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Where have All the Witches Gone? The Disappearing Witch and Children’s Literature

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Witches have had some presence in children’s literature since the nineteenth century, when their provenance was primarily retellings of certain Grimms’ fairy tales (Hansel and Gretel, Rapunzel, Jorinde and Joringel), George Dasent’s Popular Tales from the Norse (1859), and various folktales in which sundry female characters with supernatural origins or magic-working abilities, such as minor goddesses or ill-disposed fairies, are bundled together within the category of the witch. Such representations are reshaped in L. Frank Baum’s The Wonderful Wizard of Oz (1900), which Marion Gibson considers a turning-point in the history of American witchcraft because it includes both ‘good’ and ‘wicked witches.¹ In England, they peak with C. S. Lewis’s The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950),² which encapsulates how the constant in an otherwise semantically fuzzy area is a female disposition to evil. Vagueness in children’s literature as to what characterises a witch has thus been endemic from the outset and, apart from a brief period during which the literature directly addressed the question, persists up to the present time.

The hey-day of the witch in children’s literature proved to be surprisingly short, extending from around 1980 to 2000, and during this time witch stories probably only reached a large international audience through the ‘witches’ sub-set of Terry Pratchett’s crossover teen/adult novels in the ‘discworld’ series – that is, from Equal Rites (1987) to Carpe Jugulum (1998). With some notable exceptions, the literature has subsequently included few witches at its ‘high culture’ end, which appears to have happened for several reasons: the dominance of the ‘Harry Potter’ (HP) series (1997–2007), in which the representation of witches has become a literary convention and has lost most of its earlier complexity and its social function; a widespread cultural shift reflected in children’s and young adult literature whereby concerns with feminism and cultural tradition have diminished; the discrediting of the unhistorical feminist mythology of ‘the burning times’; and the flourishing interest in the adaptation of fairy tales which employ a cognitive map for fairies which occupies much the same imaginative space as the schematic map for witches. This tendency to conflate fairies and witches is quite old, however, and Susan Jennifer Elsley has identified its presence as early as 1859.³ A further contributing factor has perhaps been the expansion of gothic fiction for young readers, whereby monsters such as vampires that inhabit the border territories between life and death and between aberrant and normative
subjectivities have pushed witches to the narrative periphery. A good example of how such displacement occurs is Neil Gaiman’s gothic novel *The Graveyard Book* (2008). The ghost of a witch, Liza Hempstock, is introduced in Chapter 4, and is the focus of Bod’s almost fatal encounter with the outside world, but subsequently appears only sporadically, as she has no further role to play. She is thus a minor character in comparison with Bod’s guardian and mentor, the vampire Silas. Liza in fact embodies a schematic figure from what Diane Purkiss terms ‘radical feminist histories of witches’ that arose in the 1970s and which characterised witches as victims of patriarchal ideology – as Liza describes her own death by torture and consignment to oblivion, ‘drownded and burnded and buried here without as much as a stone to mark the spot’ (100).

The movement of witches to the periphery of narrative had occurred already in the 1990s – Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* series presents a prominent example – and the only major examples of a witch as main protagonist and focaliser in twenty-first century children’s fiction have been Pratchett’s inventive, highly-regarded ‘Tiffany Aching’ series (2003–2015), which he built around adaptations of British and Scottish folklore, and Carolyn MacCullough’s *Once a Witch* (2009) and its sequels. In addition to their innate appeal, the five Tiffany Aching books may prove to be historically important because they sustain the core scripts and schemas which underpinned representations of witches as they were formulated in the 1970s and further developed subsequently. While Pratchett’s books sell prolifically and have been translated into numerous languages, their audience is nevertheless smaller than that reached by the ‘Harry Potter’ series, and the ‘Tiffany Aching’ books have received very little critical or media attention (principally Baker and Gruner), in sharp contrast to the scholarly treadmill that was generated by the *HP* series.

Children’s literature is highly responsive to shifts in social ideology, and the women’s movement of the 1970s produced one of the most significant twentieth-century paradigm shifts in the literature. It began to incorporate feminist and quasi-feminist stances and to represent women and girls shaped by ‘second wave’ feminist concerns – primarily in terms of equality of representation in numbers and functions – and hence the new conception of the witch as a subject who resisted patriarchal efforts to victimize her because of her skills, strength and independence offered an attractive schema. Since the first transformations of the witch in feminist mythology in the 1970s, and her subsequent deployment as a significant figure in children’s literature, characters identified as witches have been found in most literary forms, ranging from picture books through to young adult fiction. As Robin Briggs observed in 1996, ‘Witches are everywhere in modern children’s literature. Sometimes they retain their old character, representing evil in its most virulent form, but more often they have become either harmless tricksters or repositories of ancient wisdom’. The witches thus described can be classified according to three distinct schemas: the ancient crone (variously embodiment of evil or harmless comic figure), the malevolent sorceress witch, and the wise woman who is a healer and midwife. In each case, the witch is assigned to the category of ‘people who in some sense or other are not full members of the community’. The identification of witches as strangers, outsiders and nonconformists is also virtually absolute in children’s literature. This otherness is commonly a catalyst for story events, but it also has a significant thematic function in that it constitutes a site from which the excluding community can be evaluated.
and judged. The witch’s apparently eccentric behaviour both marks her as an object of suspicion and defines the host community as narrow-minded, petty and malicious. This is the representation reproduced in *The Graveyard Book*.

Texts pivoting around witch-figures are inevitably intertextual, existing in a dialogic relationship with history, historiographic discourses, scholarly research and popular culture, religious belief, and classic literary works (especially fairy tales and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*). Whether implicitly or explicitly, books for young readers engage with how these discourses have figured and regulated the shape and boundaries of cultural formations: the nature of belief; the antithesis of scientific positivism and myth; the delineation of subaltern groups at the margins of sociality; the role of the feminine in patriarchal societies; and so on.

Witches, then, are commonly depicted as people finding their own way outside the boundaries of mainstream society, and their representation is a way of looking at the relationships between past and present and the nature of cultural paradigm shifts. In many late twentieth-century children’s books the witch-figure had undergone rehabilitation, though this was not universally so, and with the substantial dismantling of the 1970s witch mythology by 1996 (most influentially in the works of the cultural historians Briggs and Purkiss), the status of the witch in children’s literature changed from a quasi-historical feminist icon to a literary convention. From whatever cause, the shift is already evident in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, in which social centre and periphery are transposed and mainstream society is identified as that of witches and wizards. The principal witch character, Hermione, is marginalized not because she is a witch but because she is pervasively represented as a girlie swot, or, as Christine Schoefer puts it, ‘a smart goody-goody who annoys the boys by constantly reminding them of school rules’. The somewhat febrile debate about gender representation sparked by Schoefer’s online article focused on untheorized content analysis of Hermione’s interpellation within a recognisable late twentieth/early twenty-first century society.8 No attempt was made to explore how the representation of her subjectivity might – or might not – relate to witch schemas. Instead, discussion turned to ‘capable young woman’ schemas in the period of text production.

The witch in the *HP* series falls within a popular culture version of postfeminism more recently formulated by Stephanie Genz as a blending of feminism and femininity: ‘a more flexible and open-ended model of agency that is doubly coded in political terms and entwines backlash and innovation, complicity and critique’.9 In contrast, the rehabilitation of the witch in late twentieth-century children’s fiction was grounded in second-wave feminist analysis, which, in drawing attention to the discourses and power structures which are dominant in a given society, enabled a revaluation of the nature of female ‘others’, of women who choose or endeavour to lead lives outside the gendering frame of establishment discourses. In other words, it creates the possibility of validating what hegemonic patriarchy has rendered marginal. Purkiss points to the connection of ahistorical feminist accounts of witch persecutions with ‘contemporary questions of authority, authenticity and public politics’, and the rhetorical function of pseudo-histories ‘not as a reconstruction of the past, but an account of the way things always are’.10 However, the evocation of the suffering female body characteristic of this rhetoric makes only rare appearances in children’s literature. The extended representation of the motif in Donna Jo Napoli’s *The Magic Circle* (1993) is thus unusual, although its concomitant affirmation of
traditional feminine roles and domestic space is not. Fiction for children has, rather, one of two foci, depending on a novel’s temporal setting. First, fictions set in the past may attempt to invert historical representations by depicting a witch-figure from a sympathetic perspective. Thus Monica Furlong’s *Wise Child* (1987) is narrated by a young girl who, having been left without any adults to take care of her, is given a loving home by Juniper, the local ‘witch,’ and quickly becomes embroiled in the difference between actuality and representation. The other children, the village adults, and especially the village priest place Juniper in the subject position of the traditional evil witch. *Wise Child*, who as narrator embodies the novel’s most authoritative perspective, soon learns that Juniper is the most upright and meritorious member of the community. Second, fictions set in the present, such as Theresa Tomlinson’s *Summer Witches* (1989), are apt to deal with the theme of escaping from the limiting and confining structures of the past in the process of forming a contemporary female subjectivity.

The construction of witch schemas in the 1970s was also shaped by a second cultural factor temporally parallel with second-wave feminism. This factor was a bundle of ideas which derived its represented witch-schema and its somewhat New Age grounding philosophy from several streams. The representation of witches in contemporary, twenty-first century teen and cross-over novels – for example, Carolyn MacCullough’s *Once a Witch* (2009) – reproduces this schema. An important catalyst has been a myth derived from elements of Margaret Murray’s theory about witches as devotees of an ancient pre-Christian fertility religion. While the ‘Murrayite’ hypothesis has been generally discredited since its enunciation in 1921, it has also been enormously influential and appears to inform many of the modern representations of witches. As Jacqueline Simpson points out, because Murray was given the opportunity to present her theory in the 1929 *Encyclopedia Britannica*, where it remained as an apparent fact until 1969, her views were accessible ‘to journalists, film-makers, popular novelists and thriller writers, who adopted them enthusiastically’ (89). As Simpson concludes, ‘by now [i.e. 1994] they are so entrenched in popular culture that they will probably never be uprooted’. The subsequent appropriations of Murray’s theory offer a telling example of how people construct alternative pseudo-histories in order to challenge familiar representations in history. Subsequently wrapped in with this image is that of the midwife-healer, which, as Purkiss points out, originated as recently as 1973 in Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*. An attractive effect of such an alternative history is that it inverts the conventional, Enlightenment, probably masculine, privileging of history over myth. The entry for ‘Witchcraft’ in Barbara Walker’s *The Woman’s Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* is a convenient symptomatic example of how history, anecdote and fancy become inextricably imbricated.

For contemporary fictional representations of witchcraft, however, discriminations between fact and fancy are less important than the pervasiveness of the pseudo-history as an enabling myth. Other, often related, recent influences shaping the modern witch-schema are neo-paganism, goddess-worship, eco-feminism, and the late twentieth-century mania for Celtic traditions. All of this yields up a bundle of ideas centred on a quasi-pantheistic conception of the cosmos as an ordered and coherent universe in which all parts are interrelated but from which most human beings are alienated. This bundle of ideas is used to interrogate or reject Western historical traditions and cultural metanarratives of various kinds, ranging from the ethics of individualism to...
the social codes which regulate sexual practice and its meanings. It is often an effective mode of analogical thinking, but can also slip into discourses that are little more than sentimental essentialism. A crucial function of the modern witch-schema is that it is used to fill a gap opened up by the other strand of this second cultural factor, a pervasive unease with or anxiety about (post-)modernity.

To recognize that reality is socially constructed, along with the conceptual categories used to order and reproduce it – history, science, reason, self, subject, sex, sanity – is to destabilize the ground of children’s literature. It is no accident that Kenneth Lillington’s *An Ash-blonde Witch* (1989), for example, problematizes all of those conceptual categories just listed, or that other books reaffirm from various perspectives the existence of immanent, as opposed to transcendent, good and evil prior to the social construction of experience. Within the surface-without-depth, fragmented culture of post-Christian postmodernism, witches can be used to evoke an important function: to offer visions of wholeness, and to reassert certain values either present in or ascribed to the past, and to suggest that those values are recuperable in our mundane modern world. Witches such as Juniper, the two very different witches depicted in *An Ash-blonde Witch*, or the Northern witches in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* (see especially *The Subtle Knife* (1997), Chapter 2) are positioned on the outside of both patriarchal institutional religion and patriarchal secular society, and they either practice or move toward new versions of spirituality. What such a witch stands for is a neo-humanistic protest against postmodernism’s denial of ethical values and a resistance to late twentieth-century human indifference. As a figure (self-)excluded from patriarchal, ‘old humanist’ society and belief, the witch embodies the inverted hierarchical oppositions of modernity, but invests them with ethical and aesthetic value. Thus she sees others as fellow human beings rather than strangers, and privileges the other over the self, the object over the subject, society over the individual, myth over history, emotion over reason, intuition over knowledge, female knowledge over male knowledge, nature over culture, and immanence over transcendence. In her embodiment of these emphases, and her conversion of them into social praxis, she makes her world both meaningful and a better place.

One of the problems implicitly attributed to late modernity is that it separates people from their cultural history and alienates them from their own selves. In this context the witch-figure can be used as a counterweight to a cultural paradigm shift, which seems to be the basis for Tomlinson’s *Summer Witches*, an overtly simplified rethinking of the traditional idea of witch as crone and its cultural transmission, presented through a story about the evolution of young female friendship and subjectivities. It is a story about two girls – Sarah and Susanna – who are thrown together and negotiate friendship as they convert an old air-raid shelter into their own special place, inadvertently replicating what two female neighbours had done there during World War Two. The girls have identified one of these women – Miss Lily – as a witch because she is speech- and hearing-impaired, and have used her perceived otherness as a basis for a misconstruction in terms of the witch of fairy-tale imagination, especially in *Hansel and Gretel* and *Rapunzel*. The novel does not merely falsify and expel the girls’ misconstruction, as happens elsewhere, as, for example, in Helen Griffiths’ *The Mysterious Appearance of Agnes* (1975), a historical novel which debunks ideas about witchcraft as mere unreasoned prejudice and suspicion of otherness. Rather, *Summer Witches* replaces the crone stereotype with the ‘wise woman’ schema. This
happens quite overtly toward the end of the book, when Chapter 11 is entirely given over to a conversation about constructions of ‘witchiness.’ The positive image offered here is that of the conventional ‘green’ witch, the woman in touch with the natural world and its cycles and with her own instinctual responses. In the following chapters the girls apply their new knowledge, first by deconstructing the life-size representation of a crone-witch found in a local history museum, and second by using their own newly discovered witchiness to help Lily overcome the trauma of her wartime memories. The novel thus builds in a double recuperation of the past – of the near past of the mid-twentieth century and of the deeper past of cultural misogyny and subaltern womanhood, presenting now an image of witches as conservers of nature and tradition, healers, and agents of renewal.

Summer Witches explores the idea of the witch by contrasting two schemas familiar from the historiographical discourses about witches, encapsulated here by ‘Horrid, ugly old things who ate children and rode broomsticks’ and ‘wise women . . . [who] grew herbs and made medicines that often worked well’. These are the schemas which tend to dominate representations in children’s books, though by the 1970s the crone-schema of an old woman wearing the conventional uniform of black clothing, pointed hat, and boots, and travelling by broomstick, or ‘borrowing’ the bodies of animals, was falling out of serious use. It was being dismantled in three ways: by being rendered comic (as in, for example, the picture books of Mahy and Williams, and of Nichols and Pienkowski), by being dismissed as a stereotype, and by becoming supplanted as versions of the Murrayite wise witch emerging within children’s literature. The crone-schema did not entirely disappear, however, but has persisted in retellings of more intransigent stories, especially of Hansel and Gretel. Shelley Duvall’s melodramatic Faerie Tale Theatre retelling (1982) depicts the crone-witch in her aged ugliness – literally, warts and all. Resistance to this representation appears in Pratchett’s The Wee Free Men (2003), when Tiffany logically dismantles an adaptation of the tale and concludes that, in accordance with the ideology of folktale, an old woman was persecuted and left to die because ‘she just looked like a witch in a story’. The series often returns to this stereotype, assumingly because, in his comprehensive grasp of the power of story, Pratchett strives to dismantle unexamined cultural labels. Such a need is illustrated in that even a retelling by an adapter as astute as Neil Gaiman (Hansel and Gretel 2014) reproduces the schema by concealing the evil crone within a person who appears to be ‘not an ogre or a monster, but a kindly-faced old woman, leaning on a stick, who peered about her short-sightedly with dim eyes’, but who quickly reverts to the expected role once she has captured the children.

In opposition to the wise witch is the third witch-schema, that of the sorceress-witch; fascinating, young, beautiful, but malevolent, the sorceress-witch expresses the dark, wild and subversive elements of female desire, female pain, and female nature more generally. As far as I know, no work of children’s fiction situates such a character as primary protagonist, although she does appear in The Craft (1996), a popular film for late adolescent audiences and upward, marketed as ‘a hip, sexy, supernatural thriller.’ This film links witchcraft and femininity gone wrong and, not very subtly, reaffirms the wisdom of official society’s control over the lives and bodies of young women, of reconstituting the subversive as subaltern. Otherness here constitutes a threat, and is where the sorceress-witch schema most closely overlaps with the wicked fairy figure of, for example, Sleeping Beauty and Snow White adaptations. Robin
McKinley’s *Spindle’s End* (2000), an adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty*, only describes the malevolent Pernicia obliquely – she is tall and dressed in ‘black and grey streaked with purple and magenta and cerise, and a necklace of black stones’, but the control of dark magic is almost irresistible. It may be that the popularity of the title character of Disney’s *Maleficent* (2014) will further obliterate the witch from children’s fiction. The film’s dismantling of the misogyny normally associated with the depiction of the sorceress-witch may not be subtle, but has a greater potential to erase the schema than to recuperate it.

A text generally identifies its witch-figure as such, most usually by the suspicious, prejudiced and hostile attitudes of other characters toward her, and this enables exploration both of the nature of otherness and of the functions of historical patriarchy in deploying ideas about witchcraft to induce female conformity and docility. The wise-witch schema is therefore always an intertextual representation and often overtly presented as a contrast with or even deconstruction of the crone- and sorceress-witch schemas, so that the three possibilities are brought into dialogic relationships with one another and into relationships with historiography. Because witches have been constructed, historically, as possessing an evil disposition that sets them apart from common humanity, narratives about good witches will seek to recuperate the idea of the witch. Furlong thus defines her witch as ‘someone who loves all the creatures of the world . . . the animals, birds, plants, trees and people and who cannot bear to do any of them any harm. It is someone who believes that they are all linked together and that therefore everything can be used to heal the pain and suffering of the world. It is someone who does not hate anybody and is not frightened of anyone or anything’. As a character type, and in intertextual contrast with the received notions attached to her less savoury sisters, the wise witch conforms to a bundle of conventional schematic attributes. Further, the three principal components of the wise-witch schema as deployed in children’s fiction – her place in the community, her personal appearance, and her spiritual beliefs – function as social critique.

In appearance, the wise witch is apt to be young, healthy and handsome. Her overall wholesomeness contrasts both with the extreme ugliness of the crone and with the ‘bewitching’ beauty of the sorceress-witch. She is nevertheless usually comely enough to be an object of desire, envy, or slander. Moreover, she tends to be sexually active in a community with a patriarchal social structure, and this contributes to community representations of her as ‘witch’ and ‘evil’. As Mair puts it, ‘A witch . . . is a person who does not control the impulses that good members of society must keep in check’. When, in *An Ash-blonde Witch*, the crone-witch Dorcas wants to eliminate the beautiful newcomer, Sophie, her method is to promulgate an insinuation attributing to Sophie the perverted, insatiable, and destructive sexuality of the sorceress-witch. Because Sophie is no such thing, and is the novel’s principal focalizing character, the effect of such attributions is to interrogate the cultural formations which shape and regulate sexual practices, whether in the past or the present.

The wise witch is most set apart from the local community by her spiritual beliefs. She does not conform with, or subscribe to, the beliefs of whatever contemporary, hegemonic religion prevails (usually a form of Christianity), but either has an ecumenical view of religion, or is a pantheist, a polytheist, or a Goddess-worshiper. This makes her an inevitable object of suspicion, and sometimes a target for pulpit-oratory, and in *Wise Child*, for example, where such attacks are presented as unjustified, the
effect is to separate spiritual experience and insight from organized religion. Juniper’s ecumenical adherence to a broad-based spiritual immanence challenges other characters, and readers, to think about the nature of spiritual experience and the bases for religious pronouncements about such issues as gender. More polemically, the witches in Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* not only worship gods and goddesses linked with nature and the earth, but are overtly critical of ‘the church’, which strives ‘to suppress and control every natural impulse. And when it can’t control them it cuts them out. . . . That is what the church does, and every church is the same, control, destroy, obliterate every good feeling’. The opposition to mainstream Christianity in Pullman’s work is widely acknowledged, but the significance here is that part of his critique is grounded in late twentieth-century witch lore.

The witch in children’s and young adult literature remains an outsider outside society, but with the power to change society. This formulation underpins the two most notable contemporary witch narratives, Pratchett’s ‘Tiffany Aching’ series and Margo Lanagan’s young adult novel *Sea Hearts* (2012). Offering contrasting visions, both reach back into the twentieth century witch schemas to rethink the power of the witch as a force in women’s lives. Where the *HP* witches are narratively subordinated to dynamic male characters and perform magic which is mechanical and formulaic, Pratchett’s Tiffany Aching walks in spaces between worlds and drives back supernatural forces that persist across ages to find embodiment in Tiffany’s present. She saves everydayness and articulates its inherent value by preserving the boundaries between her world and the myriad worlds that lie contiguous with it, but also by performing everydayness – tending to the ill and the dying, birthing sheep, and embodying the essence of the land whose witch she is. *Sea Hearts* is an adaptation of the selkie legend, but turns on the power of its witch, Misskaella, to summon selkie women out of their seal bodies. That power constitutes her malice, since these displaced and captured women represent women without agency, afflicted with depression and grief for the subjectivity they have lost. They replicate the most abject female condition imagined within second-wave feminism, and thus Misskaella’s actions dismantle the quest for agency and female independence pursued by the late twentieth-century wise witch. While enriching herself by supplying selkies to the men, Misskaella exacts a terrible revenge for the outsider status thrust upon her because of her innate power and physical unattractiveness. The novel’s narrative form is unique amongst witch stories: from the opening line – ‘The old witch is there’ – she is positioned at the centre of events, both because of her role in the story and of the strategy of organizing the narrative as seven discrete sections narrated by six characters, but she occupies the centre as an influence or idea rather than an actor. The narrators are mostly unreliable, either because they are self-interested or lack information readers have gained or inferred from other narrators, but Misskaela and her actions always shadows their thoughts. The effect is to block reader empathy with the witch until the final pages, which disclose – only to readers – the witch’s anguish over the loss of the three sons she had borne to a selkie, but which she had to give back to the sea because they were unable to survive in human form. The witch’s apprentice, Trudle, describes the package containing the carefully preserved baby clothes Misskaella had instructed should be buried with her, but her inability to know the significance of what she holds focuses reader attention on that gap and produces a strong empathic response. The novel thus closes with
an intriguing experiment with reader positioning which delivers an exploration of the subjectivity of a witch unsurpassed in YA fiction.

*Sea Hearts* has the potential to prompt readers to revaluate the history of witch representations in children’s and YA fiction. The wise witch performs as a liberating force and agent of change, but is sometimes required to overcome expulsion by ‘official society’. Misskaella, however, is only positioned as focalizer of events in the second section of the novel, which she narrates as a pre-school child, and is subsequently depicted as others perceive her, so the important effect of narrative point of view becomes foregrounded in an unprecedented way. The crone, as I observed earlier, is commonly rendered as a comic non-conformist figure with subversive potential, notably in the novels of Pratchett, and in picture-books and junior fiction, whereas Lanagan reinvests the crone with darkness and danger. Where official society most forcibly reasserts traditional hegemonic structures and values, especially gendered behaviours, is in the depiction of the sorceress-witch. When positioned as a supplementary participant, she tends to represent femininity gone wrong, choosing to evade the hegemony of patriarchy by exercising her power in a dangerous and destructive manner. For example, in Donna Jo Napoli’s experimental rewriting of the Rapunzel story, *Zel* (1996), the stepmother-witch traded her soul to the devil in return for the power to ensnare Rapunzel’s parents and gain possession of their child. To escape her contract and redeem herself, she must lose her power by yielding her claim to the prince’s, and so is instrumental in returning the young lovers to the hegemony of a romantic outcome under patriarchy, where Zel exemplifies ‘good’ femininity. In contrast, *Sea Hearts* subverts patriarchy in two ways: first, through the witch’s actions which ensure that happiness will be impossible, and then through the development of moral insight in the selkies’ sons, who recognize their mothers’ pain and secretly enable their flight back to the sea. Lanagan’s novel interrogates how effectively the three witch-schemas deployed in texts for young audiences challenge patriarchal society and empower women and girls. The witch may subvert contemporary social attitudes and practices, but, finally, how transformative is her impact?

Notes


THE DISAPPEARING WITCH AND CHILDREN’S LITERATURE


19 Mair, Witchcraft, 38.


Bibliography (selection)


