The Old Child in Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising* Series

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When I started organizing this collection, some scholars to whom I showed the outline of the project voiced some concerns about the idea of putting together essays about experimental writing, science fiction and fantasy (SFF) side by side. These are, those people claimed, genres that simply do not belong together, with very different goals, audiences and traditions. To be sure, in *Re-Enchanted: The Rise of Children's Fantasy Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Maria Sachiko Cecire suggests that this might indeed be the case, when in the first few pages of her book she contends, apropos of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, who were responsible for propelling the genre of fantasy to new heights of popularity in the postwar era: "[F]ar from wanting to 'make it new,' to quote the catchphrase of Modernism, they sought to step outside of relentless linear narratives of progress and instead spark a return to the medieval past that they loved" (2019: Kindle 3). Fantasy's fascination with the past does not, however, make it necessarily any less thought-provoking and epistemologically challenging, as I have argued in the introduction and as other chapters in this book try to show. In this essay I will pursue a similar line of thinking: fantasy can indeed be as de-familiarizing and de-naturalize reality just as much as an experimental text, even if the events it depects are not real (or even plausible) and its style is not realistic.

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My piece focuses on Susan Cooper's "The Dark Is Rising" saga, which began in 1965, with *Over Sea, Under Stone*, and was concluded in 1977, with *Silver on the Tree*. The series is especially interesting when read from an Aging Studies perspective because its protagonist is, paradoxically, a child (born to a moder-day British family) who finds out he is the encarnation of an ancient undying spirit. Will Stanton is one of the so-called "Old Ones", tasked with defending humanity from the rise of the forces of the Dark. Alongside him are other allies of the Light, like Merriman Lyon (according to medievalist Jennifer Bryan, he is a Merlin figure with the trappings of our time: a professor with magical abilities) and Bran, a Welsh descendent of King Arthur. Throughout the series, Will learns how to control his power as an Old One, he collects (with the help of his companions) a set of magical signs and uses them in combination with a crystal sword to defeat his foes.

One could certainly argue that the overarching plot of the series is simplistic and its conceptions of good and evil rather naive. As Cecire points out, however, Cooper was responding to the straightforward moral reality of nazism and WW2 which she experienced first-hand (in particular the bombing of London). As Bryan observes, Cooper was "also indebted to T. S. Eliot and his quest for mythic origins in the midst of social and personal breakdown" (2017: 29). Moreover, the scholar reminds us that "according to models developed in the nineteenth century, Arthurian stories [provide] children with ethical role models to guide them in the acquisition of values and character." (2017: 29). The quasi-medieval framekwork of good vs. evil that we find in the series no doubt provides us with the comforts of a world in which characters can act with purpose and conviction, a valuable and edifying milieu especially in a time like ours, increasingly fragmented, murky and lacking clear asnwers as to what a truly progressive future would look like.

Most relevant for our purposes, "The Dark Is Rising" books take two different groups of people that we normally see as disenfranchised – children and old people – and mashes them together in the character of their protagonist. According to fantasy scholar Maria Nokolajeva, the figure of the child in children's literature is usually mobilized to probe the terrain of innocence and potentiality that one leaves behind

when one climbs to the plateau of adulthood. Childhood, from the vantagepoint provided by stories like that of Peter Pan, is a phase one ultimately must grow out of. Nevertheless, children's literature grant children abilities that (temporarily, at least) make them more powerful than adults. Such is the case in "The Dark Is Rising", in which Will, an otherwise unremarkable boy, is given special status as a major player in the struggle for the fate of humanity, a role that many a child surely wishes she one day could play, especially given how children are normally excluded from the "serious" affairs of adults.

Will is treated as a child by his parents and sublings and many times acts like one, displaying as much puzzlement and uncertainty as a normal kid would. Although he is still getting used to it, we know that he is special, the last of the Old Ones. This "time-shift" mechanism gives him access to a timeless form of knowledge and wisdom. As Nikolajeva points out, "time-shift fantasy seems a more prominent genre in children's literature than in mainstream fiction . . . not least, time displacement focuses on change, growth, ageing and death, major issues in serious children's literature" (2012: 153). Will is granted immortality (and thus complete mastery over death) and acquires the wisdom of old age, of someone who has been alive since the beginning of human history.

As an admiror of T. S. Eliot's work, Cooper knows how valuable knowledge of the past can be for a grounded uderstanding of the present. In her essay about "The Dark Is Rising", Bryan links Merriman's statement that all times co-exist to Eliot's assertion that "a poet is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in the present moment of the past" (qtd. in Bryan 2017: 35). Knowledge of the past is not something that one acquires passively or automatically (i.e. it does not come naturally with old age), as Robert Pogue Harrison points out in his about about aging, titled *Juvenescence*. Harrison notes that "wisdom does not depend on age" and that "a man of a hundred may be full of empty talk" (2014: 44). In fact, he goes on to say that the acquisition of wisdom should begin at an early age (with an journey into the past, like Will's, who actively goes out in pursuit of the symbolic "signs of power") and that wisdom is something that needs to keep being renewed and reinvented with a childlike creative spirit. In order to be fully experienced, the past

needs the present as much as the present needs the past. Moreover, one should add that it is a mistake to presuppose that old age necessarily leads to wisdom, and this is something that does a disservice to the unique histories and experiences of particular old people. At best, an older person will have a greater empirical understanding of the specific historical time she lived through, she may have amassed a unique set of memories and, as Harrison points out, she may have may have indeed worked to acquire greater learning or self-knowledge.

Another interesting way "The Dark Is Rising" can be put in conversation with Aging Studies requires us to attend to the way Cooper puts a spin on the figure of the child, which in this series does not fuction as a mere symbol of the future, unmoored from the past. Taking a cue from Cynthia Port's work on queer aging (she builds upon Lee Edelman's insights, in *No Future*, about how mainstream culture glamorizes children), Aging Studies scholars have been paying significant attention to how our age's obsession with the child as a quasi-messianic figure of redemption in effect leads to a further disenfranchisement and dismissal of older people, who ought to be treated as fully part of the present and as important as everyone else for ongoing discussions about the future.

Cooper is not, however, interested in presenting the child as a symbol of the future. Progress for progress's sake is rather the enemy of fantasy writers that follow in the footsteps of Tolkien and Lewis, as I have noted above. Instead, Cooper's "old child", Will, is bound to the past and he represents the hope in a future that draws its creative energies from an older, more cohesive and simple, time. Immortality as infinite longevity has no interest for Cooper. The author simply needs her main characters to be immortal so that they can tap into their culture's ancient traditions and use this knowledge to defeat evil. For Cooper, the noble values of Arthurian legend do not represent merely an interesting curiosity from the remote past. The middle ages do not simply conjure up a world we can escape to in order to avoid the complex challenges of the present. More than anything, the Arthurian mindset is useful. In a world in which one feels ever more impotent to change the course of things, a character like Will Stanton gives us hope and motivation. Cooper makes us believe that age-old values do matter, after all, and that, sticking to them (even if

in a somewhat quixotic manner) renders one less vulnerable to the stagnating cynicism that defines the age that we live in.

Works Cited

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