

# PETER PAN

## WAS RIGHT

ANN McCUTCHEEN

Occasionally, I will wander away from the Science Fiction and Mystery sections of a bookstore, and commune with the Children's Books. Once in a great while, generally after two or three visits, I will buy one of these oversize volumes with big print. Finally, I bought one that was science fiction:

Enchantress From the Stars  
by Sylvia Louise Engdahl

I got past the stumbling blocks of title and cover blurb ("stowaway on a dangerous mission"), and slid happily into Georyn's story. In charming fairy tale style, the woodcutter's son enters the Enchanted Forest to find and slay the fire-breathing dragon. In the Forest, he meets a woman who can only be an enchantress, for her coloring is completely unfamiliar and although she speaks an eldritch tongue, he can understand her.

At this point Elana takes over the narrative. (again), and explains how she was Sworn, and got into this situation, even before attending the Academy. This involves a lengthy explanation of the Federation, its non-disclosure policy, and the Oath. The entire set-up sounds so pompous and contrived that I nearly stopped reading. Unfortunately, the explanation is vital to the story.

Then Elana explains that Andrechia, Georyn's world, has been discovered by a star-faring race and is being readied for colonization, and natives take the hindmost. The dragon is really a combination bulldozer, power shovel, and flamethrower. The goal of Elana, her father, Evrek, and Ilura --who promptly, and deliberately, gets herself killed-- is to awaken and train the psychic powers latent in Georyn (as they are latent in all people), have him exercise them against the Imperials, and panic them into abandoning Andrechia.

This comes to pass. The important features, however, are the moral conundrums that the principle characters face, and the sacrifices they are willing to make to resolve them honorably. The scene in which Elana, among other things, makes it clear to Jarel, the Imperial, how vital it is that he never reveal her secret, is the climax of the book, and a very fine one indeed.

Eventually I got the sequel:

The Far Side of Evil  
by Sylvia Louise Engdahl

This is the story of Elana's first mission after graduation from the Academy of the Federation. She is sent, with several other Agents, to be an independent observer of Toris, a Youngling world in the Critical Stage. Their mission is to gather data, no more. It is hoped that the data will contain the key to explaining why some worlds destroy themselves in nuclear war while others turn to space exploration, the most clear-cut choice known to the Anthropological Service. Agonizingly, the data the Agents collect will be useful only if the Torisians bomb themselves into savagery.

Randil, who should have been left behind to do research, decides that passive observation is wrong, breaks his Oath, and sets out to turn the Torisians' interest to space exploration. Elana reluctantly decides to stop him. This soon places her in the local prison, being tortured. In her copious spare time, she again describes the Federation, Oath, etc., at great, pompous, and contrived length. Again, it is vital to the story.

Elana describes the tortures she can protect herself from, the torture she contrives to use for her own purposes, and the torture she is sure she cannot endure. By means of this last, she is finally able to reach Randil, demonstrate that he is a conceited flat-head, persuade him to undo his harm, and give him the means to do so. From this comes the success of the mission. How the solution arises from the problem is fascinating, and makes this book almost as well worth reading as the previous volume.

Not all the books I get are blatantly science fiction or fantasy. Not long ago I got:

The Headless Cupid  
by Zilpha Keatley Snyder

David's family has just moved into the Old Westerly Place, more or less. The more is David, age 11, the twins Esther (called Tesser) and Blair, age 4, Janie, age 8, their father, Jeff Stanley, a geologist, and their shiny-new stepmother Molly, an artist. The less is Amanda, age 12, Molly's daughter, who had been living with her father on the West Coast until things settled down.

Each character is sharply and subtly delineated, each with a distinct and consistent personality. The same treatment is given without sentimentality to the children's dead mother, a vague and fey person whose influence can still be detected.

Amanda is the key person. She is into witchcraft, hates her mother, and resents her new situation. This is all delicately presented, but everything demonstrates that she is a Problem. David chooses to involve himself and the other children in her occult activities in order to come to terms with her, as well as for the adventure. Eventually David and Amanda discover that the wooden cupid on the bannister had its head hacked off by a poltergeist in 1896. Soon classic poltergeist activity begins, and David becomes convinced that Amanda is producing the phenomena to terrify her mother. How the real poltergeist reacted to this provides a tidy and satisfactory solution to the entire story.

Angeliclittle Blair is the key to many of the situations.

Although I enjoyed David's ingenious ability to cope, I was more entertained by the occasional demonstration of Blair's communion with animals, and of his startling clairvoyance, revealed in his occasional lapses into audibility.

I enjoyed the whole story immensely. At one point, Amanda asks what David's birthday is. Upon learning that it is October second, she nods, "That explains it." and I knew just what she meant; that's my birthday.

Of course, I had to buy:

Day of the Ness

by Andre Norton and Michael Gilbert

From the large print and multitude of pictures, this is obviously geared to very young children, and the simple plot confirms it. Still, it is a pleasingly presented story, without errors or condescension to grate on the reader's nerves.

The story opens in the twilight of the Project. The Project had begun several years before when a flying saucer landed in a nearby hill. The area was cordoned off, and a trickle of communication and trade began. There has never been a meeting with the aliens; the one attempt was a fiasco. Since then, contact has ceased, and many feel that there will be no more, either because they are excusably afraid, or because they have left.

Hal and his cat, Susie, are alone at the monitoring station, with the Project scientists in Washington, when a message for help comes in from the aliens. Realizing that there are no adults around to respond, Hal decides that he must answer and act for the good of both human and alien.

Boy and cat walk to the established hillside meeting area, past the familiar Gotchas, rock-shaped beings with spidery arms to grab and trip. Hal is greeted by two very different aliens, a Rav and a Stalker, who telepathically explain the predicament of their diverse communal enclave. The evil Ness, whom they fled many years before, have arrived on Earth, destroyed their big Think-Think, and enslaved all of them, from Clusters to Flyers.

It is for Hal (and Susie) to devise a method of freeing the Think-Think, for that is essentially the only brain the hive community has, and their only hope of resisting the Ness. With trepidation, Hal undertakes the decision-making for the helpless alien group, to produce a thoroughly satisfactory result.

Gilbert's illustrations form an admirable complement to the text, demonstrating the villainy and hideousness of the Ness, the amalgam of machine and organism of the Think-Think, and the insidiousness of the Gotchas.

There was a single theme running through all four books; in each, the main character had, and acted upon, a self-imposed moral obligation. This is something that adult works lack. There, the motivation is desire, self-preservation, expediency, orders, or whim. To find characters choosing to do something that is difficult or dangerous because it is Right, is delightful. I intend to continue to ferret them out of the Children's Section, both of the bookstore and the public library.

=====  
=====