My search for Somewhere

Monica Hughes

Looking back it seems to me that my life began with books. The dreams which they invoked in me led me in one direction and then in another in search of "the Somewhere meant for me"...that special place which *had* to exist, where I could feel at home, where my questions would be answered, where the enigmas of the universe would be made clear; above all, a place where I would find ME.

Without any doubt, my first favourite book was a picture book, translated from the French, called *Ludo, the adventures of a little green duck.* Ludo was different and, when he first discovered his spectacular colouring, he considered himself too important for the little pool on the farm in Normandy where he was raised. He set out to make his fame and fortune in the great world beyond, as so many adventurers were to do in the books I was to read later. He visited many wonderful places, including the Taj Mahal and the pyramids. I could relate to that, for our apartment in Cairo at that time looked across the desert at the Great Pyramid of Ghiza. But in the end the pleasures of travel faded. Ludo, now famous and richly endowed, became sad and realized at last that his sadness was homesickness for the "Somewhere meant for him", which was the little pond with his duck family in Normandy. He flew home and lived happily ever after.

My sister and I used to weep copiously whenever this book was read to us, but we loved it and begged for it over and over again. Did we feel the longing for a "Somewhere meant for us", a place other than Egypt, with its cruel sun and harsh dryness, a Somewhere in a more gentle place? But we could never reach it since, unlike Ludo, we didn't have wings. I had a vague picture of this place, derived from Beatrix Potter's tales, a soft English landscape, inhabited by clean little mice who swept out their houses all day, by washerwomen hedgeghogs and wonderfully naughty rabbits. . .a country where it rained, puddles and puddles full of rain!

At length we did indeed go home to England, to a small suburban house in a new development in outer London. It was not a bit like the world of Beatrix Potter, and I did not feel content as Ludo had done on his return to his ancestral home. Behind our house in Ealing, which was in the last row of houses, was almost countryside, that is to say a field, the railway line, the football field, and a pond from which we could net sticklebacks. Stimulated by the stories of Mrs. Tittlemouse and Mrs. Tiggywinkle, I yearned

for a pet, something to love and care for and to imagine delightful adventures with, but my parents discouraged ideas of this kind. My affections were poured out on nothing more responsive than a jamjar full of tadpoles, which were unaccountably turned into lumps of black jelly during a heatwave, and a toad, which I found crouching panic-stricken in the middle of the road. I carried it damply home and set it beneath the shrubs in the back garden, but by next morning it was gone — ungrateful Toad! When I first met that other Toad in *The wind in the willows* I knew right away he was no good.

I went to a remarkable school for the two years we were in London, where we were taught, along with reading and printing, to write in cuneiform on wax and clay tablets and to draw in hieroglyphs the cartouches of Cleopatra and Ptolemy. We were taken to the British Museum and saw the Rosetta Stone, the Domesday Book and Magna Carta. We looked at stone-age burials and the now notorious Piltdown skull, at that time believed to be the link in the chain leading from the primates to a thinking, wordmaking human.

That school swung open a door into a passage that I knew would one day lead me to that place I was searching for, and I listened avidly to stories read aloud, legends of the making of the world and the finding of fire. We were read aloud to also from the Norse sagas, and for the first time in my life Story itself became very important to me: Story and the Hero and the inevitability and the grandeur of Death. I still remember sitting with the other girls in the Lower Two classroom, listening spellbound to the story of the death of Baldur the Beautiful at the hands of the deceitful and despicable Loki, tears pouring down our cheeks. There were no rock stars then: Baldur was the hero of our dreams.

I began to feel dissatisfied at the mundane suburban life we lived, in which daily events were so trivial compared with the matter of the sagas. I sensed the existence somewhere of a larger scheme of things: a world of true heroes and heroines and black-hearted villains, a world in which death was a frequent outcome, not death trivialized or disguised or spoken of in whispers, but magnificent, celebrated with a pyre or a Viking funeral. How right, how real! I was ripe for Robin Hood and King Arthur.

At this moment, my head spinning with the grandeur of the sagas and the English legends, I was brought down to earth by another book. I happened to win the class prize that year, a copy of Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*. It was a startling experience. I should explain that my father, a mathematician with rather odd ways of bringing up children, had never allowed my sister or me to read comics, annuals, or even the books of popular writers for young people: he considered them equally trashy and a waste of time.

I devoured the Ransome books; I discarded my romantic dream worlds in

favour of Lake Windermere. Oh, why couldn't I be one of *them*? To have their freedom, to have parents that didn't fuss and hang around, but would allow us to sail away and have tremendous adventures of our own — for quite a long time that unrealistic "real world" was my dreamed-of "somewhere".

Ironically, a few years later, while we were spending our summer holidays in the Lake District, my father became seriously ill. My mother had to stay with him and in desperation arranged rowing lessons for us on Windermere. Every morning under the silent charge of a large unimaginative boatman, not in the least like Captain Flint, we rowed an unwieldy great rowboat out over the waters across which John and Susan, Titty and Roger would skim so effortlessly in the Swallow. It wasn't the same thing at all: we landed on no desert islands. We had no adventures of any kind.

Meanwhile, back in Upper Two at the London school, I was introduced to the writer who was to become one of the most important influences in my life. Her name was Edith Nesbit and her fourteen blue-bound books on the classroom shelf opened a new world. In authoritative prose, which gainsaid any suspicion that she could have made it all up, E. Nesbit introduced the Phoenix, the Psammead, the amulet, the magic city, and, in perhaps the most satisfying story of all, the enchanted castle. She spelled out the way to that "somewhere meant for me":

> There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs for ever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in that curtain which are marked by magic rings, and amulets, and the like, almost anything may happen.

Almost anything may happen! . . . It was at this time of discovering E. Nesbit, when I was nine years old, that we left London and this wonderful school, to live in a thin, three-storey, grey granite house in Edinburgh, a house glued to the sides of the houses to left and right and so on all down the street — I had never noticed terrace houses before. The house had certain possibilities: the staircase wound up three floors with a black-and-white-squared lobby below and a huge skylight above, and the top curve was perfect for sitting and reading in. But one could not walk around the house to reach the garden at the back, but must go through the house. A walled garden! Like the Secret Garden? Like the garden in the Enchanted Castle?

Alas, no. All the three-storey houses along the street had four large windows to glare down upon it. The garden walls afforded so little privacy that Mother, intimidated by the powerful Calvinist ethic that permeated the atmosphere of Edinburgh, warned us never to play in the garden on Sundays. I tried to make that garden magic, but it was hopeless; before long my father tamed its interesting wildness with herbaceous borders and

a crazy paving walk.

I did not forget E. Nesbit. For years I haunted the second-hand junk shops in Edinburgh, turning over stuff in threepenny trays, sure that I would come across an amulet or a magic ring. When that failed I begged Mother to allow me to gather together brass jars and candlesticks, books and book-ends, dominoes and chessmen, and build a walled city — not as grand as the Magic City, because we didn't have all the useful clutter of an Edwardian household, but not bad either. I remember lying on my stomach on the drawingroom floor, willing myself to be small enough to walk through the archway of candlesticks into a city that I knew would reveal itself as teeming with people, living their own mysterious lives. But no matter how hard I tried, my city never came alive as Philip's did.

Did all the children of my generation long for a magic world to become real for them? I don't know. I never dared to share my dreams with my pragmatic Scottish classmates. I wonder if children today have the same yearning? I hope so, but sometimes wonder if they are just longing for peace and quiet and a chance to grow up in a world that won't self-destruct before they get to enjoy it. It was so different in the thirties. Our lives were dull and circumscribed, but so very safe. There were mutterings of war in Manchuria and later in Ethiopia, but there was no television to bring details into our homes; we children did not read the newspapers nor listen to the radio: that was grownup business, a different world.

At that time, when I wasn't in school or doing mountains of homework, my pursuit was to find the key to understanding the way the whole universe worked — that was all. Magic seemed to be the key. I did believe — I remember, after seeing *Peter Pan* one Christmas, driving Mother to distraction by jumping off my bed in the belief that if I only tried hard enough I would be able to fly. But my faith wasn't strong enough to move my small body, and I landed on the floor with a resounding thump every time I tried.

I was discouraged. Then, for my tenth birthday one of my greataunts — whose taste in presents luckily ran most often to books — gave me Kenneth Grahame's *Dream days* and *The golden age.* Mother said, apologetically, that I would probably find them rather dull and grown-up; challenged, I dived in and read both from cover to cover. I did find them dull, old-fashioned stuff, except for one magical chapter, called "Its walls were as of jasper". That title alone was enough to tell me I was once more on the track of my particular Somewhere. I didn't actually know what jasper was, but it had a ringing sound. How important titles of books and chapters are!

The children in this story have an ongoing game of imagining themselves inside illustrations in their books, or in pictures on the walls. The narrator says, describing an illustration from a Book of Hours:

I had got into the habit of strolling off into the background, and amusing myself

with what I found there. Meadowland came first, set with flowers, blue and red, like gems. Then a white road ran, with wilful uncalled-for loops, up a steep conical hill, crowned with towers, bastioned walls and belfries; and down the road the little knights came riding, two by two .... There was plenty to do in this pleasant land. The annoying thing about it was, one could never penetrate beyond a certain point. I might wander up that road as often as I liked, I was bound to be brought up at the gateway of the little walled town .... I could get on board a boat and row up as far as the curly ship, but around the headland I might not go .... The merchants walked on the quay, and the sailors sang as they swung out the corded bales. But as for me, I must stay down in the meadow, and imagine it all as best I could.

At ten years old I knew perfectly well that Kenneth Grahame was not talking just about pictures in a book, but about the real journey to the illusive Somewhere. So other people besides myself had tried to make this journey? And others had failed? Now I knew I was on the right track. I had always been fascinated by paintings that led the eye along paths that curved out of sight, or through archways into tantalizingly glimpsed interiors. What was going on inside? Or around the corner? Or on the other side of that window?

But it was hard work to maintain my belief in magic and the imagination in that Edinburgh school, attended from my ninth to my fourteenth year. It was a school with an unswerving single aim, to fit the student to pass the Junior and then the Senior Oxford certificate exam. Books were strictly for studying out of. This philosophy reflected the granite and windy streets of a city that has always remained in my memory as humourless and cold.

One good thing came out if it, though. At eleven I won, as a prize for English Composition and Literature, Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm.* In this hauntingly beautiful novel, a mysterious stranger tells the boy Waldo a story of the human search for truth:

Then the hunter took from his breast the shuttle of Imagination, and wound upon it the thread of his wishes and all night he sat and wove a net. In the morning he spread the golden net open on the ground and into it he threw a few grains of credulity ....

The hunter catches many beautiful birds in his net, but Wisdom tells him that Truth cannot be caught that way, that all he has snared are Lies. She tells him he must go into the land of Absolute Negation and Denial, follow the sun to the mountains of Stern Reality, scale them, and beyond them find Truth. But Wisdom also warns that Truth cannot be caught in an ordinary net, but only in one woven of her own feathers. The hunter spends the rest of his days doing as Wisdom has told him, climbing the mountains in the grim hope of finding what he seeks. Finally he knows he is about to die, without having achieved his goal, and he says:

Where I lie down worn out other men will stand, young and fresh. By the steps I

have cut they will climb; by the stairs I have built they will mount . . . . They will find her, and through me! And no man liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself.

And as he closes his eyes for the last time, a silvery feather flutters down from the sky and drops onto his breast.

What did it mean? Magic seemed to have let me down, and now Schreiner seemed to be saying that truth was unattainable. Only years later did I think that perhaps all the writers who share with their readers their experiences of Somewhere are like the hunter. No single person can capture Truth, but perhaps each, in his or her special way, carves another step in the mountain.

When I was about eleven, my father, who, besides being a mathematician was also an amateur astronomer, had introduced me to the night sky. "When you're old enough," he promised, "I will take you to the Royal Observatory to look at the stars properly." But that day never came. September 3rd, 1939, happened first. The Observatory was closed for the duration of the war, and in a year and a half my father was dead. But he left me, among other gifts, such as a respect for questioning and a need to search for answers, a small book by Sir James Jeans, *The mysterious universe.* Our knowledge of the formation of the universe has changed profoundly since Sir James wrote this book in 1930. From a scientific point of view what he says is laughably out of date; but from the point of view of myth, of fantasy, it is awe-inspiring. He says:

> The total number of stars in the universe is probably something like the total number of grains of sand on all the sea-shores of the world. Such is the littleness of our home in space when measured up against the total substance of the universe. This vast multitude of stars is wandering about in space. A few form groups which journey in company, but the majority are solitary travellers. And they travel through a universe so spacious that it is an event of almost unimaginable rarity for a star to come anywhere near to another star. For the most part, each voyages in splendid isolation, like a ship on an empty ocean . . . .

I used to gaze up at the stars back then; and later on, when I was at university, there was fire-watching on the roof over a blacked-out city. Oh, how splendidly the stars blazed down then! And they blazed, later, above an airfield in Belfast, when I was serving as a Wren in the Fleet Air Arm. And later again, in Zimbabwe — there is nothing to compare with the sight of the stars in the Southern hemisphere, so crowded together, so thickly strewn, that the Milky Way shines with a light bright enough to see by. I remembered Sir James Jeans and tried to comprehend the enormous distances, the numbers past belief; and one of the myths, read aloud to us in Lower Two, came to my mind:

There was once a high mountain, and every thousand years a bird would fly to it and remove a single grain of sand in its beak. Thousand after thousand years the bird flew to and fro, each time with a single grain in its beak, and when at last the mountain was completely worn away, a single day of eternity had passed.

Splendid isolation, Sir James Jeans had said. But just suppose it *were* possible for humans to leave earth and travel to the moon, to sister planets, even into the galaxy itself, among those splendidly isolated stars, what might we find there? In answer to these questions, I suppose, I discovered the possibility of science fiction taking over from magic in extending the search for "Somewhere meant for me".

In the real world, or the world that E. Nesbit called "the world that seems to us to be real", many unreal events were happening: the war, evacuation of the school to the western highlands, my father's death, and no longer the possibility of Oxford. I spent a year at Edinburgh University and, as soon as I was old enough, I joined the Navy. I hoped, I think, to embody the heroic figures of my reading, and to travel. It didn't pan out that way. I travelled no further than northern Scotland and Ireland. There were monotony and boredom and a job done as well as possible but nevertheless with a certain mediocrity, and certainly with no opportunities for heroism. When it was over I was numbered among the grown-ups, having to make my own decisions and abide by my own mistakes.

I couldn't settle down. Was I, like Ludo, the little green duck, still searching for a special place? Rootlessness is at the same time a pleasure and a curse. I remembered the shock of realizing that in my class in the Edinburgh school were many children who had been born in the house they now lived in, who went to North Berwick every summer holiday and had never been farther from home — and what was worse, didn't want to. Moreover, they pitied *me* for my rootless life.

Certainly, like Ludo, I was restless. Not long after the war I took my questing dream to Africa, that demanding continent that never quite lets you go once you have lived there. And in one small moment I did find the "Somewhere meant for me". I was staying on a farm about thirty miles outside Bulawayo. I went walking by myself across the bush, through grass that was waist high and as tawny as a lion. The sky above was a clear piercing blue, and the air had that wonderful upland subtropical quality that was, cliched or not, like wine. I walked, thinking of nothing, drunk on the air, and out of the grass stepped a small antelope. I stopped. It stopped. We looked at each other — I was so close I could have reached out and touched its nose. Then its head came up and it gave a little snort and trotted off and vanished in the grass. I stood still, my feet on the red dirt, the great sky above me, feeling newly made, as if the earth had just given birth to me and acknowledged me as its child, giving me the right to step on that land. The moment has magically remained with me. I know such

gifts are not repeatable, but nevertheless I have been looking, ever since, for something akin to it, some acknowledgement that Somewhere is *mine*: that I have the right to be there.

The sun and red soil of Zimbabwe made me think of Australia as a place to search for my Somewhere. I have still never been there, since I chose to go the long way around, via Canada. And here I have stayed, for thirty-five years now, struggling to come to terms with this difficult land. For it *is* a difficult country to know, compared with England, where the layers of history and myth offer themselves to the pilgrim most generously, and with Africa, whose bond to my unconscious I had already discovered. I lived in Ottawa for five years before my marriage; I used to camp in the Gatineau hills and canoe on the lakes, always trying to establish something in common with the country I was exploring; but it would have none of me. Here is where voyageurs canoed, I told myself. Here is where the coureurs du bois pushed the frontiers westward. Here is where the Indians lived for centuries before the white traders came with whiskey and disease. Show me a footprint, I begged the land. Give me a sign of your past . . . . But the Laurentian shield, those oldest mountains extant on earth, worn down now to the bare granite bones of the planet, had nothing whatever to say to me.

In the silences there were a few seconds when I felt a touch. . .when a loon's shivering cry broke across the still evening water of a lake. Or the moment when I woke very early to find the island on which we had camped surrounded by mist. I sat in the chill dawn, gazing across the lake, able to see nothing at all. Then a slow warmth crept through the whiteness and I could see a small patch of water, rippling gently. No more. I felt absolutely alone: Crusoe on a desert island. Then the silence was broken by the sound of distant singing. I strained my ears. . .the song was in French, one of the old songs that the voyageurs and rivermen must have sung, a boating song . . . . Had I finally slipped through a crack in time back to seventeenth century Canada? Or had something from the seventeenth century ghosted its way through to today? The voices grew louder. I could hear every word. Into the visible patch of water shot a war canoe with perhaps twenty young men, dressed in black, paddling. Within the space of a heartbeat it was gone into the mist. The voices faded and I was again alone. It was a never-to-be-forgotten moment, but even then I knew it was not truly mine, that my imagination had built up a false Somewhere. Later on, when I discovered the paintings of the Group of Seven and of Tom Thomson, I knew that I was foolish ever to expect something from this land. It was too harsh, too impersonal, ever to give itself to me, a foreigner.

When I married and moved to Alberta, I was struggling to write and I desperately wanted to find some bond with this land that seemed to reject human footprints and deny myth. One cannot write in a vacuum. When I

began to write seriously for young people, I struggled again with this question: why was I not able to embrace Canadian mythology and make it part of my stories, as Patricia Wrightson had done with the Australian dreamtime myth? Our countries are in many ways similar, I argued. Each is a huge continent, whose rim alone is kind to the settler, while the vast interior — or north — remains almost empty, the domain of inscrutable aboriginal people.

But there my parallel fell apart, because Patricia Wrightson has taken the dreamtime myths and incorporated them marvellously into today's Australia, making them as real as the land. The mimi and the bunyip and the nargun are alive, as the mythological figures of all good fantasy must be; she has built a Somewhere meant for the Australian child. As for Canadian myth, Christie Harris has integrated tales of west coast Indians most cleverly into her books, and James Houston tells more factual stories based on his years among the Inuit people. But I do not find a "somewhere meant for me" that I can relate to. Even Ruth Nichols, whose fantasy novels are, I believe, among the best to come out of Canada so far, did not set her stories in a peculiarly Canadian landscape: *The marrow of the world* could as easily pertain to the Northern United States.

Several years ago Janet Lunn and I talked about this difficulty of finding and incorporating in one's writing a true Canadian mythology, since there seem to be no mimis or bunyips or their kind accessible. She told me that the theme of the book she was then working on (which is now published as *The shadow on Hawthorne Bay*) dealt with precisely this problem. Her protagonist, Mary, comes from the Western Highlands to Prince Edward County, bringing her own mythology. But she finds that she has been deluding herself, that ghosts do not travel well, that she is going to have to build a new mythology in this new raw country. After Mary has vanquished the spirit of the drowned Duncan she says to herself: "The old ones came to our hills in the ancient times. It began somewhere. It began there long ago as it begins here now."

So perhaps this is what we must do: live and grow in this young country and have patience, allow our own mythology to establish itself and our household gods to find their way to our hearths. Our mythology will come to its fullness only if we believe and encourage its dormant presence.

We Canadians are constantly struggling over our identity and our culture, trying to define and defend it at the same time. It is important to be conscious of the need for an identity and a culture that expresses it. I believe that our children will be the better for growing up in a country where there are many special Somewheres for them. But we mustn't be impatient. In Ontario you have had not much more than a couple of hundred years for your "old ones", your myth figures, even to make their appearance, much less establish themselves in story and literature. Out west we

have had only half that time. It's not long. Even after Chaucer gave England perhaps her first truly native voice, poets went on copying the French romantic tales for centuries, until at last the heroic figure of Arthur stepped out of the mist and became . . . .real. It takes time.

We are all, to some degree, haunted and influenced by the encounters with the special Somewheres of our childhoods. For me there is the Lake District of Beatrix Potter and the Swallows and Amazons. I remember listening for the sound of little people in old Cornish tin mines, for the roll of Drake's Drum, for the feet of the lost legion somewhere on those Roman roads, for the chatter of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury, for voices in Sherwood Forest, and the wail of women as Arthur's body disappears into the mists of Avalon. But I must not superimpose my Somewheres upon the Canadian landscape and the Canadian reader. Janet Lunn is right: they don't travel well. In some way, as Mary did, I must shake off the ghost that pursues me and acknowledge that "as it began there long ago it begins here *now*."

Perhaps the struggle to find a "Somewhere meant for me" in an alien country may in the long run be beneficial: perhaps the pain and frustration are necessary birthpangs. It is certainly notable that among Canadian children's writers today Janet Lunn and Barbara Smucker both came from the United States and that Jean Little was brought up in Taiwan.

I did say that we are all haunted by the Somewheres of our childhood, but I'm not sure if that's true: does every child have this need for a private and personal country? I remember meeting a delightful and eager grade four reader, who asked if it was all right for her to enjoy fiction; her big sister had told her that stories were a waste of time and that she should read history and true stories about people. A world without story? Yet perhaps there are children who have no need of the Somewhere that is so important for the rest of us. But for those who do seek there is a wealth of superb, imagination-stretching stories today, realistic fiction, history, fantasy and science fiction, far more than were available when I was a child.

Some of these stories seem to chime, as E. Nesbit and, later, Olive Schreiner did for me. Where does the magic come from? One would expect to find it in works of fantasy more than others, and yet I know more people on whom *The secret garden* has had that effect than almost any other book and it is realistic fiction. What *is* the magic ingredient that weaves the spell, or builds the bridge, or charts the course for that special Somewhere meant for the young reader? I can recognize the book that leaves me looking at the world with fresh eyes, whose theme is like a precious stone that I can hide in my pocket and take out and look at whenever I choose, a book that I will want to read again and again.

But how is it done? That I don't know. Of my own writing I only know afterwards that a story has worked if I begin to get letters from children

saying what some particular story has meant to them. It has certainly something to do with the realism of the setting — whether the story is realistic, historical, or fantasy fiction is not important. When a child says: "Is that a *real* place? Have you been there?" even when she knows it is simply not possible, then I am doing something right. When the reader cares enough about the protagonist to worry about what is going to happen to him or her after the last page, that is also a good sign.

My own stories always start with a question important to me, something I want to find the answer to. "Child, you never stop asking questions!" my grandmother used to scold me. And, "You have a mind like a grasshopper."

I am thankful for both these perverse tendencies; without them I wouldn't be able to write the kind of books I enjoy writing, the ones that do put me in touch with my Somewhere. And as my formative years consisted of journeys and a sense of rootlessness, so a journey, either physical or moral, and sometimes both, is an important part of most of my stories.

Remembering Baldur the Beautiful, I try to allow my protagonists some heroic stature, even if it gets me into trouble occasionally. Children are still writing to me about *The tomorrow city* asking me whether I am going to write a sequel, because they want to know whether Caroline regains her eyesight. I sympathize with them, but I felt most strongly at the time that when Caroline is forced by circumstance or choice to act in a heroic manner, she cannot then be handed her victory on a platter; it had to be earned, and perhaps painfully earned. After the battle comes the eulogy and the Viking funeral. To have let Caroline off scot-free would have been to have diminished her and her antagonist C-Three; the whole story would have become a very forgettable incident. But kids don't forget Caroline.

Sometimes, in my search for Somewhere, my stories are realistic, because the question can be answered only in a modern setting. So *Hunter in the dark* evolved from an incident when one of my sons played hooky from school to go hunting with his best friend. He sent home a message via his younger brother: "We've gone hunting in the Swan Hills. Please don't send the RCMP after us. We'll be back in three days." But when I asked Russ why he had done such a defiantly disobedient thing he answered "I don't know, Mum. I had to." Out of that unsatisfactory answer to an innocent question came a driving need to find a better answer. As I thought about Canadian pioneers and about rites of passage today, the person of Mike Rankin began to come alive and, in answering my questions, he gave me my story, which was about a great deal more than hunting.

Similarly I wrote *Log jam* as a result of seeing Nordegg prison, on the David Thompson highway, set among some of the most beautiful country in Alberta. The contrast between the enclosed prison and the wide freedom of the forests worried at me until I translated it into a story that attempts to reconcile these opposites.

Science fiction, which is my favorite genre, begins in a slightly different way, not with a question in the here and now, but with a question that takes one into the future or into another possible society today. What would it be like to grow up under the sea? Or on the moon? What kind of society would exist under the challenge and crisis of a New Ice Age? Or what would happen to people stuck on a planet where the inhabitants treat humans the way we treat animals on Earth? Each of these questions acts on me like the challenge of the picture in the Book of Hours: what is around the bend in the road? Beyond the headland? Inside the walled city?

But after one knows what one is writing, there is not a lot of difference between science fiction and fantasy, historical or realistic fiction. In each of these genres there are questions to be answered, characters to be challenged, a setting to be truthfully delineated — a story to be told that is as close as possible to that special Somewhere that is in the writer's heart. The setting must be so realistic that the reader can say: I thought I was *there*. The characters must come alive through whatever strange alchemy that does happen, so that they think their own thoughts and speak their own minds and not the writer's whose job it is at that stage to be an accurate transcriber, with a hand held very lightly on the reins, so that the story is not forced along a false trail on the one hand, or allowed to gallop all over the landscape on the other. These challenges are common to every kind of fiction, the greatest challenge of all being to convey that "Somewhere meant for me", the almost impossible task of translating the ephemeral into words that work.

In writing science fiction I create new planets, such as Isis, or draw on the possibilities of life in some future Canada, and I find that I am writing a kind of mythology, a kind of history. Tomorrow's myths, tomorrow's history. A mythology that will travel, that is not bothered by international or cultural barriers. But I don't forget the history of story that began in those writings in cuneiform and hierolgyph. I believe it is important to reintroduce the great themes and heroic characters of our storied past and give them to the young reader in a new guise. Certainly in good fantasy, such as Susan Cooper's novels, the basic theme is still that of the sagas and myths, the struggle between good and evil. In science fiction this struggle may be less clearly delineated; it may be between blind technology and ecology, or between right wing ideologists and freedom fighters, or between the human need to reach to the limit and the natural forces opposing that reach. The myths of Pandora, Icarus, and Prometheus are echoed again and again in science fiction.

One of the exciting unexpected things about writing has been the finding of my own Somewheres as I write. Each new setting creates a place that was not there before. It may be based, consciously or not, on the Somewheres I have searched for, those I have found or those that have eluded

me. Each Somewhere is a real place, somewhere just out of sight in Tomorrow's world. It is as real to me, and I hope, to the reader, as the city with walls of jasper was to Kenneth Grahame's young hero. As I write, it begins to materialize, and that most exciting moment comes when I am able to walk through the archway into the magic city, the secret garden I have created and find them alive with people going about their own business. Coming back to the so-called "real" world, to boring things like meals and grocery shopping, can be quite painful.

I find that once a book is out of my hands and in the publisher's, the old magic fades. But by then I have started a new story and it begins all over again. Yet there is something left of the old magic. I have found that I am no longer as rootless as I was. Any place of which I have written has become my secret home. For years after writing *Earthdark* I found myself getting a shock of familiar recognition whenever I saw a full moon. *There* is Kepler crater, I would tell myself. And *there* is the Sea of Tranquillity that Kepler and Ann crossed in their stolen vehicle on their way back to the dark side of the moon.

Monica Hughes

When I drive along the River Road in Edmonton and look across the North Saskatchewan at the University, I see buildings not quite as other people do, but as ruins, jagged as broken teeth against the sky, with the red flames of sacrificial fires glimmering through the broken windows. I know also that when I drive a little further on, I will come to the gravel spit where Caroline and David found the dead tramp, and I know that in another world, not so far away from ours, separated only by that curtain as thin as gossamer, as strong as iron, of which E. Nesbit wrote, the computer C-Three *is* watching us.

It is almost sixty years since I first met Ludo, the little green duck, and began my search for the "Somewhere meant for me". I have read and travelled, asking questions in the physical, spiritual, and psychic worlds. Though I feel a certain tension between the Canada which I have called home for thirty-five years and the Britain my bones tell me is where I belong, I am in the happy process of finding the Somewhere. Each time I reach for a fresh sheet of paper and write the thought, "What would happen if. . .?" I feel the tingling sense that tells me the magic is near — just the other side of the curtain — and that maybe, if I try even harder, I will capture that magic in the net woven of Truth's own feathers and share it with my young readers, hoping that within the story some of them may

find the path that leads around the corner, through the archway, into their own special Somewhere.

Monica Hughes *lives in Edmonton. She is the author of* Keeper of the Isis Light, Hunter in the Dark, Devil on my back, *and other award-winning novels.*