate ones like roast dinners which are impractical to cook on a daily basis), and the food is never-ending and a source of comfort for homesick students. No-one would ever choose the food in *Witch Week* or find it a source of comfort, it's a factor of institutional living which is forced onto the students, and which they seem to accept on the surface, but rebel against underneath, whether via Charles' diary code or Nan's disgusting descriptions.

Dumbledore is a huge source of support for Harry, as are other teachers like Lupin. Mrs Cadwallader and her staff are certainly not supportive. The school pays lip service to helping the pupils through things like the enforced diary writing, but Mrs Cadwallader is ready to shop the less popular students to an Inquisitor in a heartbeat, steals money from the budget for her own benefit and blackmails her own staff. Everything is about appearances for her, that visitors are impressed by the students displays of table manners and the plushness of her study. The other teachers generally enforce the oppressive status quo, whether whole-heartedly like the majority of the teachers, or out of fear like Mr Wentworth. When Snape terrorises students in the *Harry Potter* books it's from direct malice and impatience with their slowness or denseness. The teachers in Witch Week act (or fail to act) out of apathy, they don't stop Theresa and Simon mocking or shaming the other students, and they don't bother to help children who are obviously unhappy. The whole society is a police state where people keep their heads down, their mouths shut, and don't draw attention to themselves by helping anyone who is drawing any attention to themselves as a suspected witch. Each for themselves.

Harry Potter attends a school specifically for magic users. There is a set curriculum, and the students progress neatly through a set series of taught spells to be performed in a set way and using a wand. Harry himself is not particularly interested in theories and systems (unlike Hermione) and as the books are from his perspective, magical education is presented as standardised set actions to learn in a rote way, without really any abstract theory underpinning it. There is a set phrase for killing people. Charles, Nan, Nirupam and Brian are totally untutored in magic. They cast their spells by pure instinct and haphazardly working things out from first principles, and the results of the magic are chaotic, unexpected and individual to the personality of the person who cast the spell. Nan's spells are based on speaking and description, and when she fails to describe things accurately and clearly she ends up with a mess like the pink satin ballgown. When she takes great care to describe things exactly and in a well thought out way, she saves everyone from being burnt as a witch. Brian's spells are showy and theatrical, he longs to be centre of attention and admired for his talents instead of being ignored and bullied. Nirupam has learnt how to keep his head down in order to not meet the same fate as his brother, he's a calm and easy going person, and his spells are quiet and thoughtful, he gives Dan

indigestion by turning the running shoes into a cake after getting to the end of his tether with Dan and tries to undo the Simon Says spell, but he doesn't do anything stupid or noticeable which draws attention to himself. Charles' magic is the most powerful, but also the most likely to go wrong. He has a analytical mind, but is so consumed with bitterness and unhappiness that he has almost forgotten how to think clearly. When he's looking for his shoes he forgets to say which shoes, and causes chaos. When he curses Simon he tries to think it through better, but still doesn't bother to think through the consequences because he's consumed with anger, coming close to ending the world. Calamity is caused in *Witch Week* by doing things without thinking about the consequences, not by a set phrase or words.

Voldemort is the grand villain in Harry Potter, from the famous school of capes, evil laughs and plan explaining. In *Witch Week*, there's no big character of a villain to defeat, just the oppressive and dysfunctional society which executes people for a natural trait. Characters behave as villains in the story, from children up to adults, but they're acting out their roles in the society that produced them, scrabbling over others in order to try to avoid sinking down to certain death. The way to defeat evil is to reform the whole society by using magic to change the circumstances that have caused the problem in the first place. It takes an outsider, on the part of Chrestomanci, to point this out, everyone else is so immersed in the society and the roles it has taught them, that they can't see this.

Adult Villains

(This is just a quick article, so it's not very in depth. I'm sure other people have gone into much more detail on the topic than me)

Diana was very good at writing villains. She fully admitted that they were often based on her own parents, and they are often characters who are supposed to care for a child or a vulnerable person, and just don't. They often pass on the surface as a caring person, but it's a façade, and underneath they really don't care about other people, only seeing them in terms of how they can control them or use them for gain, which is what makes them a villain of course.

One type of villain that crops up a few times is the respectable businessman type like Morton Leroy, Orm Pender or Uncle Ralph. They're complacent that their natural position is at the top of things. On the surface they may be charming, but they can be ruthless in maintaining the status quo where they reap all the benefit. Morton Leroy feels that he is totally entitled to Tom's life, and acts as if Tom is some kind of farm animal bred for his benefit. Reigner One is a total amoral monster, but he gives off a kind of warm magnanimous charm described as teddybear-like. It's easy to be magnanimous if you feel that everything rightly belongs to you anyway (ditto Uncle Ralph, replacing teddybear with tweedy). Uncle Bernard belongs in much the same category, but he is far less extreme of a villain. He steals David's money and acts like a ridiculous petty patriarch of the house, demanding David be grateful for having his own money be spent on him because he feels that is what he's entitled to.

A common feature of Diana's villains is that they don't just mistreat their victims, they demand that their victims be grateful to them, which is far more abusive. The attitude is "you've got no right to be unhappy, because I did *x* and *y* for you", dictating someone else's feelings and denying their view of reality. Most of the villains aren't the cape-sweeping moustache-twiddling type who revels in their evil, most of them are convinced that they're good people and have every right behave how they do, which is far more dangerous. Phyllis in *Time of the Ghos*t -based on Diana's own mother- totally neglects her children but because she puts on a saintly nurse image and plans their careers for them in lieu of actually caring for them, she sees herself as a wonderful person. Out of sight, out of mind is a good motto for a lot of Diana's villains.

Quite a few of the female villains, for instance Laurel and Aunt Maria, use superficial sweetness and social manipulation to guilt other characters into doing as they're told, because you couldn't possibly want to hurt such a sweet and kind person, could you? In Diana's words "managing". Other characters get themselves into a mess because they've worried so much that something isn't "proper" because they've been guilted or otherwise pushed down, that they ignore their own instincts about what's right. The best two examples of this are Polly being guilted by Laurel into forgetting Tom and Mig being manipulated into waiting hand and foot on Aunt Maria. Despite it not being 1955 anymore, women are still pressured by society in a lot of ways to be nicey-nice, docile, demure, conventionally pretty, and unassertive and characters such as Aunt Maria both impose these pressures on others and also take advantage of the guilt and uncertainty having these expectations pushed on them creates in other characters.

Visiting Miss Phelps is incredibly refreshing, because she's direct and interested in people for their own sakes, not for how she can control them or use them as a tool. It's also possible to see systems or cultures as the villains in some of the books such as the *Dalemark* books, the *Homeward Bounders* and *Witch Week*. I've written about the oppressive society as a villain in my *Witch Week* article, and Farah Mendlesohn has some very incisive things to say on the topic in the *Dalemark* books, so I won't repeat it here.

Review of Farah Menlesohn's book

This is a collection of academic essays exploring different aspects of Diana's books. Diana was known to take a wry view of academic analysis of her work, but also had a keen academic mind herself as you can see from some of her essays that are available both on the internet and in various printed sources (my particular favourites are *Inventing the Middle Ages* and *Heroes*, both well worth a read and available online) and from the way she carefully underpins her stories on themes taken from philosophy and literature (Shelley in the *Homeward Bounders*, Eliot and folktales in *Fire & Hemlock*, Norse mythology in *Seven Days of Luke*, etc, etc). I love reading academic analyses of things I've encountered outside an academic context particularly children's, books but it's also something that has an almost unlimited ability to annoy me. For every Girls and Boys Forever by Alison Lurie or Marvels and Tales journal that I've enjoyed, there's large stacks of essays and articles that have made me want to tear my hair out.

My pet hate in academic writing is when the writer just repeats their theory again and again as it was at the beginning of the article attaching quotes or supporting information as if the theory comes first and the proofs are an attachment rather than the other way round, without significantly building on the theory or taking it apart or challenging it to see if it stands up on its own feet afterwards. I always think of it as the "Yeah! I'm right, and here's how" approach, rather than the "Am I right? Let's see if I am. Ah, yes, it turns out at the end I was" approach that I much prefer. This is probably some prejudice on my part. I guess I want to explore and discuss far more than I just want to prove something is right in black and white terms.

Luckily this book was the kind of academic writing I like, finely analysing something to give you a whole new perspective on something, and a deeper understanding of the underlying factors. I loved the general analysis of various characters gaining agency, and I thought her exploration of the Dalemark books in particular was fantastic. She looks very closely at how the characters' senses of self subtly change throughout the books, particularly Mitt, Moril and Tanaqui, and how the dynamics of power and oppression in Dalemark's society affect characters like Mitt, Hildy and Navis. It's nice to see someone looking closely at Hildy and how she could reasonably have grown up to be how she was. I particularly liked these quotes from the Dalemark section:

"Genre fantasy for adults and children has been a refuge for the reactionary ... novel after novel within the genre revels in cod medievalism or early modernism and perpetuates an orientalist, static view of the past"

"The Dalemark Quartet forms probably Jones' most sustained fictional attack on the construction of otherworlds. Each of the novels is a medieval fantasy ... it is not fun, people don't enjoy being medieval and there are stresses and strains on the political system." (a point also eloquently expressed in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*).

The Dalemark section also made me want to re-read *The True State of Things*, a story which had never really resonated with me before, which is surely one of the points of analysing anything in the first place: to come to surprising new points and insights you would otherwise never have noticed.

I must admit though that I wasn't very keen on the time travel section. I don't know if it's just because I didn't agree with it on its own terms, or if I just didn't grasp what the writer was saying, or some sort of combination of the two factors, but I just didn't like it. Farah Mendlesohn analyses it in J.M.E. Taggart's terms of **relative time**, where events are organised into past, present and future related to you believing yourself to view things from a present, and **absolute time**, where the focus is on what order the events occurred in and their relationship to each other, rather than in regard to whether they happened in the past, present or future from your viewpoint (if I got that right, which I hope I did). There are a lot of helpful/baffling diagrams of the plots of various Diana Wynne Jones books accompanying it. (Helpfulness depending on your viewpoint).

It's nice to see someone taking this aspect of the books apart and analysing it, but I found the whole section too rigid, as if something that is understood intuitively were being split into concrete blocks, like trying to form a liquid into cubes without freezing it. Again, maybe that's some peculiar prejudice of mine speaking, but also maybe that McTaggart was writing just before the First World War, and I think that people's minds these days run on different, perhaps more flexible lines when thinking about time, influenced by the large amounts of stories about time travel now available. (I obviously also watched too much Dr Who when I was a kid, and read too many Diana Wynne Jones books as well). I disliked the time travel section so much that I was almost tempted to stop reading the book, but I rarely give up on books, and I was immensely glad that I didn't, because this is a rewarding and thoughtful book that I highly recommend.

(Ayn Rand and Finnegan's Wake being my main exceptions so far on giving up on books, on separate grounds of one being badly written and based on an abhorrent philosophy, and the other being famously unreadably dense).

Polly's Book List

The books Tom sends Polly are an important part of *Fire and Hemlock*. Tom tries to hint at his situation through the choice of books (in particular *East of the Sun, West of the Moon; The Golden Bough* and *The Oxford Book of Ballads)* but also inspire Polly's imagination, and teach her about magic, the difficulty in knowing what you want and being careful what you ask for, heroism and fighting injustice. The physical evidence through the gift of books that someone cares about Polly, and the love of reading they incubate in her keep Polly going through her difficult childhood, and help to give her the strength of character she needs when she's older to save Tom (your mileage may vary as to whether cynically created by Tom as a calculated lifeline or not). Even Polly's tutorial topic, Keats, continues the themes of the book, and *Ode to a Nightingale* sums up her feelings at that point:

"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains"

(*The Belle Dame Sans Merci* would also be pretty appropriate here).

I've read all of these that are possible, except *Henrietta's House*. The books in brackets are entirely fictional. T.S. Eliot is mentioned *nowhere* in the novel, but his *Four Quartets* are as much of an underpinning to the story as *Tam Lin* or *Thomas the Rhymer*. I have listed them in the order they appear in the story. Why not tick them off as you read them?

There is also an online version of this reading list with links to Goodreads at www.anoteonarainynight.com/**pollysreadinglist**/

□ **(Times Out of Mind)** - ed L. Perry
□ **The Wizard of Oz** - L. Frank Baum
□ **Five Children and It** - E. Nesbit
□ **The Treasure Seekers** - E. Nesbit
□ **The Wolves of Willoughby Chase** - Joan Aiken
□ **The Box of Delights** - John Masefield
□ **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe** - C.S.Lewis
□ **The Sword in the Stone** - T.H. White
□ **The 101 Dalmatians** - Dodie Smith
□ **Henrietta's House** - Elizabeth Goudge
□ **Black Beauty** - Anna Sewell
□ **Sherlock Holmes** - Arthur Conan Doyle
□ **Uncle Tom's Cabin** - Harriet Beecher Stowe
□ **The Three Musketeers** - Alexandre Dumas
□ **(Popular Beliefs)**
□ **King Arthur** - Not specified but probably **King Arthur and His Knights of the Round Table** by Roger Lancelyn Green and the **Mort d'Arthur** by Thomas Malory
□ **East of the Sun, West of the Moon**
□ **The Lord of the Rings** - J.R.R. Tolkein
□ **Kim** - Rudyard Kipling
□ **The Man Who Was Thursday** - G.K. Chesterton
□ **Perelandra / Voyage to Venus** - C.S. Lewis
□ **The Napoleon of Notting Hill** - G.K. Chesterton
□ **The 39 Steps** - John Buchan
□ **Tom's Midnight Garden** - Philippa Pearce
□ **The Oxford Book of Ballads** - ed. Arthur Quiller-Couch
□ **The Castle of Adventure** - Enid Blyton
□ **The Golden Bough** - James Frazer
□ **(Tales From Nowhere)** - The Dumas Quartet
□ **Ode to a Nightingale** - John Keats
□ **The Four Quartets** - T.S. Eliot

The Ending of Fire and Hemlock

The ending of *Fire and Hemlock* famously baffles people. For some reason it has never confused me, and hopefully by sharing my interpretation of it here, I can help to unbaffle people, and help them be able to enjoy the ending more.

Fire and Hemlock is a book of patterns. Themes and events cross over from beginning to end, and patterns shown in the stories of the books Polly reads and the poems the book is based on are inverted and turned round in the main narrative of the story, and incidents from earlier in the story are carefully set up to grow and be seen in new lights later in the story. Tom is a cursed fairy tale prince, but it's modern times and not everything in the fairy tale pattern applies any more. Polly has been educated through stories, but she has also learnt that an important part of being a hero is being bold enough to create your own pattern, and not follow the set one because you feel you ought to, or because you feel too embarrassed to do what you really think or feel.

In the story of Tam Lin, Janet saves Tom by hanging on to him no matter what. Hanging onto Tom serves Polly up to a point, but there comes a time when she has to forge her own path. Ivy and Seb's examples have shown her the futility of trying to make someone love you by hanging on to them, as did the moment where she drunkenly hung on to Tom's arm at Middleton Fair. She can't create future freedom for Tom by clinging on to him.

Laurel is coldly amused enough by Polly's devotion to create a contest where it looks like Tom can win his life back. Of course things aren't so simple. The pool is Eliot's "world of perpetual solitude", whoever ends up going down to the bottom into the coffin shaped trench has lost, and is the one who dies. Morton Leroy is old and unfit and has no friends, and so on paper he is the loser against Tom, who is young, healthy, determined, and has loyal friends to help him. Laurel has turned the tables though by rigging the game to invert things so that every strength is a weakness, and help from friends weighs you down. So the only way to win is to have no strength or friends or help. Tom obviously won't give those things up, because he hasn't figured out the rules, and he thinks his strengths count as strengths in the contest, so Polly has to forcefully take them away. She can't just fake abandoning Tom. She has to really mean it in some way, as an honest feeling, rather than a façade or else he isn't really abandoned without help, and is too strong to win. She sets him free by letting him go, and if he's free then he doesn't belong to anyone, certainly not Laurel.

When Tom has won, and Morton has died, Polly thinks she has to go on abandoning Tom, otherwise what she did in the pool doesn't count, and Tom will die. Laurel operates on "chilly logic" though, and they play a logic game, making it up as they go along and realising the logical implications at the same time that mean they can stay together **and** still have won against Laurel.

It goes like this:
We can't be together anywhere.
Where is the opposite of Anywhere? Nowhere.
We've often been to Nowhere. (Nowhere is a lot like Now Here anyway)
If we **can't** be together **nowhere**, that means we **can** be together **somewhere**. (negative + negative = positive)

I think you need to be the sort of person who only imagines books in images to get the most out of the pool scene. I don't think it works so well for the people who hear text as a kind of audio book in their brain when they read. I know Diana herself had that type of brain, she mentioned in interviews that she had a photographic memory and came up with her plots by suddenly being struck by a sequence of very precise images which she had to work through the story to work out how on earth the characters got to the next image. I guess that explains why she also had some strikingly imaged pivotal scenes.

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I also make other zines:

Being Editors 1- Essays on Diana Wynne Jones
Being Editors 2- Essays on C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman (May 2017)
Being Editors 3- Essays on Oliver Postgate (TBA)
Being Editors 4- Essays on E.Nesbit (TBA)
Colouring book zine
Egeszsegedre!- Hungary and Budapest

Fanzine Ynfytyn 12.5-24hr zine about charity shop bargains
Fanzine Ynfytyn 14-Vienna- all the schnitzels and dumplings you can eat
Fanzine Ynfytyn 15-Pointless board games and bad French jokes
Fanzine Ynfytyn 16-Grandparents and their weird habits and people I wanted to be when I grew up
Fanzine Ynfytyn 16.5-24hr zine about El Topo and Sedmikrasky and hometown boredom
Fanzine Ynfytyn 17-Why Mr Frosty sets are disappointing as an adult and lists about J.Mascis and cats
Fanzine Ynfytyn 18– 80s video hire and a delicious lasagne recipe
Fanzine Ynfytyn 19-Bulgaria and glasses wearing
Fanzine Ynfytyn 20-North Korea (a place I have not visited) and winning competitions
Fanzine Ynfytyn 21-Paris on a budget of nothing (April 2017)
Fanzine Ynfytyn 22-Foxes and being in charge of a maze
Fanzine Ynfytyn 23-Illness and trying to avoid "wellness culture" bullshit
Fanzine Ynfytyn 23.5-24 hour zine about bees, quilting and modular synths
Fanzine Ynfytyn 24-Mirena IUDs in combo with PCOS and Prednisone
Fanzine Ynfytyn 25-Our Maxim from Almaty, and exploring the world of the ceiling
Fanzine Ynfytyn 26-The strange world of French campsites
Fanzine Ynfytyn 27-Circular Journeys in Central Europe (April 2017)
Fanzine Ynfytyn 28-Three weeks in Japan
Fanzine Ynfytyn 28.5- Mini photo-zine of Japan
Fanzine Ynfytyn 29- Oxbridge or Bust? (May 2017)
Fanzine Ynfytyn 30- Solitude Standing (May 2017)

Little Whisper Smoke Signs 1-
photo zine

Little Whisper Smoke Signs 2-
photo zine

Pobble Eh Come? Tiny silly collage zines

They get everywhere